Hannah Arendt: On Public Education and Public Dialogue

Dialogue and its Use in Education

This article, that draws upon a recent book (Guilherme/Morgan 2018), considers dialogue and its use in education taking the political philosopher Hannah Arendt as an example. It is argued as worthwhile for two reasons: First, dialogue is understood usually as a conversation, as an exchange between two or more individuals or sets of individuals. Secondly, it has been the subject of enquiries in Occidental philosophies of education since the Socratic dialogues of Plato and of Xenophon. However, these have focussed on effective communicative exchange. They have not always considered the relations involved in dialogue, such as whether power is symmetric or asymmetric. Dialogue may have a goal, but it may also be open and fluid with no one knowing where it might lead. In practice dialogue does not operate simply between two persons or groups; it comprises also internal tensions, contradictions, and crosscurrents.

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Johanna "Hannah" Cohn Arendt was born in Hannover in 1906 to an assimilated Jewish family and brought up in Königsberg, the historic Prussian city celebrated as the home of Immanuel Kant (now Kaliningrad in Russia). Arendt's life and work as a political philosopher and social critic are very well known, both being full of controversy. At Marburg, Freiburg, and Heidelberg universities, she was a brilliant student of Philosophy, first with Martin Heidegger, with whom she had a brief intimate relationship; and completing her doctorate with Karl Jaspers. Heidegger was later to be notorious for his membership of the National Socialist Party. In 1933 when the Nazis came to power Arendt left for France, living in Paris until 1940. She then escaped to the United States having been deprived by the Nazis of her German citizenship in 1937. In the United States, of which she became a citizen in 1950, she taught at several universities, notably the New School for Social Research, New York City, but did not accept a tenure track position preferring to be an independent scholar. She worked also as a publishers' consultant and, after the war, for the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction programme

In her writing, in which she applied the phenomenological method to the study of politics, Arendt developed an understanding of dialogue as needing a "public space" for it to be meaningful. She envisaged a civic republicanism which was both original and phenomenological in that it was derived from experience. She did not offer social blueprints, but rather intelligent reflection on recent history and contemporary society. She wrote influential books of political philosophy, notably "The Origins of Totalitarianism" (1951), "The Human Condition" (1958), "On Revolution" (1963) and the essay collections "Men in Dark Times" (1970) and "The Jewish Writings" (2007). Arendt's work was known for its erudition, its lucidity, and the quality of its analysis. It stimulated books, articles, reviews, and other commentaries. The most useful for the general reader is the collection edited by Villa (2000) that considers all aspects of Arendt's life and work in a detailed and yet accessible way and which has an excellent bibliography.

Hannah Arendt's best-known book is undoubtedly "Eichmann in Jerusalem" (1963) in which, reporting on the trial of the Nazi Adolf Eichmann, she coined the phrase "...the banality of evil". The book aroused bitter controversy with Arendt accused of betraying her Jewish heritage. She had already aroused criticism for her

attempt to understand Martin Heidegger's political behaviour and renewing personal contact with him. Arendt argued that "...matters of practical politics [are] subject to the agreement of many; they can never lie in theoretical considerations or the opinion of one person, as though we dealt here with problems for which only one solution is possible" (Arendt 1958/1998, p. 5; cited in Guilherme/Morgan 2018/2019, p. 60). The Eichmann controversy has been dramatized in the film "Hannah Arendt" (2012) directed by Margarethe von Trotta with Barbara Sukowa in the title role.

Hannah Arendt on Public Education

Apart from "The Crisis in Education" (1954) and "Reflections on Little Rock" (1959), the latter being a comment on a campaign in Arkansas that led to a Supreme Court ruling ending segregation in American schools, Arendt wrote relatively little on education as such. Nevertheless, she has been influential on the politics of education as citation indices show (Guilherme/Morgan 2018/2019, p. 64). Arendt developed a concept of dialogue that connected action, speech, and personal internal reflection through a public space. Contemporary trends in education policy, marketisation, privatisation, and economic and social change especially in countries affected by globalisation, challenge this relationship. If it is to be met "...schools and universities should retain their dual aspect of belonging both to the private and to the public sphere. This is not just as physical public spaces but also where speech and action are encouraged" (Guilherme/Morgan 2018/2019, p. 69). Arendt provided a controversial example in her essay "Reflections on Little Rock", which was much criticised. She argued that children belonged to the private realm of the family and that to make them an instrument of the public sphere "...was to burden children, black and white, with the working out of a problem which adults for generations have confessed themselves unable to solve" (Arendt 1959, p. 50; cited in Guilherme/Morgan 2018, p. 60). It is an example of Arendt's intellectual honesty in the face of a contrary public opinion.

Arendt's general perspective is found in "The Crisis in Education" (1954/1993) that considers purpose. She claimed that: "Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to take responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young would be inevitable" (Arendt 1954/1993, p. 196). It is a starting point for considering Hannah Arendt's dialogical philosophy and its implications for educational policy and practice. The quote continues: "And education too, is whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, not to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world" (Arendt 1954/1993, p. 196; cited in Guilherme/Morgan 2018, p. 69). A crucial point considering, for example, contemporary debate on climate change.

Awareness of the Cultural Past

Hannah Arendt reminds us that the sustenance and development of human society depends on the innovation and changes that each generation brings with it. However, she argues it is essential that education cultivated also in each generation an awareness and appreciation of the cultural past if continuity and cohesion are to be sustained. This is necessary to nurturing each generation's capacity and confidence when meeting fresh economic, social, and political circumstances. "Therein lies the importance of education as a 'bridge' between the private and the public spheres" (Guilherme/Morgan 2018, p. 69). Such an education must balance the need for internal reflection on the one hand and the need for public dialogue on the other.

The former carries the risk of personal and private concerns encouraging aloofness from the public space. It has been argued that neo-liberalism restricts the public space and the political as defined by Arendt. Wolin (2008) has described this as an "inverted totalitarianism" (cited in Guilherme/Morgan 2018, p. 65). The latter carries with it the risk of an education that "...might be so controlled that it damages internal dialogue, speech and action because of fear of criticism and a necessity for compliance" (Guilherme/Morgan 2018, p. 69). Arendt traced this to a diminution in the role and authority of the teacher. Speaking of the United States she argued: "The...basic assumption which has come into question in the present crisis has to do with

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. (...) This in turn means not only that the students are actually left to their own resources but that the most legitimate source of the teacher's authority as the person who, turn it whatever way one will, still knows more and can do more than oneself is no longer effective. Thus, the non-authoritarian teacher, who would like to abstain from all methods of compulsion because he is able to rely on his own authority, can no longer exist" (Arendt 1954, p. 182-183; cited in Guilherme/Morgan 2018, p. 66).

Respect instead of Power

It may be argued that Arendt, through lack of personal knowledge and experience, exaggerated this aspect of modern teaching, while teaching methods have changed in the years since she wrote. What remains valid is her concern that teaching authority draw upon respect rather than be based on power. For example: "The classroom should be an open space for discussion, and teachers should not avoid topics because they are either political or controversial. It is through such experiences that students develop the capacity for critical thinking and become prepared to disclose themselves in the public arena. If the individual is not exposed to critical thinking, and by this we mean not only to be able to question knowledge and other individuals, but also to formulate new propositions and defend them, then the ability to participate in the public sphere is restricted' (Guilherme/Morgan 2018, p. 68).

The growing caution in teaching and the so-called "trigger-warnings" of contemporary educational curricula are stimulated by a "political correctness" that is in danger of becoming a kind of "soft totalitarianism". Hannah Arendt's seminal study "The Origins of Totalitarianism" (1951) is still important for its historical analysis of such issues

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Arendt considered the concept of dialogue in "The Human Condition" and again in "Eichmann in Jerusalem". In the former she developed the concept of public space in which political dialogue takes place. It is there that "...action and speech may be realised; that is, a context in which people can encounter one another as members of a community, disclose their views and what they stand for through action and speech, coordinate actions, and establish relationships with those who think alike or differently" (Guilherme/Morgan 2018/2019, p. 62). In the latter she developed the concept of personal internal reflection which creates the capacity in individuals to take part in the dialogue of the public sphere. Using Adolf Eichmann as an example: "Arendt argues that the absence of internal dialogue, the inability to think and confront ourselves, other human beings, and crucial issues, could lead one to make judgements and engage in actions that are ultimately immoral. According to Arendt, the worst evils of humanity are committed not by malevolent individuals, but by people incapable, or even afraid to think" (Guilherme/Morgan 2018/2019, p. 63). Hence her well-known phrase "the banality of evil".

Dialogue has become a fashionable concept particularly among those who wish to encourage a critical pedagogy or "critical skills" in education, derived for instance from Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony or from educators such as Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich or the feminist writer bell hooks. A paradox may be that such dialogue often becomes institutionalized, developed according to "correct" formulae. This does not consider sufficiently complexities such as history and culture with their normative values and power relations. In practice dialogue is dependent on disposition and on situation and is often difficult to initiate, let alone sustain. Consider its use in conflict resolution, as in the case of the religious philosopher Martin Buber (Morgan/Guilherme 2014a) and by contrast with that of the psychiatrist and anti-colonial militant Frantz Fanon (Morgan/Guilherme 2014b).

The Balance between Private and Public

It is clear that "...finding the balance between private and public is not something achieved easily; however, the consequences of not attempting this balance are serious and very difficult of recovery" (Guilherme/Morgan 2018, p. 69-70). Again: "On the educational scene there is no competition between dialogue and monologue; for various reasons dialogue rules the day. If we

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look at dialogue as a basic form of communication, it becomes clear that it has its limitations. Conversely, monologue possesses valuable qualities that are mainly ignored. Monologue is not in itself an authoritarian form that treats listeners like objects, but one that gives them freedom to respond or not to respond, and to interpret the message in their own individual ways" (Kvernbekk 2012, p. 977).

These raise questions about "dialogue" as a core aspect of social and political philosophy. There are limits and dialogue breaks down both between individuals and between communities. For example, the consequences for the conduct of both private and public life brought about by the COVID-19 crisis are likely to be profound. Yet, as the 18th century English poet and priest John Donne reminds us in "Meditation XVII", from his prose devotional writings: "No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee" (Donne 1987).

Conclusion

Such ethical dilemmas, noted in the comparison of Martin Buber and Frantz Fanon (Morgan/Guilherme 2014b), show that ultimately one must defend the humanity both of oneself and of others. The massive anti-racism protests in the United States and elsewhere that followed the death in police custody of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on 25 May, 2020, show such a dilemma in practice. This is the basis of the "just war" which has a philosophical history dating from St. Augustine of Hippo (Walzer 2006). Yet by remaining at "the disposal of dialogue", as Buber says, it continues to be meaningful, offering "...an active philosophy of hope through dialogical education instead of passive resignation to circumstances" (Morgan/White 2019, p. 30). The human condition carries with it the possibilities of personal and social reconciliation, and of flourishing. This potential, emphasized by Hannah Arendt in her writings, and, most importantly, in her still controversial book "Eichmann in Jerusalem" (1963), will yet again be of profound importance as humanity emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, with its warning of other threats to the survival of civilization and indeed of humanity itself.

An erudite and independent intellectual, she considered partisan Orwellian group-think an abdication from responsibility for individual assessment and judgment of evidence. "The Life of the Mind" (1978), a philosophical study of the conditions for moral responsibility, remained unfinished at her death.

Jewish by heritage, German by education, and influenced by her American exile, Hannah Arendt was a woman of intellectual honesty and courage, although this sometimes led her to be stubborn in argument. She was an outstanding citizen of the twentieth-century's Republic of Letters, and her writing, especially on moral responsibility, remains relevant today.

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