

Original Paper

Hannah Arendt on Proper Education for Politics

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Abstract

This paper examines the writings of one of the most influential political philosophers of our time Hannah Arendt. It focuses especially on her views regarding “The Crisis in Education”, where she asserts that “education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. Hannah Arendt’s work points towards how we can fall short in our responsibility for, and love of, the world, and for that, education can become complicit in the erosion of a vibrant and robust public realm, the realm of politics. So education should aim at preparing the child for this challenge. In this regard, Arendt’s work takes on a prophetic character, because it denounces a process of alienation in respect to a world that is still ongoing in the field of education.

Keywords

Hannah Arendt, political, education, crisis, modernity, world, private realm and public realm

1. Introduction

This review, discusses Hannah Arendt’s ideas about the crisis in education in the contemporary world especially in America. Her hypothesis is that the crisis in education is also related to the introduction of educational approaches of psycho-pedagogical nature, which instead of contributing to educate the youth so that they assume responsibility for the world and take political action, are keeping them in an infantile condition until they reach adulthood, thus, creating, new political issues Arendt, tells us that crisis in education are the products of modern phenomena and invites us to behold the crisis as a privileged moment to exercise critical thinking. In Arendt’s opinion, the crisis must be understood as a crucial opportunity to make critical reflections on the educational process itself.

We shall argue that Hannah Arendt provides an illuminating perspective on the “crisis” of education. Because her work does not cohere with either contemporary liberal or contemporary conservative

criticisms or justifications of higher education, or with either moral or vocational promises about its merit, Arendt's understanding of education appears less as a competing approach than as simply an eclipsed perspective. By focusing on the meanings and values of the public world of politics, we shall submit that her reflections on education illuminate politics in contemporary epoch. Now let us first of all examine the meaning and the concept of education which will provide the basis of our analysis of Arendt's critique.

2. Etymological Meaning of Education

In English, the term "Education" has been derived from two Latin words Educare (Educere) and Educatum. "Educare" means to train or mould. It again means to bring up or to lead out or to draw out, propulsion from inward to outward. The term "Educatum" denotes the act of teaching. It throws light on the principles and practice of teaching. The term Educare or Educere mainly indicates development of the latent faculties of the child. But the child does not know these possibilities. It is the educator or the teacher who can know these and take appropriate methods to develop those powers.

If we go into certain definitions of education of great educators of the East and the West, we may have a clearer picture of the nature and meaning of the term education. However, that would be outside the scope of this article. Thus, let us look for a working concept.

2.1 A Working Concept

There are many concepts and definitions of education by great educators of the East and West from Plato Rabindranath Tagore through Jean-Jacque Rousseau to John Dewey. Putting them together, we can deduce and conclude that education is a life that is devoted to intellectual excellence, promotes a genuine love for knowledge and ideas and not just simply what is practical and useful. It is a systematic process through which a child acquires knowledge, experience, skill and sound attitude. It makes an individual civilized, refined, cultured and educated. "For a civilized and socialized society, education is the only means. Its goal is to make an individual perfect. Every society gives importance to education because it is a panacea for all evils. It is the key to solve the various problems of life" (Note 1).

What a surprise, therefore, to see that Hannah Arendt writes that school and ingenuity are not and have never been the proper places for the display of human excellence. Arendt writes that excellence is found only in the public realm, that space to which "excellence has always been assigned". This paper is devoted to critical examination this idea of Hannah Arendt to find out if it has actually relevance to politics in our present society. What then does she mean by Public Realm?

3. The Public Realm/Private Realm

The public is the political and Arendt refers to it as "the locus in which mutual and genuine relationships between peers occur, corresponding to the polis life and citizenship characterized by freedom and individuality" (Note 2), This is "the place everybody needs the other in order to distinguish him or herself and show in deed and word that he or she is unique (thereby becoming immortal) where a remedy for futility of action and speech is, offered" (Note 3). Arendt explains that a public realm "cannot be

erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life span of mortal men” (Note 4). She contrasts the public with the private sphere, corresponding to the household, governed with necessity and driven by wants and needs and generally by life itself (Note 5). Hence, “the private is the centre of vital production including not only economic concerns but also bodily function and species reproduction” (Note 6). Under this natural community, “the labour of man to provide nourishment and the labour of the woman in giving birth” are subject to and born of the same necessity and urgency of life” (Note 7).

Arendt argues “that in ancient times, the private sphere facilitated the hide away of these labourers and their laborious-devoted-to-bodily-functions lives (especially women and slaves) and their segregation from the community” (Note 8). A man who lived only a private life, who like the slave was not permitted to enter the public realm, or like the barbarian had chosen not to establish such a realm, was not fully human.

We are referring here to a kind of environment, or as Arendt puts it, the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it (Note 9). The concern of Arendt is that this sharp distinction that existed between Private and public has been distorted by modernity and it impossible to provide the proper way to train the children for politics. She bitterly remarks that “with ideological or entertainment intrusions, children are forced to expose themselves in a public light in a stage of incompleteness, thus potentially retarding their growth and ability to eventually form independent, critical judgments” (Note 10). In other words, the more completely modern society discards the distinction between what is private and what is public, between what can thrive only in concealment and what needs to be shown to all in the full light of the public world, the more, it introduces between the private and the public a social sphere in which the private is made public and vice versa, the harder it makes things for its children, who by nature require the security of concealment in order to mature undisturbed” (Note 11).

Educational achievements, for example learnedness and scholarship, are important for students, but have nothing to do with excellence. But what then does Arendt mean by human excellence? And why does it require a public realm? More to the point of modern debates, why is education not the proper locus of excellence?

Education is one of the elementary and necessary human activities. As noted before now, the word education comes from the Latin verbs *educare* (to mold) and *educere* (to lead out). To teach and educate is to take a human being in the process of becoming and lead him or her out of the confines of the home into the world, into his or her community. Formal education, Arendt argues in *The Crisis in Education*, is the time when schools and teachers assume the responsibility for what we generally call the free development of characteristic qualities and talents. This is the stage in the educational development of the student in which he or she is not only introduced to the world, but when he or she becomes freely and spontaneously acquainted with those qualities that make one unique and further refined as a person.

It is also in school that we learn what human excellence is and the conditions in which human excellence is properly displayed. Human excellence, Arendt argues, is what the ancient Greeks called *arête* and the Romans *virtus*. The concepts of *arete* and *virtus* were always used by the ancients to denote the good and distinctive qualities embodied by those who performed in public. Drawing upon these concepts, Arendt argues that human excellence is a public act that manifests what she calls “inspiring principles”, e.g., prudence, justice, and courage, qualities of conduct that allow one to excel and distinguish oneself from all others. Arendt understands school in this manner.

4. Public Realm and Realm of School

Unlike the realm of the school, where one is expected only to learn and develop the characteristics used to make the principles of prudence, justice and courage manifest, the public realm demands that one’s act embodies excellence. It is our capacities for speech and action that allows for this display of excellence to be distinctively human. Arendt argues that only “in acting and speaking, that men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identity and thus make their appearance in the human world”. In contrast to education, which is concerned with the development of talents and virtues of the developing human being, in the political realm, these talents and virtues are fully developed and displayed.

Schools for Arendt are neither public nor private but “the institutions that we interpose between the private domain of home and the world in order to make the transition from the family to the world”. Schools are hidden from the world, as are the activities through which the student first displays his or her qualities and talents. Schools offer the student “the security of concealment in order to mature undisturbed”. But in order to achieve excellence, action needs an audience, a stage, a public realm where these characteristics can be properly manifested and properly received. Activities completed in school hide these characteristics and nurture the creative process, in contrast to those performed public, which always display the virtuosity, the excellence inherent in action.

5. Public Realm: The Space of Equality

The public realm is also the space of equality, which is alien to schools. In schools, the teacher is the authoritative figure, the one who knows the world, and in order to teach it, deference to authority is required. Arendt argues that this responsibility of authority is given to the educator because the educator not only knows the world but also belongs and acts in it. In the school, the educator acts as a representative of that world by “pointing out the details and saying to the child: this is our world”. Once the student knows the world and assumes responsibility for it, he or she can go into the world and act virtuously, display human excellence and start something new, which could potentially change it. This is why Arendt argues that school is not the “proper place” to display excellence, to act, and create something new. This is because, ability to be excellent to act, and to start something new demands responsibility for the world. In education, this responsibility takes the form of authority, which is why it is given to the educator, and not to the student.

This does not mean, however, that Arendt is against changing the world; she is against changing it by disturbing the activity of education. Change, the new, is a phenomenon of the political realm, an activity performed among equal and fully-grown human beings. For Arendt, the “conservative function” that preserves traditions and the status quo in education comes to an end in the political realm. This conservative attitude in politics, she says, can only lead to destruction. As she explains: “because the world is made by mortals it wears out; and because it continuously changes its inhabitants it runs the risk of becoming as mortal as they. To preserve the world from the mortality of its creators and inhabitants it must be constantly set right anew”. Arendt maintains that to act and to change the world is expected of those who get educated and enter the community of adults and the political world.

6. Love for the World—Amor Mundi

School for Arendt is where we learn and decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and renew it or watch it fall as a victim of our very own condition of mortality. In order to change the world, one has to love and understand it. For Arendt, one has to learn to love the world, whether one wishes to propagate and preserve it or to set it entirely anew; love of the world for her is what constitutes the world because it “fits me into it”, it allows one to “under-stand”, to grasp while being in the midst of things.

The world has to be constantly renewed but this can only happen once we leave the concealment of the classroom and acquire the courage to enter the political realm. “This is the stage in the educational development of the student in which he or she is not only introduced to the world, but when he or she becomes *freely* and spontaneously acquainted with it” (Note 12).

So education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. Moreover, education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world. At this juncture, let us examine the human conditional of Natality.

7. The Human Condition of Natality

The most distinctive aspect of Arendt’s philosophy of education and politics is her concept of natality. Remarking on the importance of natality to Arendt’s thought, Patricia Bowen says, I quote it verbatim: “*What frequently has been neglected by her interpreters is Arendt’s sustained focus on the capacity for beginning in fact, in thought, and in action which the miracle of human birth announces. Arendt’s special term for the profound dimensions of this experience is natality. When accompanied by the attitude amor mundi, love for the world, the category of natality provides Arendt’s multifaceted works with a unity and structure by which to elucidate her thought. With Hannah Arendt, the experience of*

natality is elevated to a philosophic thematic; it is the inspiration and meaning governing her philosophic and political analyses” (Note 13).

She claims that “education belongs among the most elementary and necessary activities of human society, which never remains as it is but continuously renews itself through birth, through the arrival of new human beings” (Note 14).

Natality calls our attention to the unusual fact that Arendt approaches the education issue by referring it to the human condition of natality: Natality is the essence of education, the fact that we have all come into the world by being born. In *The Human Condition*, her most important theoretical work, the author asserts that each human birth represents a new beginning. Being born does not mean to merely appear into the world, but it represents a new beginning in the world. Natality cannot be confused, therefore, with the mere event of being born, but it constitutes the beginning, the new for the human being.

It is the human condition of natality that assures that one has the possibility to act as an agent in the world, initiating new unpredictable relationships. Natality is the main category in political thinking because it is the ontological source of action and, therefore, of freedom and of newness, which are intrinsic to the origin of men on Earth.

According to Arendt, “if a child weren’t a newcomer to this world, but only an unfinished live creature, education would be merely a life duty and it wouldn’t have to be consisted of nothing that goes beyond the concern with life preservation and training and the practice of living that all animals take on in relation to their children” (Note 15).

The human relationship with the world, mediated by education, is also a privileged relationship in the sense that it is never given beforehand, but it has to be entangled over again at each new birth, when comes to the world an entirely new being that is distinct from the other beings. Therefore, education can never be understood as something given, done and finished, but it has to be continually rethought due to the changes in the world, in which new human beings come to life.

Then, although Arendt’s concept of natality maintains connection with the fact of generating mere life (in Greek, *zoe*, the common condition of all life), the really important aspect to be emphasized is the relationship between human life and world. In a sense, plants and animals are also “sprung” in a determined habitat, but one cannot say they come into the world.

For Arendt, the world is a peculiar creation of humans, comprised of a set of durable artefacts and institutions, which are meant for allowing men to be continually connected to one another and letting them be disconnected at the same time. The world is not mistaken for the ground where they move or for the nature from which the material to produce their artefacts are extracted, but it has relation to the multiple artificial, institutional and cultural bounds that humans interpose one another, themselves and their own nature. According to Arendt’s ideas the world also refers to those subjects that are between men, that is, those subjects that are of their interest when they get into political affiliation with one another. In this more restricted sense, the world also determines the set of institutions and laws that are common and appear to all. It concerns that institutional place that must survive to the natural life and

death cycle of generations in order to secure some stability to a life that is under constant change, in a cycle without beginning or end, in which consecutive living and dying are embodied. Arendt affirms, as we have seen before, that “the essence of education is natality, the fact that human beings are born into the world” (Note 16). Therefore, it is through education that children begin to live in a world that is already old and that still remains unknown to the newcomers. The child is a stranger to us and to the world; it comes into the world and to us suddenly and only gradually becomes someone recognizable, that is, he or she becomes one of us. Education plays an important role in this change process of the child’s radical alterity into something recognizable. As Larrosa declares, “education is the way people, institutions and societies receive or respond to the arrival of those who are born” (Note 17).

However, this act of hosting or receiving the new in an already old world cannot come about without tension. At the same time that child and birth represent the safeguarding of world renewal, the world itself also needs to be put in safety against the child and youth. For that reason, Arendt argues that education is always unquestionably a field of tension, a critical domain in crisis. From this important thesis, education can be understood as a field of permanent tension between the new and established, that is, between the new beings and a world that is already firmly settled and has a long cultural tradition.

Understanding education as a field of indissoluble tension, Arendt affirms that “where the line between childhood and adulthood falls in each instance cannot be determined by a general rule” (Note 18). After all, as education is the only way we have to receive the children that are born and come into the world, the conflict and crisis are permanently established in this field, since at each birth a new tension emerges between the new and the cultural tradition, displayed in the conversion of that unknown being into “our” logic way to see and relate to the world.

This entails that children-as-students are newcomers who are not born into the world as finished products that merely need to be sorted out in a Platonic version of testing and categorizing (as mentioned above) but are, rather, in a state of becoming. As the subject of education, the child has a double aspect: he is in a state of becoming, like all animals, but is just as much “new in a world that is strange to him” (Note 19) (Arendt, 1960). She is not merely “...a new human being ... [but she] ... is becoming a human being” (Note 20) (Arendt, 1960). What Arendt means is that the child is born into the world and must be trained in those skills that are conducive to her survival like any other animal or organic being. But unlike other species, the child is born into a *world* that was there before her and will continue long after her death. It is that world in which she will spend her life engaged in activities that have less to do with survival than with the sort of working and acting that is, essentially, useless for sustenance and survival. Although useless, that sort of working and acting contributes to the world in such a way that makes the struggles and joys of carrying on in the world worthwhile at all.

8. Conclusions/Recommendations

In discussions about democratic education and in short education in general, there is a strong tendency to see the role of education as that of the preparation of children and young people for their future participation in democratic life. A major problem with this view is that it relies on the idea that the guarantee for democracy lies in the existence of a properly educated citizenry so that once all citizens have received their education, democracy will simply follow. In this article we have presented a critical analysis the work of Hannah Arendt, with a specific focus on her ideas about the relationship between education and politics and her views on the role of understanding in politics. Arendt's writings on the relationship between education and politics maintain that the child is not yet ready for political life, so education has to be separated from politics and seen as a preparation for future participation in political life. Her writings articulate what it means to exist politically. That is, to exist together in plurality. It also, highlights that political existence is neither based on, nor can be guaranteed by, moral qualities such as tolerance and respect. I submit that education should not be seen as the preparation of citizens for their future participation in political life. Rather, it should focus on creating opportunities for political existence inside and outside schools. Instead of thinking of democratic education as learning for political existence, it is argued that the focus of our educational endeavours should be on how we can learn from political existence. Hence while education is fundamental for founding a vibrant polis, it cannot be defined by and thereby reduced to this function. Rather, our education can provide us with access to the past, to tradition, to our roots, to stories, that will enable us contribute to the well being of our societies. However, the lesson that Arendt's concept of proper education has to teach us is that we cannot resolve a political problem without first of all understanding the meaning of the political. This is something we cannot learn in school, but something we must discover in the vibrant and robust public realm.

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Notes

Note 1. https://www.google.de/search?q=PHILOSOPHERS+AND+aUTHORS+ON+DEFINITION+OF+eDUCATION&hl=de&gbv=2&prmd=ivns&ei=S3WPWb71A4GOU96lh_gE&start=20&sa=N

Note 2. Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 32-33.

Note 3. Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*, 197. Despite this self centered motivation to act socially and the treating of other humans as means to one's ends, Arendt interestingly uses a social contract theory to explain what keeps members of the public together. Cf. Pitkin, Haanah F., *Justice: On relating private and public op. cit*, p. 337.

Note 4. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

Note 5. *Ibid.*

Note 6. Arendt draws here from Hegel's conception of the system of needs, namely that sphere in which economic exchange activities for the sole satisfaction of exchangers' needs becomes the norm of human interaction Cf Benhabib, Seyla, *The reluctant modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Thousand Oaks, London & New Delhi: Sage Pub. 1996, 24.

Note 7. Arendt H., *The Human Condition*. 30.

Note 8. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

Note 9. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

Note 10. Arendt, H. *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1960), 188.

Note 11. *Ibid.*

Note 12. Biesta GJJ (2010). How to exist politically and learn from it: Hannah Arendt and the problem of democratic education, *Teachers College Record*, 112(2), 556-575.

Note 13. Patricia Bowen Moore, *Natality, Amor Mundi and Nuclearism in the Thought of Hannah Arendt*. <https://link.springer.com/chapter/1>

Note 14. Arendt Hannah, *Between Past and Future*, op. Cit., p. 185.

Note 15. *Ibid.*

Note 16. ARENDT, H. *Entre o passado e o futuro*. (Tradução Mauro W. Barbosa. 5. ed. São Paulo: Perspectiva), 223.

Note 17. LARROSA, J. O enigma da infância. In: *Pedagogia profana: danças, piruetas e mascaradas*. (Porto Alegre: Contra-Bando, 1998), 234-235.

Note 18. ARENDT, H. *Entre o passado e o futuro* (Tradução Mauro W. Barbosa. 5. ed. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2005), 246.

Note 19. Arendt Hannah, *Between Past and Future*, op. Cit., p. 185.

Note 20. *Ibid.*