

Comment on *Fiction Without Humanity*

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I wanted to begin by thanking the Center for Eighteenth-Century Studies, Rebecca Spang, and the selection committee for all their work in bringing this event together. I am also grateful to everyone for being here today. I know an extra zoom session on a late Friday afternoon in an era of remote pandemic teaching is not high on anyone's list, but it's lovely to have you here, not least because this book came out of conversations I've had with many of the people present today. No book is written in a vacuum, and *Fiction Without Humanity* was indelibly shaped by the work of other scholars in the field. It is thus wonderfully fitting in this context that the paragraph from page 99 that I was asked to read and discuss today concerns the ways individual works draw from and belong to a broader communal enterprise to which they endeavor to contribute.

The paragraph is from a chapter about the seventeenth-century natural philosopher Robert Hooke. An endlessly inventive technician and a dazzling polymath, Hooke was the curator of experiments for the Royal Society, most famous for his spectacular compendium of images of the microscopic world, the 1665 *Micrographia*. Hooke referred to devices like the microscope as "artificial helps," because they allowed the viewer to see the sub-visible world, augmenting the sensory capacities of the human body. The microscope for Hooke created a prosthetically-enhanced body that enables human and instrument to become reciprocal objects of each other's formation, thus making possible the progressive history of humankind.

Here's the paragraph:

Hooke's "helps" constitute what Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* calls *works*—the "artificial" world of things, that condition human nature, making a world that houses each individual life but "meant to outlast and transcend them all." Humanity's "ability to leave non-perishable traces behind" distinguishes it from animals by creating a perdurable culture that allows for knowledge to be bequeathed in the form of "things—works and deeds and words." To be sure, Hooke's endless squabbles over credit for inventions—most famously with Isaac Newton—and his increasingly secretive and miserly ways toward the end of his life make it difficult to incorporate him into a communal project for the advancement of humankind, or even into the model of collectively authored scientific consensus central to many accounts of the Royal Society. Yet his texts abound with directions for replicating his work: diagrams, explanations of how to make and use various instruments, step-by-step breakdowns of experimental processes, and meticulous reconstructions of the trial-and-error means by which he jury-rigged solutions to problems encountered along the way. Hooke may have wanted credit for his works, but he also sought to transmit knowledge to posterity and to provide the impetus for humanity's future labors. Indeed, the devices he bequeathed to humanity at large are the material incarnation of his thinking.

This paragraph returns to a number of claims advanced in *Fiction Without Humanity*. The book argues that the distinction between human and animal is not a simple prefab binary, but is created or articulated through the relation each takes to things: works of art, tools, commodities, and here the perdurable objects fabricated by humankind. We can see this triangulation in this paragraph, where humanity is not only defined as a "tool-making animal" (nonhuman animals of

course may use instruments), but also as the maker of Arendt's *works*, things that outlast the individual user and thus allow the intelligence contained within them to become part of history. Humans (like animals, *as* animals) die, but their skill and knowledge are contained in the works they leave behind: objects— devices— serve as repositories for technology, storing cognitive labor for future generations and serving as agents of historical advancement. Works contain and bequeath the knowledge that enables historical progress, and, in the process, they point to the fact that humans themselves are works-in-progress— participants in a developmental trajectory that embraces the species as well as the individual. Humans, that is, make things that make history, and that history, in turn, remakes the very nature of humanity.

If, for Hooke, objects are vessels for the intelligence that went into their making, then knowledge is not purely abstract or ideational, but is embedded in the material world. Long before the iPhone, our objects knew things that we may not ourselves know. Hooke's understanding of knowledge is incarnated not only in objects but in practices, breaking down the neat division between mind and hand, between *homo faber* and *homo sapiens*, thus challenging the hierarchy of abstract thought over manual labor. That Hooke's "how-to" writing invites the reader to replicate his practice—to *do* what he's talking about— empowers others to follow in his tracks, to incorporate his inventions (and his inventiveness) into future progress. His text, that is, inculcates a *techne* that in turn institutes a kind of historical anthropology.

What I want to underline in closing is that the definition of humanity that emerges from this anthropology is unusually open-ended, for humanity is defined not just through the possession or attribution of specific traits, but through the capacities that human beings may come to master. That humanity is something that emerges through practice means that no singular static template governs what will be understood as human. By requiring the reader to enact abilities that were understood to be distinctively human, Hooke's works *produce* humanity, a humanity grounded not in a stipulated essence but in the *possibility*, both individual and collective, of becoming something other than what we already are. And that possibility emerges in its most potent form when the things that we make— whether they be microscopes or Arendt's works or books that we have written— enter into a world where they are shared at events like this one. It is an honor to be part of this larger conversation, a conversation that I believe Hooke would understand to be human in the best sense of the word.