Most conservative approaches to education emphasize the need to teach worthy subjects and fundamental moral values to the young. For educators like Edward Wynne the main mission of schools is to indoctrinate the young in the moral values of the great tradition. One rarely encounters a conservative educator who believes in providing students with opportunities for change and innovation. Since they disregard issues such as plurality, individual creativity, and critical citizenry, these educators, as Barbara Finkelstein and others have shown, cannot contribute much to the current debate on democratic education. In this article I will argue that Hannah Arendt’s conservatism is an exception to this trend and that her insights on authority need to be taken seriously by democratic educators. While Arendt favored maintaining a traditional notion of authority in education, she also insisted that teachers should foster the revolutionary, innovative, and newness in children. In effect, she helps us bridge the gap between the old (tradition) and the new (change), a problem which has troubled educators for centuries. As such, Arendt’s approach to education is not only much more convincing than mainstream conservative arguments, but also constitutes a genuine contribution to the debate over schooling in a democratic society.

This article includes three main parts corresponding to the three steps of my argument. In the first part I show that Arendt’s conception of authority shares a number of fundamental assumptions with the mainstream conservative view of authority. However, the political philosophy that Arendt developed is far from being “conservative” since it is heavily influenced by her existentialist convictions. This unusual blend of a traditional view of authority together with an existentialist approach to politics shapes her ideas on education, which I discuss in the second part. One cannot fully grasp her views on education without seeing them as emerging out of these two elements. I compare Arendt’s view on authority in education to mainstream conservative approaches and argue that her view constitutes a genuine alternative to these approaches, one that throws fresh light on the meaning of conservatism in education. The final part of this essay explores the implications of


Arendt’s insights on authority for the debate on democratic education. I show that, unlike the views of two mainstream conservatives, Arendt’s conception of pedagogical authority has a number of important implications for democratic education.

AUTHORITY AND POLITICAL EXISTENCE

A CONSERVATIVE HISTORICAL CONCEPTION OF AUTHORITY

Before discussing the similarities between Arendt’s conception of authority and that of mainstream conservatives, I want to indicate briefly what is meant here by the term “conservative.” While there are significant differences between conservative thinkers, it is possible to delineate a number of central convictions that most of them share. By conservatism, I mean an attitude that seeks to preserve the customs, values, and institutions that have been successfully established in the past. Most conservative thinkers “have agreed that virtue, stability, and civilization depend on the continuity of long-established institutions. Political stability is founded on state, church, and family, while moral stability rests upon a strong sense of duty, preferably buttressed by religious belief.” 3 Conservatives are usually suspicious of and even hostile to radical social transformation, particularly change that is instituted by governments to advance the underprivileged sectors of society. Even when they call for change and reform their intention is usually to restore some of the values and practices of tradition to their former influence.

Given this general definition of conservatism, it is possible to identify at least four basic assumptions about authority that Arendt shares with mainstream conservatives. Yves Simon, for example, argues that the need for authority is not derived from a lack of agreement about truth claims or from the privation of justice. Rather, authority has an essential, constructive function:

Given a community on its way to its common good, and given, on the part of this community, the degree of excellence which entails the possibility of attaining the good in a diversity of ways, authority has an indispensable role to play, and this role originates entirely in plenteity and accomplishment.... An ideally enlightened and virtuous community needs authority to unify its action. By accident, it may need it less than a community which, as a result of ignorance, is often confronted with illusory needs. But by essence it is more powerful than any community afflicted with vice and ignorance, and as a result of its greater power it controls choices involving new problems of unity which cannot be solved by way of unanimity but only by way of authority. 4

One assumption held by many conservatives is that in the life of a community authority has an inherently positive role to play. While conservatives like Simon recognize that authority may also have some negative functions, as when opinions are disputed by appeals to authority rather than reason, they insist that its central role is constructive. The notion that authority's role is essentially constructive is at the basis of Arendt's interpretation of the Roman origin of the word and concept:


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The word auctoritas derives from the verb augere, “augment,” and what authority or those in authority constantly augment is the foundation. Those endowed with authority were the elders, the Senate or the patres, who had obtained it by descent or by transmission (tradition) from those who had laid the foundations for all things to come, the ancestors, whom the Romans therefore called the maiores [the great ones].

In Arendt’s view, the meaning of authority is closely connected to the words “augment” and “foundation,” both of which have positive connotations. Foundation, in this context, refers to the original establishment of the city of Rome with its institutions, laws, and values, while to augment means to add to and enhance the original foundation. Thus, like mainstream conservatives, Arendt believes that the role of authority is essentially positive and constructive rather than negative and limiting.

Another assumption that Arendt shares with conservative thinkers is that authority is intimately connected to both tradition and religion. Authority, tradition, and religion are all regarded by conservatives as the foundations for the ways in which we act and think in the present. The three are considered indispensable because they provide stability, meaning, and virtue to our lives. For conservatives, moreover, the surge of problems such as violence and teen-age pregnancy is closely related to our break with the trinity of authority, tradition, and religion. While Arendt does not share mainstream conservatives’ uncritical reverence for this trinity, she does agree that historically speaking the three were connected. Indeed, she argues that whenever one of the elements of the trinity was challenged the other two were no longer secure. The decline of political authority in the modern age, for instance, has proved to be such a significant loss because it was also a loss of tradition and religion:

For to live in a political realm with neither authority nor the concomitant awareness that the source of authority transcends power and those who are in power, means to be confronted anew, without the religious trust in a sacred beginning and without the protection of tradition and therefore self-evident standards of behavior, by the elementary problems of human living-together (WA, 141).

A third belief that Arendt shares with mainstream conservatives has to do with the issue of the purpose of authority in the life of a community. Many conservative thinkers contend that authority is needed in a community in order to unify the action of the individual members. Simon argues that since “a community comprises a number of individuals, the unity of its action cannot be taken for granted: it has to be caused. Further, if the community is to endure, the cause of its united action must be firm and stable.”6 Because a community is made up of individuals who are different from each other, a principle is needed to guarantee that each one will follow the same procedures and norms. Conservatives believe that authority is perhaps the only principle that can bring about this unity of judgment and action. To be sure, Arendt does not go this far, and her concept of action discussed below illustrates the importance of public debates and deliberation in the life of a democracy. Yet, like mainstream conservatives, Arendt maintains that, historically, authority is the

principle that "had endowed political structures with durability, continuity and permanence" [WA, 127]. It is this same principle, she believes, that previously unified human action and gave meaning and coherence to human existence.

Finally, Arendt shares the conviction of many conservatives that authority does not rest on persuasion and rational debate. She thinks that the two are fundamentally different because, unlike authority, persuasion presupposes a relationship of equality and works through a process of argumentation: "Where arguments are used, authority is left in abeyance. Against the egalitarian order of persuasion stands the authoritarian order which is always hierarchical" [WA, 93]. This means that conservatives reject the claim voiced by many liberals that the obedience inherent in the authority relation rests on rational discussion and persuasion. They point out that the authority of the expert is based on the subjects' trust in the expert's superior knowledge and moral integrity. Consequently, this authority is almost always accepted without argument and cannot be questioned or doubted. Alven M. Neiman explains this point with the example of teachers and students:

Students of mathematics come to believe in the correctness of certain formulae for dividing fractions simply on the basis of what a teacher says. They come to accept and depict certain conceptions of how a poem is to be interpreted for similar reasons. In each case the students implicitly trust that their acceptance, without discussion or argument, is correct.7

Conservatives like Neiman and Simon share Arendt's view that the authority relation between bearer and subject is based on a hierarchical order "whose rightness and legitimacy both recognize and where both have their predetermined stable place" [WA, 93].

AN EXISTENTIALIST VIEW OF POLITICAL EXISTENCE

Thus far I have argued that Arendt's conception of authority has several underlying assumptions in common with the mainstream conservative view of authority. Yet, as we shall soon see, this "conservative" conception does not fully account for her views on authority in education. In order to get a firm grasp on the latter, I need to explain her notions of action and natality since they are central to understanding Arendt's approach to political existence.

In The Human Condition, Arendt discusses political existence from the vantage point of the agent who acts in history and tries to create a new beginning. Political action, according to Arendt, is connected to the human condition of "natality," to the fact that we come into the world through birth and that each birth is an entirely new beginning:

The new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity to begin something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities. Moreover, since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought.8

Arendt explains that to act is to insert ourselves into the world with words and deeds. Yet this insertion is neither moved by necessity like labor, nor prompted by utility,

like work. Action, she holds, is often aroused by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them. The impulse to act springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative.

Her point is twofold. First, she thinks that action’s worth is in the activity itself, unlike work and labor, which are instrumental activities, being merely means to achieve higher ends. Action should be viewed outside of the means-ends category precisely because it has no end. The strength of the action process can never be reduced to a single deed with a definite outcome, but on the contrary, can grow while its consequences multiply. Second is the fact that human action, unlike animal behavior, can never be completely conditioned or controlled. In other words, action, like birth, contains an element of surprise since its outcome can never be fully predicted in advance. This is because it comes about through the joint efforts of beings who are beginnings (unique) and beginners (who initiate) in this world and, therefore, have the capacity to make the unexpected happen. One can never anticipate all the possible consequences of a public debate or a worker’s strike, let alone a revolution. In short, action is the actualization of the human condition of freedom; it is the realization of our capacity to initiate something altogether new.

Yet, Arendt teaches us more about political existence than the fact that action is a kind of activity that transcends the means-ends framework and that this activity is the same as the experience of being free. No less important is her insight that action saves human deeds from the doom of history and from the fatality of historical processes. If left to themselves human affairs must follow the law of mortality, which is the inevitable outcome of every individual life. Action is the activity that interrupts the irreversible and unpredictable course of human life in order to begin something new. The point is that action, as the ability to interrupt and begin again, bestows meaning on human existence, which would otherwise resemble other natural processes like the life of a volcano.

To combat the irreversibility and unpredictability of human deeds action does not need to enlist a higher faculty, since the remedy for this predicament is one of the potentialities of action itself. The remedy for not being able to reverse what one has done is the act of forgiving, while the remedy for the uncertainty of the future is contained in the act of making and keeping promises. Without being forgiven, we could never be released from the harmful consequences of our actions, thereby greatly limiting our capacity to act anew. And without being bound to keep our promises, we would never be able to master the chaotic future that is simultaneously shaped by human freedom and plurality. Taking into account the power to initiate, to forgive, and to make promises, action seems like a miracle. This miracle not only bestows on human affairs faith and hope, but also ensures that greatness (great words and deeds) will always be a part of the political realm: “The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, “natural” ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other

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9. Related to this is her notion that political action resembles the performing arts in that both come to an end when the activity is over and leave no trace behind except the memory of what was seen or heard.
words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born."\textsuperscript{10}

This brief account illustrates that although Arendt derives many of her political notions from the ancient Greek and Roman experience and philosophy, there is a strong existentialist component in her thinking. She stresses, more than most political philosophers, the human capacity to act and to begin something new in the face of powerful historical processes and long-lasting oppressive institutions (for instance, the modern revolutions). And she insists that no democratic country can be called egalitarian and just unless the ordinary citizens have an opportunity to gather, deliberate, and decide on issues of public concern. In such a society the positive freedom of individuals, the freedom to collaborate with others on political projects, is guaranteed. Such freedom, Arendt believes, carries with it the burden of responsibility for the decisions that we make. For to give citizens freedom to decide on public issues makes no sense if they are not simultaneously required to assume responsibility for these decisions. As we shall soon see, these existentialist convictions had a profound effect on Arendt’s views on education.

RETHINKING CONSERVATISM IN EDUCATION

AUTHORITY IN EDUCATION

In “The Crisis in Education,” Arendt argues against those who view the crisis in educational authority of the late 1950s — a crisis lasting, I believe, up to the present time — as nothing more than a local phenomenon, peculiar to American society and unconnected to the larger issues of the twentieth century. If this were the case, the crisis in American schools would not have become a political problem and educators would have been able to deal with it in time. Much more is involved here, she felt, than the decline of elementary standards throughout the American school system. Rather, the problem is that the widespread erosion of authority in the Western world has in America infiltrated the school system and education in general. Therefore, she believes that the crisis in education that is being felt strongly in the United States, could easily become a reality in other countries in the foreseeable future.

But what is the nature of the particular authority that is being eroded in the American educational system of the second half of the twentieth century? For Arendt, authority in education is intimately connected to assuming responsibility for the world. She explains that

educators here stand in relation to the young as representatives of a world for which they must assume responsibility although they themselves did not make it, and even though they may, secretly or openly, wish it were other than it is. This responsibility is not arbitrarily imposed upon educators; it is implicit in the fact that the young are introduced by adults into a continuously changing world... In education this responsibility for the world takes the form of authority. The authority of the educator and the qualifications of the teacher are not the same thing. Although a measure of qualification is indispensable for authority, the highest possible qualification can never by itself beget authority. 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. \textit{Vis-a-vis} the child it is as though he were a representative of all adult inhabitants, pointing out the details and saying to the child: This is our world.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition}, 247.

\textsuperscript{11} Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” in Arendt, \textit{Between Past and Future}, 189. This article will be cited as \textit{CE} in the text for all subsequent references.
I have quoted this passage at length not only because it reveals her view on the nature of authority in education, but also because it points to the connection between this kind of authority and political authority. Further, it shows how her existentialist beliefs influenced her ideas on education. For the ancient Romans but also for many of the succeeding generations, including the founders of the American republic, true authority was always joined with responsibility for the course of events in the world. Those in authority knew that they must assume responsibility not only for themselves and their property but for everyone and everything else under their jurisdiction. Similarly, in education, Arendt holds that to be in authority requires parents and teachers to take responsibility for preparing the young to take part in the common world. Hence, her conception of authority in education is based on her understanding of the ancient Roman experience of political authority.

However, Arendt’s insistence that the teachers’ authority rests on their assumption of responsibility for the world illustrates how her views on education were also shaped by her existentialist beliefs. To demand of parents and teachers that they assume responsibility for the world into which they introduce the young, as she does, presupposes that responsibility and freedom are fundamental possibilities of the human condition. In fact, she believes that the current loss of authority in education was partly brought about by parents and teachers who refused to assume this responsibility. Arendt argues that in this realm adults and children cannot equally share in the responsibility for the education of the latter: “Children cannot throw off educational authority, as though they were in a position of oppression by an adult majority” (CE, 190). Rather, she thinks that authority has been discarded by adults, which means that adults are increasingly refusing to assume responsibility for the world into which they have brought their children. To illustrate this point we just need to think of the number of cases in the United States in which parents who themselves abuse drugs and alcohol bring children into a world for which they can take little or no responsibility.

Thus Arendt’s existential convictions infiltrate her traditional conception of authority and create an unusual conservative approach to education. As she describes it,

To avoid misunderstanding: it seems to me that conservatism 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, the new against the old, the old against the new. Even the comprehensive responsibility for the world that is thereby assumed implies, of course, a conservative attitude (CE, 192).

It implies, in other words, the need to preserve the world from the hands of the young who might destroy parts of it if left to their own devices. Arendt means that since the world is constantly made and remade by mortals, it runs the risk of becoming as mortal and temporary as they are. She is referring here primarily to the world that humans have created, that is, to the totality of human culture. To preserve this human world against the mortality of its creators means to constantly renew it so

12. This argument is especially strong today because the traditional despotic methods of pedagogy used in the past have been replaced by more liberal and democratic approaches.
that it can provide a permanent home for succeeding generations who will inhabit it. This point is reminiscent of the mainstream conservative argument that holds that society and tradition are to be preserved by imparting to the young the worthy values and great ideas of the past.

Yet, Arendt also presents a stronger argument: that conservatism in education implies a willingness on the part of adults to protect the young from the world [in other words, from social conventions], which seeks to suppress the new and revolutionary in every child. Unlike mainstream conservative approaches that, at best, ignore the fresh possibilities that new borns bring into the world, she insists that educators must cherish and foster them. For Arendt perhaps the most important and difficult problem in education is how to preserve the new and revolutionary in the child while simultaneously conserving the world as a permanent home for human beings. The question is, then, How do we protect the world from the actions of the young while not squashing their chance to be creative and original? In short, the problem is one of bridging the gap between the old [the past and tradition] and the new [change and creativity] in education. In Arendt’s view, as we shall soon see, the only way to solve this problem is by adopting a conservative attitude.

The conservative attitude that provides, according to Arendt, the answer to the central dilemma facing education today, should be distinguished from mainstream conservative approaches. On the one hand, she agrees with mainstream conservatives like Wynne and Allan Bloom who claim that the task of educators is to mediate between the old and the new. This means that their very profession requires of them an attitude of reverence toward the past. Wynne, for instance, thinks that educators need to be sensitive to the implications of our break with the great tradition: the deliberate transmission of moral values to students. He insists that “to understand the significance of the great tradition, we must engage in a form of consciousness-raising by enriching our understanding of the past and by understanding the misperceptions that pervade contemporary education.”

On the other hand, Arendt suggests that these conservatives ignore the fact that the crisis in authority is closely connected to the crisis of tradition. She points out that, together with authority, the value and relevance of Western tradition has been called into question today and that we can no longer take for granted the Roman attitude of respect toward the past. This view is strengthened by contemporary liberal and radical thinkers who argue that educators need to engage critically the works of tradition because of their limited scope and oppressive elements. Unlike most conservatives, Arendt acknowledges the assertion that educators’ attitude toward the past and tradition has in the modern world become problematized.

Moreover, Arendt criticizes mainstream conservatives for attempting to return to an old-fashioned political existence in which tradition and authority played such an important role. Such a position seems absurd to her because,

wherever the crisis has occurred in the modern world, one cannot simply go on nor yet simply turn back. Such a reversal will never bring us anywhere except to the same situation out of which the crisis has just arisen. . . . On the other hand, simple, unreflective perseverance, whether it be pressing forward in the crisis or adhering to the routine that blandly believes that the crisis will not engulf its particular sphere of life, can only, because it surrenders to the course of time, lead to ruin (CE, 194).

This quote points to a fundamental distinction between Arendt and other conservative thinkers regarding the educator's attitude toward the past. What I am suggesting is that Arendt's way of conceptualizing tradition is very different from that of conservatives like Bloom and Wynne. This difference is expressed most clearly in the essay she wrote on the German literary critic Walter Benjamin. Arendt notes that Benjamin was well aware that the crisis in authority and the break with tradition were irreversible, and therefore attempted to find new ways of dealing with the past. This he achieved through "the destructive power of quotations" and by "thinking poetically." Arendt writes that this kind of thinking is fed by the present and works with the "thought fragments" it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past — but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages.14

Unlike the pearl diver, conservatives like Bloom and Wynne respond to what they perceive as the nihilism of our time by attempting to resuscitate the past and renew the values and practices of tradition. Bloom and Wynne believe that if the great works and deeds of the past can be brought to light and appreciated, authority and tradition can be saved from decay and revitalized. Underlying this conviction is the notion that tradition is like a seam whose function is to connect the present with the past and provide a sense of unity to the different periods of human civilization. In this view, the educator's task is to repair and nourish this seam or to "protect and cultivate the delicate tendrils" so that the past can continue to throw light on the present and provide us with a sense of coherence and unity.15

As opposed to conservatives like Bloom and Wynne, Arendt does not view tradition as a seam that connects one generation to the next and endows human civilization with unity and significance. Rather, for her, it should be conceived as a series of innovations, itself full of breaks and fissures and the kinds of reinventions Arendt wants the young to make. To clarify this idea let us return once again to the metaphor of the pearl diver. Arendt shares Benjamin's view that although human culture is subject to the ruin of time:

the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things "suffer a sea-change" and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up to the world of the living.16

From this perspective, the problem is not to revitalize our ties with tradition and the past as one mends a worn-out seam. It is rather to discover those crystallized forms and shapes that have survived the forces of destruction so we can use them to interrupt and critique the present. For Benjamin, this meant that the quotations he collected were not used to reestablish a connection to the past but rather to arrest the flow of the present and introduce something new. Arendt applies this idea to the educational realm and argues that educators need to help students become “pearl divers” who can descend into the depths of the past and find the crystallized artifacts. That is, educators should expose students to those ideas and values that, though they have undergone change, have survived in a different form and can be used to interrupt, critique, and transform the present. Unlike mainstream conservatives who want to use these ideas and values to bridge the gap between the past and the present, Arendt wants to use them for the sake of creating a new beginning. The former insist that a deep familiarity with the past means to study the works of tradition in their original context and complexity. Arendt, following Benjamin and Martin Heidegger, thinks that such familiarity is rather the ability to find “living eyes and living bones that had sea-changed into pearls and coral, and as such could be saved and lifted into the present only by doing violence to their context in interpreting them with ‘the deadly impact’ of new thoughts.” The former hold that the treasures of the past can provide our lives with continuity, unity, and meaning; she views these treasures as tools that enable us to critique problematic aspects in the present as well as to generate fresh initiatives.

**Practical Implications**

One of the most pressing problems confronting educators in the modern age, according to Arendt, is that, on the one hand, they cannot forgo either authority or tradition; yet, on the other, they must continue living in a world that is neither bound by authority nor held together by tradition. For her this means that all adults, not only educators and teachers, should apply a radically different attitude toward children than the one they apply toward each other. She states that we should separate the realm of education from all others, especially the political sphere in order to “apply to it alone a concept of authority and an attitude toward the past which are appropriate to it but have no general validity and must not claim a general validity in the world of grown-ups” ([CE, 195]). In saying this, Arendt is not suggesting that we should not respect children or that they should be arbitrarily subjected to our wills. But she does think that in education grown-ups should not treat children as equal partners, since only the former are truly responsible for the well-being of the latter and the world.

The demand to separate education from all other realms in order to maintain there a traditional concept of authority, has a number of practical implications. First, Arendt thinks that we should recognize that the function of the school is to teach children about the world and not to instruct them in the art of living. This is because authority, in the sense of assuming responsibility for the world, presupposes that one is familiar with that world and can instruct others about it. Since the world is always

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17. Ibid., 201.
older than the children, learning will inevitably be aimed at the past, no matter how much they need to adjust to a changing present. In this way, both authority and tradition will always play a major role in education even as both are losing their grasp on other aspects of our lives. The advantage of this approach to pedagogy, as Natasha Levinson notes, is that "it offers each new being an opportunity to see how they have been made what they are, and provides an incentive for them to reconfigure themselves in response to this history."  

Second, the dividing line maintained between children and adults through authority signifies that one can neither treat children as though they were grown-ups nor educate adults. Yet Arendt quickly adds the qualification that this line should not be allowed to grow into a wall closing off all contact between children and the adult community. She thinks that we ought to relate differently to children than we do toward each other, which means that we should neither allow them the same rights and freedoms that adults enjoy nor hold them responsible in the same way. However, she does not call for a complete separation between the two, one that would involve setting up an autonomous world for the young governed by its own laws.

But what does Arendt mean when she says that one cannot educate adults? To understand this statement I think that it is important to keep in mind that she is distinguishing between educating and learning. Arendt believes that adults can certainly learn by being instructed about a particular aspect of the world. Education, on the other hand, has a more specific function and aims at introducing the young person to the world as a whole. It has to do with responsibly preparing children to live in and renew the common world.

Arendt insists that education involves assuming responsibility for both the world and our children in order to protect them from harm and preserve the possibility of renewal. While the common world needs to be preserved from the actions of human beings, children require a safe environment to enhance their development. This conservative attitude, applied to both the world and the young, helps to bridge the gap between the old and the new in education. Since both the children and the world need to be preserved, they should no longer be conceived as diametrically opposed.

From this perspective, education involves a unique triadic relation among educators, the world, and our children, in which it is the former's task to mediate between the latter two. Such a relation, according to Arendt, is both difficult to maintain and undesirable in other realms since it is based on authority and therefore fundamentally nonegalitarian. But in education, it is precisely the authority relation and its corresponding conservative attitude that make room for renewal and innovation. Renewal and innovation are contingent upon the young coming to know the world; only adults, because they are already familiar with the world, can teach children about it. Education, she argues, is worthwhile when the conservative and the revolutionary go hand in hand, when we preserve the past for the sake of the new:

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Exactly for the sake of what is new and revolutionary in every child, education must be conservative; it must preserve this newness and introduce it as a new thing into an old world, which, however revolutionary its actions may be, is always, from the standpoint of the next generation, superannuated and close to destruction (CE, 192-93).

This last point should be underlined because I believe that Arendt is one of the only modern thinkers who insists that in education we must be conservative for the sake of the new. Gramsci is a noteworthy exception. She is not arguing, as mainstream conservatives have, that children should be taught the great works of the past because of their important educational insights and relevance for our lives. Rather, she is claiming that the past and the relation of authority are essential to help children realize their potential for creating something new. Without being taught the classic works of tradition, children would not have the basic knowledge needed to change and renew the world. And without adults assuming responsibility for the common world and guiding the young in it, they would not have the security needed to operate adequately in a rapidly changing world. In Arendt’s view, the most important goal of education is to help children become familiar with the world and feel secure in it so that they may have a chance to be creative and attempt something new.

Yet what distinguishes Arendt’s conception of educational authority is not merely the idea of preserving the past for the sake of the new. No less important is her emphasis on human action and the fact of natality on which action is ontologically based. For Arendt, each child has the potential to initiate something new in the world by virtue of the fact that “with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world.” The fact that birth constantly brings newcomers who are not only beginners but also unique into our world means that the unexpected can be expected from them. It means that the young can intervene in the ordinary course of events and initiate radical changes in society. Since Arendt strongly believes in the human capacity to act, she would reject the view of conservatives like Bloom and Wynne that a worthy education is based primarily on the transmission of the great ideas and values of the past to the young. Instead, education should be aimed at preparing the young to a life of action, to a life of involvement in and transformation of the world:

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from the ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chances of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world (CE, 196).

In Arendt’s view, therefore, education is aimed at preparing the young for taking responsibility for the world. Yet this responsibility for the world does not mean clinging to traditional morals or returning to a “golden past,” as many conservatives advocate. It means rather, as I noted, preparing our students for action, that is, for

19. Arendt, The Human Condition, 178. Even thinkers like Nietzsche who share Arendt’s concern for preserving the past for the sake of creativity and renewal do not consider the significance of action as a universal possibility of the human condition. For Nietzsche, what saves our civilization from doom is not the changes brought about by ordinary people who gather and act in the public realm, but rather the creative work of a handful of free spirits or great human beings.
intervening in the world and creating a more humane society. In this context, it is interesting to note the difference between Bloom's interpretation of the university students' protest movement and that of Arendt's. Bloom argues that university students played a marginal role in the civil rights movement and the other major historical changes between 1950 and 1970, and that many students were plagued by a "histrionic morality." 20 Arendt, on the other hand, claims that university students played a decisive part in bringing about these changes and that the student movement "did not simply carry on propaganda, but acted, and, moreover acted almost exclusively from moral motives." 21 What is involved here is not simply two different readings of historical events, but, more significantly, divergent conceptions of the relation of education and action. For Bloom, action, as manifest in the student protest movement, is primarily a way of evading the true learning that goes on in the classroom and the responsibility for one's education as a free spirit and a lover of truth. Contrarily, Arendt believes that education is ideally a space that can help students prepare for taking responsibility for the world by providing them with the kind of information and skills [such as moral reasoning] that they will need in order to act. In brief, Bloom considers action as a vain diversion from education while Arendt sees action as its fulfillment.

ARENDT AND DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

I have argued that Arendt's conservative approach to education represents a genuine alternative to mainstream conservative arguments, one that is not only more convincing but also empowering. Whereas mainstream conservatives disregard the creative possibilities of the young, she celebrates these possibilities and insists that educators should foster them. In the final part of this article I would like to discuss the relevance of Arendt's views for the debate on democratic education. In my view, her insights on authority constitute a significant contribution to the debate on the ways to attain democratic educational aims. This view is encouraging because, as Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren have shown, the new conservative discourse strips public education of a democratic virtue by emphasizing objectives such as standardization, competency, technical expertise, and a narrow and uncritical view of culture:

The ideological interests that inform the new conservative proposals are based on a view of morality and politics that is legitimated through an appeal to custom, national unity, and tradition. Within this discourse, democracy loses its dynamic character and is reduced to a set of inherited principles and institutional arrangements that teach students how to adapt rather than to question the basic precepts of society. What is left in the new reform proposals is a view of authority constructed around a mandate to follow and implement predetermined rules, to transmit an unquestioned cultural tradition, and to sanctify industrial discipline. 21

Giroux and McLaren are referring to conservatives like Bloom who, troubled by the relativism and anti-intellectualism of American college students, argues that the

only way to combat these problems is by returning to a type of liberal education that 
privileges the classic books of Western culture. Bloom's conception of liberal 
education consists of 

reading certain generally recognized classic texts, just reading them, letting them dictate what 
the questions are and the method of approaching them — not forcing them into categories we 
makeup, not treating them as historical products, but trying to read them as their authors wished 
them to be read.23

What is troubling about Bloom's conception of liberal education is not so much 
his preference for a very limited notion of the Western canon as the fact that he favors 
a pedagogy that relies heavily on transmission and imposition. For Bloom, it is 
obvious that there is only one legitimate way to read the classic texts and that the 
lessons that can be gleaned from them are explicit and timeless. In this view, "reading 
critically is reduced to appropriating so-called legitimate cultural capital, decoding 
texts, or authorizing the voice of the 'masters.'"24

Another conservative pedagogical approach that shares some of Bloom's basic 
assumptions about teaching and learning is that of E.D. Hirsch. In his book, Cultural 
Literacy, Hirsch addresses the problem of ignorance and lack of mature literacy 
among American students as exhibited primarily in the decline of standardized test 
scores. Hirsch defines cultural literacy as 

the network of information that all competent readers possess. It is the background information, 
stored in their minds, that enables them to take up a newspaper and read it with an adequate level 
of comprehension, getting the point, grasping the implications, relating what they read to the 
unstated context which alone gives meaning to what they read....The achievement of high 
universal literacy is the key to all other fundamental improvements in American education."25

In short, for Hirsch, cultural literacy is essentially the body of information or facts 
that enables people to understand texts, communicate effectively with each other, 
and compete effectively in the marketplace. This notion of literacy presupposes what 
Paulo Freire calls "the banking concept of education," which consists of depositing 
information in students' heads, information that is often meaningless to them.26 
Freire shows that this approach to education fosters students who are passive, 
disciplined, and content rather than ones that can question, doubt, and think for 
themselves. In Hirsch's case, what we are offered is an approach to literacy that 
focuses on the need to appropriate a universal cultural capital and has little to say 
about how to develop those skills and capabilities that students need to evaluate and 
critique this capital.

In contrast to both Bloom and Hirsch, I think that Arendt's unique conservative 
approach to education can be used to reinforce the liberal and radical efforts to

24. See Henry A. Giroux, "Curriculum Theory, Textual Authority, and the Role of Teachers as Public 
26. For a detailed discussion of this notion see Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York: 
Continuum, 1970), chap. 2.
establish more democratic classrooms that develop critical and active students. To advance my argument, I would like to focus on the question, What can we learn from Arendt's conception of pedagogical authority about the conditions necessary to achieve a democratic education? I believe that a conception of authority rooted in assuming responsibility for the world suggests that democratic educators need to take into account two primary conditions in their efforts to redefine the practices of teaching and learning. First is the idea that the democratic aim of enhancing children's creativity and initiative cannot be achieved unless teachers instruct the young about the cultural traditions of the past. The reason is that it is impossible to critique, change, and renew the world without being thoroughly familiar with it first. That is, Arendt rightly emphasizes the fact that a worthy and effective critique is always grounded in a profound knowledge of the past. Likewise, creativity and innovation are truly significant only in relation to the world that came before them: "Only in relation to this world will students come to an understanding of what needs to be challenged and transformed."  

The importance of Arendt's view is, therefore, in her claim that an education that rests on responsible initiation of students to the cultural traditions of the past, far from being opposed to creativity and critical thinking, can actually foster these goals. According to this view, learning about the past and the great works of tradition should not be done, as mainstream conservatives claim, in order to glorify and imitate them. Rather, such works should be taught in order to encourage children to respond to these examples and create something new. In this case, students' creativity and initiative are not stifled by coming to know a particular aspect of one's tradition and past, but in fact emerge as a response to it. This point is crucial not only because Arendt is going beyond mainstream conservative educators who claim that the great works of tradition should be taught because they contain invaluable insights for our lives. She is also making a stronger point than a number of progressive educators who stress that the past and tradition have to be incorporated for pragmatic reasons. John Dewey, for instance, contends that unless democratic education starts with an idea of the existing society and practices, its goals will be utopian and impracticable. In short, Arendt provides democratic educators with a more convincing rationale than the existing arguments for incorporating tradition and the great works of the past into the curriculum.  

Still, how would an Arendtian pedagogy bridge the gap between the need for each generation to know what has come before it and the need to renew the world? And, what would an Arendtian engagement with "the canon" look like? In my view, the answer to these questions lies in Arendt's emphasis on the twofold responsibility of the educators: the responsibility to preserve the totality of human culture (the world) as well as to protect the young's possibility for renewal and creativity. The strength of Arendt's approach is in her insistence that these two responsibilities are mutually

dependent rather than opposed. On the one hand, as I argued above, children will not be able to be revolutionary and creative unless the educators first introduce them to the traditions and ideas of the past. On the other hand, the continuous creation of great works of art is contingent on the ability of the young not simply to repeat the past but to change and renew it.

What I am suggesting, following Arendt, is that it is not the case, as feminist literary critics like Judith Fetterly would have us believe, that "to read the canon of what is currently considered classic American literature is perforce to identify as male." By arguing that women are obliged to respond to a text in a certain way, Fetterly, in effect, takes for granted the same traditional notion of reading embraced by mainstream conservative educators. According to this notion, the author has already defined the meaning of a text and the reader's task is to try to discover this hidden meaning independently of his or her context. Today, however, it is widely recognized that the meaning of a text cannot be separated from the social and political context of its readers. Moreover, since readers bring different perspectives to the encounter with the text, its meaning arises out of multiplicity and the recognition of otherness. Arendt would say that to argue that works of literature require readers to adopt a certain meaning disregards the capacity of humans to challenge and create something new.

Neither is it correct to suggest, as Fetterly does, that texts typically elicit a response of "identification." Rather, it is more accurate to say, as Buber does, that of the many things that impress upon our character some "exert their influence by stimulating agreement, imitation, desire, effort; others by arousing questions, doubts, dislike, resistance. Character is formed by the interpenetration of all these multifarious, opposing influences." My experience of reading and discussing classic texts with hundreds of female and minority college students indicates that identification is only one of many possible responses to these texts. In fact, resistance and dislike are just as likely to occur.

The crucial question for curriculum theory and pedagogy is, therefore, How can teachers encourage students to be critical and innovative readers and learners? Like Arendt, I would argue that what is essential in education is not so much what the curriculum includes but how any text, whether traditional or modern, feminist or minority, is read and discussed. Thus it is incorrect to assert, as a number of critical educators have, that the Eurocentric curriculum is responsible for making students

32. At the same time, I believe that Arendt would be sympathetic to the claim of feminists and critical educators that we should incorporate into "the canon" the voices of women and minorities who historically have been excluded from joining it.
passive and content. This curriculum, no matter how distorted, cannot by itself, without the support of teachers who subscribe to traditional pedagogical approaches, have such an effect on students. Indeed, even texts written by authors who portray the values of a slave society or an elitist society can have a liberating effect. Such an effect is possible if, for example, Plato is read "not as a cultural icon whose abstractions one might reproduce on exams, but as a living force with whom one might argue, agree, and disagree, embrace and reject." On the other hand, one might imagine a classroom in which a feminist text is read and discussed in a dogmatic and uncritical way. Following Arendt, I submit that the educator is responsible more than any other factor for empowering students to become critical and active readers and learners.

Second, is the idea that, for Arendt, assuming responsibility for the world implies not only preserving the great works of the past while protecting the young's possibility for renewal. It also means preserving and renewing our common habitation so that it can provide a secure home for succeeding generations that will inhabit it: "Because the world is made by mortals it wears out; and because it continuously changes its inhabitants it runs the risk of becoming as mortal as they are. To preserve the world against the mortality of its creators and inhabitants it must be constantly set right anew" (GE, 192). This "setting right anew" suggests that Arendt believes that educators should confront rather than avoid the problems that threaten to destroy our common world. The responsibility for the common world is crucial today more than ever when millions are dying of hunger, the environment is being destroyed in the name of capitalism and free enterprise, and violence is rampant. These global and local catastrophes, usually brought about by human actions, demonstrate that for many people the world can no longer provide a secure haven. Arendt suggests that educators need to make people aware of the fact that their actions may inevitably affect the lives of others who share this world now, as well as those who will be here tomorrow. Her conviction that education should prepare students for a life of action echoes the concern of many progressive educators who argue that democratic education should be aimed at developing a sense of community, solidarity, and responsibility for others.

However, Arendt diverges from liberals and radicals on the means to achieve such educational aims. Many liberal and radical educators argue that these goals can be attained primarily by encouraging students to think critically about and struggle against the oppressive institutions and inequalities of their society. These educators subscribe to a pedagogy based on dialogue, equality, and the idea that teachers and students should share in the responsibility for the learning process. Giroux, for example, advocates a radical pedagogy that incorporates and analyzes the immediate experiences and cultures of students. In addition, such radical pedagogy needs to:

critically appropriate forms of knowledge that exist outside the immediate experience of students' lives in order to broaden their sense of understanding and possibility. This means that students need to learn and appropriate other codes of experience as well as other discourses in time and place that extend their horizons while constantly pushing them to test what it means to resist oppression, work collectively, and exercise authority from the position of an ever-developing sense of knowledge, expertise, and commitment."

Contrary to these educators, Arendt maintains that the responsibility for the learning process cannot be shared and should be assumed by the educators. For her, parents and teachers are the only ones responsible for helping students develop a sense of community and concern for the world as well as for making sure that the world remains a safe place for children. As Elisabeth Young-Bruehl notes, Arendt strongly believed that adults must not "forswear their responsibility for children as children, they must not refuse to children a sheltered period of maturation, for being at home in the world." Thus she would criticize progressive educators like Giroux and McLaren for blurring the distinguishing line between children and adults. She would also chastise them for expecting children to assume responsibility for social problems such as racial oppression and inequality and to become involved in political struggles.

Arendt's criticism of progressive educators is particularly relevant in light of a weighty problem in contemporary American education. This problem concerns the lack of a secure and nourishing place for teenagers in present-day American society. David Elkind describes this problem well:

There is no place for teenagers in American society today — not in our homes, not in our schools, and not in society at large. This was not always the case: barely a decade ago, teenagers had a clearly defined position in the social structure. They were the "next generation," the "future leaders" of America. Their intellectual, social, and moral development was considered important, and therefore it was protected and nurtured... Teenagers thus received the time needed to adapt to the remarkable transformations their bodies, minds, and emotions were undergoing. Society recognized that the transition from childhood to adulthood was difficult and that young people needed time, support, and guidance in this endeavor."

The problem that Elkind points to is that in today's society many parents and teachers are unable or unwilling to give adolescents the necessary guidance and direction they need in order to mature into healthy adults. Many parents and teachers assume that the teenager is a kind of adult and thus expect him or her to "confront life and its challenges with the maturity once expected only of the middle aged, without any time for preparation." Elkind claims that there are two detrimental results to the imposition of premature adulthood upon teenagers. First, the absence of a clearly defined transition period from childhood to adulthood impairs teenagers' ability to form a secure personal identity. Second, premature adulthood leads teenagers to undergo excessive stress, making it almost impossible for many of them to adapt to the demands of a rapidly changing society.

38. Ibid.
Elkind and others have argued that what is true for teenagers — the disappearance of adolescence as a clearly defined period — is equally true for younger children. In *The Disappearance of Childhood*, Neil Postman claims that childhood as a period of innocence has all but disappeared and that today's children are exposed to all sorts of information that was once the privilege of adults. 39 Television, for instance, has made violence and sexual information accessible even to young children, thereby robbing many of them of their innocence before they are ripe. As a result, young children, much like adolescents, are subjected to inordinate stress that is proving to be too much for many of them to bear.

In my view, the problem of the disappearance of childhood and adolescence as clearly defined periods is related to a more general problem in educational authority. More specifically, I would argue that the crisis that many teenagers and young children are undergoing today is largely a product of the erosion of authority in education. Arendt is correct in her claim that the loss of authority in education suggests that adults are increasingly refusing "to assume responsibility for the world into which they have brought the children" ([CE, 190]). In other words, pedagogical authority is at stake when educators repudiate the responsibility for children and the world. The refusal to assume this responsibility can be seen in the fact that many parents expect their children to confront difficult problems and make weighty decisions on their own without adult guidance and support. Radical educators who expect students to struggle for social transformation and justice may be inadvertently contributing to the problem of the disappearance of childhood. At the very least, these educators need to be clearer about what kind of responsibility they think should be required of children at different ages. The crucial point for educators who believe that students should partake in the responsibility for the learning process is that they need to make sure that the students are ready and willing to assume this responsibility.

If we agree with progressive educators that democratic education should be aimed at fostering students who can think critically about oppressive social structures, then we must adopt a notion of pedagogical authority for which the responsibility of the educator is central. What is missing from the conception of democratic education of many radical pedagogues is the necessity of grounding critique and reform on a deep familiarity with the past and tradition. Yet also missing is the recognition that there are certain responsibilities regarding our common world that should not be shared even with the brightest children. These oversights can be corrected if radical pedagogues take seriously Arendt's claim that authority in education rests on the willingness of educators to assume responsibility for the welfare of both our children and the world. The import of Arendt's approach is not merely in her emphasis on the twofold responsibility of the educators, but also in her helping us to understand how these two responsibilities are connected: that children will not be able to be revolutionary and creative unless educators first introduce

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them to the values and ideas of the past. Recognizing that these two responsibilities are mutually dependent is significant because it enables us to break the impasse between the mainstream conservatives' emphasis on preserving tradition and the progressives' focus on critical citizenry and social justice.

I AM GRATEFUL FOR the input of Nicholas Burbules and the anonymous reviewers who made excellent comments on previous versions of this article and helped me bring it to fruition.