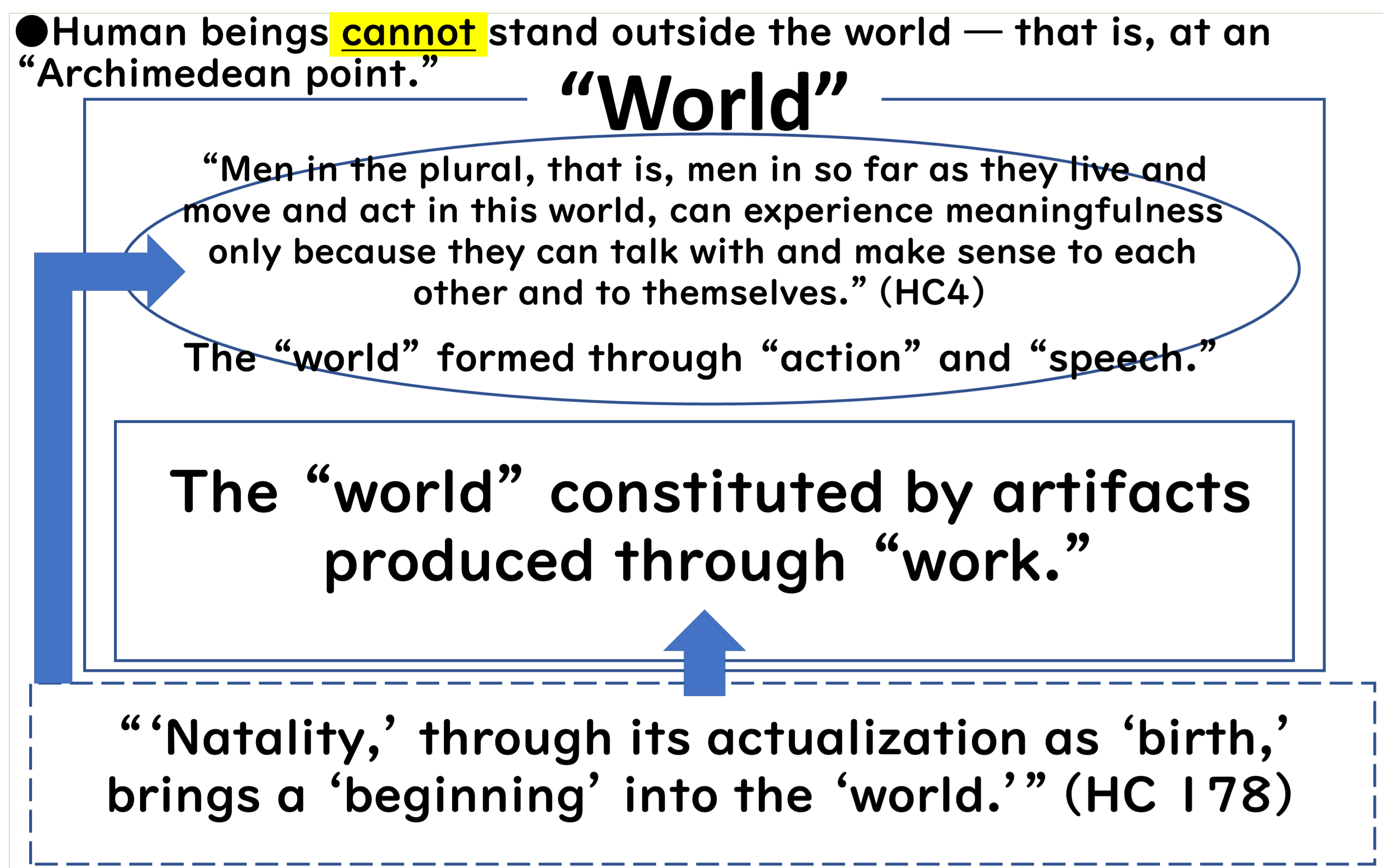


The Philosophical Foundations for Applying Hannah Arendt's Thought to Disability Studies

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Figure 1. The “world” as conceived by Arendt.



1. Introduction

This study examines the philosophical foundation within Hannah Arendt's (1906–1975) thought that can support disability studies in pursuing a society where the voices of person with disabilities concerned are reflected and respected.

2. Object and Method

Focusing primarily on Arendt's major work *The Human Condition* (1958), this study conducts a literature-based analysis to clarify the internal connections within her thought and explore their applicability to disability studies.

3. Arendt's thought

When Arendt's thought is viewed through the lens of the concept of the “world,” it can be illustrated as shown in the above diagram (Figure 1). Arendt holds that one cannot stand at a point outside this “world”—that is, at an Archimedean point—and conceive how the “world” ought to be. In other words, within the “public realm,” which is part of the “world” (referred to in the diagram as “The ‘world’ formed through ‘action’ and ‘speech’”), no one can decide that “persons with disabilities have no value in living.” Such a judgment would be made from a standpoint outside the “world.”

Arendt also states that the very fact that multiple and diverse human beings, each possessing differences, exist together in this “world” — what she calls “plurality” — constitutes the necessary and sufficient condition for politics (HC 7). If that is the case, it must also be presupposed that persons with disabilities, while possessing characteristics different from those of “non-disabled” persons, nonetheless exist as human beings with the same dignity.

Moreover, Arendt holds that within the “public realm,” human beings, each possessing their own distinct differences, engage in mutual dialogue and in the reciprocal attribution of meaning (HC 4). The “public realm” as Arendt conceives it is a space in which people, standing in equal relationships, converse through “speech” about the question, “Who are you?” Although it is a demanding and even severe space, it is not one from which individuals are excluded on the basis of disability; rather, such differences are respected as forms of distinctiveness.

Furthermore, in Arendt's view, “freedom” does not mean the absence of interference but instead consists in receiving a response from others within the “public realm.” From the standpoint of Arendt's thought, it is unacceptable for persons with disabilities to be ignored, arbitrarily represented, or interpreted without their consent within the “public realm.”

4. Conclusion

In these respects lies the potential of Arendt's thought for contributing to disability studies. However, Arendt appears to place strong emphasis on direct speech within the “public realm.” This raises concerns that her conception may exclude persons with disabilities for whom speech is difficult. In addition, while Arendt extensively develops her discussion of the “public realm,” she pays relatively little attention to discrimination within the “social realm.” These points seem to indicate certain problems and limitations in her thought, the examination of which should be left for future study.

• Reference

HC: H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, 1958; reed., The University of Chicago Press, 1995.

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