

# education for the love of the world

hannah arendt on education

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## **Abstract**

This article is about Hannah Arendt's thinking on education for the love of the world. The first part of this article focuses on the nature of the human world and the reasons why it should be loved. This is followed by Arendt's discussion on the major characteristics and roles of education towards the preservation of the world. Lastly, this article presents reasons why education should be for the love of the world.

## **Keywords**

Hannah Arendt, love of the world, education, plurality



## Hannah Arendt's Idea of the World

Hannah Arendt's idea of the *world* is a continuation of her discussions regarding the primacy of politics in the lives of every individual and the significant role of active citizenship in the ideal political system. This Arendtian tendency is an afterthought of her negative experiences during the totalitarian regime of the Nazis and her negative evaluation of the Stalinist regime. Hannah Arendt was a German Jew and she experienced the height of Jewish persecution, which was one of the focal political programs of Adolf Hitler's government. The Nazis arrested the Jewish people and gathered them in concentration camps situated in some parts of Germany and Europe. The political experiences of the people under these regimes served as benchmarks of Hannah Arendt regarding what constitutes an abnormal political system. Moreover, when Arendt published her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) she was already sure in her discussions that the Stalin regime will not survive long basically because similar to Nazism, Stalin's regime is an abnormal political system.

What happened in Germany during the rule of the Nazis is best described as a phenomenon wherein man attempted to change or destroy something which is necessarily present in the human condition: the human plurality; "men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world."<sup>1</sup> The Nazis and its sympathizers refused the Jewish people of their rights towards self-determination and freedom to practice their religion. Inspired by a grand narrative of Aryan superiority, the Germans of that time consider themselves as the remaining Aryan people and they wanted to exterminate races and group of people who could not fit into their Aryan categories. This series of events, according to Arendt, started with the destruction of the human world. But what is Hannah Arendt's idea of the world?

The human world is man-made and it provides stability in the ever changing natural world. The world houses man against the impermanence of nature by providing man a venue to do activities other than responding to biological needs. Human beings as Arendt see them have two aspects. "On the one hand we are animals, members of a species and subject to biological necessities like other animals. As such we are part of nature, which moves in endless cycles of growth and decay, one generation of animals and plants replacing the previous generation in a natural movement that is indifferent to individual specimens. Unlike other animals, however, which live a natural life on the earth as it is given to them; human beings constructed a world of their own over and above the natural earth."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1958), 7. Henceforth HC.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

What the human world of civilization provides in the first place is stability. Instead of an ever-changing natural environment, the man-made world of houses, artifacts and institutions provides a stable background against which individual lives can show up and have significance.<sup>3</sup> The entire discussion of the human world shows how Hannah Arendt dislikes human existence devoid of memorable traces or at least she wanted to gain human immortality by taking part in the stories or history that will be shared into posterity. She abhors human existence devoted towards responding to biological needs because this kind of life leaves no traces. After satisfying the biological needs for the day, the individual will once again work on to respond to the same needs in the next day, hence life becomes repetitive. And if this kind of existence becomes common to all human beings, human life will be the same to everyone or everybody will have similar life-story and there is no room for human plurality.

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it: the world like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.<sup>4</sup>

The metaphor of a table is the most appropriate explication of what it means to live in the world. Like a table, the world is composed of things made by human hands providing space for every human person to appear as unique individual ready to face and share his perspective in the community of other people.

The human world is definitely distinguishable from the privately owned place of an individual. "In private life," Arendt asserted, "biological commonalities rule; in public life people appear as full individuals."<sup>5</sup> The repetitive and the uniform character of life dedicated to responding biological needs or in the words of Hannah Arendt the private realm of the human person is not humanizing rather an experience shared with other animals; leaving no traces of its existence. This is crucially linked to her view that it is in public life that people are able to see (and create) the common world by looking at the things and relationships between them from their many different vantage points.<sup>6</sup> According to Margaret Canovan (1992), as soon as the person begins to show himself in public and shares his story to others, they begin to put in place institutions that will ensure that every participant will have an equal chance to show and speak up. These institutions are exactly what Hannah Arendt refers to as human world. What then is this world that houses us, guards us from nature, stabilizes our lives and allows us to be individuals? It is

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 58.

something artificial and durable produced by transforming natural material into an environment that can outlast individual human lives. It includes such things as artifacts, cultivated land and the products of organization, such as political institutions.

Moreover, the 'world' in Arendt's sense materializes in the forms of institutions and places that ensure opportunities for every individual to be seen and get heard by everybody. One concrete example of these institutions, Hannah Arendt mentions the most important product after American Revolution – the American Constitution.<sup>7</sup> According to her this particular constitution makes American Revolution more significant over the French Revolution. The constitution ensures equal protection and opportunity for every citizen of the country. Citizens under and enjoying protection of the constitution are not afraid to go out and share their opinion. The plenitude of perspectives gained from people who are willing to get involved brings more meaning to reality.

Everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance – something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves – constitutes reality.<sup>8</sup>

In Hannah Arendt's words, more and varied perspectives constitute reality. Thus, Arendt is for the provision of occasions for recognition, expression and interrelationship "where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them – that is sheer human togetherness."<sup>9</sup> This experience was lost during the time of the Nazis. Robert Pogue Harrison, an avid Arendt reader, has a warning for us, people who are enjoying the blessing of a strong human world:

If you loved the world; if you considered it your mortal home; if you were aware of how much effort and foresight it had cost your forebears to secure its foundations, build its institutions, and shape its culture; if you saw the world as the place of your secular afterlife, then you had good reasons to impute sinister tendencies to those who would tamper with its configuration or render it alien to you.<sup>10</sup>

In Hannah Arendt's thinking, the preservation of human world is the primal reason why should there be education in the first place. Aside from the human condition of plurality, an equally important character that is present in all human history is the

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<sup>7</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> HC 52.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>10</sup> See Roger Berkowitz, "<http://www.hannaharendtcenter.org/>." *www.hannaharendtcenter.org*. July 20, 2014 (accessed 2014).

condition of human natality. From time to time, a new human person is born and there is a need for this new being to be introduced to the human world.

### **Education for the Love of the World**

If we are going to follow the Arendtian view of education *for the love of the world* in practice, "the first consequence of this would be clear, understanding 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."<sup>11</sup> Moreover, education, writes Hannah Arendt in *The Crisis in Education*, is predicted on the basic fact that human beings are born into the world. Young people come into the world and, because they are newcomers and uninitiated, need to be educated, which means they must be introduced to the world. Parents do this to some degree in the home, bringing the child from the home into wider world. But the primary institutions in which children are educated, in which they are led into the world, are schools.<sup>12</sup>

This is the main character that distinguishes Arendtian view of education. Education, in this sense, is not primarily geared towards skills development rather in making students feel at home and being in-love with the world. Education for skills development is equivalent for training students for the future while education for the love of the world is grounded on the past. What makes education for skills training a second priority to Hannah Arendt is it delimits opportunities for students to look at the world in its entirety. Skills training require specialization while Hannah Arendt wants education to foster critical thinking skills training. This particular type of education needs broad knowledge and a realistic assessment of what the world of the past and the present can offer; critical thinking is required when student comes to the point of deciding whether to love or change the world.

In the preface to *Between Past and Future* (1968) Hannah Arendt suggests that in a world oriented toward the future [referring to our current situation] rather than structured by the tradition of the past, the need to think "became a tangible reality and perplexity for all; that is it became a fact of political relevance." Teachers today must teach critical thinking by first loving and caring about the perplexity of our current global, political, environmental and technological situation. Arendt believes that when teachers assume responsibility for the world through this committed critical engagement with the world, they also save it from ruin which, expert for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. Therefore we must seize every opportunity to share

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<sup>11</sup> See Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 173-196.

<sup>12</sup> See Roger "http://www.hannaharendtcenter.org/?p=7823." *www.hannaharendtcenter.org*. October 5, 2012 (accessed 2012).

the perplexities of our times with young people, for doing so might inspire them to take up the task of thinking about and remaking the world for themselves.<sup>13</sup>

What then are the qualifications of teachers if we are going to follow the Arendtian paradigm of education? "The teacher's qualification consists in knowing the world and being able to instruct others about it, but his authority rests on his assumption of responsibility for that world. Vis-à-vis the child it is as though he were a representative of all adult inhabitants, pointing out the details and saying the child: this is our world."<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, according to Steven Tatum, "teachers need to have both a broad and deep knowledge of the world to be able to lead newcomers into it."<sup>15</sup> They also need a particular attitude toward the world in order to lead with authority, an attitude which Arendt defines here as 'assuming responsibility' for the world and elsewhere in her essay as loving the world. A teacher, Arendt suggests, is someone who stands between her students and the broader world into which we were all thrown at birth, and a good teacher is someone who is able to lead them into an understanding of the world that inspires a renewed commitment to it. Teachers, in other words, seek to help young people feel at home in the world by accomplishing their transition from their beginning as 'strangers and newcomers' in an already existing world to their maturity as people ready and willing to assume responsibility for the world through their freedom to act and change it. The authority of the teacher is, at bottom, a matter of his or her willingness to take responsibility for the world. In other words, the teacher must be conservative in the sense that his or her role is to cherish and protect something – the child against the world, the world against the child, the new against the old, the old against the new. The teacher conserves both the world as it is – insofar as he teaches the child what is rather than what should be or what will be – and the child in her newness – by refusing to tell the child what will be or should be, and thus allowing the child the experience of freedom to rebel against the world when and if the time is right.

### **The World and the Human Political Action**

Aside from the two human conditions of plurality and natality, human beings are also endowed with an equally important condition of spontaneity. In the book *Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt distinguished three human activities; labor, work and action. Laboring activities answer the biological demands of human existence. This type of activities are repetitive and do not leave any traces. Work, for its part, creates something

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<sup>13</sup> Steven Tatum, "[http://www.hannaharendtcenter.org/?p=12297#at\\_pco=smlwn-1.0&at\\_si=53de7999f24ba797&at\\_ab=per-2&at\\_pos=0&at\\_tot=1](http://www.hannaharendtcenter.org/?p=12297#at_pco=smlwn-1.0&at_si=53de7999f24ba797&at_ab=per-2&at_pos=0&at_tot=1)." *www.hannaharendtcenter.org*. January 01, 2014. (accessed 2014).

<sup>14</sup> See Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future*, 173-196.

<sup>15</sup> See Tatum.

that shelters man and at the same time makes his existence comfortable like buildings, institutions that protect him and other technologies to help man make his activities lighter. Work is considered higher than laboring because it leaves something that lasts, hence it is beyond consumption. Lastly, man is capable of acting, which Arendt regard as highest among the three.

Only human beings are capable of doing action. Laboring or responding to biological needs activities are also observed among other animals. Working, on the other hand, cannot be considered as humanizing considering that these activities are predetermined. Hence, it is done not out of spontaneity. Besides, when man works he does it alone without minding others. Action is distinguishable from laboring and working due to the fact that action cannot be done in isolation. Many times, in Hannah Arendt's discussion, action is being equated with speech. Action is always done in the presence of others and it requires words to be understood. And when people start conversing and arguing it becomes spontaneous and unpredictable.

Ironically, though action is a humanizing activity, it also poses threat to humanity itself. Action can even result to the destruction of humanity. A very good example happened during the totalitarian rule of the Nazis. This regime was a product of many causes but it was an output of political activities in its fundamental sense and a clear evidence of how dangerous action can be. Likewise, it also serves as a concrete proof of what man is capable of doing. With this, the world or lasting institutions based on human plurality are very important to check human actions. According to Margaret Canovan,

one implication of Arendt's stress on plurality that is relevant here is that human beings do not need to be good *as individuals* to be able to establish a world of institutions in their midst. Moralists have always tried to make men good by purifying their motives and intentions, and political reformers have often supposed that the way to political justice lies through a change of heart or even a 'new humanity.' But Arendt argued that human plurality makes it possible to establish agreements, laws and institutions without needing to inquire into the 'darkness' of the human heart or entertaining vain hopes of reforming it. The American Founding Fathers did not believe in the goodness of man or the perfectibility of human nature, but they understood the true promise of politics: that 'hope for man in his singularity lay in the fact that not man but men inhabit the earth and form a world between them. It is human worldliness that will save men from the pitfalls of human nature.'<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, according to Canovan, when Arendt meditated on the Founding Fathers and the power of agreements between free men, one of the points which struck

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<sup>16</sup> Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1992), 192-93.

her was that because human beings exist in the plural they have available to them a set of bulwarks against evil which are more reliable than personal goodness, namely the institutions they can establish amongst themselves by acting together. But if one implication of plurality is that we should concentrate on politics on the actions and institutions that appear in the world, not on the feelings and motives that are hidden in the darkness of the human heart, a second implication is that such worldly institutions are indispensable. If men are to be protected from the danger of a recurrence of totalitarianism, they need the housing of a solid structure of rights guaranteed by law, and since constitutions are only pieces of paper unless they are upheld by constantly renewed consent, the citizens need to understand the importance of such institutions and be prepared to value the conservation of their republic above their private interests.<sup>17</sup>

Arendt's conclusion is "that the answer to the horrors of totalitarianism is not to be found in personal morality, however exalted, but that only worldly institutions, built in the space between plural men and kept in being by their active consent, can rescue us from "the darkness of the human heart."<sup>18</sup> She adds:

All that is necessary is that we should be committed to *political* solutions to political problems: that we should be willing to make and keep agreements with one another, to establish lasting institutions to guard the rights we guarantee one another, and to devote ourselves as citizens to maintaining and improving the public world that lies between us.<sup>19</sup>

After all the arguments about the significance of the *human world* especially towards its promise of saving humanity from the possible emergence of another totalitarian regime or political rules that have genocidal tendencies, education must take an active part in inculcating to the young minds of students the necessity of loving the world; the institutions that guarantee the human condition of plurality, natality and spontaneity.

## Conclusion

Arendt's education for the love of the world is meant to protect humanity against the dangers of an abnormal political system. Likewise, it ensures that what happened under the Nazi and the Stalinist's rule shall never recur in our time. After what she had witnessed and experienced under Hitler's regime, she concluded that traditions, mores and customs are so fragile to withstand the challenges of an abnormal political system.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 199-200.



She even doubted the long held belief about personal goodness. She could not rationalize why there were so many people who joined and took part in the devilish endeavor. In the end, we do not know exactly what man is capable of doing. The lesson after totalitarianism that she wants to emphasize is that political problems can only be addressed politically.

The human conditions of plurality, natality and spontaneity are main ingredients that should be present in an ideal political system. The absences of the similar human conditions indicate that political system has gone so far. Following Hannah Arendt's discussions, these human condition can only be protected and be in place if the human world is strong and open enough to embrace human plurality, enough to welcome human natality and tolerant enough to accommodate human spontaneity. If citizens of a particular political system become uniform and too predictable, this is sheer abnormality.

The potential of education has long been considered very powerful and influential. The same power of education has been recognized by Hannah Arendt as a potent tool to promote her ideology of loving the world to protect humanity from abnormal political system especially those that harbor genocidal tendencies; political system that wants to do away with human plurality. Everything is subject to changes including the very world we are living with. This has become prominent as every single day more people are born and the need for introduction of these newborns to the human world has never been more pressing than today especially as we witness the increase of terrorist groups who are willing to kill and die for their hegemonic political and religious convictions. Education plays a major role in introducing the world to the young ones with the end of making them love whatever the same world can offer especially the human condition of plurality. Hannah Arendt, in this sense, is not only promoting a certain pedagogic style instead she wanted to come up with an entire curriculum toward the preservation of the world.

This curriculum for the love of the world is basically loaded with liberal arts subjects that will equip learners with critical thinking skills necessary as they decide whether what needs to be retained or change from the world we have to promote the necessary human conditions of plurality, natality and spontaneity. Teachers have great role to play in presenting the world to students. Teachers can begin by presenting and discussing events happening around the globe, especially those that are political in nature. Wars due to religious conflicts, territorial disputes or even national aggressions can be a good material because these events are manifestations of how fragile the world can be. Life could be very difficult if the very world protecting its citizens has been shattered by wars. Abuse in any form can happen and who can protect these hapless citizens. Critical discourse will then follow regarding reasons behind before the world was shattered. After identifying the causes and the preceding events, it is now up to the

students to evaluate the same world protecting them so that it will not undergo similar processes of the world destroyed by wars and other political conflicts.

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