

## Teaching the Art of Living: A Critical Reading of Arendt's Philosophy of Education

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### Main Question:

This paper is a response to Arendt's claim "that the function of the school is to teach children what the world is like and not to instruct them in the art of living." ('Crisis in Education,' 195) Why *not* teach the art of living?

### General Overview:

After establishing the context for this question I will, first, provide an overview of Arendt's reasoning on the matter, as expressed in her philosophy of education. Next, moving into the wider domain of her work, I will show how her reading of the Stoics actually supports a different kind of response, one that actually supports her central convictions with regard to education. In sum, I will show how Arendt, in her essay "Crisis in Education," sets up false dichotomy that cuts against her concern that we prepare the young to renew and repair the world. Teaching the art of living, as I will argue in this paper, has the purpose of preparing the young to not only care for the self, but, in turn, to care for the world. In sum, with my critique of Arendt, I want to argue that the role of the 'responsible' educator is *both* to teach the student about world as it is [in its multiplicity] *and* to instruct the student in the art of living.

### 'Thought-Trains' that Move in the Paper:

Several questions need to be addressed. First and foremost, why is Arendt so emphatic about not instructing students in the art of living? Indeed, what is this 'art of living', and why does she believe it to be so problematic? In order to answer this question we must explore her reading of the Stoics. The Stoics are traditionally associated with understanding philosophy as the practice in the art of living. Arendt makes this connection in volume one of her *Life of the Mind*, which I will turn to briefly in a moment. In the end, however, what needs to be asked is whether or not Arendt would consider Epictetus, Cato, and any number of Stoics, as worthy of the role of educator, assuming she would allow that their practice is viable in modernity. I want to make a case that these philosophers represent precisely the sort of educator that can respond to what she calls the crisis in modern education.

Why not teach the art of living? Why only teach the world 'as it is', which entails a study of history? Why turn away from the present and future, and focus on the past? To a large extent Arendt's concern is with the condition of modernity, or what she calls "a world that is neither structured by authority nor held together by tradition." Turning to the past is a way of responding to this crisis of tradition and authority. But what of her claim that the educator is introducing the student into a world that is always in need of renewal and

repair, a world that is “out of joint”? What is implied here is the belief that the properly educated person will be ready and able to take up the work of repair and renewal of this world. Does a study of the past enable one to take up such work? Is Arendt calling for a restoration of tradition? Hardly, for she, like others of her time, especially the Frankfurt School, who were writing in the long wake created by Nietzsche, understood the radical break that occurred with modernity. If modernity is the untethering of the human spirit from the weight of tradition’s unquestioned authority to dictate the past, present and future, then what is needed is both an education that provides students with a deep historical consciousness, and one that also provides them with a deep subjective consciousness, i.e., an awareness of their singularity, or what Arendt calls ‘natality.’ Together these two moments in education prepare for reciprocal concern for self and world.

The child/world relation is at the center of Arendt’s philosophy of education, because it is at the center of the educator’s dual responsibility for child and world. The world is the public realm, which is common to all: “In this public world, persons count, and so does work, that is, the work of our hands that each of us contributes to our common world...but life *qua* life does not matter there. The world cannot be regardful of it, and it has to be hidden and protected from the world...Normally the child is first introduced to the world in school...the institution that we interpose between the private domain of home and the world in order to make the transition from the family to the world possible.” (‘Crisis,’ 186) The child must be gradually introduced to the world, and it is the primary role of the educator to make this introduction. This introduction reveals the authority of the educator to take responsibility for the world. But beyond this, Arendt says nothing about the expectations the educator has for the student in relation *to* that introduction. Are they suppose to remain reverent and respectful? And assuming they are uncritical in their reception, what then are they to do with this knowledge of the world ‘as it is’? Arendt says very little on that account, because her argument has more to do the responsibility of the educator than the learning of the student. Why might call this a gap in Arendt’s philosophy of education, and we might attempt to fill this gap by importing one her central concerns, viz., her concern with evil, or what she calls ‘thoughtlessness.’ Put differently, we might identify the core of the student’s learning to be the practice in ‘thinking’, or the activity that Arendt believes is “among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually ‘condition’ them against it? (The very word ‘con-science,’ at any rate, points in this direction insofar as it means ‘to know with and by myself,’ a kind of knowledge that is actualized in every thinking process.)” (*Life of the Mind*, 5)

The crisis in education, for Arendt, has to do with modernity’s estrangement with the world, with the dissatisfaction and disgust with the way things are. In response to this crisis, the educator must take responsibility for the mess, and yet prepare the student to repair and renew the world ‘out of joint.’ This is precisely where the two-sidedness of education arises: on the one hand, learning about the way things are in the world, and, on the other had, preparation in bringing something new into this world. (But what is this ‘new’ that will be brought into the world? The student herself! More below.) Thus it is of paramount importance that the student is empowered to engage in repair and renewal.

Such empowerment arises with a thinking that produces knowledge of self, that is to say, that is both a caring for the self, and a creation of the self. The art of living entails such a thinking, i.e., one that prepares the student to be amongst those 'persons' who count in the public world. *To appear as unique persona in the world common to all is the central event of world renewal and repair.*

Arendt writes, "conservation, 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." She adds, "Basically we are always educating for a world that is or is becoming out of joint, for this is the basic human situation, in which the world is created by mortal hands to serve mortals for a limited time as home." ('Crisis,' 192)

If we are educating for a world that is or is becoming out of joint, then we are educating towards the renewal and repair of the world. And this work is grounded in what Arendt calls the fact of natality, or what is new and revolutionary in each child. A "conservative" education conserves the natality of each person, which is the basis of their singularity, which, in turn, is the basis of the plurality of humanity, or what Arendt calls the fact that 'men' not 'Man' inhabit the earth. A conservative education thus prepares one for action, "the only activity that goes on directly between men (*sic*) without the intermediary of things or matter, correspond[ing] to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world...Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live." (*The Human Condition*, 7-8) People exist in this world as *personas*, unique characters that are constantly forming and reforming themselves, alone and in relation to others. And thus when we educate in such a way that we conserve the natality, the revolutionary of each and every child, we are educating to and for that singularity, which is another way of saying that we *must* instruct in the art of living, we must teach the student how to care for them self, how to create them self, how to be, as Kierkegaard put it, the *author*. He said, "subjectivity is the truth," and by saying this Kierkegaard was identifying the essence of our being to be our singularity, which is not the fact of our existence, but the *persona* we make out of this existence, the work of art that we form out of our life. And this ongoing care and creation of a persona is precisely what is happening with the art of living. Thus to instruct in the art of living is to prepare the young to be actors, singular beings who renew the human condition of plurality.

Arendt names Epictetus, "the Greek slave and the most acute mind, possibly, among the late Stoics," as expressing best that distinctly Stoic approach to philosophy that is intent on making life bearable, which is another way of saying that philosophy's role is to insure the freedom and integrity of the self. For Epictetus, she tells us, "the subject matter of philosophy is each man's own life, and what philosophy teaches man is an 'art of living,' how to deal with life, in the same fashion that carpentry teaches an apprentice how to deal with wood....to think and to understand are a mere preparation for action." (*LM*, 154). Philosophy for the Stoics was a *techne*, amongst those practices that were closely related to the curative or health practices. Today we would consider Stoic

philosophy as something akin to a therapeutic practice, and, indeed, it was considered philosophic *therapeia* of the soul.

Thinking appears to fill the vacuum created by thoughtlessness, or the failure of conscience to arise in response to the estrangement of humanity from the world, i.e., the crisis of modernity arising when the untethered spirit of humanity loses its unifying common ground. Thinking responds to the “need for another world, more harmonious and more meaningful.”(LM, 153) To instruct in the art of living is to teach the practice of thinking as curative practice that enables *both* the withdrawal from *and* reconciliation with the world. In withdrawing, conscience arises as a reflection upon the world (i.e., learning about the world ‘as it is’), but also as an imagining of a more harmonious, meaningful, and beautiful world. In returning, action attempts to make manifest the idealization of the ‘harmonious world,’ by enacting an ethics, or a practice that expresses the ‘beautiful life.’ The art of living is the ongoing practice of bringing forth these imagined ideals through meaningful acts guided by thinking. Such an ethical practice might be called ‘mindfulness.’ Like the carpenter who turns the wood into a beautiful table, the philosopher uses the *techne* of thinking like “a particular kind of craftsmanship, perhaps deemed the highest – certainly the most urgently needed, because its end product is the conduct of your own life.”(LM, 154)

The Stoic concern for self, practiced in the art of living, is thus precisely the manner in which the child’s natality, singularity, and revolutionary uniqueness, can be preserved. If, as Arendt insists, education “must preserve this newness and introduce it as a new thing into an old world,” then the preservation of this newness entails a protection of the child’s singularity, or what I am calling her *persona*. This is at the core of Arendt’s ‘conservative’ education. And this is exactly what the Stoic philosophy of life entails, i.e., a preservation of singularity through thinking. Such is the manner in which the *persona* arises, the singular being whose uniqueness represents a kind of harmony of being, a unity of thought and action. To teach the art of living is to teach a care and concern for self that enabled the growth and development of a *persona* as a grounded individual, a subject, in the Kierkegaardian sense. But an instruction in this practice of thinking that preserves singularity will also have as its outcome the protection of plurality, that condition of humanity that is in fact the condition for the possibility of a common world. When Arendt writes in *The Human Condition* that the public realm is the sphere of plurality, where people are seen and see, hear and are heard, she was assuming the coincidental appearance of a common shared ground and the plurality that arises therein. But the crux of the matter is that the plurality of humanity emerges from singularity, from the uniqueness that is conserved and developed in education. Thus we might call the instruction in the art of living the *a priori* condition for the possibility of the world and humanity.

To instruct in the art of living is to preserve singularity by teaching the student to care for them-self, to cherish their natality, and to understand this in relation to others, and the common public world shared by all, and thus to understand that singularity arises only in the midst of plurality. The Stoic art of living is thus more about the renewal and repair of the world as the abode of plurality.

In sum, Arendt's call to 'divorce' the realm of education from the public realm must be modulated by her more overriding concern to insure a world of plurality, of enacted freedom informed by thinking. While her call to maintain a separation of the realms implies and insures the preservation of natality, singularity, as it 'protects' the child from the overbearing reality of the world, it is necessary to use the time and space of education to instruct in the art of living, to teach the practice of self-concern that arises from a turning to self in thinking; a practice that will both conserve the natality of each student, and insure the renewal and repair of the world by the regeneration of plurality.