

Agonistic Recognition in Education: On Arendt's Qualification of Political and Moral Meaning

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Abstract Agonistic recognition in education has three interlinked modes of aesthetic experience and self-presentation where one is related to actions in the public realm; one is related to plurality in the way in which it comes into existence in confrontation with others; and one is related to the subject-self, disclosed by 'thinking. Arendt's conception of 'thinking' is a way of getting to grips with aesthetic self-presentation in education. By action, i.e., by disclosing oneself and by taking initiatives, students and teachers constitute their being. The way Arendt theorizes action (*vita activa*) makes it essentially unpredictable and destabilizing, which does not seem to fit into what should be expected from education. In the article I will argue that it should have a place by virtue of the debate, challenge and contest it offers. But education should also be defined from a specific kind of contemplation called 'thinking' to become the cultivation of a faculty of judgment in education—thinking (*vita contemplativa*) as a common virtue in education. Arendt's demarcation between truth and meaning does from the point of view of agonistic recognition in education call for 'thinking' as a qualification of political and moral meaning—the 'taste' to be established in the individual, by individual judgements but always judged in relation to members of a community.

Keywords Actors and spectators · Agonism · Arendt · Judgement · Moral education · Politics · Thinking · Truth and meaning

The Meaning of Being Educated

Education is about learning and teaching and also about becoming a person by entering into what I will refer to as a community of thought and action. What are the characteristics of such a community? Although classroom communication is universally recognized as complex, the idea that knowing and explaining lie at the heart of education appears to be

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hegemonic. When epistemology is expected to do the work by delivering true stories and true facts in schools there would be no reason to pay attention to the opinions of others or to question what is heard and seen. Then no other form of communication than ‘truth-telling’ by ‘truth-tellers’ would be required. In contrast to this, I think that in education illumination may well come less from knowledge of theories and concepts than from the self-understanding or lack of self-understanding of the situation in which teachers and students communicate. Further, I think—and that is what motivates this article—that many of the theories of communication that are currently being used in education do not have enough power to shed light on one highly decisive aspect of communication in the realm of education, i.e. *thinking*. When communicative approaches to education focus on debating or deliberating, speaking or listening, recognizing or misrecognizing, broadening social, cultural or political perspectives, learning how to participate in democracy, how to judge right from wrong or whatever the indicator of communication in education may be, *thinking* is seldom on the agenda. In light of this I shall discuss education as an arena for thinking in the sense of consideration. The symbiosis between self-understanding and the understanding of oneself as viewed by others justifies thinking as a decisive aspect of what it means to be educated. In contrast to having been taught about the world, being educated means understanding the self—not in isolation but in a way that I will refer to as agonistic recognition in education.

In education communication can be defined on the basis of the thesis that the more we can identify the different viewpoints from which a situation can be interpreted, the more it is possible to be sensitive to the particularities that are involved and with this to history and to other individuals. This is about the capacity to *represent to oneself* a variety of viewpoints in order to be sensitive to different kinds of political and moral situations. This can be done, to use the often quoted words of Hannah Arendt, by “being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not” (Arendt 1961/1993, p. 241). In this article I will argue for an understanding of the meaning of the capacity to “represent to oneself different viewpoints” not as cognition or as “enlarged thinking” in the way it usually is done, for example by Benhabib (1996). The argument that she and others propose, viz., that thinking and moral consideration is primarily justifiable as a dialogic procedure of enlarged thought and its enhancement of a democratic ethos is, I think, appropriate in many educational situations. For instance one of her theses is that the nature of moral action “entails the exercise of moral imagination which activates our capacity for thinking of possible narratives and descriptions in light of which our actions can be understood by others” (ibid., p. 129). The inter-subjective emphasis on the capacity to think of possible narratives and descriptions that are not mine is of course a strong argument for how to expound skills and how to educate in political and moral questions. In this article, however, I shall try to demonstrate some consequences of viewing thinking as a decisive aspect of communication in education from another point of view, i.e., from the premise that education establishes *self-understanding*. Even though self-understanding requires checking one’s own understanding of the world not just against the perspectives of others but also *against oneself*, it should be borne in mind that this still occurs in the presence of others, represented to myself not by my imagination but by my agonistic recognition of myself—a recognition that necessitates withdrawnness of a certain kind called ‘thinking’ and where the agonistic aspect in that thinking means a provocation with the world that always is a response to our own appearance and self-understanding as well.¹ I picture this kind of ‘thinking’ as an almost outworn feature in education, repressed by constant pressure from a

¹ C.f. Curtis (1999, p. 164, n. 23) concerning Arendt’s conception of the self.

society that calls for *action*. To be educated by entering a community of thought and action means to become a person among persons in an act of communication where to be educated in contrast to be taught or instructed is not an act of preparation but of contingent action. By this I mean that education should not primarily be thought of as operating through rational argumentation or the gradual winning of universal assent. Rather, when it comes to political and moral questions, education in terms of contingent action should be thought of as involving actors that, in an Arendtian kind of phrase, move in plurality and appearance while confronting the particularity of the individual/the distinct ‘who’ and the generality of the citizen/the shared ‘what’.²

Such an agonistic confrontation of the self is a device for grappling with Arendt’s theory on action. For Arendt political life consists of both agonistic (‘provocative’) and consensual moments but, as many scholars have recognized, what she constantly returns to is the conception of plurality. And with plurality the aspects of difference, particularity and individuality—or in Arendt’s vocabulary: uniqueness—follow. The capacity to become a unique and politically strong person—or, better still, what enables a person to stay unique by virtue of being born depends on the mutual provocation between beings who disclose themselves in speech and acts. And, in turn, a person’s capacity to disclose the self depends not only upon the possibility of acting in concert—maybe the most popular inspiration from Arendt’s philosophy in the philosophy of education (see, e.g., Gordon 2001)—but whether the subject-self can be constituted by ‘thinking.’ Despite the fact that Arendt’s ambiguous attitude to thinking in relation to judging and the political is often addressed, my aim here is to argue that ‘thinking’ is crucial to education, where ‘thinking’ has an aesthetic (self-understanding) as well as a political dimension (viewing the other). The relation between aesthetics and politics in education can be demonstrated distinctly. If Arendt had been posed the question of what politics is for, I believe she would have answered in a way that corresponds to what Curtis has expressed as “our dependence upon the presence of others for our sense of the real” (Curtis 1999, p. 15). Irrespective of Arendt’s own attitude to education, when she theorizes our dependence upon others her philosophy is appropriate for our understanding of education since it makes it possible to reconfigure the relationship between human particularity and a common shared world and the collective foundations of individuality where a specific kind of ‘thinking’ could be brought into the context of education.

Before entering into the longer discussion, I wish to recall briefly another concept close to that of communication, viz., the notion of ‘responsiveness,’ not only understood as a response to the views of others or to myself but to civilization or modernity itself in a situation where its technological and political developments have contributed to enervating the conditions to act. Responsiveness as a key concept in education can then be defined as a resetting of the possibilities to act. This means that action is the guarantor for the possibilities “to sustain and to intensify the awareness of reality” (Curtis 1999, p. 19). Arendt (1958/1998, Chap. 35) identified loneliness as a mass phenomenon in modernity and wanted to respond to this ‘world alienation’ by creating spaces of public-political appearance. In education this involves the obligation to renew the space of the world so that others may begin and, despite Arendt’s conservative attitude to education,³ to me this

² Passerin d’ Entrèves (1994) introduced the notions of ‘distinct who’ and ‘shared what’ into the discussion on Arendt’s philosophy. I find these notions helpful for my understanding of agonism and agonistic recognition and will argue that becoming a ‘distinct who’ necessitates ‘thinking.’

³ Arendt’s attitude to ‘the crisis in education’ explicitly says that the teacher’s authority lies in pointing out the details and saying to the child that ‘this is our world’ (Arendt 1961/1983, Chap. 5).

is the teacher's 'first position.' In the case of education the space of appearance for the individual *and* the society means that her concept of 'thinking' is a way of getting to grips with *aesthetic self-presentation* by disclosing herself and by taking initiatives. Biesta's reinvention of the meaning of initiatives and beginnings in education addresses what I will propose here as the overall character in the relation between the 'vita contemplativa' and the 'vita activa' in education. I wish to suggest that his question "(If) education cannot be conceived as technique or an instrument, what is there actually to *do* for educators?" (Biesta 2006, p. 99) should be answered from the approach of 'thinking.' Biesta's own tentative answer refers to the comparison between *Bildung* and architecture/building motivated by what he defines as a situation of "the community of those who have nothing in common" which can be read as a definition of "the worldliness of worldly spaces"—spaces that "only exist in the *interruption* of the rational community, the community of logic, rationality, order, structure and purpose" (ibid., p. 115). My contribution to the concrete aspect of such interruptions is a further specification of 'thinking' as a kind of *agonistic recognition* by withdrawnness—a withdrawnness that has political and moral implications. This means that I will try to demonstrate the consequences of Arendt's (1978, p. 189) conclusion that human beings cannot avoid their own company, and that to conduct a dialogue not only with others but with oneself makes sense of "the actualization of the difference given in consciousness." Consciousness then is "the anticipation of the fellow who awaits you if and when you come home" (ibid., p. 191). In the last section of the article I will recall these passages and relate to educational settings.

Agonistic Recognition: Disclosure and Withdrawnness of the Self

The *agōn* in "agonistic recognition" has a political purpose. What, then, can be learned from the history of the *agōn*, if our interest is in defining the meaning of agonistic recognition in the realm of a democratic education? In contrast to consensual procedures, agonistic democracy is the situation in which one view wins while other views lose, not, however, for ever but for the moment. What is, however, of greater importance is that in Arendt's agonism the person itself, an agonistic subjectivity, is the starting point in the procedure. Her affirmation of action as spontaneous beginning, 'natality', and aestheticism comprise her ontological approach to political action which has its roots in the Heideggerian concept of being. As Villa (1996, pp. 118–119) has shown, the concept of being from which Arendt offers a theory of a radically human, 'groundless' freedom as the basis for action is not defined as an inner human disposition but as a dimension of human existence in the world. This, in turn, corresponds to Arendt's thesis that (political) action and freedom are the same. What she means is that action is radical in the meaning of a 'new beginning,' which is a way to distinguish action not just from work and labour but also from teleological conceptions of action.

The traditional teleological conception of action where action is guided by reason and by will is, according to Arendt, free from its intended goal as predictable effect. Such a philosophical freedom is a way of 'thinking' that foregoes political freedom. Villa characterises this as Arendt's shift between Heidegger's existential and ontological *break with the will*, opening the way to the elucidation of freedom as a mode of being-in-the-world when saying that "this [being-in-the-world] is a necessary, albeit insufficient, step toward the elucidation of freedom as a mode of being-of-the-world, which Arendt's political theory undertakes" (ibid., p. 119). The point I wish to emphasise in relation to this is that being-of-the-world requires 'thinking,' not just acting. Arendt's application of Heidegger's

ontological break with the will, and her ensuing aestheticism of politics is an emancipatory moment in her philosophy and is also what makes it political. This is also so for education if defined as the person's establishment of self-understanding through both disclosure (acting/vita activa) and withdrawnness (thinking/vita contemplativa).

The Relation Between the 'Vita Activa' and the 'Vita Contemplativa': Avenues for Reintegrating Individuality Into a Wider Community

In order to deepen my argument, I will here take issue with the common interpretation of how Arendt can be used in the realm of education and the politics of recognition and distinguish it in relation to what I term an agonistic recognition in education. Taking agonistic recognition in education seriously means giving priority to a kind of action where the self becomes open and apparent not only to others but to the self as well, i.e. where the contingency of subjectivity as a consequence of being-*in-the-world* should be educated to a being-*of-the world*—something which can be done through *aesthetic self-presentation*. The simple but at the same time complex question inherent in such an education is not just to ask how to present action in a way that can be understood by others but the question “what are your arguments *to yourself* to do what you are doing; to say what you are saying?” In posing such a question to students, teachers are inviting them to ‘stop and think.’ The justification for contemplation in education in the meaning of ‘stop and think’ about one’s arguments or lack of arguments for one’s doings does not just stem from the need to strengthen the practices that make it possible for groups and persons to communicate political and moral questions in the light of a mutual acknowledgment of the contingency of subjectivity. The care for the thinking subject rather should be seen as a moderator of the ‘epistemological thickness’ in education where thinking is often about theorizing. Not only in education but in modernity itself there is a kind of theoretical impulse—with the words of Pirro, a temptation “not merely to rationalize the world but to rationalize the world *away* by not taking due account of its variety and difference, its particularities and contingencies” (Pirro 2001, p. 12). In education, in its practice and theory, there is a sense that theory should make a difference to how people think, judge and act, of course. But there are reasons to hesitate in the face of the attitude that an intellectually rationalized theory is good enough to keep us in touch with political and moral issues.

I will further develop the definition of agonistic recognition in education by discussing what it means to *think* as a process that discriminates *understanding* from *knowing*, from *explaining*. In order to apply the relationship between the ‘vita activa’ and the ‘vita contemplativa’ in Arendt’s political philosophy I would like to adopt the characterization from Lewis and Sandra Hinchman in relation to Arendt’s cooperation with Karl Jaspers. Hinchman and Hinchman (1994, p. 143) say that both Jaspers and Arendt hoped to overcome “the tendency toward the isolation and self-absorption of the individual thinker or agent” and that while retaining “the dichotomy between the ‘mass man’ and the ‘authentic individual’ they sought avenues for reintegrating individuality into a wider community, whether through, communication, (Jaspers) or action in the political arena (Arendt)”. My references to Arendt’s conception of ‘thinking’ should be read from such an understanding of the characteristics in her philosophy which I find fertile for political and moral education. The conception of ‘thinking’ is explained in close connection with the concept of ‘judging’. Her main assumption when singling out judgement as a distinct capacity of the mind is that “judgements are not arrived at by either deduction or induction: in short they have nothing in common with logical operations” (Arendt 1982, p. 4).

Instead, she argues, we should be in search of what has been regarded since Kant as ‘taste’ in the realm of *aesthetics*. And, as she formulates it, “in practical and moral matters it was called ‘conscience’, and conscience did not judge; it told you (...) what to do, and what to repent of” (ibid.).

Arendt criticized modernity for being apolitical and not allowing the subject to come into presence; narrowing the space of appearance; ignoring plurality and difference etcetera. Under such conditions the ‘*vita activa*’ which is about “a life devoted to public-political matters” (Arendt 1958/1998, p. 12) is oppressed. Central to my focus on the relation between the ‘*vita activa*’ and the ‘*vita contemplativa*’ is that the term ‘*vita activa*’ is historically loaded with tradition and receives its meaning, its energy from the ‘*vita contemplativa*’ in a way that I think is still of interest for a philosophy of education. ‘*Vita activa*’, in the words of Arendt, comprehends and conceptualizes the political experiences of Western mankind and was in medieval philosophy the standard translation of the Aristotelian *bios politicos* (ibid.). But with the disappearance of the ancient city-state, the *polis*, the term ‘*vita activa*’ lost its distinct political meaning of being a specific kind of *action*. Instead, and this is a central element in Arendt’s critique of modernity, all kinds of active engagement—*work* and *labour*—were included in the meaning of ‘*action*’ which is now also “reckoned among the necessities of earthly life, so that contemplation (the *bios theōrētikos*, translated into the *vita contemplativa*) was left as the only truly free way of life” (ibid., p. 14). The point here is that also the meaning of the Greek word *skholē* which primarily means freedom from political activity but even freedom from labour and the necessities of life (c.f. ibid., n. 10) was changed. In modernity, ‘school’ became the instrument of *labour* rather than its original meaning of being a specific kind of “freedom”—a ‘*vita contemplativa*’; a *bios theōrētikos*. This meant that the historical trappings of *labour* pervade the tenor of ‘theory’ and of ‘school’ and with this, as has been discussed, the world is not just rationalized but runs the risk of being rationalizing *away* through the failure to take due account of its variety, its difference, its particularities and contingencies.

The way Arendt theorizes action (*vita activa*) makes it essentially unpredictable, boundless and destabilizing, which at a first glance does not fit into what should be expected from education. I will argue that it should matter, however, because of the debate, challenge and contest it offers. Action should, however, also be defined from a specific kind of contemplation called ‘thinking’ to become the educational cultivation of a faculty of judgment—thinking as a common virtue in education. This commonality can be demonstrated by placing the emphasis on how to *understand* reality in contrast to how to *know* it, or how to *explain* it. The reduction of thinking into the epistemological tradition and the use of theory and knowledge in order to predict, prevent and prolong human action is similar to a reduction into what Heller (1989, p. 145) correctly characterises as Arendt’s definition of ‘cognition’ (*Verstand*). In contrast to ‘cognition’, which refers to epistemology, ‘thinking’ is in Arendt’s vocabulary a specific kind of ‘reason’ (*Vernunft*) referring to politics.⁴ Heller also argues that Arendt’s definition of ‘thinking,’ connected to the attitude of *the spectator*, does not make sense since spectatorship rather should be linked with judging. This is a complex question and I take it that Heller is an authority here, but I

⁴ Even though Heller is sceptical of Arendt’s thesis that the quest for meaning has nothing to do with the quest for knowledge, I find it defensible to use this thesis in my discussion of education since the arguments, also from Heller, for “accepting” the quest for knowledge and truth (*cognition/Verstand*) as aspects of reason (*Vernunft*) do not concern what one could term ‘scientific knowledge’ (Heller 1989, p. 152). So, if the term ‘knowledge’ is to be used in order to define ‘reason’ it should be a specific kind of knowledge.

think that her critique can to some extent be countered by a quotation in which Arendt in her interpretation of Kant (c.f. *ibid.*, Chap. 8) makes a demarcation between truth and meaning in saying that,

[...] the intellect (*Verstand*) desires to grasp what is given to the senses, but reason (*Vernunft*) wishes to understand its *meaning*. Cognition, whose highest criterion is truth, derives that criterion from the world of appearances in which we take our bearings through sense perceptions, whose testimony is self-evident, that is, unshakeable by argument and replaceable only by other evidence [...] truth is located in the evidence of the senses. But that is by no means the case with meaning and with the faculty of thought, which searches for it; the latter does not ask what something is or whether it exists at all—its existence is always taken for granted—but *what it means for it to be*. (Arendt 1978, p. 57).

From the point of view of agonistic recognition in education this demarcation calls for ‘thinking’ as a qualification of political and moral meaning—the “taste” to be established in the individual, by individual judgements but always judged in relation to members of a community. When Arendt’s conception of thinking is her reference to Kant’s “enlarged mentality” and what she elaborates in her frequently quoted statement “political thought is representative” (Arendt 1961/1993, p. 241), she also states that the very process of political thinking (formation of an opinion) is determined by “those in whose places somebody thinks and uses his own mind” (*ibid.*, p. 242) and that the only condition for this is “disinterestedness and the liberation from one’s own private interests” (*ibid.*). My interpretation here is that given such thinking, political thought is a matter of the contingency of thinking. Since no opinion is self-evident, Arendt holds that “thinking is truly discursive, running, as it were, from place to place, from one part of the world to another, through all kinds of conflicting views, until it finally ascends from these particularities to some impartial generality” (*ibid.*). Discursive thinking and judgements of particularities which end up in some impartial generality, characterize agonistic recognition in education through which a specific kind of ‘thinking’ should be given priority—a thinking that foregoes political thought in terms of “enlarged” or “representative” thinking. Thinking in terms of an agonistic recognition is where the subject-self can appear to identify the ‘taste’ and be recognized agonistically and make itself responsible rather than use taught morality as a guidance for action.

The Agonistic Subject-Self and Transformative Solicitations

Here I will quote Arendt at full length since she offers such a central critique of epistemology and a distinct division of the phenomena of knowledge and explanation from understanding, and this is at the heart of what I try to define as agonistic recognition in education. The passage is from her article “Truth and Politics” (Arendt 1961/1993, Chap. 7). The quotation is very close to what I have introduced as characteristic of education from the angle of ‘thinking’ in saying that it is about actors who move in plurality and appearance in a public arena while confronting the particularity of the individual and the generality of the citizen. My thesis is that such education formulated beyond epistemology requires a philosophy that forefronts the difference between facts that derive from generalizing theories on the one hand and *the meaning of facts* deriving from a particular judgement on the other. In the words of Arendt,

Rational truth enlightens human understanding, and factual truth must inform opinions, but these truths, though they are never obscure, are not transparent either, and it is in their very nature to withstand further elucidation, as is it in the nature of light to withstand enlightenment. Nowhere, moreover, is the opacity more patent and more irritating than where we are confronted with facts and factual truths, for facts have no conclusive reason whatever for being what they are; they could always have been otherwise, and this annoying contingency is literally unlimited. (...) In other words, factual truth is no more self-evident than opinion, and this may be among the reasons that opinion-holders find it relatively easy to discredit factual truth as just another opinion. Factual evidence, moreover, is established through testimony by eyewitnesses—notoriously unreliable—and by records, documents, and monuments, all of which can be suspected as forgeries. In the event of a dispute, only other witnesses but no third and higher instance can be invoked, and settlement is usually arrived at by way of a majority; that is, in the same way as the settlement of opinion disputes—a wholly unsatisfactory procedure, since there is nothing to prevent a majority of witnesses from being false witnesses. On the contrary, under certain circumstances the feeling of belonging to majority may even encourage false testimony (Arendt 1961/1993, pp. 242–243).

This means that when political thought is representative it must also be representative to the subject-self, not only and not always to the community, since the community can be wrong or false in relation to my deliberation and agreements with myself. Impartiality and the judging of particulars before entering the stage of generality (of the citizens) require us to allow students to start something anew and to withdraw momentarily from everything but the self. Bearing in the mind the nature of the self as a political and aesthetic self-presentation, the meaning of withdrawnness can be viewed in a way that points to its non-passive and non-individualistic dimension. As I understand it, withdrawnness has to do with two central attitudes in Arendt's philosophy. One which says that political action should be understood as neither for nor against others but "entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others" (Arendt 1958/1988, p. 23)—which indicates that (political) action is expressive in a relation to others. In relation to the self, the dependency on the presence of others has to do with what Curtis refers to as "transformative solicitations" where "to excel politically is to make one's presence felt by resonating the web of human relationship surrounding the phenomenon in question" (Curtis 1999, p. 148). What we solicit (or what we place at the centre of the agonistic recognition) is that "those we countenance loosen their grip of *what* they are so as to enable them to become a more distinctive *who*" (ibid., *emph. in original*). From a teacher's standpoint, using the words of Curtis I would claim that this can be done by "suspending our expectation that *what* we know them to be will determine their actions, while at the same time retaining our knowledge of the world out of which they struggle to rise, struggle to make a specific response to our particular solicitation" (ibid.). How does this correspond to withdrawnness? With Villa (1996, p. 91) we can say that action according to Arendt provides us with "an escape from the inner, determining, multiple self" where freedom, understood as the beginning of something new by solicitation, is a way to understand the withdrawnness in the light of others.

The second attitude that legitimizes withdrawnness should be read against the background of the presence of others and is about aesthetic self-presentation or with an Arendtian formulation the disclosure of the agent in speech and action. The valuable point in her discussion when it comes to my thesis of agonistic recognition in education is that

human *distinctness* is not the same as otherness. Otherness, she says, is an important aspect of plurality and the reason why we cannot say what anything is without distinguishing it from something else. Distinctness in contrast, is reserved for man (sic) only—only man can expressly distinguish himself “and only he can communicate himself and not merely something [...] this appearance, as distinguished from merely body existence, rests on initiative, but it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human” (Arendt 1958/1998, p. 176). Recalling Biesta’s (2006, p. 115) “worldly spaces” that only exist in “the *interruption* of the rational community (...)” means that in order to show themselves as distinct to the world people will need to interrupt. Curtis, referring to Arendt’s concept of action, says that interruption is about interrupting the web of human relationships in a way that could be interpreted as being about the teacher’s position in viewing agonistic recognition in education. The teacher then, when using text books or whatever material or situations, should care about the consequences of plurality and distinctness by interrupting, or by stopping and thinking in the face of “traditions, standards of evaluation, seminal stories, cultural icons, lines of battle, places of sedimentation and ossification, and forms of oblivion, all of which constitute the fickle, uncertain, fragile field of receptivity” (Curtis 1999, p. 144). The “thinking-position” of the teacher as well as of the student is one where the agonistic recognition is contextualised by the presence of others and judgements understood as answers to reality by the individual *taste*, i.e. personal conscience which is always under pressure from the majority of opinion holders and from the fact of the contingency in truth-telling.

Unlike scholars who hold that judgement can be taught, I wish to argue that it cannot be taught but that we can educate for judgement. Even though I agree with the kind of arguments held, for instance, by Smith, formulated in the thoughtful conclusion that “like the function of taste in the aesthetic realm, judgement as a political ability has to do with the transformation of individual idiosyncrasy and self-interest” (Smith 2001, p. 72), I do not think that this transformation process can be taught; at most it can be practised. This does not mean that there is no role for educators or for schools in training the faculty of judgement but, despite the opinions of Smith and others, it means that it is not merely a question of practising judgement as *preparation* for politics, i.e. by letting the students read novels set in other cultural contexts or study the history of different people, or by exposing them to divergent perspectives through interaction with other people, or by making good use of the actual diversity of perspectives that exist within school settings (ibid., pp. 83–84). I find such strategies important for placing pressure on individual idiosyncrasies and self-interests but, and this is my point, pressure should also come from the effects of ‘thinking’, i.e., in relation to ‘transformative solicitations.’ To be clear, thinking should not be motivated by what exactly is solicited but by what Arendt calls “unanswerable questions” when making a distinction between truth and meaning, between knowing and thinking. While insisting on its importance to thinking she does not deny that these aspects are connected but, as she says,

By posing the unanswerable questions of meaning, men establish themselves as question-asking beings. Behind all the cognitive questions for which men find answers, there lurk the unanswerable ones that seem entirely idle and have always been denounced as such. It is more than likely that men, if they were ever to lose the appetite for meaning we call thinking and cease to ask unanswerable questions, would lose not only the ability to produce those thought-things that we call works of art but also the capacity to ask all the unanswerable questions upon which every civilization is founded (Arendt 1978, p. 62).

The difference in consequences from *Verstand*/cognition and *Vernunft*/reason become clear if we face ‘thinking’ as a necessary activity for moral conscience. ‘Thinking’ is partially about withdrawnness from the world—a shift from the ‘*vita activa*’ to the ‘*vita contemplativa*’. However, the “contemplative life” should not be conceived in terms of passivity but as an active aesthetic relation to reality—as a particular response to solicitation in order to become a more distinctive who capable of political and moral action.

Morality that Cannot be Taught: Actors and Spectators

As part of the ‘*vita contemplativa*,’ the faculty of ‘thinking’ is distinguished from the search for knowledge since thinking as such does not give any guidance on what to do in moral situations. Still thinking, as I have suggested and as Minnich (1989, p. 139) makes clear, affects morality in the way that it “opens us to the unmediated experience of the subject”—it opens us to judging in ways that cannot be taught. It cannot be taught since there is nothing in advance to guide our action—nothing but thinking for ourselves and then “be told” what to do and what to repent of. This may appear mystifying, strange, alien and misdirected for a modern, epistemologically-orientated education. And this is perhaps even more so in Arendt’s assertion that thinking is a kind of destruction. But even if the concept of ‘thinking’, in contrast to epistemology, provides us with no principles or rules (no substantive morality) to apply, this destruction does not mean relativism or nihilism. Arendt, answering the (often quoted) question of whether the activity of thinking *per se* could be of such a nature that it conditions evil-doing, responds that,

...this destruction has a liberating effect on another human faculty, the faculty of judgement, which one may call, with some justification, the most particular of man’s mental abilities. It is the faculty that judges *particulars* without subsuming them under those general rules which can be taught and learned until they grow into habits that can be replaced by other habits and rules (Arendt 1978, pp. 192–193).

To accept what one could call an endless plurality or contingency when judging, is why general principles or universals do not correspond to thinking but to knowing. This, to my mind, is what Minnich (1989, p. 139) refers to in saying that thinking opens us to the unmediated experience of the subject and in addition that “the experience of being human in the essential mystery of the unknowable subject-self, is in itself moral.” This is the predicament in teaching where the teacher who wants to retain an agonistic recognition standpoint in relation to thinking and judging in the classroom has to accept the contingency in individuals (including the teacher herself) as unknowable subjects. And as in the case of ‘thinking without knowledge,’ in the case of the unknowable subject-self there is still a *relation* between subjects—a relation that defines the subject when acting in relation to plural persons with space between them (see Canovan 1992, p. 281). This, moreover, is a relation *within* the subject that affects the transformation of individual idiosyncrasy and self-interest. Even though the thinking-relation is built on withdrawnness and spectatorship of a certain kind, it should not be confused with passivity, not even with a “solitary reflection,” as Beiner (1989, p. 139) suggests. Judging lies at the heart of what Arendt defines as a distinct kind of understanding—based on *Vernunft*—which appears from the preservation of a certain sort of *distance*, though still dependent on the presence of others.⁵

⁵ The importance of the preservation of distance can be justified on the basis of Arendt’s ontological vocabulary about the relation between people but also on the basis of her conception of judgements as *past-oriented*.

We should rather agree with Arendt that ‘thinking’ as a kind of destruction helps us to be political through the way in which it qualifies us to *judge particulars* and to *understand*.

If theory and theorizing run the risk of rationalizing the world away, we cannot judge between the better and the worse. In epistemological education where knowledge/*Verstand* is established to make prediction possible, judging, as we have seen, is of a specific sort of truth isolated from politics but still available for action. Agnes Heller argues that Arendt distinguishes between primary and secondary judgement. Primary judgement is what is supposed to be the effect of knowledge in answering the question ‘What to do?’ Secondary judgement though, is “not the kind of judgement we pass *in* action but the one we pass *on* action” (Heller 1989, p. 149), i.e. what Kant meant by “taste”. In the case of an education grounded in reason/*Vernunft* this means two things. It means that deliberation on history or on hypothetic situations of action or storytelling make (secondary) judging possible. It also means that, since *Vernunft* is about our capacity to “understand what we know” through ‘thinking,’ it opens us to the unmediated experience of the subject-self, and it opens us to judging in ways that cannot be taught. Judgement is, as we were told by Arendt herself, the faculty of judging *particulars* without subsuming them under those general rules which can be taught and learned. With Heller (ibid.) we can pass (secondary) judgments on action if the action has already terminated or, “at least, we pass secondary judgements on action *as if* the actions had already terminated” where a consequence for the subject-self is that “the person who mobilises the faculty of judgement is not the actor but the *spectator*” (ibid.; emph. in original). Heller also makes the statement that judging is the only mental faculty that mediates between the ‘*vita contemplativa*’ and the ‘*vita activa*’, saying that “although judgements are passed *by spectators* they are passed *on actors*” (Heller 1989, p. 149). This means that it makes sense to say that judging in the ‘*vita contemplativa*’ corresponds to political action in the ‘*vita activa*’ and here we have the opportunity to return to my introductory statement that Arendt separates education from politics.

The Double Character of Thinking and Judging in Education

My understanding, beyond Arendt’s own explicit argumentation, is that the separation is justified because education is not in the first hand about the ‘*vita activa*’ but about the ‘*vita contemplativa*,’ i.e. about thinking where *Vernunft* is the kind of reason that should not *emanate* from education, because thinking knows no progression, but should *educate* in the meaning of being the energy that make a person out of the individual. The person is defined from the re-emergence of the subject by transformation of the idiosyncrasies and self-interests to a wider community. But this is not in order to erase idiosyncrasies but rather by offering the subject agonistic recognition through transformative solicitations. From this follows my hypothesis that educators should accept the contingency defined by the particular situation at hand rather than try to ensure that after being educated individuals will become one kind of person rather than another from any universal standpoint. To focus on particularity is a teaching strategy that is philosophically and politically defensible but of course it has several inherent problems since (again) judging cannot be taught; it can at

Footnote 5 continued

Several authors have argued that with this suggestion Arendt blurs her own concept (see, e.g., Heller 1989, p. 148; Passerin d’ Entrèves 1994, pp. 104–108; Benhabib 1996, p. 174). I will not go into this discussion but will try to make sense of judgement and judging as oriented to the past as well as to the future by reminding the reader of my point that morality cannot guarantee or form the foundation of political existence.

best be trained. One ‘light step’ to promote particularity (individuality) is to educate in order to establish norms that everyone can accept but not necessarily identify with in terms of their personhood. Of course, this raises the question of the extent to which education in the realm of a liberal democracy of one kind or another can be separated from the aim to educate for a specific society or culture defined from its cherished values and virtues since understanding oneself as a member of a specific community is similar to aspiring to certain values and virtues. What exactly attracts a young person to a certain affiliation and what makes others repugnant may of course have many answers. The question that foregoes these answers though is how the idea of *teaching* morality and moral judgement can be addressed if it is supposed to be something different from a substantial learning of a political or moral literacy and if the aim is to understand what we know. We can teach from the perspective of ideas and principles for morality and moral judgement in the way that political and moral literacy are taught, but we can hardly teach students to become certain persons who embrace certain values or have a specific taste. This is not to say that teaching about moral issues has no impact on what a person becomes or on the affinity to other people, ideas and values. I have rather argued that moral thinking and judging cannot be taught but that we can educate for judgement, depending on how ‘thinking’ can be transformed into opportunities for making (secondary) judgements.

As has already been outlined to some extent, personality and individuality (not to be confused with individualism) have a strong position in any education defined by agonistic recognition. Nevertheless, when political action (*‘vita activa’*) and ‘thinking’ (*‘vita contemplativa’*) are mediated by ‘judging’, the character of ‘thinking’ clearly becomes something for which it would not be enough to be in agreement with one’s own self. I have also dwelt on what Arendt refers to Kant’s “enlarged mentality” (*eine erweiterte Denkungsart*). Let me place on the agenda her own evolved concept of ‘enlarged thinking’ where she says that,

The power of judgement rests on a potential agreement with others, and the thinking process which is active in judging something is not, like the thought process of pure reasoning, a dialogue between me and myself, but finds itself always and primarily, even if I am quite alone in making up my mind, in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement. From this potential agreement judgement derives its specific validity (Arendt 1961/1993, p. 220).

Aware of the double character of thinking and judging we can pose the question of what this means for education. To what extent and in what way should ‘thinking’ be thought of as a withdrawal of the individual (the *‘vita contemplativa’*) from the collective life (the *‘vita activa’*)? My standpoint is, as hinted on in my early uptake from Benhabib’s interpretation, that we should not read the quotation above as describing a purely consensual situation of communication. Beiner (1989) points to what he holds to be Arendt’s two distinct conceptions of judgment, which resemble what I, following Heller, have referred to as primary and secondary judgment, or as the actor and the spectator. Beiner writes that “the more she reflected on the faculty of judgement, the more inclined she was to regard it as the prerogative of the solitary (though public-spirited) contemplator as opposed to the actor (whose activity is necessarily non-solitary). One acts with others; one judges by oneself (even though one does so by making present in one’s imagination those who are absent)” (ibid., p. 92). In the later writings⁶ that are referred to here Arendt, in the words of

⁶ Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy (Arendt 1989), Thinking and Moral Considerations (Arendt 1984).

Beiner, approaches judging from a much more ambitious point of view. My interest in trying to go beyond the actor/praxis dimension in the ‘vita activa’ to the ‘vita contemplativa’ means that ‘thinking’ and ‘judging’ can be defined in a way that preserves the individual’s *distance* from shared history, traditions and ideals as well as from participation in and communication of shared meanings. The less such a situation is possible, the more narrowly defined the meaning of being (political) will become and the greater the elimination of the difference between *Verstand* and *Vernunft*.

Even though ‘judgement’ is neither about self-interest and idiosyncratic subjects nor about universality but rather is about plurality and particularity, a democratic heterogeneous society has to make room for the (non-solitary) individual. From an Arendtian point of view this can never be done isolated from the community of thought and action. But it does point at the suppressed aspect of action, i.e. that the political concept of difference refers to individuals who ‘think for themselves’ and who act from a position in the public realm. In Arendt’s early writings (1958/1998, p. 57) this public realm is a reality that “relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised.” Her general definition of action as the possibility to start something anew and her attitude that the “unitedness of many into one is basically antipolitical” (ibid., p. 214) means that politics and political action require plurality. They also require individuality and a unique distinctness that emanates from ‘thinking’ in the ‘vita contemplativa’. Villa (1999) has formulated an interesting answer to the question why Arendt maintained the distinction between thought and action (and with that the difference between cognition and reason). His starting point is Arendt’s analysis of ideology which he summarizes as the insight that “ideologies work by positing a single idea (for example, the idea of race or class struggle) as an axiomatic premise, and then unfolding it in a manner that apparently comprehends the totality of the historical process” and that “as an instrument of total explanation, ideologies emancipate their believers from experience by violently reducing reality to an ‘inner logic’ at work behind multifarious appearances” (ibid., pp. 91–92). This situation is similar to my starting point in the criticism of the temptation offered by theory not merely to rationalize the world but to rationalize the world *away* by not taking due account of its variety, its difference, its particularities and contingencies.

Education and Agonistic Democracy

‘Thinking’ is what is needed to make judging possible, i.e. to act from the subject-self (not from ideology or theory) and answer the Arendtian questions ‘Who are you?’. This corresponds to the specific situation in education discussed above where the experience of “the unknowable subject-self, is in itself moral”⁷ and takes us back to the question of how to understand Arendt’s approach to judging and the role of thinking. In relation to Arendt’s (1971) question whether ‘thinking’ is among the conditions that keep us from evil-doings we may very well be at the heart of education in politics and morality. Maybe one key answer can be found in a passage in which Arendt (Arendt 1978, p. 93) discusses the theme

⁷ See my discussion of Minnich’s (1989) thesis above. The strongest and most convincing argument for the agonistic aspects of ‘thinking’, even though the authors do not elaborate the relationship, may perhaps be found in what Villa describes as a philosophy of “negative preparation” in Arendt (Villa 1999, p. 101) and what Pirro (2001, Chap. 1) defines as the intuitive basis for democratic citizenship.

of “thinking and doing” and makes the point that there is a link between the Greek word for spectator (*theatai*) and the term ‘theory’—“and the word ‘theoretical’ until a few hundred years ago meant ‘contemplating,’ looking upon something from the outside” (ibid.). Then this theoretical position is hidden from what is happening on the stage. Arendt says that the inference to be drawn from this distinction between doing (the actor/*vita activa*) and understanding (the spectator/*vita contemplativa*) is that “as a spectator you may understand the ‘truth’ of what the spectacle is about; but the price you have to pay is withdrawal from participating in it” (ibid.). This relates to what I have tried to demonstrate, namely that the traditional teleological concept of action guided by reason and will is in Arendt’s conception free from motive on one side and from its intended goal as predictable effect on the other. Then we can say that political action is separate from education and teaching as far as it is understood in terms of cognition and *Verstand*. This is in line with Arendt’s own conservative conception of education, which is, however, a kind of a paradox since she argues that exactly because of their capacity to act children must be introduced to the world “as it is” (Arendt 1961/1993, Chap. 6). The teacher’s role in such a situation is then to protect the children, the newcomers, from the brutal world before they enter it with the capacity to change it, also by ‘thinking’. As Curtis (2001) has convincingly demonstrated, Arendt’s attitude here largely stems from her disregard of what in her day had become the “factual truth” with regard to the war. To this Curtis comments that this means that “like other truth-tellers, the educator, too, must be the keeper of the often difficult majesty of factual truth” (ibid., p. 136). And as she continues to argue that Arendt’s emphasis on a tradition-bound world means that the educator is responsible for securing it while at the same time this is not *our* world, she goes on to say that,

Indeed, our sense of a common world, radically unassured in a traditionless world, is forged, we might say, in the present: through ongoing public witnessing to factual reality and through contestation over what experiences and whose memories count as the most significant narrative constructions of our past—and why. [...] It is the world as this contentious field that the educator has the responsibility to convey to the young (ibid., p. 138).

As I have indirectly demonstrated, Arendt’s argument for the existence of factual truth as related to the world ‘as it is,’ is at odds with her conception of ‘thinking’ and I agree with Curtis when she says that in ‘our world’ where factual truth has become fragile and where tradition can no longer secure the relationship between people, Arendt’s argument that the teacher’s loyalty to the world ‘as it is’ cannot be interpreted in a familiar conservative fashion—not as an obligation to reproduce a fixed and stable body of knowledge. Relating to the world ‘as it is’ means rather that the teacher must exercise a kind of impartiality. Curtis defends a kind of teacher position where the educator has to choose the perspectives of the victors as well as the vanquished, and then be what one could in Arendt’s terms call the old-timer in front of the newcomers. Curtis views an educator as one from whom is required “both a scrupulous impartiality *and* a close, sympathetic, even partisan stake in empowering and giving voice to the subjugated” (ibid., p. 147). I think her conclusion that educators must both resist and celebrate the politics involved in their education is correct. But my view is that it needs to be supplemented by a withdrawnness, a ‘thinking’ which affects not only the educator’s choices but also the understanding of the newcomers. The problem here is to decide when newcomers are to be defined as present and capable of ‘thinking’ and understanding in a way that make them able to judge—not in the first instance the world but their own morality that cannot be taught. The educator as a truth-teller is sympathetic to the way in which teaching is a spectacle where the spectators

are the newcomers who have to pay the price of not taking part. But in education the contrast between truth and meaning, between knowledge and reason is decisive for understanding. In my view arguments for education through agonistic recognition offer fruitful grounds for criticism of the idea of empowerment in education, which cannot be justified only or primarily by knowledge. Empowerment, understood through agonism, is self-empowering; idiosyncrasy both retained and transformed by solicitations and agonistic provocations, which rather than focusing on recognition of a person's affiliation to a group has to be aesthetic. To sum up, agonistic recognition in education has three interlinked modes of aesthetic experience and self-presentation where one is related to the real, i.e. to actions in the public realm; one is about external inter-subjectivity, i.e. related to plurality in the way in which it comes into existence in confrontation with others; and one is about internal inter-subjectivity, i.e. related to the unknown subject-self disclosed by 'thinking.'

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