

## **Hannah Arendt: natality as ethical education**

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### **Abstract**

*In recent years, higher education across the globe has been increasingly marketized, accompanied by a technocratic approach that views education as a utilitarian tool in service of economic ends. A value-neutral, managerial approach to education educates young people into forming similarly 'neutral-free attitudes', at the loss of moral formation that is able to affect social change. As a result, key character qualities and communication skills that enable civic and democratic life are effaced. This paper addresses the contemporary crisis of education through the work of Hannah Arendt, and her critique of education in the context of her phenomenological account of subjectivity in modernity, particularly through her concepts of action and natality, and her description of the changing social and relational structure of modernity. It critically examines Arendt's vision of education in the context of the organization of human life, particularly as she relates it to political freedom, and outlines some examples of how Arendt might be applied to the challenges that face the contemporary university.*

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Education, Arendt, Natality, Plurality, Action

### **Introduction**

In his essay 'Academic Capitalism: Towards a Global Free Trade Zone in University Services', Professor of Sociology Helmut Dubiel recounts the shock he experienced when returning from a 5-year absence as a visiting professorship at UC Berkeley and New York University, to his home university in Giessen, Germany: 'I had to literally rub my eyes' (2010, p. 61). What he refers to were the changes taking place in European universities as a result of the Bologna Process, which commenced in 1999; this resulted in a change in which the higher education institution was becoming 'a firm,' (2010, p. 63). Dubiel critically analyses this change within the chronology of the modern university, which Dubiel notes began with the 'Prussian Revolution', instigated by Wilhelm Von Humboldt in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Humboldt sought to bring together two ideals: knowledge acquisition and knowledge communication, under the notion of *Bildung*, understood as the self-formation or self-cultivation of the subject. In this context, it was envisioned that the role of the state was to educate 'individuals to develop their unique characters rather than by subjecting them to a stultifying vocational training'; if such a process of education were allowed, it was envisioned that each person would 'also be a productive and contributing citizen' (Sorkin, 1983, p. 65). Dubiel notes the second significant revolution as occurring in the 1960 and 1970s. This culture revolution was accompanied by demand for increased participation in

social and democratic processes, and led to the widening of participation in higher education. This would seem to be compatible with the Humboldtian ideal of education as leading to the individual's capacity to make autonomous, self-directed choices. Yet, as Dubiel notes, what was a 'decidedly grassroots, democratically organized reform movement' nevertheless joined with 'a bureaucratically oriented conglomerate that represented corporate interests' (2010, p. 65). When Dubiel returned to Europe in the early 2000s, he found a third revolution underway in university development, a counter-revolution, the driving force of which was the global world economy, that had 'jettisoned the normative, largely radical-democratic legacies of the student movement,' and in which he suggests the nation-state and associated culture are destined to play 'an ever-narrower role' (2010, p. 66). There are serious ethical implications to the status of the university as an educational institution, and the academic's role as teachers of future generations, as a result of the latest 'revolutionary' change in the development of the contemporary university. The public status of university is predicted to decline in the new market place defined by competition for scarce resources (Dubiel, 2010, p. 71). Further to this, the managerial approach to education that operates in a value-neutral way, 'has the effect of promoting (whether intended or not) the technicist view that all problems have a value-neutral technical solution,' and subsequently educates young people into forming similarly 'neutral-free attitudes' (Ormell, 2013, p. 24). Thus, the language of moral formation (a legacy of the Humboldtian education revolution) that is able to affect social change (a legacy of the 1960s and 1970s cultural revolution) disappears. Instead, student career success or 'personal economic prosperity' is seen as 'both the marker of student achievement and the primary mission of the university' (Zakin, 2017, p. 121).

The political philosopher Hannah Arendt can provide an important voice in debating the direction of the contemporary university. Some contemporary philosophers and educational theorists are using Arendt to draw attention to the 'ethically important moments' that must remain key to teaching in the university classroom (Taylor, 2017); to critique the contemporary emphasis on problem-solving and outcome-driven approaches to education (Hinchcliffe, 2013); and to contest the marketized approach of the contemporary university (Zakin, 2017), particularly through challenging higher education leadership (Berger, 2015; Gunter, 2013). While Arendt has been described as perpetuating the political values of European conservatives (Gines, 2014, Butler, 2007, Benhabib, 1992), and as anti-democratic (Lysaker, 2015), nevertheless Arendt's views on education enable a bridge between the old (tradition) and the new (change), and as such 'constitutes a genuine contribution to the debate over schooling in a democratic society' (Gordon, 1999, p. 161). This paper addresses the contemporary crisis of education through the work of Hannah Arendt, and her critique of education in the context of her phenomenological account of subjectivity in modernity, particularly through her concepts of action and natality, and her description of the changing social and relational structure of modernity. It critically examines Arendt's vision of education in the context of the organization of human life, particularly as she relates it to political freedom, and it provides several examples of recent scholarship in education that demonstrates how Arendt might be applied to challenge the neoliberal direction of the contemporary university.

## **Hannah Arendt's critique of education**

Arendt is primarily known as a political philosopher, and has written little directly on education. Key terms such as pedagogy, education, curriculum or teaching are not mentioned in her magnum opus *The Human Condition* (Ormell, 2013, p. 25). And for reasons that will become clear, what Arendt has written on education requires careful reading in the context of her wider work and ideas. Her most comprehensive reflections on education can be found in her essay 'The crisis of education', written in 1954. Here she offers a critical perspective on what she believes was a crisis of education in America's progressive educational system (shaped by Dewey), 'which valorizes whatever is currently on trend and reflects the desire for and belief in the possibility of self-perfection' (Zakin, 2017, p. 120), a valorization also evident in the global neo-liberal world. Arendt identifies three basic assumptions that have led to the crisis.

First is the idea that there exists a child's world, an autonomous society formed by children that must be left to themselves. As a result of this idea, 'the real and normal relations between children and adults, arising from the fact that people of all ages are always simultaneously together in the world, are thus broken off', writes Arendt (1968a, p. 181). That is, there is no concept of inter-generational presence in contemporary schooling. The child is now subjected to a group of their peers, which for Arendt means nothing less than preparing a child for future subjection to tyranny, where rule is driven only by 'will and interest', rather than law, (Arendt 1968b, p. 97). From the standpoint of the child, there is no possibility of rebellion as there is no sense of hierarchy and inequality, and no sense of solidarity with those who are subjected to the authority of the hierarchy, in this case represented by the adult world. Such a child is in a hopeless position: 'of a minority of one confronted by the absolute majority of all others', writes Arendt (1968a, p. 181). With the loss of adult influence, the child has been banished from the adult world, the world is barred for them and they cannot escape the tyranny of their peers.

The second assumption is to do with teaching. This is the separation of the 'science of teaching' in general, from the context of what is to be taught. The teacher can teach anything and is not required to actually have mastery of content in an area. Therefore, the teacher does not have any 'authority' in what they teach, and as a result – 'the non-authoritarian teacher, who would like to abstain from all methods of compulsion because he is able to rely on his own authority, can no longer exist', writes Arendt (1968a, p. 182). Without authority, teachers are forced to rely on compulsion and coercion, evidenced by the increased emphasis on testing.

The third assumption is the priority of doing for learning. Here Arendt argues that the outcome of pragmatism, that you can know and only understand what you have done yourself, was rather poorly applied to pedagogy generally, where skill replaced content. With the substitution of doing for learning came also an emphasis of play over working, effectively barring the child from the world of grownups, a situation Arendt believed was deplorable as it fails to recognize that childhood is preparation for adulthood.

This holding back of the child is artificial because it breaks off the natural relationship between grown-ups and children, which consists among other things in teaching and learning, and because at the same time it belies the fact that the child

is a developing human being, that childhood is a temporary stage, a preparation for adulthood. (Arendt, 1968a, p. 184)

By saying that childhood is a preparation for adulthood, Arendt does not mean to suggest that education is the formation of individuals to fulfil their potential, nor is it the cultivation of human nature. It is precisely this that Arendt identified as the American crisis of education, driven as it was by the 'progressive ideals' of education, 'which valorizes whatever is currently on trend and reflects the desire for and belief in the possibility of self-perfection' (Zakin, 2017, p. 120). Something similar can be said of the neoliberal attempt to link education to the perfection of market economies and outcomes. Instead, Arendt suggests childhood is a preparation for adulthood as taking up responsibility for preserving the world of plurality, the political world, for coming generations. Thus, education is preparation for the task of adulthood, which is the preservation of and caring for the world. Why does Arendt suggest this, and what is involved in the task of caring for and preserving the world? To answer this question, an overview of Arendt's view of the organization of human life is necessary.

### **The organization of human life: labour and work**

In the *Human Condition*, Arendt divides the realm of human life into three areas: labour, work and action. These divisions are ontological distinctions, where each 'involves a fundamentally different mode of activity [...] with distinct properties, meanings and logic' (Walsh, 2011, p. 124). Labor corresponds to caring for our biological needs; as such it is a perpetual cycle of meeting needs that is similar to the animal need to survive in nature. It most closely corresponds to requirements of organic, biological life, similar to the birth and lives of animals. It is humankind's 'oldest and most natural burden' (Arendt, 1998, p. 4), characterized by the peasant laboring in the field, subject to the circle of life and death, food, clothing and shelter. Negatively, it is tied to the survival of the body in the face of the nature's indifference.

Work corresponds to our ability to fabricate or make things beyond our attending to our immediate biological needs. Human activity in this mode is represented by the builder, the architect, the artist and legislator, and symbolizes the specific human enterprise of enabling 'stability and solidity [...] to house the unstable and mortal creature which is man' (Arendt, 1998, 136). Work can produce quasi permanent artefacts, whereas labour is cyclical, ending only to commence again. Work therefore has an aspect of durability to it. For Arendt, work brings some freedom. It is no longer tied to the household but takes place in a common world; harnessed towards an end or goal, it is 'communal organized activity, oriented towards the construction of a shared objective' (Walsh, 2011, p. 126). It is through work that humans come to find themselves in a world – work creates a human world as opposed to a struggle with nature. Yet, over against an individual's attempt to create enduring work stands the human world that outlasts the individual creator. Negatively, therefore, work can also lead to the reification of the world of work itself, in order to provide security.

While there is distinction between the 'reproductive' nature of labour and the 'productive' nature of work (Higgins 2011, p. 86), the distinction between the two isn't always clear. One might say there is collaboration between labour and work, in that the latter enables the care

of the biological body with a greater degree of success through the use of enduring tools and structures. What the two do have in common is that they both enable predictable and measurable outcomes, or teleological ends, that can be determined ahead of time. Education can be understood in this context as teaching skills needed to survive as biological creatures in the world, and the skills needed to engage in the world of fabrication. Such skills can be measured and anticipated in a predictable fashion, in terms of predetermined goals such as skills needed to provide materials for improved quality of life, or teaching of skills required in the world of work, here understood as the fabrication of objects including tools, buildings, and cultural artefacts.

### **The organization of human life: action and natality**

Action is a wholly distinct category from labour or work that relates to ‘the in-between’ or the web of human relationships (Arendt, 1998, p. 183), and a special combination of equality and distinctiveness (Higgins, 2011, p. 88). According to Arendt, action belongs in the political sphere, the highest expression of human engagement in the world. The concept of action is multifaceted, and has both an ontological foundation, and a phenomenological descriptive aspect in its manifestation in political life.

The ontological foundation for Arendt’s concept of action is natality, described in the *Human Condition* as follows:

‘[O]f the three [activities], action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities.’ (Arendt, 1998, p. 90)

We can interpret natality as the ontological condition of humanity, or the pre-political world into which we are born. Natality thus understood is pre-worldly or pre-language in origin. The birth of the child into the world signifies the pre-political experience of potentiality or the innate power to begin based on Augustine’s differentiation between ‘the *principium* of the Heaven and the Earth and the *initium* of Man’ (Arendt, 1978, p. 110). It testifies to the highest capacity for human beings because it is common to each individual by virtue of their birth, their presence in the world.

Action that springs from our condition as natals has a number of distinct characteristics: newness, createdness, temporality and memory. First, newness is a feature of natality, as our capacity to begin and where the new ‘always appears in the guise of a miracle’ writes Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1998, p. 178). As symbolising the new, or the capacity to begin anew, natality also shows that the birth of the individual is the unpredictable, spontaneous event; the beginning of life contains a moment of radical openness, of orientation towards the future. Second, natality testifies to our human condition as created beings, dependent on others, inter-subjective, existing ‘in the mode of relation’, writes Arendt in her dissertation (1996, p. 53). Finally, as created beings, we are also temporal beings; ‘everything that began exists in the mode of becoming’ (Arendt, 1996, p. 54). Here Arendt again draws on Augustine, who envisioned that identity is constituted in time, establishing memory through looking backwards to origins, and forward to the possibility

of the new in life. Indeed, when Arendt first introduces the concept of natality in her dissertation, *The Concept of Love in Augustine*, she links memory and natality decisively together: 'the decisive fact determining man as a conscious, remembering being is birth or 'natality', that is, the fact that we have entered the world through birth' (Arendt, 1996, p. 51). The concepts of newness and createdness as both constitutive of the human condition are perhaps counter-intuitive. Yet, for Arendt, natality understood as the defining capacity of humanity to make a spontaneous beginning must be joined by an understanding of humanity as constituted in time and in relation to others, as 'created' into an already existing and finite world. Natality contains therefore both a moment of radical openness towards the future, but once born into the time order, into temporality, personhood should be understood as 'an unprecedented experience of the new in a preceded reality' (Bowen-Moore, 1989, p. 22). Through her concept of natality, Arendt describes the human condition as containing the possibility for the new, unexpected and radically creative, but recognizes that this can only be expressed in the already constituted world of other, equally new and free, human beings. Because action brings together the new and unexpected, with inter-relatedness and temporality, it is the one mode of being that cannot be captured by either the repetitive, predictable and cyclical nature of labour, nor the semi-permanent and enduring structure of fabrication. Action takes place only between human beings without the mediation of things or matter, and, unlike fabrication, has no 'output' or 'result' that corresponds to the human intention of the act (Young-Bruehl, 2006, p. 88). Action corresponds to the human condition of plurality and equality, a plurality that is specifically the condition of all political life, argues Arendt (1998, p. 9).

### **Natality, education and political life**

For Arendt, education involves preserving the world of plurality for coming generations, or the preservation of, and caring for, the world. Arendt sees education as closely linked to political action, describing both as belonging to 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' (1968a, p. 185). Education that prepares individuals to undertake action in the public sphere must be mindful of the ontological nature of action as grounded in natality, and as expressed through the features of newness, createdness, and temporality/memory. As already noted, newness appears into the existing order, or the beginner is born into an existing world. While the birth of the child or the beginner in the world is marked by the new and unknown, nevertheless the individual is born into an existing communal world, effectively as a stranger who learns to answer the question 'who are you?' in the context of her location or place in the communal world. The beginner who is born into the world is completely dependent on the hospitality and care of the world into which she is born, and her own place in it will be determined by the kind of welcome extended to her entry into the world. In turn, her unique and distinctive identity, revealed in her learning to answer the question, 'who are you?' contributes to, and changes also, the world into which she is born. Because the beginner and the world exist in the mode of relation through our condition as created, the beginner and the world are bound together by a 'promise' that is twofold: it is a promise to the child on behalf of others that the common world into which she is born will be preserved as a place into which she can learn to know herself as a unique individual, a 'who'; it is a promise to

others on behalf of the child that this will also be granted to future generations, and that beginnings will continue to be made for the sake of the world. Understanding the concept of natality, of the birth of the beginner into an existing world, we can see that this translates also to the place of the child in the school, and in relation to the teacher. Beginners or students are new in a world that is strange, and in the process of becoming persons in the world. For Arendt, the student signifies the double relationship of human beings to life and to the world. The child is both new in relation to what she calls 'a world' but the world precedes the child, and will continue after their death. Teachers represent the adults who introduce the child for the world, and who have taken on the responsibility for this introduction, and the preservation of the world for future generations. For Arendt, the authority of teachers therefore lies not in qualifications, but is a sign that they have assumed responsibility for the world to which they introduce children. Teachers are authority figures, not because they have 'authority over' others, but because they enact the promise between the beginner and the world in which the young are granted a place in which to mature. Children require time and concealment to be able to mature undisturbed, suggests Arendt. The metaphor for this is that of the nurturing in darkness, and the maturation in light: 'Everything that lives [...] emerges from darkness and, however strong its natural tendency to thrust itself into the light, it nevertheless needs the security of darkness to grow at all' (Arendt, 1968a, p. 186). As an intermediary, the school makes possible the introduction of the young and the newcomers and strangers to the world. School as an institution represents the world, it is not itself the world. Teachers act as mediators to, and preservers of, the world. For this reason, Arendt sees conservatism, in the sense of preserving the past for the sake of the present, as the essence of educational activity: 'whose task is always to cherish and protect something the child against the world, the world against the child, the new against the old, the old against the new' (1968a, p. 192). We educate the young for 'a world that is or is becoming out of joint', which as created by mortals, and its inhabitations are constantly changing (Arendt 1968a, p. 192). For Arendt, authority is linked with responsibility of preserving a space for the sake of the new and unexpected to be born. Rejecting the authority of the school in this task is a sign that adults have refused responsibility for the world in which children are born.

Because the adult makes the promise to preserve the world for the young and the new, Arendt argues that tradition is key to education, as it introduces the possibility for remembrance, memory and a sense of belonging to the temporal order of the world; tradition enables the construction of an individual identity within a community. This shared identity is constituted through the stories in which the actor and the world are shown in their inter-related meaningfulness: 'it is through linking one's disclosure with the web of human relations that a unique life story can emerge' (Berger, 2015, p. 484). Such stories do not solve problems, nor produce outcomes but 'illuminate existence' and 'disrupt hegemonic processes and reveal new possibilities of *being* and *acting* in the world', argues Berger (2015, pp. 483, 486). The stories of one's tradition are key to enabling later political action. Thus, education is more than the skills needed to survive in the world of labour (nature), much as animals train their young. It is also more than the productive work of fabrication. Education is the introduction into 'a world' that is uniquely human. This is the common and political world of plurality and equality, in which human beings are unique in needing to find

expression, to find their 'place' in the human world. It is also the world of action and speech, made possible through language.

### **Critique of Arendt's view on politics and education**

Arendt's views on education have received criticism, particularly as she attempted to apply it to actual events in the American social context, where education and politics are closely linked as facilitating social justice. Arendt does not see education as relevant for social and political emancipation. Indeed, in her essay *Crisis on Education*, Arendt specifically argues for a separation between the school and politics, suggesting that children should not bear the responsibility for the actions of adults in the public sphere. Such a theoretical perspective appears to have little relevance to actual life, where education *is* politicized in an attempt to address issues of inequality and disparity. Arendt's failure in applying her theory around education to the socio-political context in the US can be illustrated through her essay, 'Reflections on Little Rock', published prior to the essay on education, in 1959. It responded to events surrounding the direct intervention of the Federal government into state-legislated segregation of black children from white schools. Arendt argues that a newspaper photograph provoked her to write the essay:

I think no one will find it easy to forget the photograph reproduced in newspapers and magazines throughout the country, showing a Negro girl, accompanied by a white friend of her father, walking away from school, persecuted and followed into bodily proximity by a jeering and grimacing mob of youngsters. (Arendt, 1959, p. 50)

Arendt's description of this scene is a perfect exemplar of the kind of tyranny she envisioned would take place in an autonomous society formed by children and left to themselves, as she described it several years later in her essay on education. The lack of solidarity amongst children made possible through the hierarchy of the educational institution has disappeared, and the girl is subjected to the tyranny of the mob. Arendt comments that: 'The picture looked to me like a fantastic caricature of progressive education which, by abolishing the authority of adults, implicitly denies their responsibility for the world into which they have borne children and refuses the duty of guiding them' (Arendt 1959, p. 50). The girl in this instance is asked to be a 'hero', while she is abandoned by the adults who have 'for generations' been unable to work out the issues of segregation, argues Arendt (1959, p. 50).

Arendt's essay on Little Rock has been extensively critiqued for multiple reasons. Significant for the purposes of this paper is that Arendt's description and assessment of the photograph and event in question was factually wrong (Gines, 2014, p. 16). Kathryn Gines in *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* points out that Arendt conflates two different images that appear on the front page of the New York Times on September 5, 1957 – and the actual circumstances of the image that most resembles Arendt's description quite clearly reject Arendt's interpretation of the young woman in question. According to Gines, Arendt's inattention to the facts shows that she does not seek understanding of what is happening, 'rather, she thinks that she already understands. Arendt looks upon the photographs with already formed assumptions that adversely impact how she sees and



judges them' (Gines, 2014, p. 19). Arendt herself acknowledged that she had neither experience, nor extensive knowledge of circumstances and issues surrounding the desegregation movement, and she later reversed her position on her original reflections on Little Rock (Young-Bruehl, 2004, p. 316). In the preliminary remarks to the essay, Arendt confessed that she initially approached the events as 'an outsider', motivated by her own 'sympathy for the cause of the Negroes as for all oppressed or underprivileged peoples', something she felt was born out of her own experience of being a Jew (1959, p. 46). Yet, Gines argues that Arendt's analysis of the Little Rock events points to systemic errors in Arendt's organization of society, something echoed by Judith Butler (2007), who scathingly refers to Arendt's 'presumption about the cultural superiority of Europe', and Seyla Benhabib, who refers to this more generously as 'a blind spot in Hannah Arendt's thought' (1992, p. 94). The 'systematic errors' or 'blind spot' that critics identify is located in Arendt's rigid separation of the private and public spheres, and her rejection of the concept of the social as having any political import. Arendt's private-public distinction is based on the Greek division between the household (*oikos*) and the public market place (*polis*). In this division, the work of labour as envisioned in Arendt's organization of society, belongs to the private sphere of the household and was sustained by slaves (and women) who were subjected to the violence of the head of the household (*despot*). The latter, in order to seek his own freedom in the public realm, was required to oppress those in the household. The private sphere in ancient Greece was therefore characterized by inequality. On this account, Arendt can be read to exclude those trapped in the private realm of labour or the household from public engagement, to some extent appearing to justify the oppression that makes great figures who are free to engage in the public realm possible. In Arendt's account, the many are required to serve the needs of a few, who in turn can enjoy unfettered freedom through violence over others. As a result, the public sphere is 'permeated by a fiercely agonal spirit where everybody had to constantly distinguish themselves from all others' (Gines, 2014, p. 41). The public/private division and her rejection of the social means that Arendt appears to relegate issues of sexism, racism to the private sphere. The oppressed will never experience the agency idealized by Arendt, and no mechanism exists to enable them to do so (Gines, 2014, p. 57). This apparent conservatism about social/political emancipatory projects, has led critics to claim Arendt's thought is 'anti-democratic due to her seemingly reactionary, elitist, and hierarchical view of the political' (Lysaker, 2015, p. 304).

It is true that Arendt saw the Greek concept of the *polis* as exemplary of political action, as a public space where individual achievements occurs in the presence of others. Immortality is gained briefly in such a space, in a struggle with others who also desire to be heard. Yet, Arendt also notes that in the political world 'we act among and with adults and equals' (1968, p. 192). Arendt therefore did not simply affirm the inequality of Greek society and see this is a viable option for modernity. She attempts to provide both a 'phenomenological account of subjectivity in modernity' and 'a social-historical account of the changing social and relational structure of modernity (Higgins, 2011, p. 89). This dual approach may lead the reader to conflate Arendt's social-historical account of the origins of modernity, with a prescriptive account of how modernity should resolve its phenomenological worldlessness. But if we return to the ontological foundation of nativity, a different Arendtian critique of social justice emerges. Arendt's critique of the modern social justice movement might well

be that it embodies the Enlightenment belief in progress, without taking into account the radical unpredictability of human action. Arendt's ontology of natality also rejects a conservative political view that would valorize tradition as the best way to govern society. For Arendt, the political sphere is not one marked by tradition, but by openness to the future and the unexpected, precisely through the struggle that takes place amongst equals. Conservatism in political life leads to the ruin of the world, since the world is mortal, and humans must always work to keep civilization from decay. Arendt further recognizes that modern society no longer looks to authority, nor tradition. This, argues Arendt, is precisely what has given rise to the problem of education in the modern world. Education by its very nature requires authority and tradition in preserving the world for the new, hence Arendt's insistence on a rigid separation between education and public/political life. She provides little detail on how education of children should take place, content to leave it 'to the experts and the pedagogues' (1968, p. 196) and this perhaps aggravates Arendt's misunderstanding of what actually takes place in schools. What does interest Arendt (and cannot be turned over to specialists) is the relationship between adults and children or, as she puts it, our attitude towards education, which '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 the ruin which, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable' (1968a, p. 196). Education asks that we love our children enough not to expel them from our world, but that we prepare them in advance for the 'task of renewing a common world', suggests Arendt.

It should be noted that invoking the concept of natality as a correction to critical readings of Arendt, does not provide a silver bullet to address the condition of modernity. While some have read Arendt's ontology of natality as 'necessarily bound up with optimism and a longing for certainty' (Biss 2012, p. 767), Arendt in her work is at times ambivalent about the concept of natality. Natality can also 'dissipate into a vortex of worldlessness' and is powerless to 'manufacture a new man' (Zakin 2017, p. 126). The terms 'natality' and 'worldliness' while used in the context of political action, can also be applied to the private sphere of labour, marked by our birth into the natural world as biological creatures and conditioned by our mortality as much as by our ability to be creative. The characteristics of natality when applied to the task of labour draw attention to the 'wordlessness' of modernity, a condition characterized by a suspension in time, 'discontinuous with what came before and what might yet come', and inwardness, where 'the experience of interiority takes precedence over public existence' (Zakin 2017, p. 123). Thus, the concept of natality itself has a shadow side in that it does not lead automatically to action in concert with others in the public sphere. Without the mediation of authority and tradition, it can perversely lead individuals and society towards a reification of the private, understood precisely in the liberal terms of pursuing one's own interests, the very condition of the neoliberal model of society. Invoking natality is best used as a critique to highlight 'that which perpetually escapes even the most reified order of presence' (Villa 1996, p. 266); natality points to the futility of putting faith into work or fabrication as the attempt to escape the worldlessness that is characteristic of the human condition. Fabrication, whether through the work of the builder, the architect, the artist or the legislator, cannot provide the secure future desired by humanity. What remains for us is an acceptance of our condition as natals, and a trust in our capacity to act in concert amongst others, even if that involves an

element of 'agonistic struggle' as we recognize our limited capacity to act in the face of the other's freedom.

### **Nativity, ethics and higher education**

While in the Arendtian model, schools may be required to shelter children from the robust life of the public sphere, higher education certainly belongs to that world in which young people begin to make an appearance into the public world of action. Carol Taylor invokes Arendt in her examination of what she calls 'ethically important moments' in the classroom, moments that she argues are currently in danger of being lost in the economic instrumentalism and marketization of higher education in which learning is viewed as 'a privatised, individualised means oriented to instrumental ends' (2017, p. 232). 'Ethically important moments' provide the opportunity for young adults to reflect on what it means to emerge in the space of appearance in which all are considered equal. Higher education classrooms provide a 'public space where equals come together to initiate action' (Taylor 2017, p. 235). Taylor uses key Arendtian concepts such as nativity, action, speech and freedom to envision 'the higher education classroom [...] [as] a high-stakes political place conditioned by self-exposure and the responsibility to others that attend nativity' that enables the 'emergence of unique individuals through courage and risk (2016, pp. 236, 239).

Nor is an Arendtian insight restricted to the university classroom location. Emily Zakin (2017) invokes Arendt reflection of education as a direct critique of the marketized approach, but also the contemporary liberal and conservative defenders of education as political and moral character formation. There are those who valorize the 'timeless past', the conservative defenders who blame postmodernism for the demise of education; but there are also those who valorize the 'timeless future', progressives who believe inclusivity, respect for difference and addressing power imbalances will improve social cohesion, argues Zakin (2017, p. 121). These projects can all fall prey to totalitarianism by viewing children as material for fabrication, as part of the world of work. Geoff Hinchliffe uses Arendt to critique problem-solving and outcome driven approaches to education, arguing that these undermine the activity of learning itself, which must be undertaken for its own sake, unmotivated by external goals and requirements; such education is characterized by Arendt's concept of action – which embraces both ethics and risk within its framework, argues Hinchliffe (2013, pp 18-20). Hinchliffe shows that Arendt also has something to offer higher education leadership, which has been co-opted into the marketization model, required to deliver pre-determined outcomes in efficient ways to consumers. Hinchliffe suggests teaching should be seen as a 'risky business', as teachers bring something new into the world of students; the creativity of this newness implies a lack of control over the outcomes of the education process, something that is to be encouraged by teachers within students (2013, p. 20).

Iris Berger (2015) and Helen Gunter (2013) directly invoke Arendt as they critique leadership in contemporary educational institutions. Berger argues that leaders in education have an ethical duty to preserve the conditions of plurality that affirm the uniqueness of students and enables them to show their distinctiveness, affirming their plurality or infinite distinctiveness (2015, pp. 478, 479.) Rather than one of control, Arendt presents a vision of leadership that is first of all relational, and it is reflected not in achievement and outcomes

at the end of a process, but in the willingness of the leader to show initiative and take a risk, particularly through speaking in the public sphere through the use of provocative stories (Berger, 2015, pp. 478, 485). Gunter uses Arendt's political and historical thinking as a lens through which to examine 'the interrelationship between plural persons generating ideas and taking action, and can illuminate the dangers of substituting action with activity', particularly for those in educational leadership, management and administration (ELMA) (2013, p. 1).

## **Conclusion**

Arendt rejects both a naïve progressivism in education, perhaps represented by those who enthusiastically tie education to the emancipatory project, and a retrieval of education based on a traditional religious point of view, such as that embedded in conservatism. It would therefore be a mistake to suppose that invoking Arendt in this paper is done in order to call for a return to either the political agenda or the ethical purpose of education. Arendt tries to avoid either of these alternatives. Indeed, if the marketized, bureaucratized, moralized or politicized visions all represent an attempt to reform education as a process of self-formation, then Arendt's view is simply to point out that this is wrong; education is the process by which new beings are introduced into an old world, it brings the unpredictable and new together with an old and seemingly stable order, expressed in tradition. For this reason, Arendt's concept of action in relation to education does not simply affirm a retrieval of the past, despite the importance of tradition in establishing a sense of narrative and belonging. Arendt illuminates 'the temporal precarity that is intrinsic to the human condition' (Zakin, 2017, p. 122), the condition of human beings as natals, and that makes the unique human world in which we exist actually possible. In such a world, there must be a public realm of contestation between equals who have the communally constructed self-identity, shared stories and language to be equipped to act in such a world. Without a 'politically guaranteed public realm, freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance', writes Arendt (1977, p. 149).

Undoubtedly those in leadership in higher education face a difficult task, required to deliver education in a marketized model that is at best ignorant of, and perhaps even undermines, key values of education. The marketized model can only survive parasitically on the ideas and stories of the humanist foundations of the university, and the legacy of an emancipatory vision of education, whether this is understood in terms of individual autonomy, as per Humboldt's ideal, or the political emancipation envisioned in the 1960s and 1970s cultural revolution. Arendt recognizes that political freedom in modernity comes at a price. It should not be understood as the choice to pursue private ends, but is active and public in the world. Arendt's critique of capitalism is that it views the political primarily as economic management. Such forms of governance remain in the first stage of human existence: that of labor and are unable to be expressions of political freedom. Education in the neoliberal model is reduced to preparing children to be labourers, or workers but not citizens. This is not to disparage the role of education that prepares students for participation in the

workforce. Labour, work and action should all be understood as having their place in what Arendt calls the *vita activa* (Walsh, 2011, p.127). However, we should be aware of the distinct properties, meanings and logics of each, and the consequences of transvaluation, of replacing the educational goal of political action with workplace training. Arendt provides a timely reminder ‘that we need to educate the rising generations in a more full-blooded, personal, moral and imaginative way’ (Ormell, 2013, p. 26). The communicative models of unique disciplines within the University, particularly within the arts and humanities that are now under threat because of the ‘one language’ of marketization, must be preserved in order to equip future generations with the capacity to act creatively and freely in a pluralist world, not one necessarily marked by agreement, but one in which contestation takes place through robust but respectful debate. Such a world is not defined by one global dominating worldview, but by a plurality of voices that have sufficient cultural capital and communication skills in order to discuss and live with a plurality of meanings and values within a shared world.

Arendt’s reflections on education can shed light or draw attention to the role education plays in making possible this engagement in the public sphere. In questioning the direction of the contemporary university, scholars in education are now increasingly drawing on the work of the philosopher Hannah Arendt. This paper is one such contribution, and it is both timely in addressing pressing contemporary issues around higher education, and in extending Arendtian scholarship into broader fields.

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