

## WHY DO PHILOSOPHERS AND EDUCATORS KEEP COMING BACK TO HANNAH ARENDT?

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### INTRODUCTION

It has been over twenty years since my collection of essays *Hannah Arendt and Education: Renewing our Common World* was first published (2001, Westview Press).<sup>2</sup> The novelty of this book was in its being the first to make an explicit connection between Arendt's political concepts and the field of education. Before the publication of *Hannah Arendt and Education: Renewing our Common World* very few articles and no books had been written that explored the implications of her insights for educational theory and practice. In part for that reason, my original prediction was that the 2001 collection of essays on Arendt and education would be a niche book, one that would appeal to a relatively small number of Arendtian scholars. Fortunately, this prediction proved to be wrong and *Hannah Arendt and Education: Renewing our Common World* reached a much broader audience than I had anticipated. In fact, this book is still in print, having sold thousands of copies, translated into several languages, and continues to receive favorable reviews.

Most importantly, is the fact that in the last two decades, we have witnessed numerous scholarly articles written and presentations in professional conferences delivered that attempted to take seriously the very question that prompted me to edit the 2001 collection: what can Arendt's political, social, and moral insights bring to education? For instance, *Educational Theory*, a leading North American journal in philosophy of education, has published about twenty articles that are based on Arendt in the last two decades. During this same timeframe, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, a journal published by Taylor and Francis, has featured close to a hundred essays that touch on Arendt's ideas. Moreover, hardly a year goes by in which one or more paper presentations that rely on Arendtian concepts are included in the program of the Philosophy of Education Annual Conference. Thus, given this sustained interest in the significance of Hannah Arendt's insights for education, it makes sense to consider the question: Why do philosophers and educators keep coming back to Hannah Arendt?

This essay seeks to respond to that question by highlighting what I believe Arendt can offer philosophers of education and educators in general. More Specifically, I argue that there are at least four distinct aspects of her political and philosophical writings that continue to attract philosophers and educators alike. First, is the fact that Arendt's works feature some perceptive philosophical and political concepts like natality, action, plurality, and forgiveness, which have a wealth of implications for

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<sup>2</sup> See *Hannah Arendt and Education: Renewing our Common World*, ed. by Mordechai Gordon, New York: Westview Press, 2001.

education. Second, Arendt's affinity for conceptual distinctions (e.g., public vs. private, political vs. social, and action vs. work and labor) has provoked both admiration and resistance among those that study her writings. Third, philosophers, educators, and other scholars continue to grapple with some of Arendt's most controversial notions such as "the banality of evil" and statements like that "Eichmann never realized what he was doing." Finally, is the notion that Arendt was a unique and original thinker, one who does not fit neatly into any of our common ideological factions like conservative versus liberal or reactionary versus progressive. As such, Arendt's ideas not only attract scholars from a broad range of political affinities but also those that see in her a thinker who sought to build ideological bridges and integrate seemingly opposing perspectives. In what follows, I develop each of these aspects of Arendt's philosophy while explaining why it provides a source of inspiration for her readers and critics.

### PHILOSOPHICAL AND POLITICAL CONCEPTS

Arendt's most important philosophical and political concepts are introduced and developed in her work *The Human Condition*. In that book, Arendt discussed political existence from the vantage point of the agent who acts in history and tries to create a new beginning. Political action, according to Arendt, is connected to the human condition of "natality," to the fact that we come into the world through birth and that each birth is an entirely new beginning:

The new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity to begin 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. Moreover, since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought.<sup>3</sup>

Arendt explains that to act is to insert ourselves into the world with words and deeds. Yet this insertion is neither moved by necessity like labor, nor prompted by utility, like work. Action, she holds, is often aroused by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them. The impulse to act springs from the beginning that came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative (i.e., the condition of natality).

Her point is twofold. First, she thinks that action's worth is in the activity itself, unlike work and labor, which are instrumental activities, being merely means to achieve higher ends. Action should be viewed outside of the means-ends category precisely because it has no end. The strength of the action process can never be reduced to a single deed with a definite outcome, but on the contrary, can

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<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), 9. Parts of this essay were originally published in Mordechai Gordon's article "Hannah Arendt on authority: Conservatism in education reconsidered." *Educational theory* 49(2), (1999): 161-180.

grow while its consequences multiply. Second is the fact that human action, unlike animal behavior, can never be completely conditioned or controlled. In other words, action, like birth, contains an element of surprise since its outcome can never be predicted in advance. This is because it comes about through the joint efforts of beings who are beginnings (unique) and beginners (who initiate) in this world and, therefore, have the capacity to make the unexpected happen. One can never anticipate all the possible consequences of a public debate or a worker's strike, let alone a revolution. In short, action is the actualization of the human condition of freedom; it is the realization of our capacity to initiate something altogether new.

Yet, Arendt teaches us more about political existence than the fact that action is a kind of activity that transcends the means-ends framework, and that this activity is the same as the experience of being free. No less important is her insight that action saves human deeds from the doom of history and from the fatality of historical processes. If left to themselves human affairs must follow the law of mortality, which is the inevitable outcome of every individual life. Action is the activity that interrupts the irreversible and unpredictable course of human life in order to begin something new. The point is that action, as the ability to interrupt and begin again, bestows meaning on human existence, which would otherwise resemble other natural processes like the life of a volcano.

To combat the irreversibility and unpredictability of human deeds action does not need to enlist a higher faculty, since the remedy for this predicament is one of the potentialities of action itself. The remedy for not being able to reverse what one has done is the act of forgiving, while the remedy for the uncertainty of the future is contained in the act of making and keeping promises. Without being forgiven, we could never be released from the harmful consequences of our actions, thereby greatly limiting our capacity to act anew. And without being bound to keep our promises, we would never be able to master the chaotic future that is simultaneously shaped by human freedom and plurality. Taking into account the power to initiate, to forgive, and to make promises, action seems like a miracle. This miracle not only bestows on human affairs faith and hope, but also ensures that greatness (great words and deeds) will always be a part of the political realm. Summarizing the connections between her concepts of natality and action, Arendt noted: "The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born."<sup>4</sup>

How have scholars of Arendt applied her philosophical and political concepts like natality, action, and forgiveness to the field of education? A few examples will suffice to illustrate the range of

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<sup>4</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 247.

possible connections and applications that different researchers have made. In “Teaching in the Midst of Belatedness: The Paradox of Natality in Hannah Arendt’s Educational Thought,”<sup>5</sup> Natasha Levinson explores the challenges posed by the condition of natality to those educators engaged in multicultural and antiracist education. Levinson highlights the paradox of natality that threads through Arendt’s essay “The Crisis in Education” as well as her broader inquiry into the conditions that make political action possible in *The Human Condition*. Levinson’s essay also examines the conditions of *belatedness* and *plurality* that work to mitigate against natality and the likelihood of social transformation. Despite these mitigating conditions, Levinson shows that the concept of natality helps us better understand the many frustrations that arise when we attempt to engage in dialogues across racial differences. She argues that coming to terms with these frustrations will provide us insight into the ways in which those multicultural encounters that often seem to accomplish so little might instead be viewed as signs for the potential for new beginnings to transform the world.

Another scholar that has applied one of Arendt’s central concepts is Geoff Hinchliffe who authored the essay “Action in a Shared World.” The purpose of Hinchliffe’s study is:

(1) to supplement the concept of action that in certain respects is undertheorized by Arendt, (2) to argue that the domain of the public needs to be extended to the “shared world” that includes, for example, action in professional life and not only politics, and (3) to argue that education, as part of the shared world, should look to extending the capability for action.<sup>6</sup>

Utilizing philosophical and historical analysis, Hinchliffe argues that teachers have a responsibility to help their students develop the capability for action in the Arendtian sense of the term (i.e., creative activity in a public domain). Following Arendt, Hinchliffe insists that the educators’ role should go beyond instruction and include the creation of conditions in which students can start to take risks and assume responsibility for themselves as future citizens.

R. M. Kennedy’s “Toward a Cosmopolitan Curriculum of Forgiveness” provides a final case examined here of an educational researcher building upon one of Arendt’s political concepts. Arguing against educational approaches that universalize identity, Kennedy notes “that an ethos of forgiveness supports a cosmopolitan educational project, which articulates the necessity of responsibility across social difference and beyond inherited notions of group belonging.”<sup>7</sup> Based on Arendt’s notion of forgiveness, Kennedy suggests that the call to forgive does not replace the demand for justice, but opens us to the interpretive work of forging fresh meanings and new forms of ethical relationships. Summarizing his findings, Kennedy concludes that “forgiveness’s work in education is not to dictate a

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<sup>5</sup> Natasha Levinson. “Teaching in the midst of belatedness: The paradox of natality in Hannah Arendt’s educational thought.” *Educational Theory* 48(1), (1998).

<sup>6</sup> Geoff Hinchliffe. “Action in a shared world.” *Teachers College Record* 112(2), (2010): 446.

<sup>7</sup> R. M. Kennedy, “Toward a cosmopolitan curriculum of forgiveness.” *Curriculum Inquiry* 41(3), (2011): 373.

particular sanctioned position, but to generate the conditions for subjects—both perpetrators and victims of social injustices—to continue reconstituting themselves as individuals in the process of becoming.”<sup>8</sup>

This brief survey of how three scholars have utilized the Arendtian concepts of natality, action, and forgiveness indicates that one of the reasons that philosophers and educators keep coming back to Arendt’s insights is that these concepts can be applied to a wide range of pressing educational issues. Levinson’s research demonstrates that Arendt’s concept of natality can help us gain a better understanding of the sense of futility that frequently accompanies efforts to conduct conversations across racial or ideological divides. Likewise, Hinchliffe’s study extends Arendt’s notion of political action to areas that she did not anticipate like public education and professional training, areas that, like politics, include a shared world that needs to be protected. Finally, Kennedy’s analysis suggests that forgiveness, as Arendt conceived it, enables us to rethink how to design curricula that address historical cases of injustice and to cultivate new forms of ethical connections between perpetrators and victims.

### CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTIONS

Arendt was fond of making conceptual distinctions such as between the social and the political, education and politics, and labor, work, and action. Regarding the distinction between education and politics, Arendt wrote in her essay “The Crisis of Education” that we must separate the realm of education from all others, especially the political sphere in order to “apply to it alone a concept of authority and an attitude toward the past which are appropriate to it but have no general validity and must not claim a general validity in the world of grown-ups.”<sup>9</sup> In saying this, Arendt is not suggesting that adults should not respect children or that they should be arbitrarily subjected to our wills. But she does think that in education grown-ups should not treat children as equal partners, since only the former are truly responsible for the well-being of the latter and the world. In other words, only adults should be considered political actors whereas children, in Arendt’s view, should not be afforded the same rights as grown-ups and protected from politics.

To be sure, many educators from the liberal and critical traditions have taken issue with Arendt’s stark division between education and politics. These educators have argued that education in democratic societies cannot be separated from politics and that, in fact, educators should attempt to identify the connections between these two realms so that students can make sense of them and become politically active. For instance, in their feature article “Classroom Deliberation in an Era of Political Polarization,” Paula McAvoy and Diana Hess argue that when living in a polarized time such as the current one “teachers should resist the temptation to avoid engaging students in discussions of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” in *Between Past and Future*, New York: Penguin Books, 1977, 195.

controversial issues in an attempt to create a ‘politically safe place.’<sup>10</sup> McAvoy’s and Hess’s extensive research suggests that an essential component of a robust civics education involves creating classrooms that engage students in pedagogical practices of debate on relevant political issues that can be viewed from multiple perspectives. McAvoy and Hess make no excuses about the close connections between politics and education, asserting that “when teachers ask students to research and discuss a current controversy such as ‘should there be laws against the private ownership of assault weapons?’ they are engaging in politics.”<sup>11</sup> My point is not to argue in favor of Arendt’s position or of the opposite viewpoint, but rather to highlight the fact that the issue that she raised—that education and politics should be divorced—is still relevant and being debated today.

Aside from her insistence that education and politics should remain separate, scholars of Arendt have called into question the distinction she made in *The Human Condition* between labor, work, and action. At face value, the distinction that Arendt is making between these three concepts and fundamental constituents of the active life is clear and straightforward:

Labor corresponds to life itself; it is the activity we must all engage in if we are to live on earth. In laboring, the body concentrates on nothing other than being alive; it remains imprisoned in its metabolism with nature... Work, on the other hand, is synonymous with making and fabricating. It corresponds to our worldliness, the activity of producing human artifacts – those things that are used, enjoyed, revered or contemplated. They are not consumed, for to be consumed is the fate of the products of labor.<sup>12</sup>

Action, the third concept—which has already been introduced in this essay—corresponds to the fact of human *plurality*, that is, to the presence, words, and deeds of others who come together in the political arena in order to bring about change and initiate new beginnings.

However, a closer examination of her account of labor, work, and action suggests that the distinction that Arendt is making is less clear-cut and more complex than her depiction of this issue. For one, there are some human activities—like mining for minerals—that could be considered both labor and work. Moreover, Arendt’s characterization of action as “the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter”<sup>13</sup> can be challenged. That is, a case could be made that in today’s world, there are forms of work (like working in teams of individuals on a joint project) that involve the kind of unmediated interaction between people that Arendt associated only with action. Likewise, from a political perspective, one could argue that there are modes of action that, much like work, produce artifacts (e.g., significant legislation) that will endure over time. The point

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<sup>10</sup> Paula McAvoy & Diana Hess, “Classroom Deliberation in an Era of Political Polarization,” *Curriculum Inquiry*, 43(1), (2013): 16.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Carol Azumah Dennis, Octavia Springbett, and Lizzie Walker. "Further education, leadership and ethical action: Thinking with Hannah Arendt." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 47(2), (2019): 191.

<sup>13</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

is that despite the conceptual simplicity that it provides, Arendt's distinction between labor, work, and action is more ambiguous than she appears to have recognized. Put differently, her distinction between the three fundamental human activities has left us with more questions than answers.

The ambiguity of the distinction between labor, work, and action, was recognized by Arendt's critics soon after *The Human Condition* was first published in 1958. For example, Charles Frankel wondered whether Arendt's concepts refer to "three distinct classes of activities" or to "three elements that can be found, at least potentially, in any activities?"<sup>14</sup> The latter option was adopted by some of her more sympathetic critics who tried to salvage the distinction between labor, work, and action by suggesting that Arendt was merely referring to a division between attitudes, ideal types, or useful abstractions. As Patchen Markell observes, these readers propose that "we can preserve the analytic force of Arendt's distinctions while acknowledging the overlap of labor, work and action in the 'welter of worldly activity'."<sup>15</sup>

For our purposes the point that needs to be emphasized is that the perplexity of Arendt's distinction between labor, work, and action continues to fascinate her readers and critics. Markell's own interpretation of what he refers to 'as the architecture of *The Human Condition*' is both unique and provocative. For Markell:

The conceptual triad of labor, work, and action is best understood not as a single, functionally continuous three-part distinction, but rather as the fraught conjunction of two different pairs of concepts—labor and work, and work and action—which operate in very different ways and serve quite different purposes in Arendt's book. In short: work is not to action as labor is to work.<sup>16</sup>

Markell goes on to argue that the concept of work plays a unique role in Arendt's theory because it is the point at which her two pairs of concepts meet. His controversial conclusion is that "judged in terms of the amount of weight it bears in the book, work and not action is the most important concept in *The Human Condition*."<sup>17</sup>

To be perfectly clear, my aim is neither to endorse nor take issue with Markell's provocative interpretation of the architecture of *The Human Condition*. It is rather to suggest that Arendt's separation between labor, work, and action as well as other distinctions she made is one of the reasons that philosophers, educators, and other Arendtian scholars continue to be attracted to her ideas. From this perspective, Arendt's distinctions keep attracting her readers and critics not so much because they provide accurate accounts of the human condition, but rather because they are complex, confusing, and

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Frankel. Review of *Man and Crisis*, by Jose Ortega y Gasset, and *The Human Condition*, by Hannah Arendt. *Political Science Quarterly* 74(3), (September 1959): 422.

<sup>15</sup> Patchen Markell, "Arendt's Work: On the Architecture of 'The Human Condition'." *College Literature* 38(1), (2011): 17.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*,

thought-provoking. In short, the various conceptual distinctions that Arendt has proposed continue to provide scholars that interact with her writings both inspiration and opportunities to engage and critique.

### CONTROVERSIAL NOTIONS

There is no doubt that the Arendtian term that stirred up the most resistance and controversy is “the banality of evil.” In coining the concept the banality of evil, Arendt pointed to a phenomenon unique to twentieth century political life, and especially to totalitarian regimes. She thus challenged political thinkers to reflect on the potency of this concept even though she never developed a theory of evil. When describing this phenomenon, Arendt insisted that banal individuals, who are thoughtless and remote from reality, can commit crimes on a mass scale without even realizing that they are doing wrong:

Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III “to prove a villain.” He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing... It was sheer thoughtlessness - something by no means identical with stupidity - that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period... That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man - that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup>

The phrase chosen by Arendt to describe what she witnessed—*the banality of evil*—was provocative, and her book documenting the trial of Eichmann stirred up a big controversy when it was first published not only among Jewish leaders and intellectuals but among historians. Many historians took issue with Arendt’s representation of Eichmann as an instance of banal evil as opposed to the pathological, sadistic monster that the prosecutors tried to portray at his trial.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Susan Neiman explains that what was both unique and controversial in Arendt’s notion of the banality of evil is that it called into question two centuries of modern thought about motive—that which identified “evil and evil intention so thoroughly that denying the latter is normally viewed as a way of denying the former.”<sup>20</sup> The difficulty in Arendt’s concept was the need to come to terms with the idea that being guilty of mass murder, as Eichmann was, did not require one to display forethought and malice.

In addition to the controversy that Arendt’s notion of the banality of evil stirred up among historians of the Holocaust, Seyla Benhabib has argued that this phrase was confusing to readers and

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<sup>18</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann In Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Penguin Books, 1977, 287-288.

<sup>19</sup> Recently, Yariv Mozer’s 2022 film “The Devil’s Confession: The Lost Eichmann Tapes” disputes Arendt’s account of Eichmann. <https://www.amazon.com/Devils-Confession-Eichmann-Tapes-Season/dp/B0B8SXW2GD>.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004, 272.



led many of them to misunderstand it, as though she was referring to Eichmann's deeds. Benhabib writes that Arendt "did not mean that what Eichmann had cooperated in perpetrating was banal or that the extermination of the Jews, and of other peoples, by the Nazis was banal. The phrase the 'banality of evil' was meant to refer to a specific quality of mind and character of the doer himself, and neither to the deeds nor to the principles behind those deeds."<sup>21</sup> Richard Bernstein echoes Benhabib's sentiment noting that the banality of evil is not an expression that refers to Eichmann's actions. "There was nothing banal about these," he writes. "Rather 'the banality of evil' refers to his motives and intentions."<sup>22</sup> On this view, the banality of Eichmann pointed to a kind of shallowness of thought, a shallowness that was striking for Arendt when she covered his trial in Jerusalem, notwithstanding the tremendous death and destruction that he had helped bring about.

Regardless of how one depicts Eichmann, Bernstein is correct to assert that Arendt's bigger point is that "normal people with banal motives and intentions can commit horrendous crimes and evil deeds."<sup>23</sup> As such, Arendt's concept forces us to look at the nature of evil from a fresh perspective, namely the viewpoint of criminals that are thoughtless, bureaucratic, and commonplace. Moreover, not only does the banality of evil provide a different understanding of evil, but this notion raises a host of questions with which researchers are still grappling. For instance, how can we best identify the type of evil that is thoughtless rather than monstrous? What are the conditions that contribute to the proliferation of the banality of evil? What can educators do to prepare students to resist this type of evil? And does it make sense to talk about the banality of good?

With respect to the latter question, my analysis suggests that some researchers believe that it does make sense to talk about the banality of good. How might we identify or define the banality of good? One way of accounting for good actions that are banal is described by Geoffrey Scarre who notes that such deeds are characterized by "the absence of moral commitment on the part of the agent to producing the results that he or she intentionally brings about."<sup>24</sup> Scarre's understanding of being banally good suggests that banality is a matter of intentions, not the consequence of one's actions. More specifically, for Scarre a good act is banal when it is *not* motivated by some ethical tenet, be that tenet religious, secular, or personal. Thus, we can imagine someone recycling her waste not because of a moral commitment to save the planet, but because she does not want to stand out when all her neighbors are recycling. Likewise, we can envision a retired man who volunteers at a homeless shelter in order to help pass the time rather than due to a deep-seated desire to assist those in need.

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<sup>21</sup> Seyla Benhabib, "Identity, Perspective and Narrative in Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*," *History and Memory* 8(2), (1996): 45.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Bernstein, "Are Arendt's reflections on evil still relevant?" *The review of politics* 70(1), (2008): 73.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey Scarre, "The 'Banality of Good?'" *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 6(4), (2009): 505.

Scarre also presents a more specific category of the banality of good that resembles Arendt's notion of the banality of evil and consist of "good acts that, albeit well-intentioned, are practically foolish or ill-thought-out."<sup>25</sup> In this case, what is at stake are well-meaning actions that are motivated by worthy ideals but are not fully thought-through and hence end up being shallow and divorced from reality. Akin to Arendt's understanding of the banality of evil as thoughtlessness and remote from reality, I would argue that there are specific types of well-intentioned words and deeds that are banal in the sense that they are thoughtless. An example of this notion of the banality of good is the 'Land Acknowledgements' that some professors in the United States have recently added to their syllabi. Land acknowledgements ought to be considered a case of the banally good since, as Graeme Wood has argued, they are typically nothing more than a form of moral exhibitionism or virtue signaling.<sup>26</sup>

I bring up the issue of the banality of good to illustrate the point that Arendt's notion of the banality of evil has impacted not only historical debates about the Holocaust and the nature of evil but also contemporary conversations about what it means to do good and act responsibly. In fact, I suspect that the concept of the banality of evil has created more controversy and provided additional food for thought than she could have ever imagined. My contention is that sixty years after Arendt first used the term, her controversial notion is still resonating today and stimulating discussions among historians, philosophers, educators, and ordinary citizens. And my contention is that, despite Arendt's likely mistaken assessment of Eichmann, the term that she coined (the banality of evil) will continue to provide food for thought for future generation of scholars.

## UNIQUE THINKER

The final reason that explains why philosophers and educators keep coming back to Hannah Arendt is that she represents to many of her readers a unique and original thinker, one who, though influenced by many of her predecessors, cannot be easily labeled as a member of any of our common ideological factions. On the one hand, it is difficult to deny the fact that many of Arendt's writings contain some significant conservative strands. Readers of *The Human Condition* and some of her essays are aware that Arendt derived many of her political notions from the ancient Greek and Roman experience and philosophy. For instance, she based her understanding of the notion of authority on the Roman origin of the word and concept:

The word *auctoritas* derives from the verb *augere*, "augment," and what authority or those in authority constantly augment is the foundation. Those endowed with authority were the elders, the Senate or the *patres*, who had obtained it by descent or by transmission (tradition) from those who had laid the foundations for all things to

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 509.

<sup>26</sup> See Graeme Wood's article in the *Atlantic Magazine*: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/against-land-acknowledgements-native-american/620820/>

come, the ancestors, whom the Romans therefore called the *maiores* [the great ones].<sup>27</sup>

In Arendt's view, the meaning of authority is closely connected to the words 'augment' and 'foundation,' both of which can be traced back to Roman history and tradition. Foundation, in this context, refers to the original establishment of the city of Rome with its institutions, laws, and values, while to augment means to add to and enhance the original foundation. Much like mainstream conservatives, Arendt believed that the role of authority is essentially positive and constructive rather than negative and limiting.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that Arendt's ideas were shaped by some of her existentialist mentors like Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, and Franz Kafka. Arendt stressed, more than most political philosophers, the human capacity to act and to begin something new in the face of powerful historical processes and long-lasting oppressive institutions (for instance, the modern revolutions). And she insisted that no democratic country can be called egalitarian and just unless the ordinary citizens have an opportunity to gather, deliberate, and decide on issues of public concern. In such a society, the positive freedom of individuals, the freedom to collaborate with others on political projects, is guaranteed. Such freedom, Arendt believed, carries with it the burden of responsibility for the decisions that we make. For to give citizens freedom to deliberate on public issues makes no sense if they are not simultaneously required to assume responsibility for these decisions. Hence, the existentialist conceptions of freedom and responsibility play a major role in Arendt's philosophical works (*The Human Condition*), historical analysis (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*), and essays ("What is Freedom").

My reading of Arendt indicates that her existential convictions infiltrated her traditional conception of authority and created a unique conservative approach to education. As she noted:

To avoid misunderstanding: it seems to me that conservatism in the sense of conservation, is of the essence of the 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. Even the comprehensive responsibility for the world that is thereby assumed implies, of course, a conservative attitude.<sup>28</sup>

It implies, in other words, the need to preserve the world from the hands of the young who might destroy parts of it if left to their own devices. Since the world is constantly made and remade by mortals, it runs the risk of becoming as mortal and temporary as they are. To preserve this human world against the mortality of its creators means to constantly renew it so that it can provide a permanent home for succeeding generations who will inhabit it. This point is reminiscent of the

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<sup>27</sup> Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?" in, *Between Past and Future* New York: Penguin Books, 1977, 121-22.

<sup>28</sup> Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," 192.

mainstream conservative argument that holds that society and tradition are to be preserved by imparting to the young the worthy values and great ideas of the past.

Yet, Arendt also presented a stronger argument: that conservatism in education implies a willingness on the part of adults to protect the young from the world (e.g., from social conventions), which seeks to suppress the new and revolutionary in every child. Unlike mainstream conservative approaches that often ignore the fresh possibilities that newborns bring into the world, she insisted that educators must cherish and foster them. For Arendt, perhaps the most important and difficult problem in education is how to preserve the new and revolutionary in the child while simultaneously conserving the world as a permanent home for human beings. The question is, then, how do we protect the world from the actions of the young while not squashing their chance to be creative and original? In short, the problem is one of bridging the gap between the old (the past and tradition] and the new (change and creativity) in education.

From Arendt's perspective, education involves a unique triadic relation among educators, the world, and our children, in which it is the former's task to mediate between the latter two. Such a relation, according to Arendt, is both difficult to maintain and undesirable in other realms since it is based on authority and therefore fundamentally nonegalitarian. But in education, it is precisely the authority relation and its corresponding conservative attitude that make room for renewal and innovation. Renewal and innovation are contingent upon the young coming to know the world and only adults, because they are already familiar with the world, can teach children about it. Education, she insists, is worthwhile when the conservative and the revolutionary go hand in hand, when we preserve the past for the sake of the new:

Exactly for the sake of what is new and revolutionary in every child, education must be conservative; it must preserve this newness and introduce it as a new thing into an old world, which, however revolutionary its actions may be, is always, from the standpoint of the next generation, superannuated and close to destruction.<sup>29</sup>

This last point should be underlined because I believe that Arendt is one of the only modern thinkers who insists that, in education, we must be conservative for the sake of the new (Gramsci is a noteworthy exception). She is not arguing, as mainstream conservatives have, that children should be taught the great works of the past because of their important educational insights and relevance for our lives. Rather, she is claiming that the past and the relation of authority are essential to help children realize their potential for creating something new. Without being taught the classic works of tradition, children would not have the basic knowledge needed to change and renew the world. And without adults assuming responsibility for the common world and guiding the young in it, they would not have

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 192-193.

the security needed to operate adequately in a rapidly changing world. In Arendt's view, the most important goal of education is to help children become familiar with the world and feel secure in it so that they have a chance to be creative and attempt something new.

I bring up Arendt's notion of the essence of education to illustrate the point that a major reason that scholars keep coming back to her for insight and inspiration is that she represents to many of her readers an original thinker who cannot be categorized as simply conservative, progressive, or existentialist. Indeed, educators and scholars from a diverse range of ideological perspectives have gravitated to and drawn upon the originality of her ideas. Conservative thinkers generally find in Arendt an ally due to her insistence that education should preserve the past and tradition rather than moving away from them. These thinkers are also sympathetic with Arendt's resistance to politicize education and with her claim that the two realms need to be kept separate.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, critical educators are drawn to Arendt's critique of totalitarianism as well as her notion of political action, which suggests that citizens should take an active part in the life of a democracy. Henry Giroux, for instance, writes that "Hannah Arendt recognized that any viable democratic politics must address the totality of public life and refuse to withdraw from such a challenge in the face of totalitarian violence that legitimates itself through appeals to safety, fear, and the threat of terrorism."<sup>31</sup> Likewise, feminist researchers have contributed essays to volumes that provide insightful interpretations of Arendtian concepts like natality and forgiveness.<sup>32</sup> Finally, multicultural thinkers have found inspiration and shared commitments in Arendt's call on educators to empower students to renew our common world.<sup>33</sup>

This brief survey of scholars who have turned to Arendt for inspiration and insight suggests not only that her ideas continue to appeal to a wide-ranging group of thinkers, but also to those who see in her a unique researcher who was successful at integrating various perspectives that have traditionally been at odds with each other. My point is that Arendt has provided philosophers and educators with a rich source of ideas that are not only thought-provoking but also lend themselves to a variety of interpretations and uses based on the researchers' own interests. The issue that needs to be underlined is not that Arendt's writings are confusing or disconcerting, but rather that their richness, distinctiveness, and complexity have attracted and continue to attract scholars from a variety of disciplines and ideological perspectives. There is something enticing about profound and provocative

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<sup>30</sup> Arendt's resistance to politicize education is manifest in "Reflections on Little Rock," *Dissent* (6)1, (1959): 45–56.

<sup>31</sup> Henry Giroux. "Higher education under siege: Rethinking the politics of critical pedagogy." *Counterpoints* 422 (2012): 338.

<sup>32</sup> See for example Melissa Orlie's essay "Forgiving Trespasses, Promising Futures," in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995): 337-356.

<sup>33</sup> See Kimberly Curtis's chapter "Multicultural Education and Arendtian Conservatism: On Memory, Historical Injury, and our Sense of the Common," in *Hannah Arendt and Education: Renewing our Common World*, ed. by Mordechai Gordon, New York: Westview Press, 2001: 127-152.

ideas even when we do not agree with them, a fact that helps explain why they continue to both confound and nourish us.