

## Arendt, Action and Teaching

### **Introduction**

This contribution aims to show how Hannah Arendt's concept of action may help to illuminate the activities of both teaching and learning. This goes against what Arendt herself said – namely, that action needs to be kept well outside the sphere of education (Arendt, 1977 p. 195). Nevertheless, I maintain that the domain of action need not be as restrictive as Arendt proposed and that education is better off if it includes elements of Arendtian action.

### **Arendt's Concept of Action**

The core of the concept of action lies in Aristotle's notion of *energeia*. *Kinesis* is a process that has an end-limit, a beginning and an end whereas *energeia* denotes activities that are complete at any time. So building a house is a *kinesis* whilst dancing or caring is an *energeia*. For Arendt, these are activities that "exhaust their full meaning in the performance itself" which implies that when applied to human conduct the means to achieve it "are themselves actualities" (*Human Condition*, henceforth HC, p. 206-7). They are actions that are complete at any one time throughout their duration whereas kinetic activities have an identifiable end point and are not complete until that end-point is reached. A good example of a non-kinetic activity is that of loving someone: the love is fulfilled at any one point that the loving endures; ordinarily, we would not say that love is something to be achieved or that we embark on a series of activities construed as means which finally result in something called love. Another way of thinking about these actions is that they are undertaken for their own sake and the recognition of such actions consists in an appreciation of their character, whether or not anything useful emerges. So not everything that human beings do can be characterised in terms of problem-solving because there are some things we do for their own sake and their own sake alone. We do them not because we want to build or make something or because we want to solve some problem: the nature of the activity itself is its own motivation. This is difficult to appreciate in culture in which learning, for example, cannot be undertaken for its own sake but has to have outcomes. The reason why outcome-driven learning may undermine the *activity* of learning is that the outcomes get detached from the process so it doesn't matter how the outcomes are achieved so long as they can be identified and ticked off. The Arendtian concept of action is averse to a culture that is predominantly results-driven. The Arendtian perspective demands a space reserved for activities that have the quality of *energeia*.

Another kind of activity that has the character of action is ethical conduct. We can see this when we consider that we undertake to do what is just or fair for the sake of justice and not because it may in some sense bring us advantage. A good example of ethical activity is courage: if we really are courageous then we take the risk not because we will get rewarded or honoured but simply because when we have to, we try to act with courage rather than with cowardice. Moreover, the true hero avoids the limelight and finds accolades rather embarrassing. So far so good: but there may seem

to be a problem for Arendt's Aristotelian account of action. Surely, we want to say, many actions of an ethical character are motivated by getting a hoped-for result. That is, many ethical actions have the form of *kinesis* – for example, rescuing the drowning man. I suggest, however, that these may still be considered actions in the sense that it is more than a good result that is secured: such kinetic-like actions amount to the actuality of virtue (in this case, that of courage). Elsewhere, Arendt refers to these actualities as 'principles': "the inspiring principle becomes fully manifest only in the performing act itself... the manifestation of principles comes about only through action... such principles are honour or glory, love of equality" (Arendt, 1977, p 152). It is because actions are the actualization of qualities that they are capable of revealing the identity of the agent in his or her distinctness: actions enable persons to flourish because the result of the action is complemented by the quality of character displayed.

Actions, Arendt thinks, may have an unpredictability about them. Closely tied to this is another quality as well: they are radically creative in the sense that they start something new and unexpected (see HC, p. 9). The newness of an action is radically unpredictable in that it sets in motion a ripple of consequences that depend on persons interpreting the action in a particular way. Yet this interpretation may itself be unpredictable and may itself occasion even more actions. The impact of an action is wholly dependent on its recognition by others: but the form this takes may be as uncertain to predict as the original action itself. According to Seyla Benhabib's analysis, Arendt was doing much more than reviving a lost ancient vocabulary of action and that, in fact, the concept of action is nothing less than a radicalisation of Heidegger. She suggests that although his concept of *Mitsein*, being-with, was meant to be constitutive of human plurality, "the fundamental categories of his existential analytic, rather than illuminating human plurality denigrated human togetherness to a form of being with the *das Man*, the 'They'" (Benhabib, p. 104). For Benhabib, Arendt's particular philosophical achievement was the transformation of some of the categories and motifs that characterised Heidegger's account of *Dasein*. The key transformation here concerned authenticity: Arendt substituted natality for being-towards-death: authenticity could be accomplished through bringing and initiating newness into the world and the reason she was able to do this was through placing *praxis* as emblematic of *Dasein*. For the newness that was created was not an artefact but an event that could only be discerned within that intangible, unseen web of relationships. Through the concepts of action and natality, Arendt was able to reconstruct the state of being-in-world as one of a basic plurality among persons.

But how, we might ask, do agents know that others recognise an action as actualising a principle? Here, I suggest that the conception of meaning put forward by Paul Grice in a celebrated 1957 paper may be of assistance. It has been called the 'communication-intention' theory of meaning (Strawson, pp. 170-189) and though Grice refined the theory considerably, under the weight of extended criticism, interest and comment, the basic ideas in the original paper will suffice for my purposes.

Grice proposes that meaning works as follows:

"A must intend to induce by *x* a belief in an audience, and he must also intend his utterance to be recognised as so intended. But these intentions are not independent; the recognition is intended by *A* to play its part in inducing the belief, and if it does

not do so something will have gone wrong with the fulfilment of A's intentions”  
(Grice, p. 383-4)

What *A* does to induce a belief may be an utterance but it may also be any kind of sign, including gestures. Thus it is that Priam, at the end of *The Iliad* goes to Achilles, kisses his hand and kneeling, asks that the body of his slain son, Hector, be returned for burial. These gestures make sense not only through Achilles' recognition of their import but also from the fact that Priam intends that they be so recognised. Through a common subscription to considerations pertaining to honour, nobility and service Priam and Achilles achieve a mutual understanding, which in this case enables the suffering that they have both endured to be revealed. The bond between them is the acknowledgement of this suffering; but for this to happen there had to be this recognition of certain gestures by Achilles. Yet it is not Achilles' particular sensitivity or intelligence that enables him to recognise and understand the gestures of Achilles, even though at this point in the story Achilles does indeed display considerable sensitivity towards Priam's position. It is, rather, that both subscribe to certain conditions that enable Priam's initial gestures to work in the first place.

Something like Grice's theory of communication-intention is needed to underpin the dialectic of action and recognition. What is particularly important is that the recognition take the form of an understanding: it is not the mere perlocutionary effect of a piece of discourse instrumentally designed and fashioned to achieve certain outcomes.

### **Action in the Classroom**

It is well-known that Arendt restricted the scope of action to the public domain excluding the domains of work, labour and education. Yet if we take the concept of action as explained, there seems no reason for restricting its scope in this way: action, we might say, occurs whenever there is a dialectic of recognition regarding the enactment of principles of actuality. Whenever acts occur that exemplify such principles, there we have action. There are a number of reasons why we might suppose that the teacher is more than a mere instructor and is, indeed, a purveyor of action, at least some of the time.

First, teaching can be a risky business in that the teacher brings something new into the world of children or students. Second, the creativity of newness – natality – implies a lack of control over a situation to this extent: “there is the possibility of taking the risk of proposing or defending an idea in front of the class and finding out whether it flies or fails” (Dreyfus, 2002). Thirdly, the same teacher will also encourage her students to take risks, to put aside the fear of being found wrong. Dreyfus put these ideas forward as part of an attack on distance learning: it gives students the anonymity that many of them crave. And we have seen the action is the opposite of this: by definition, no action can be anonymous because it discloses the identity of the agent. It does this through the very newness of the act, so that the actor can't hide behind comfortable conventions. Self-disclosure in a learning context has a twofold dimension: it involves daring to be a bit different, to be sure. But in as much as it involves stating or expressing a set of beliefs we approach a better understanding of a person through what they are prepared to believe and argue for.

We can see how this might work by looking at the Gricean dialectic. The key point here is that subscription to a practice alone is not enough to get action recognised. It's not enough because though the terms of a practice may be sufficient to get an action recognised as something of a certain type or character, more is needed in terms of recognition of an action's specificity. We need not only to induce a belief in a person and for them to recognise that belief but also for them to recognise that is what I am trying to do in the first place. Recently, I was attempting to 'induce' in students certain beliefs about Kierkegaardian despair. The problem was not the despair – they all recognised angst when they saw it. The problem was understanding the idea of despair before God for persons (including myself) of a secular, or at least semi-secular disposition. Our perplexity was only broached when we started to talk about the idea of surrendering yourself before God – what could this mean? One student then recounted his conversations with alcoholics in an AA group and the idea that when you reach rock bottom you admit defeat and surrender yourself, as the first stage of your recovery. There was a bit of action going on here, I would say – the student who revealed his close contact with alcoholics, those who insisted on maintaining their secularity, others who were half-baked and even one or two who, in the end, professed their Christianity. Those students risked revealing something about themselves as part of the process of learning about a particular concept of despair. They also found out a little bit about a Danish thinker who, unbeknownst to him, had his identity re-revealed on a December night over one hundred and fifty years after his death in a country he never visited once.

I spoke earlier of the principles which animate the 'actuality' of an action. The principle is not only exemplified by the action, it is also informed by it so that an understanding of a principle is inseparable from an understanding of the kinds of actions that characterise it. We noted that Arendt herself referred to principles of honour, glory or equality – but what principle could it be that is actualised in the classroom? What principle is it that the teacher enacts and that her students or children learn to share? Remember, this is not just a cognitive grasp of an abstract principle. In Gricean terms, we could say that the principle is recognised through the deliberate intention that it be recognised as such. We could even (borrowing something else from Kierkegaard) say that the principle need only be indirectly communicated so that it can be intimated rather than fully spelt out (see Kierkegaard, p. 68). Apart from anything else it needs to be a principle such that through its intimation what is being learnt at a particular time is recognised as *important* and is not just a fact to be set alongside innumerable other facts.

It seems to me that it is *Bildung* itself that is being actualised through action. Hannah Arendt herself, I venture, would recognise this. Was she not a student who enrolled for classes with Heidegger in Marburg, 1925, when the word got out that there was a philosopher saying something new and important for the first time? And did she not, both then and subsequently, take risks with her intellectual life (leaving aside the remarkable story of her political life in the 1930s)? Thus *Bildung*, that process of formation and self-formation, may require not only a slow, measured, purposeful development if it is to take root; it also requires risk, daring and even courage.

## **Bibliography**

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