

# Political Upheaval and Turmoil's Shaping Educational Philosophy: Hannah Arendt on Education

**David Snelgrove, University of Central Oklahoma**

## **Introduction**

Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) was a student of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), and Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), three important, influential, 20<sup>th</sup>-century German philosophers whose work grounded and remained visible in Arendt's philosophy. Arendt's philosophy also recalls the German philosophical systems of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), and, dare I say, Karl Marx (1818–1883). Although Arendt's philosophy does not necessarily resemble Kantian rationalism, Hegelian idealism, or Marxian dialectical materialism, she developed a philosophy that was every bit as systematic as these earlier German philosophies. In *The Human Condition* (1958), for example, Arendt wrote a well-conceived examination of *vita activa*, in its three parts: labor, work, and action. Using a three-part analysis again in *The Life of the Mind* (1978), her unfinished but posthumously published study of *vita contemplativa*, Arendt analyzed the mind's three functions: thinking, willing, and judging. In this paper, I trace Hannah Arendt's life as it relates to her work with particular attention to the philosophers who taught and influenced her, her writing, and her activism; next, I examine her philosophy of education as it emerged during her life in the United States amidst political turmoil played out in public school yards, turmoil that did much to shape her philosophy of education; finally, I offer a remaking of Arendt's philosophy of education the way I deduce it might look had she not, perhaps, been caught between cultures when her own philosophy of education emerged out of the Civil Rights Movement.

## **Philosopher, Political Analyst, Biographer, and Poet**

Arendt's phenomenological roots (Husserl, Heidegger, and Jaspers) affect not only her philosophy but also her political and biographical work. Beginning with her doctoral dissertation published as *Der Liebesbegriff bei Augustin* (1929; *St. Augustine's Concept of Love*) and later in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *On Revolution*, (1963), *On Violence*

(1970), and *Crises of the Republic* (1972), Arendt examined, with new insights, some pivotal historical ideas and events. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) provided Arendt recognition as historian and political philosopher. In *Origins* (1951), Arendt analyzed totalitarian government systems' rise focusing on Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. After the publication of *Origins* (1951), she received invitations to lecture at Princeton (1953), Berkeley (1955), and Chicago (1956) universities and joined the faculty of the New School of Social Research (1967).<sup>1</sup> Interspersed throughout her publications are short (with the exception of the over 300-page biography, *Hannah Arendt: The Life of a Jewess*, 1957/1997) biographical studies that represent another facet of her work and thought. In these biographical studies, Arendt analyzed individuals' contributions with a goal of examining "how they were affected by historical times."<sup>2</sup> Arendt seemed to be especially interested in individuals' strengths and weaknesses during particularly distressing times. Finally, though seldom mentioned, but not without importance, Hannah Arendt was a poet with a poet's sensibility that appears even in her prose. "Poetry," she said, "whose material is language, is perhaps the most human and least worldly of the arts, the one in which the end product remains closest to the thought that inspired it."<sup>3</sup>

### **From Prep-School Dismissal to University: Growing Phenomenological Roots**

Capable student, voracious reader, and popular peer, Hannah Arendt was expelled from her girls' gymnasium/prep school after leading a demonstration against a disliked teacher, the last of many difficulties the temperamental and willful Hannah had with the conservative and often anti-Semitic *Ladies' School* (girls' gymnasium/prep school in Königsberg).<sup>4</sup> Those not so gifted suffered significantly more than she from German anti-Semitism that increased with the rise of the Nazi party and Hitler's dictatorship. Arendt survived her early education by being a gifted student whose family had the wherewithal to support her when situations that stifled her creativity and intelligence confronted her. Thus, her family was able to sustain her continued studies after she was expelled from her Königsberg *Ladies' School* sending Arendt to Berlin where she studied independently for the *Abitur*,<sup>5</sup> or high-school graduation and college-entrance exam. Interested in Christian Theology, especially the then-popular, existentialist Christian theology, Arendt studied Greek and Latin, attended the lectures of Romano Guardini (1885–1968), and read the works of Soren Kierkegaard (1813–1855)<sup>6</sup> in which she later found the source of Existenz Philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Despite her interest in theology, after reading Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), and Jaspers' *Psychology of World Views* (1919), the 16–17-year-old Arendt became increasingly critical of dogmatic religion.<sup>8</sup>

In 1924, Hannah Arendt passed the *Abitur*, thereby earned admission to the university, and began her university studies as Martin Heidegger's student in Marburg, fall 1924. A well-known and popular philosophy professor in Marburg, Heidegger had studied with Edmund Husserl in Freiburg and taught there as *Privatdozent* (university lecturer paid by students) until he became professor of philosophy at Marburg in 1922. Although it was another three years before his most important work, *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), was published, his students and colleagues highly regarded him as a lecturer and thinker: his "name traveled all over Germany like the rumor of a hidden King."<sup>9</sup> Arendt described Heidegger's thinking as having a "digging quality peculiar to itself, which, should we wish to put it in linguistic form, lies in the transitive use of the verb 'to think.' Heidegger never thinks 'about' something; he thinks something."<sup>10</sup> Despite his thinking's digging quality, "to thinking there belongs *Gelassenheit*: serenity, composure, release, a state of relaxation."<sup>11</sup> Although Heidegger partially defines thinking as serene, composed, a state of relaxation, and contrasting to willing (in which there is always something to be willed—power, wealth, health, etc.), he also defines thinking as passion: "To the old opposition of reason versus passion, spirit versus life, the idea of passionate thinking, in which thinking and aliveness become one, takes us somewhat aback."<sup>12</sup> His term "passionate thinking" indicated the energy and creativity Heidegger applied to the act of thinking, an energy and creativity that especially impressed Arendt:

That something like Heidegger's passionate thinking exists is indeed, as we can recognize afterward, a condition of the possibility of there being any philosophy at all. But it is more than questionable, especially in our century, that we would ever have discovered this without the existence of Heidegger's thinking.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond the allure of his exquisite teaching and thinking, Heidegger was brilliant, charming, thirty-five, and married with two sons; Arendt was young (18), naïve, swept up in "Heidegger, the perfect teacher,"<sup>14</sup> and in love. By the end of the year, it was clear *they* had no future. The next year Arendt moved to Freiburg to study with Heidegger's mentor, Edmund Husserl. Arendt and Heidegger remained close until he was appointed Rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933—ten days after which he joined the Nazi Party and remained an active member for nearly a year. Arendt found it interesting that Heidegger and Plato alike, when entering "into human affairs, turned to tyrants and Führers."<sup>15</sup>

Arendt stayed in Freiburg to study with Husserl who was in his last years at Freiburg where he had been for twelve years. Now swept up in the "most modern and interesting philosophical tendency, Edmund

Husserl's phenomenology,"<sup>16</sup> she concluded Husserl's phenomenology transcended the historical, natural, biological, or psychological determinism found in the philosophy of the time; broke from Hegel's metaphysical and historical approach; and "freed modern philosophy... from the fetters of historicism."<sup>17</sup> Although she studied with Husserl only one semester, this semester marked an important change, for in Husserl's phenomenology, Arendt found the relation between being and thought.<sup>18</sup> Husserl helped Arendt master the "modern feeling of homelessness in the world," the feeling that "things are torn out of their natural context."<sup>19</sup> Because Husserl was convinced that through phenomenology man could again be at home in a world that had become alien, she surmised: "In this fundamental claim of phenomenology lies the most properly permanent and most modern attempt to find a new foundation for humanism."<sup>20</sup> Mastering Husserl's phenomenology, particularly his ideas concerning homelessness, being torn from one's natural context, and the possibility of being at home again in a world become alien increased in importance as she faced the Nazi party's mounting influence, control, and the effects of that influence and control.

After her semester in Freiburg with Husserl, Arendt went to Heidelberg to study and write her dissertation with Karl Jaspers. Unlike her relationship with Heidegger, from whom she was estranged between the early 1930s and 1949, Arendt and Jaspers had a long friendship and extensive correspondence. Jaspers gave Arendt a new slant on phenomenological thinking unencumbered by Husserl's classicism or Heidegger's functionalism. Jaspers' philosophy focuses on communication, sharing ideas with another person. One sees Jaspers' influence in *The Human Condition* (1958) in which Arendt developed the idea of action: public, political behavior based on communication. This political expression became the *vita activa* so important in Arendt's thinking. "Jaspers," Arendt wrote, "achieved his break with traditional philosophy in his *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, where he represents and relativizes all philosophical systems as mythologizing structures, in which Man, seeking protection, flees before the real questions of his Existenz."<sup>21</sup> This Existenz is, for Jaspers, nothing less than human freedom. Arendt wrote: "only in so far as Man moves in the freedom that rests upon his own spontaneity and is directed in communication to the freedom of others, is there reality for him."<sup>22</sup> Seeking reality is, for Jaspers, the end of philosophy. One can see Arendt merging the idea of home from Husserl with Jaspers' emphasis on reality: "The task of philosophy is to free Man from the illusory world of the pure object of thought and let him find his way home to Reality.... Being as such is not knowable, it is to be experienced...."<sup>23</sup>

While Arendt's teachers and mentors clearly influenced her, she brought considerable gifts to her work when applying what she learned (both through instruction and through introspection) to communicate her thoughts and ideas through essays and books. In her historical and biographical works, Arendt shows a broad interest in using writing as communication and philosophy as a means of analysis in the phenomenological and existential thought permeating her writings and as a means of analyzing philosophy of the past.

### **From Student to Philosopher-Activist**

#### ***Hegel's Philosophy of History Influences Arendt's Philosophy and Activism***

Although Arendt was as well versed in classical philosophy as in the 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century French and German philosophers, it was not until her work observing and assessing the Eichmann trial and writing *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) that Arendt, with her phenomenological underpinnings and perspective, looked to history and the philosopher of history, Hegel, to help her understand and explain Eichmann's actions and the actions of others like him. Hegel posited individuals' day-to-day activities move history forward. From the greatest to the lowest, responding to their own needs and desires, prejudices and preferences, the power they wielded or to which they succumbed, and their responses to social and physical environments and pressures account for history's progress: "mankind ceases to be a species of nature, and what distinguishes him from the animals is no longer merely that he has speech...or reason...his very life now distinguishes him...his history."<sup>24</sup> Humans' activities "spring from their needs, their passions, their interests, their characters and their talents";<sup>25</sup> reason uses those activities to advance history. In gratifying their interests, humans subconsciously do reason's bidding and make history: the *cunning of reason* "sets passions to work...while that through which it develops itself pays the penalty and suffers the loss."<sup>26</sup> For Hegel, "The happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed...on the slaughter bench of history.... To what have these things been sacrificed?"<sup>27</sup> They have been sacrificed to the growth of human freedom to which attaining freedom always proceeds even if it often seems to take two steps forward and one step back. In addition to Hegel's idea that day-to-day activities move history forward as people gratify their interests, desires, and passions and that the cunning of reason sets passions to work, significant to Arendt's analysis and assessment of WWII atrocities and Eichmann's role is Hegel's warning: "The caprice of the individual is not freedom. It is this caprice which is being limited, the license of particular desires...law, morality, the state...are the positive reality and satisfaction of freedom."<sup>28</sup>

### **Analyzing Eichmann's Crime: Historical and Phenomenological Lenses**

Arendt's interest in human affairs resulted from her encounter with the "shock of Nazism" that led to her political and Zionist activities in the 1930s and '40s, first in Germany then in France and the United States. Because "philosophy is a solitary business,"<sup>29</sup> Arendt chose to leave it in favor of action in the public realm. Thus, when the editor of *The New Yorker* requested Arendt cover the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel for his role in the "final solution of the Jewish question,"<sup>30</sup> Arendt, feeling compelled to view the proceedings first-hand, rearranged her rather-full calendar. In her mind, she had a debt to her past to see, in the flesh, the person responsible for the deaths of so many: in Berlin Eichmann assumed responsibility for Jews' deportation, evacuation, and transportation to implement the Final Solution.<sup>31</sup>

Arendt found what drove Eichmann, even if evidence to the contrary now exists, was not hatred for the Jews, which he had; Nazi ideology, which he adhered to; or some personal depravity. Eichmann, she thought, was but a career-oriented *petit bourgeois* bureaucrat whose inflated sense-of-self increased when accepted into the *Schutzstaffel* (S.S.); after receiving military training transfer to the *Sicherheitsdienst* (S.D.), the S.S. intelligence agency; and when earning subsequent promotions. Perhaps Eichmann became, for Arendt, the German *everyman*, and evil became the banal product of the bureaucracy in which no one was to blame since all the bureaucrats did what they were told. "The trouble with Eichmann," she wrote, "was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal."<sup>32</sup> If the S.S. and Gestapo were the implements of terror in the camps and in society, many functionaries made it possible for them to do their bloody work.<sup>33</sup> Gaining insight from Hegel, she concluded history proceeded through the activities and labor of these plodding bureaucrats and party apparatchiks always seeking increased rank, status, importance, and wealth.

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), which resulted from her *New Yorker* assignment, Arendt portrayed Eichmann as a simple-minded bureaucrat and clown<sup>34</sup> and, again drawing upon Hegel, reduced the Jewish Councils' collaboration with the Nazis to behaviors required to fulfill their own needs and self-interests. Arendt's understanding of Hegelian historical philosophy allowed her to view the effects of the individual's caprice and the *cunning of reason* at work in the process of history. When reading *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) the similarity between evil's banality, which loomed large in Nazi Germany, and Hegel's cunning of reason, putting passions to work and thereby advancing history, is apparent. Upon publishing her analysis and assessment of Eichmann's trial, Arendt

lost much of the Jewish community's and the state of Israel's support, for the Israelis banned *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963).<sup>35</sup>

### **From Thoughtlessness and Civil Unrest Emerge Arendt's Philosophy of Education**

#### **Setting the Stage**

During the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, in addition to teaching at the New School of Social Research and writing essays and books, Arendt increasingly spoke as a guest lecturer in many colleges, universities, and other organizations. These were turbulent years in the United States; the Civil Rights Movement, legislation, and U.S. Supreme Court decisions resulted in backlash. The Vietnam War and antiwar movement created division and dissension. The deaths of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and others, created a sense of hopelessness for the future. Constantly thinking and writing about the social, political, and educational events and issues of her time, Arendt did not follow conventional wisdom and was sometimes misunderstood as when she published *Eichmann* (1963). In "Crisis in Education" (1958) and "Reflections on Little Rock" (1959), for example, Arendt considered the wider implications of the thoughtlessness she saw in *Eichmann*, the thoughtlessness of people in response to the issues and events that confronted them, and the consequences—intended and unintended—of national leaders' and their opponents'—the extremists and radicals—actions on the left and right. Arendt found U.S. society's problems in these years to stem from "a security hysteria, a runaway prosperity, and the concomitant transformation of an economy of abundance into a market where sheer superfluity and nonsense almost wash out the essential and the productive...and...the problem of mass culture and mass education."<sup>36</sup> One can see Arendt's analysis of the world was without sentimentality or bias. She took this same kind of analysis into her posthumously published, *The Life of the Mind* (1978), where she dealt with the thoughtlessness present in her society.

#### **Emerging Philosophy of Education: Outside the Mainstream**

The editor of *Commentary*<sup>37</sup> invited Arendt to write "Reflections on Little Rock."<sup>38</sup> Arendt used the picture of Elizabeth Eckford, one of the students who integrated Little Rock Central High School in 1957, as an organizing graphic. Because the essay she submitted to *Commentary*, "Reflections on Little Rock," was outside the mainstream, *Commentary* refused to publish it. Although Arendt considered not publishing, when subsequent events clarified her contribution's importance, Arendt published the essay some months later in *Dissent*<sup>39</sup> with a preface acknowledging the controversy. In short, she questioned the propriety of using children and schools to solve social problems and to attain rights.

Ralph Ellison (1914–1994) pointed out to Arendt that she did not understand the Black experience in which it was necessary for young people to experience firsthand the “terrors of social life with all the mysteries stripped away”<sup>40</sup> unadulterated by parents, pastors, teachers, etc. When making such a statement to Arendt, Ellison seems not to have considered Arendt’s own experiences with “terrors,” and that being a Jewish child in Nazi Germany instead of a young adult would have magnified her experiences with those terrors. Still, Arendt did not think U.S. racism mirrored German racism in particular and European racism in general but was unique because “created by the one great crime in America’s history”<sup>41</sup> and rooted in a tradition that led to the conditions of segregation, discrimination, and bigotry.

In addition to racial issues, in “Reflections on Little Rock,” Arendt found politicians at fault for using schools and other educational institutions to work out societal problems adults had failed to solve. Arendt asked, “Have we now come to the point where it is the children who are being asked to change or improve the world? And do we intend to have our political battles fought out in school yards?”<sup>42</sup> Arendt identified the problem from a Hegelian perspective: “the United States is not a nation-state in the European sense and never was”;<sup>43</sup> like Hegel, she saw the state as the unified cultural, linguistic, and historical condition of a people.<sup>44</sup> Such a multi-tiered unification did not exist in the U.S. Using public schools to alleviate social problems became problematic for her because schools, like family and religion, are also rooted in the private and social realms. Specifically, Arendt conceived society, much as she did philosophy, in three realms, the private, the social, and the political; when the political disregards the social and the private, totalitarian tendencies ensue:<sup>45</sup>

Because the many different factors involved in public education can quickly be set to work at cross purposes...it seems highly questionable whether it was wise to begin enforcement of civil rights in a domain where no basic human and no basic political right is at stake, and where other rights—social and private—whose protection is no less vital, can so easily be hurt.<sup>46</sup>

At about the time she wrote “Reflections on Little Rock,” Arendt (1958) published “The Crisis in Education” in *Partisan Review* (1958).<sup>47</sup> In this essay, Arendt critiqued using schools as a political means of addressing problems, and she referred to the condition of schools and pedagogy in general, especially the excesses of student-centered education, as the “Rousseauian ideal in education.”<sup>48</sup> For Arendt, “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.”<sup>49</sup> She



explained, “Modern education, insofar as it attempts to establish a world of children, destroys the necessary conditions for vital development and growth.”<sup>50</sup> For her, solving the problem of education meant looking closely at the way schools function in society.

Arendt contended the crisis in education related to three assumptions about education. “The first,” she said, “is that there [exists] a child’s world and a society formed among children that are autonomous and must insofar as possible be left to them to govern.”<sup>51</sup> This assumption focuses too much on the child group and deprives children of the normal child-adult relationship. The second assumption Arendt connected to the education crisis concerned pedagogy, the science of teaching: “Under the influence of modern psychology and the tenets of pragmatism...[pedagogy] has developed into a science of teaching in general in such a way as to be wholly emancipated from the actual material to be taught.”<sup>52</sup> The result is a deficiency in teachers’ content knowledge leaving students to their own devices and depriving teachers of the respect that comes with superior knowledge. The third assumption about education she critiqued and deflated advanced the notion “that you can know and understand only what you have done yourself...[and therefore] results in the substitution of doing for learning and of playing for working...[both attempt] to keep the older child...at the infant level.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, for Arendt, the education

...that should prepare the child for the world of adults, the gradually acquired habit of work and of not-playing, is done away with in favor of the autonomy of the world of childhood...and the pragmatic formula, its application to education, that is, to the way the child learns, tends to make absolute the world of childhood.<sup>54</sup>

Arendt linked this assumption about education to a “pathos of the new...the illusion that a new world is being built through the education of the children.”<sup>55</sup> In contrast and in keeping with Hegel, Arendt viewed any world into which children are born as an “old world, that is, a pre-existing world, constructed by the living and the dead.”<sup>56</sup> Arendt claimed the disappearance of common sense—meaning the community’s shared-in-common sense of reality (rather than “good sense”)—led to the educational crisis. Arendt saw common sense working as a necessity in U.S. political life “directly influenced by Rousseau, in which education became an instrument of politics, and political activity itself was conceived of as a form of education.”<sup>57</sup> In the political realm, Arendt identified

...the unique role the concept of equality plays and always has played in American life...more than...equality before the law, more...than the leveling of class distinctions, more even than what is expressed in the phrase “equality of opportunity”...in

the American view a right to education is one of the inalienable civic rights.<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, the pathos of the new was in response to the old world that had “no solution for poverty and oppression.”<sup>59</sup> For Arendt the struggle to equalize, minimize, and erase differences exacerbated the educational crisis politicizing it during the Civil Rights Movement and, more specifically, during the movement to integrate public schools.<sup>60</sup>

Although at the time Arendt was writing on education, her ideas were outside the mainstream, she was neither writing in a vacuum nor alone in making controversial claims about the state of U.S. education. Her position resembled many others’ views on public education’s woeful condition. Arthur Bestor (1908–1994), James Conant (1893–1978), John Gardner (1933–1982), and Hyman Rickover (1900–1986) all bemoaned the U.S. education system’s failure, in their opinions, to teach essential skills.<sup>61</sup> Such others as Robert Hutchins (1899–1977) and Mortimer Adler (1902–2001) contended schools failed to cultivate the intellect leaving students ignorant of their intellectual history.<sup>62</sup> Given these critics’ backgrounds,<sup>63</sup> one can understand and appreciate their positions, but Heidegger, Husserl, and Jaspers were not their teachers.

While Arendt certainly cast into relief important flaws in the U.S. educational system and ways the relation among the political, social, and private influence children in schools, she also attacked and dismissed student-centered learning as a means of teaching students to remain infantile, as an emphasis on pedagogy without content knowledge, and as a skirting of one’s responsibility to prepare students for the adult world of work. It is this attack and dismissal I find problematic and outside her philosophical character. How could Arendt be an existentialist in virtually all other ways and remain so anti-progressive in her views on education? How could she embrace Jaspers’ emphasis on communication and communication directed toward others’ freedom and altogether reject student-centered learning? Arendt once noted many bureaucrats who served the Nazi regime slid into position to run the post-war, German government.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps because the same was true for teachers—many who taught under the Nazi Reich continued teaching in the *Bundesrepublik* (The Federal Republic of Germany, democratic West Germany) and the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* (The German Democratic Republic [DDR], communist East Germany)—Arendt distrusted teachers and other government workers to have the intellectual fortitude to teach students the meaning and value of living in a free society; how to maintain and retain that free society; how to recognize such destructive ideas as those of the anti-democratic, anti-human, anti-free-individual, fascist Nazi regime; and how to stand firm

against destructive forces always recognizing that “they” may take the Jews today, but, even with one’s silence as they take the Jews away, these same destructive forces will take everyone else tomorrow. Possibly her success as a student in a conservative educational institution, despite being discriminated against and feeling discomfited, caused her to underestimate the importance of equal treatment and opportunities in schools. Conceivably, her Germanic roots in which the mother tongue and German culture are paramount—language and culture she continued to prefer above all others—exercised such power and influence over her she was unable to observe and analyze from any other perspective.

### **Remaking Arendt’s Philosophy of Education**

Arendt asserted schools function to incite and support society’s continuous rebirth and evolution; this on-going rebirth ensures possibilities of newness, diversity, and freedom.<sup>65</sup> I posit 21<sup>st</sup>-century, U.S., public education must transcend the psychological and developmental models that have defined it for the last half-century and escape the business management model focused on economic and consumer behavior while sacrificing *teaching* students *for* living the active political and social lives necessary to good citizenship in a vital democracy. As a result, I remake Hannah Arendt’s educational philosophy to support U.S. public education’s transcending and escaping these models; to reflect her philosophy as it appears in *The Human Condition* (1958) and *The Life of the Mind* (1978); and to meet Arendt’s “necessary conditions for vital development and growth”:<sup>66</sup> preparing “the child for the world of adults, the gradually acquired habit of work and of not-playing.”<sup>67</sup> Revisiting Arendt’s phenomenological background (Husserl, Heidegger, Jaspers) and her own philosophy for the purpose of constructing a philosophy of education based on her work, but markedly different from the philosophy of education she wrote during mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century, civil unrest in the United States, I theorize an Arendtian philosophy of education useful in contemporary public schools, true to Arendt’s non-education philosophical thinking, and respectful of her “necessary conditions”<sup>68</sup> while free from her preference for German language and culture.

For Husserl education meant developing empirical learning into an ordered knowledge system through a process of eidetic and phenomenological reduction that allows one to abstract and apply intellectual data.<sup>69</sup> Husserl “sought to reestablish the ancient relation between Being and Thought”<sup>70</sup> as a palliative to homelessness, *anomie* (lack of society’s moral guidance), *ressentiment* (sense of frustration, hostility, and powerlessness), and alienation thereby enabling a

“reconstruction of the world from consciousness.”<sup>71</sup> For him, “the phenomenological method operates exclusively in acts of reflection.”<sup>72</sup> Recalling Husserl’s *Phänomenologie* (1913) is the basis of Husserl’s, Heidegger’s, Jaspers’, and Arendt’s existential thought, one also sees Heidegger focused on thinking and being but through the process of hermeneutics based on the individual in the world rather than as a palliative to homelessness, *anomie*, *ressentiment*, and alienation. Education for Heidegger concerned the individual student trying to answer the question “Who am I?” through “calculative and meditative thinking.”<sup>73</sup> For Karl Jaspers education’s meaning and role lay in “helping the individual to come into his own in a spirit of freedom and not like a trained animal” (“*Erziehung ist die Hilfe zum Selbstwerden in Freiheit, nicht Dressur*”).<sup>74</sup> Therefore, for Jaspers education requires students to act in freedom making their own choices in lieu of acting in ways others require them to act and choosing what others oblige them to choose.

Arendt’s work, primarily her philosophical works, *The Human Condition* (1958) and *The Life of the Mind* (1978), provides the means to construct a philosophy of education that, although not aligned with her published essays on education, honors her philosophy and her teachers’ legacy, Husserl’s, Heidegger’s, and Jaspers’. In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt investigates the *vita activa* and the problem of action, a central concern expressed in political theory. She designates “three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action. They are fundamental because they correspond to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man.”<sup>75</sup> Labor sustains the biological life process; work results from man’s creative interaction with and change of nature; action results from the condition of citizenship, membership in a culture, state, or group.<sup>76</sup> One can expand upon her structure to posit schools should be part labor, part work, and part action. Not all learning is creative; some is just necessary, and schools provide students with avenues for acquiring these necessities essential for modern life.

A possible schema for an Arendtian philosophy of education would include the labor, work, action format Arendt advances in *The Human Condition* (1958) and the thinking, willing, judgment format she puts forth in *The Life of the Mind* (1978). In schools “labor” means schools provide instruction and training on skills necessary in everyday life while students learn the requisite fundamental disciplinary knowledge needed for more advanced learning. After mastering the educational basics through “labor,” students would have opportunities to move beyond labor to educational work. Educational work would include students’ applying creativity and intelligence to investigating and solving problems,

seeking and creating new knowledge, and learning both independently and through interactions with others. Education as work becomes more personal, internal, and important to students than labor. The teacher-instructor during “labor” now becomes teacher-fellow-investigator during “work” as teacher and students delve more deeply into the subject matters’ complexities and nuances. “Action” means and even requires students be ever-more creative over increasingly long time periods and over time for students to perceive creativity magnifying in value. The “work” of learning, applying creativity and intelligence, enhances the “labor” of learning, acquiring facts and skills. The “action” of learning, learning through active participation, means embracing Jaspers’ emphasis on communication, moving in freedom, directing communication to free others, and arriving home to reality. This student-centered communication keeps students grounded in reality and working toward good citizenship in a free society. Combining Jaspers’ emphasis on communication and reality with Hegel’s philosophy of history means the “action” of learning involves students in intellectual community positively influencing their personal and social well beings.

An example of the “labor, work, action” continuum from foreign-language learning illustrates labor, work, and action in one content area. When learning a foreign language, students begin their language learning by rote. They memorize vocabulary, conjugate verbs, and learn grammar rules; as they advance, students assemble sentences, communicate creatively with others, apply the knowledge they have in various ways. If they show interest and fortitude, they become active learners choosing literature, responding to cultural behaviors, and remaking themselves in response to new stimuli. Those who travel experience concretely the breadth of knowledge that had been hitherto abstract and academic. By progressing from labor to work to action, students participate fully in the discipline they have learned.

Although Arendt’s labor-work-action continuum works well within the educational context, this Arendtian philosophy of education means more than defining education as *vita activa*—labor, work, and action—and assigning it value. In re-visioning and remaking Arendt’s philosophy of education, I connect *vita activa* to preparing students for a life of the mind, *vita contemplativa*—thinking, willing, and judging—and to assigning that life value. According to Arendt, thought is abstract, is the search for meaning and relevance. Thinking concerns not only one’s own daily life and environment, the amalgamation of one’s experiences, feelings, and emotions, it includes considering others’ lives and environments in one’s own and foreign societies. Unlike thinking, willing and judging have particular objects or goals.<sup>77</sup> Willing means making decisions and choices, means expressing desires; based on thought and reason, willing

is the “spring of action”;<sup>78</sup> appreciating human action’s diverse nature is in turn a requisite of freedom.<sup>79</sup> Societies establish parameters for what one may reasonably will, parameters that define these societies’ freedoms. Since schools are one way societies pass on their cultures and values, in school one is taught that willing beyond those parameters invites censure; therefore, one is taught to limit and constrain one’s will and then extend what one has learned about parameters in school through the process of daily living and learning from experience. Judging, the problem Arendt least clarified, means contemplating attributes and deciding their relative value.<sup>80</sup> In philosophy of education, judging presupposes knowledge and sense of the common world—a “sixth sense,”<sup>81</sup> the social group’s shared wisdom. Though perhaps not always the case, generally, thinking and willing are necessary for judging causing all manner of prejudice and discrimination to result from will and judgment without thought.

Thinking, willing, and judging ultimately serve to inform labor, work, and action. The educated person, then, thinks, wills, and judges while performing labor, doing work, and being socially and politically active. Arendt’s educational philosophy conceptualized as *vita activa* with a goal of *vita contemplativa* would focus on the learner as a thoughtful community member participating in and preparing for an active social and political life in a free, diverse society, a progressive idea indeed.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Soon after she arrived in the United States, Hannah Arendt began teaching at Brooklyn College, summer 1942. She regularly taught courses at Brooklyn College, Columbia University, and the New School for Social Research in the 1940s and 1950s. The New School had formed the University in Exile in 1933 to accommodate academics unable to remain in their own countries. Arendt was invited to lecture at Princeton in 1953, Berkeley in 1955, and Chicago in 1956. She was named lecturer at Princeton in 1959 and taught at the University of Chicago, 1963–1967, until she was named Professor of Philosophy at the New School in 1967. “Biographical Note,” *The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress*, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendhtml/arendthome.html>
- <sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: HBJ, 1968), vii.
- <sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 169–170. (originally published in 1958)

- 4 Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 33–34.
- 5 *Abitur* is the name of the high school graduation exam in Germany, Finland, Lithuania, Bulgaria, and Estonia. This exam may be at the end of either 12 or 13 years of education.
- 6 Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 34.
- 7 Hannah Arendt, “What is Existenz Philosophy?,” *Partisan Review* 1 (1946): 34–56.
- 8 Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 36.
- 9 Hannah Arendt, “Martin Heidegger at Eighty,” *New York Review of Books*, 21 October 1971, 50–54, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1971/oct/21/martin-heidegger-at-eighty/?pagination=false>
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 46.
- 15 Arendt, “Heidegger at Eighty,” 50–54. After resigning as Rector, Heidegger remained an inactive Nazi-party member. He had a strong pride in and preference for German culture and language.
- 16 Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 46.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 18 Arendt, “What Is Existenz Philosophy?,” 35.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 52.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 53.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 54–55.
- 24 Arendt, “The Concept of History,” 75.
- 25 G. W. F. Hegel, *Reason in History*, ed. Robert S. Hatmann (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), 26.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 50.
- 29 Hannah Arendt, “Sonning Prize Acceptance Speech” (presented at the University of Copenhagen, 19 April 1975), <http://miscellaneousmaterial.blogspot.com/2011/08/hannah-arendt-sonning-prize-acceptance.html>

- <sup>30</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 5.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 64–65.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.
- <sup>33</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Auschwitz on Trial,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003).
- <sup>34</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 54.
- <sup>35</sup> The film, *Hannah Arendt*, Zeitgeist Films, 2012, directed by Margarethe von Trotta, screenplay by Pamela Katz and Margarethe von Trotta, dramatizes the events surrounding the Eichmann trial, the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and the effects of the book’s publication.
- <sup>36</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” *Dissent* 6, no. 1 (Winter, 1959), 55.
- <sup>37</sup> In 1945 the American Jewish Committee founded *Commentary* magazine and appointed Elliot Cohen (1899–1959) editor; the Committee established *Commentary* for the purpose of carrying forward Jewish spiritual and cultural heritage. “*Commentary*,” Jewish Virtual Library, [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud\\_0002\\_0005\\_0\\_04544.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0005_0_04544.html)
- <sup>38</sup> Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” 49–56.
- <sup>39</sup> *Dissent Quarterly* was established in 1954 “to dissent from the bleak atmosphere of conformism that pervades the political and intellectual life of the United States; to dissent from the support of the status quo now so noticeable on the part of many former radicals and socialists; to dissent from the terrible assumption that a new war is necessary or inevitable, and that the only way to defeat Stalinism is through atomic world suicide.” <http://dissentmagazine.org/files/wordtoreaders1954.pdf>
- <sup>40</sup> Ralph Ellison quoted in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 316.
- <sup>41</sup> Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” 46.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>44</sup> Hegel, *Reason in History*, 50.
- <sup>45</sup> Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” 50–52.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.
- <sup>47</sup> In 1934 William Phillips, Philip Rahv, and Sender Garlin founded the critical, political, cultural, and literary journal, *Partisan Review*. The last



- issue of *Partisan Review* was spring, 2003. In 1961 “The Crisis in Education” was included in the collection of essays, *Hannah Arendt: Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968). <http://hgar-pub1.bu.edu/web/partisan-review>
- 48 Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” 46.
- 49 Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 185.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 187.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 180–181.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 182.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 183.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 184.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 176–177.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 177.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 176.
- 58 *Ibid.*, 179.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 178.
- 60 Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 311.
- 61 John D. Pulliam and James J. Van Patten, *History of Education in America*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2003), 265.
- 62 *Ibid.*
- 63 *Ibid.*
- 64 Hannah Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 34–35.
- 65 Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 185.
- 66 *Ibid.*
- 67 *Ibid.*, 184.
- 68 *Ibid.*, 185.
- 69 Edmond Husserl, introduction to *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 3–8; Edmond Husserl, “Second Section, Fourth Chapter, Point 56,” in *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, First Book*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 104.
- 70 Arendt, “What is Existenz Philosophy?,” 35.
- 71 *Ibid.*, 36.

- <sup>72</sup> Husserl, *Ideas*, “Introduction,” 3–8; “Third Section, Second Chapter, Point 77,” 139–142.
- <sup>73</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Thinking,” quoted in John Paul Strain, *Philosophies of Education* (New York: Random House, 1971), 475. Heidegger and Arendt found meditative thinking to be lacking from modern-era societies and thoughtlessness to be a modern problem of monumental scale.
- <sup>74</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Wohin treibt die Bundesrepublik?* (München. 8. Aufl., 1967), 202 translated and quoted in Hermann Horn, “Karl Jaspers 1883–1969,” in *Thinkers on Education* (New Delhi: Oxford and IBH, 1997), originally in *Prospects: the Quarterly Review of Comparative Education* vol. XXIII, no. 3/4, (1993): 721–739, <http://www.ibe.unesco.org/publications/ThinkersPdf/jasperse.pdf>
- <sup>75</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>77</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Thinking,” in *The Life of the Mind*, ed. Mary McCarthy (New York: Harcourt, 1978), 92.
- <sup>78</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Willing,” in *The Life of the Mind*, ed. Mary McCarthy (New York: Harcourt, 1978), 6.
- <sup>79</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 234; “Thinking,” 214.
- <sup>80</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 69–70.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid., 50.