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Reconciling ourselves to reality: Arendt, education and the challenge of being at home in the world

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore the educational significance of the work of Hannah Arendt through reflections on four papers that constitute this special issue. I focus on the challenge of reconciling ourselves to reality, that is, of being at home in the world. Although Arendt's idea of being at home in the world is connected to her explorations of understanding, such understanding should not be approached as a matter of sense making, but in terms of 'eccentric judgement'. For judgement to be eccentric, we must expose ourselves to otherness, which has to do with friendship if we understand friendship as a public rather than an entirely private matter. While political judgement requires a 'being in the presence of others' Arendt's views on thinking and its role in moral judgement indicate the necessity of solitude, of being alone with oneself. Rather than seeing this a process through which one calls oneself into question, I highlight the importance of the experience of being called into question, which I understand as the experience of 'being taught'. I conclude that the educational significance of Arendt's work particularly lies in this link with teaching, and less so in notions of learning, reflection and sense making.

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If there is one thing that the four papers in this collection make clear, it is that the thought of Hannah Arendt remains a rich and highly original source for engaging with some of the key questions about our common life and the role of education in it. While Arendt's own understanding of education may have been limited – a point I tried to make in Biesta (2010a), arguing that Arendt's assumptions about education were more developmental than educational – her insights into what it *means* to live together in plurality, and also into what it *requires* to live together in plurality, contain important messages for contemporary education. The four papers articulate some of these messages and in doing so provide a helpful window on the significance of Arendt's thought for contemporary education. In this contribution, I share my reflections on the papers and through this highlight some Arendtian lessons for education today. My focus, as I hope to make clear in what is to follow, is on education itself – on what it 'is', on what it means, on what it might be and, most importantly, on what it ought to be.

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Understanding without sense making

Maria Tamboukou explores the potential of Arendt's thought by comparing it to the work of Alfred Whitehead. In doing so, she particularly highlights the process dimensions of Arendt's thought with reference to the idea of reality as 'everlasting becoming' – a notion that appears in Arendt's dissertation on Saint Augustine (Arendt 1996) on the context of a discussion of Plato's *Timaeus*. In reading Arendt through the eyes of Whitehead, Tamboukou ends up with a conceptualisation of education as 'a creative process enabling and supporting our immanence in, but also emergence from the world', and hence as a process that 'facilitates the fluency of becomings, while at the same time [foregrounding] the importance of knowledge and understanding' (Tamboukou 2016). With Whitehead, she characterises education as an 'adventure' that is focused on 'imaginative learning', highlighting the creative rather than the reproductive aspects of ... It is here that I hesitate, because I am not entirely sure whether the word to put here is education or learning or, particularly with regard to Whitehead, whether the discussion is actually about what should happen in the university.

There are two passages in Tamboukou's paper where she discusses Arendt's way of distinguishing education from learning. One refers to the obvious but nonetheless important point that 'one can go on learning to the end of one's days without for that reason becoming educated' (Arendt 1977a, p. 192). To be educated thus denotes a particularly 'quality' that is not simply the result of engagement in learning. But the more intriguing observation is Arendt's claim that 'an education without learning is empty and therefore degenerates with great ease into moral – emotional rhetoric' (Arendt 1977a, p. 192). Here, as Tamboukou explains, Arendt is warning against a conception (and practice) of education that simply focuses on the transmission of knowledge from teacher to students, without providing students with opportunities for 'grasping' the world, that is, come to an understanding of it. It is in relation to these observations that I would like to mention a third option, namely that of the danger of learning without education. By this, I do *not* mean learning that does not contribute to the process of becoming educated – where the real question, of course, is what it might mean to be educated – but rather education that has turned into learning and where questions of what it means to be educated or, to be more precise, what it means *to be taught*, are no longer 'on the radar' (on the distinction see Biesta 2013).

It is with regard to this question that I want to offer a slightly different reading of Arendt; one that seeks to highlight the difference between Arendt and Whitehead more than what they may have in common. Key to this is the notion of understanding. Tamboukou provides us with the following quote from Arendt on understanding.

Understanding, as distinguished from having correct information and scientific knowledge, is a complicated process, which never produces unequivocal results. It is an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world. (Arendt 1994, pp. 307–308)

It is tempting to read this as a definition of *understanding as sense making*, and my impression is that by reading Arendt through the eyes of Whitehead, this is what Tamboukou does, hence ending up with a conception of education as what we might term 'creative sense making' or, in Whitehead's language, 'imaginative learning'. I want to suggest a

rather different reading precisely in order to keep the discussion of understanding away from sense making – we could also say: to keep understanding away from cognition or, as I will discuss next, reflection – and highlight the existential and political ‘challenge’ we find in Arendt’s quote, namely the challenge to ‘reconcile ourselves to reality’, which for Arendt (1994, pp. 307–308) means trying ‘to be at home in the world’ (which, in my view, is fundamentally different from two renditions Tamboukou gives of this, namely ‘becoming’ at home in the world and ‘feeling’ at home in the world). Reality does not appear here as something we should make sense of, but rather as something we should reconcile ourselves with, and this reconciliation means that we try to be at home in the world, where we have to bear in mind that ‘world’ for Arendt is a highly political concept, denoting existing-together-in-plurality. This, so I wish to suggest, highlights a rather different task for education than that of ‘imaginative learning’. The paper by Donald Gillies provides a helpful next step for exploring why this is so.

Eccentric judgement in a world without banisters

Gillies engages with Arendt’s work through a discussion of the theme of the reflective practitioner and the role of reflection in educational practice. Already in the opening paragraphs, he points out very powerfully that we should not conflate reflection with the mere expression of an opinion. Even more importantly, in my view, he highlights that the quality of reflection not only relies on *what* we reflect with – the ideas, theories, knowledge and values that come into play – but also with *who* we reflect with – highlighting, with Arendt, the public and political character of reflection and judgement. (That this does not preclude that reflection – in the form of thinking – also has a uniquely individual aspect is something I will turn to below.) While I do think that there is more to Aristotle’s *techne* than what Gillies seems to think (on this see Biesta 2015a) and while I also think that there is more to find in Aristotle about how we might become practically wise (see Biesta 2015a), and while I would also argue that the values that should be at stake in education are not just moral values but need to include educational values (Biesta 2015b), I wholeheartedly agree with the suggestion that Arendt’s work on judgement provides a very meaningful addition to discussions about reflection and reflective practice in education, particularly in order to keep it away from the all too trivial interpretations that now seem moribund in education.

What is key in Arendt’s use of Kant in articulating a conception of political judgement is that she takes recourse to Kant’s views on aesthetic judgement. The reason for this is that in the domain of aesthetic judgement, we have nothing to base our judgement on – works of art are not true or false – so that it is up to us to come to a judgement. This is where the idea of ‘thinking without banisters’ has its place and it refers to a wider acknowledgement that where it concerns political judgement, that is judgement about how to act together, we operate in a world without banisters – which means that we carry ultimate responsibility for our judgements. To carry responsibility for one’s judgements does not reduce them to the status of opinion, that is, to the singular expression of one’s own position simply because it is one’s own position. (This, as Marie Morgan shows in her paper, is precisely where Eichmann went wrong in his interpretation of Kant.) In this regard, Arendt strongly argues against what we might call ‘plurality without judgement’. But she also strongly argues against the opposite of this: judgement without plurality. That is why, as Gillies

makes clear, political thought for Arendt has to be *representative* which, in Arendt's terms, means that it has to be *general* rather than, as Kant would have it, *universal*.

Representative thought is not to be understood as thought that represents all possible positions and opinions, but rather denotes a quality of each individual's singular judgement where, for such judgements to be representative, they need to have gone through a process of 'making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent' as Arendt puts it (quoted in Gillies). But it is ultimately about 'my final conclusions, my opinion' (Gillies 2016). The metaphor Arendt invokes to explain how this might 'work' is the idea of visiting. There are two aspects to this – visiting itself and which we might term the quality of those we visit, which is the idea of 'good company'. Let me first say a few more things about visiting and then turn to the predicament of good company, which, I think, highlights a crucial issue for the question of education.

With regard to the idea of visiting, I still find the work of Lisa Disch (1994) extremely helpful, particularly because her discussion of Arendt's notion of visiting shows so clearly why visiting should not be understood as an act of empathy. This begins by highlighting that for Arendt, representative thinking is a form of *multi-perspective understanding* (see Disch 1994), which means that 'it is not abstraction but considered attention to particularity that accounts for "enlarged thought"' (Disch 1994, p. 153). Representative thinking is therefore closely connected with particulars, 'with the particular conditions of the standpoints one has to go through in order to arrive at one's own "general standpoint"' (Arendt 1982, p. 44). In order to achieve this, the act of judgement must consist of more than thinking and decision. It needs the help of the *imagination*. But unlike Kant, who assumed that imagination is only needed to establish a critical distance that makes it possible to assume a universal standpoint, Arendt argues that we need imagination both for 'putting things in their proper distance' and for 'bridging the abysses to others' (Disch 1994, p. 157). And it is this latter activity of the imagination in judging that is called *visiting*.

Visiting, as Disch (1994, p. 158) explains, involves 'constructing stories of an event from each of the plurality of perspectives that might have an interest in telling it and' – and this 'and' is crucial – 'imagining how I would respond as a character in a story very different from my own'. Visiting is not the same as *parochialism*, which is not to visit at all but to stay at home. Visiting is also different from *tourism*, which is 'to ensure that you will have all the comforts of home even as you travel'. (Disch 1994, pp. 158–159) But visiting should also be distinguished from *empathy* which, as a form of 'assimilationism' is 'forcibly to make yourself at home in a place that is not your home by appropriating its customs' (Disch 1994, p. 159).

The problem with tourism and empathy is that they both tend to erase plurality. The former does so 'by an objectivist stance that holds to "how we do things" as a lens through which different cultures can only appear as other'. The latter trades this spectatorial lens 'to assume native glasses, identifying with the new culture so as to avoid the discomfort of being in an unfamiliar place' (Disch 1994, p. 159). Visiting, in contrast, is 'being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not' (Arendt 1977b, p. 241). It is to think one's *own* thoughts but in a story very different from one's own, thereby permitting yourself the 'disorientation that is necessary to understanding just how the world looks different to someone else' (Disch 1994, p. 159).

The innovative character of the idea of visiting does therefore not lie in the fact that visiting differs from tourism, but rather lies in the fact that it provides an alternative for *empathy*. To my mind, the main problem with empathy is that it assumes that we can simply (and comfortably) take the position of the other, thereby denying both the situatedness of one's own seeing and thinking and that of the other. Visiting is therefore *not* to see through the eyes of someone else, but to see *with your own eyes* from a position that is *not* your own. Visiting is therefore a form of decentred thinking – a thinking where one is out of one's centre; we could even say that visiting highlights the need for thinking that is literally *eccentric* (ex-centric).

This of course raises the interesting and important question how our thinking might become eccentric. Gillies suggests that this has something to do with the idea of 'good company' although if I read Arendt correctly here, I think that the critical distinction is not between 'good' and 'bad' company – because if that were the case, we do indeed end up with the problem how to judge 'about the quality of the perspectives to which one should gravitate' (Gillies 2016) – but rather, so we might say, has to do with the question of the 'right' company. After all, the point Arendt makes is that 'our decisions about right and wrong will depend upon our choice of company' (Arendt, quoted in Gillies) which, I think, could also be read – and in my view ought to be read – as the question how we ensure that we expose ourselves to a sufficiently broad 'variety' of positions. The idea of 'good company' sounds a bit like 'comfortable company', but if the thinking that is to inform my judgement is to be truly representative, we should precisely not try 'to avoid the discomfort of being in an unfamiliar place' (Disch 1994, p. 159).

Rather than just enlarging our learning, I wish to suggest that this implies that we also let ourselves be taught (see again Biesta 2013). This means that rather than only trying to enlarge our sense making – which needs to be done as well, and Gillies provides many helpful practical suggestions for this – we should also actively seek those places and spaces where our sense making might be *interrupted* (and I can see aspects of this as well in what Gillies proposes). To expose ourselves to the possibility of such interruptions – which, with Derrida we might refer to as preparing ourselves for the 'incalculable' (Biesta 2001) – is another way of reading Arendt's notion of understanding *existentially*, that is, as the ongoing task of trying to be at home in the world rather than being with ourselves. It is an eccentric existence where we try to reconcile ourselves to (a) reality that exists independently from us.

Being in the company of friends

I think that Jon Nixon's reflections on friendship – both trying to make sense of the notion of friendship and showing how the particular quality of the friendship that emerged between Arendt and Jaspers; and what is interesting is that this friendship emerged out of an earlier educational relationship between the two – provides us with an astute insight into what it means to try to be at home in the world, to reconcile ourselves to a reality that is precisely 'beyond' ourselves and, through this, with an image of what it means to expose oneself to company that can deepen the representative quality of our judgements. Put simply, Nixon's paper highlights that friendship and being in the company of friends are precisely not about a relationship of total agreement, but rather denote a quality of coexisting where there is room for disagreement and where we might even

say that such disagreement is precisely the point of friendship. It is after all easy to be friendly with those one agrees with; it is far more difficult to be friends with those one disagrees with, but that is precisely what friendship should be able to 'hold' so that one's friends can appear as *other* and not as mirrors of the self.

Good friendship, as Nixon makes clear, has all the qualities of Arendtian understanding if we approach it in the existential way I have suggested – that is, as the situation where we try to be at home in the world and therefore outside of ourselves. Good friendship, so we might say, is letting oneself be interrupted. Such interruption is not – or not necessarily – destructive. It rather is a state of being – of being-in-company – that is aimed at helping each other to exist in the world in a 'worldly' way. It is therefore, as Nixon argues, about 'mutual flourishing', bearing in mind that such flourishing is not about achieving private satisfaction – the Freudian pleasure principle – but about 'worldly' flourishing, an existing together-in-plurality – which we might link to the Freudian reality principle and thus to the ongoing task of reconciling ourselves to reality. There are two important points in Nixon's discussion of friendship that I wish to highlight. The first is already beautifully formulated in the second sentence of the paper, namely that friendship is an 'in-between space that acknowledge[s] the need for intimacy while not being exclusively private and [admitting] the public while retaining a degree on inclusivity' (Nixon 2016). Friendship, in other words, is a relationship based on 'equality and freedom, difference and mutuality, autonomy and reciprocity', in each case highlighting that friendship is neither being 'at home' nor being 'at sea', so to speak, but being outside of oneself with others.

The second important observation Nixon makes throughout his paper is that maintaining such a state of being does not come naturally but requires work and attention, including work on and attention to the conditions that would make such a state of being-together-in-plurality possible. Here, Nixon particularly highlights the fact that our institutions of higher education – and even modern societies more generally – have become less and less hospitable to these kinds of relationships. This, so I wish to add, is not only to the detriment of the quality of learning that may take place in such institutions, but also erodes the educational potential of higher education, if we understand the 'condition' of education precisely as the situation of being outside of oneself, being exposed to what is beyond one's own 'circle' of sense making and imagination, that is, being in the company of friends.

Calling oneself into question; being called into question

Many of the themes I have highlighted so far are also present in the first sections of Marie Morgan's paper. She particularly highlights the importance of the distinction between private and public life in Arendt's work, where, with Arendt, she not only emphasises that it is the public life that is the 'truly human life' (Arendt 1998, p. 58) but also shows that it is the public life, our political existence (Biesta 2010a), that 'constitutes reality' (Arendt 1998, p. 50). To exist 'in the presence of others' (Arendt 1998, p. 51) is what Arendt has in mind with her conception of freedom, which, as Morgan makes clear, is the exact opposite of the liberal notion of freedom, where freedom is understood as ultimately private and as a state of 'sovereignty', as Arendt would put it. And it is whilst being

in the present of others that judgement can become representative and can move beyond the mere expression of (private) opinions.

The importance of Morgan's contribution to this collection of papers is that, in addition to exploring what it means to exist 'in the presence of others' and how such a 'mode' of existing is crucial for political judgement, she discusses what at first sight seems to be the entirely opposite view, namely that thinking is fundamentally a solitary activity, as Arendt calls it. But solitude is not about loneliness or isolation, but rather is a state of 'being alone in which "I" am together with "myself" where "I am two in one"' (Morgan 2016). Every thought process, as Arendt puts it, 'is an activity in which I speak with myself about whatever happens to concern me' (Arendt, quoted in Morgan). While the concerns are themselves public, that is, they stem from my public existence, the thought process itself is private. Or as Morgan puts it, 'The answers that are demanded are not of others or of a political self, but of the private self' (Morgan 2016). Thinking, as Morgan explains, 'is an activity that culminates in the making of moral judgements', that is, judgements about 'what I ought to do' (Morgan 2016). What makes such thinking possible is the 'inner dichotomy' of the private self, which is not just a matter of thinking but, as Morgan puts it, a matter of 'calling oneself into question' (Morgan 2016). As she explains: 'Thus it is in the relation between "myself" and "I" that one engages in the activity of the kind of thinking that develops not only self-criticality but the capacity to develop moral conscience and judgement' (Morgan 2016).

If the 'freedom to think' has to do with the existence of the 'inner dichotomy', this dichotomy – and therefore the very possibility to think – is 'overshadowed' when the individual moves into the public realm. Moving into the public world, as Morgan explains, 'requires, at least for a time, the suspension of the internal dichotomy [so that] thought becomes vulnerable to the dangers of "non-thinking"' (Morgan 2016). To demonstrate what is at stake here, Morgan turns to a discussion of Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt 1963), which she reads in conjunction with *Responsibility and Judgement* (Arendt 2003). What becomes visible in this discussion is that Eichmann made 'a conscious decision not to think for himself' which, according to Arendt, was 'driven by the desire of "wanting-to-say-we"' (Arendt, quoted in Morgan) which, for Arendt, resulted in a state of 'non-thinking'. While it may seem that Arendt creates a strong opposition between our private existence – where thinking is possible and such thinking is characterised as a calling oneself into question – and our public existence where representative judgement is called for, Morgan actually shows that the two are not in opposition to each other but follow the same underlying 'logic'. It is important to quote Morgan here at length.

For Arendt, refusing to be alone with oneself is to refuse the 'other' and is thus an overcoming of the external as well as the internal dichotomies that characterise one's public and private self. The public consequence of such overcoming is that, externally, one fails to comprehend 'others' as fellow citizens whilst internally one fails to recognise one's own otherness as the call to conscience. (Morgan 2016)

What makes the evil of Eichmann 'banal' is that fact that it is issued 'from the failure to think for oneself, from the purposeful relinquishment of autonomy and of the responsibility for one's own judgements and public attitudes that accompanies it' (Morgan 2016). It is against this background that Morgan emphasises the educational importance

of the freedom to think, so that education can contribute to ‘the development of self-criticality *and* ... the development of moral judgement and public attitudes which result in a thinking, political person who can contribute to the renewal of the world’ (Morgan, 2016).

The value of Morgan’s contribution, so I wish to suggest, lies in the way in which she brings together the public and the private – or to be more precise: highlights the intriguing tension in Arendt’s ideas about the public and the private – by adding the issue of thinking/non-thinking and the need for solitude to questions of political existence that are foregrounded in the other papers. This not only reveals the sophistication of Arendt’s thought but also shows a struggle in Arendt’s work between wanting to think politically – that is, wanting to understand human existence as fundamentally an ‘existing-in-plurality’ – and the need to claim a space for critical thinking and moral judgement, for judgement about ‘what I ought to do’.

While analytically this adds depth and complexity to the discussion of Arendt’s work, one question that remains is why Eichmann actually did not call himself into question. While it may well be correct that this possibility was ‘overshadowed’, to use the word again, by a desire to say ‘we’, one could ask whether it is indeed the case that key to thinking (and to everything that follows from it) is the ‘ability’ to call oneself into question. I put ‘ability’ here in quotation marks because thinking of this as an ability runs the risk of psychologising it, that is, of thinking of it as some kind of inner or even innate capacity that can be effective when it is strong enough to resist the desire to say ‘we’ but that loses its efficacy when other forces or desires turn out to be stronger. If that were the case then it would follow the Eichmann’s evil (and with it the evil of the Third Reich) was the result of a weakness of resolve. Rather than focusing on an alleged ability to call oneself into question, one could also come at it from the other side and suggest that thinking actually starts at a different ‘point’, that is, as a result of the experience of *being called into question* and thus the experience of an encounter with the reality of another human being who addresses me, who calls me, and by doing so calls me into question. This possibility – which is admittedly Levinasian (see Levinas 1981, Biesta *in press*) – does not preclude the importance of solitude, but suggests that the ‘inner dichotomy’ is the result of an ‘encounter’ with the reality of another human being and our ‘reconciliation’ to this reality.

Education: the experience of being taught

Looked at it this way, the question is no longer why Eichmann did not call himself into question, nor is it why Eichmann was not called into question – one can assume he was many times – but why he had become immune to this calling, why this calling was no longer able to address him (on immunity and education see Masschelein 1996). To bring the threads that I have been trying to weave throughout my discussion of the papers in this collection together – and I am aware that I am taking a number of rather big steps in doing so – I wish to suggest that what Eichmann had become immune for is what can be called teaching or, to be more precise, the experience of ‘being taught’. While it goes too far to say that contemporary education has completely lost its connection with this experience, the ongoing ‘learnification’ (Biesta 2010b) of educational discourse and practice – that is the reduction of all education to matters of learning – does raise the question whether in our schools, colleges and universities children and young

people still have opportunities for encountering the reality of being called into question, for practising what it might mean to reconcile oneself to reality and, through this, sincerely try to be at home in the world, that is, in this ‘eccentric’ state of being that is the ‘truly human life’ (Arendt 1998, p. 58). The papers in this collection all make important contributions towards this ambition. I hope that my reflections on them show that there is still one more step to take in order to really reveal the educational potential and significance of Arendt’s thought, partly with and partly ‘beyond’ Arendt.

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