

I do not walk alone: Hannah Arendt and the commitment of education

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Abstract: This article presents considerations concerning the relationship between the self and the world, or between ethics and politics, in Hannah Arendt's theory. The purpose is to analyze the author's statement that the educator would undertake responsibility for the world by presenting it to the child. The hypothesis posed here is that education, this act of engagement with the world, can be sustained as an articulation between politics and ethics in Hannah Arendt's theory.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, 1906-1975, education, ethics, politics.

bate o vento eu movo
volta a bater de novo
a me mover eu volto
sempre em volta deste
meu amor ao vento
(Paulo Leminski)

In this essay, we aim to present some reflections we covered while dwelling on Hannah Arendt's thought. Our major goal is to highlight points that allow us to propose considerations on the relation between the *self* and the *world*, or yet between ethics and politics, once we assume as background Arendt's statement (2005a) on "The Crisis in Education" affirming the educator would have to assume responsibility for the world towards the child, when he or she says "that is the world" (p. 239).

The world is not identical to nature, it concerns "human artifact, with the product of human hands" (Arendt, 1997, p. 62). It transcends a lifetime, "it pre-existed our arrival and it will survive our brief permanence" (Arendt, 1997, p. 65). Each new being who enters the world requires some care and protection, not only in the sense of looking after its development, but also in the sense of looking after the permanence of the world. This relation of each singularity with the world is called natality and it is defined by "the fact we all enter the world, at the moment we are born, and the world is constantly renewed by birth" (Arendt, 2005a, p. 247). In this regard, natality means being born for the world and not merely the advent of a birth. According to Passos (2013), in Arendt's point of view it is inconceivable to think about the *self-isolated and individual*¹, because men's true humanity would consist of "be-

ing close to others and concerning about taking care of the world and preserving it" (p. 259).

According to the author,

The problem of education in modern world is that, for its nature, it can relinquish neither authority nor tradition, and it is still obliged, nonetheless, to walk in a world which is neither structured by authority nor kept cohesive for tradition. (Arendt, 2005a, p. 245-246)

In one of the lessons compiled in the book "Responsibility and Judgment", she quotes Churchill's declaration saying all his convictions on what was impossible had happened. She highlights that the few moral rules that had served men to distinguish right and wrong one had crumbled:

It was like morality suddenly showed its original meaning, as a set of customs (mores), uses and ways that could be exchanged by another one without any greater difficulty than the ones experienced to change manners on the table of an individual or people. (Arendt, 2004, p.113)

What we had learned as being right and wrong, disseminated by generations, does not operate anymore as a reference or standard for men's behavior. This is called a rupture with tradition.

She dwells on events occurred in Germany during Nazism. The Nazi system "proved that no one had to be a convict Nazi to adapt and forget overnight, so to speak, not one's social status, but moral convictions that once had followed this position" (Arendt, 2004, p. 117). Throwing light not on the Nazis, the ones we could call villains, but on people who had not acted by conviction, the ones who had been good employees and gladly fulfilled the orders to which they were submitted. In these terms, they were only executors.

Having said that, Arendt writes that "nobody in fair competition can still affirm that moral behavior is

1 Fábio Passos, in his research, dwells on the relation between philosophy, politics and the world in Hannah Arendt's thought. Thereunto, he mainly addresses the phenomenological analyses of Husserl and Heidegger, shedding light on what he argues to be Arendt's progress in relation to more traditional phenomenological conceptions, specially Heidegger's. Arendt highlights the conception according to which man inhabits the world with his pairs, while, for Heidegger, "the self, if not isolated, is no longer an authentic one, because he is submerged in the daily life of public individual" (Passos, 2013, p. 259).

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something natural” (Arendt, 2004, p.124). She finds support in thinkers who had addressed ethics, who had asked themselves about the assumption that men would possess a kind of internal voice that would help them to distinguish right and wrong.

She assumes Kantian categorical imperative, which says what one might do in a universal form, without being conditioned by others (a sanction, for example). The difficulty would be with men that had passed their own lives among scoundrels, and would not have experienced any virtue example. Arendt (2004) highlights the fact that Kant “did not want to say more than the fact that human mind guides itself by examples in such issues” (p.125). Therefore, if this man, who had lived between scoundrels, had been faced to a virtue example, he would also be able to discern right and wrong. If, in Kant, moral knowledge is natural, behavior is not. “Man is not only a rational being, he also belongs to the world of senses, which will tempt him to surrender to inclinations, instead of following the reason or the heart” (p.126). Kant calls radical evil the fact that man may do evil by surrendering to his inclinations.

According to Arendt (2004), Kant places duties man has with himself in front of duties related to others. Moral behavior is a consequence of a relationship man would maintain with himself. “The standard is neither the love for a close one, nor the love for himself, but self-respect” (p. 131). In this point, the author seeks in Socrates the affirmation that “it is better to suffer from evil than committing it” (p. 136).

She highlights that, in Socrates, there is not an imperative, a duty, but rather what would be preferable. Nevertheless, there is one reservation: “In the case of Kant, conscience represents a threat by self-disdain; in the case of Socrates, as we shall see, threat is in contradiction” (Arendt, 2004, p. 142).

According to Socrates, “if I practice evil, I live with an evildoer” (Arendt, 2004, p. 155). There would be the need of man talking to himself. All men would be two in one, in a “very specify and active sense of this quiet dialogue, of feeding a constant interaction, of being in condition to talk to themselves” (p.157). Thereby, “men not only exist in plural form, as all human beings in the world, but also bring within themselves an indication of this plurality” (Arendt, 2002, p. 103). According to Passos (2013), dialogue one may establish with oneself “ratify the certainty that diversity is the world’s main characteristic, because we are not only one when we activate thinking, but two in one, in a constant interaction with other individuals when we anticipate different points of view” (p. 254).

Arendt highlights this quiet dialogue, which is the own activity of the thought. She states that “the most certain way for a criminal to never get discovered and to escape punishment is to forget what he or she has done and not to think about the subject ever again” (Arendt, 2004, p. 158). If someone has never thought about the question, nothing will be able to stop this person. These considerations allow Arendt to affirm that “the greater evil is not

radical, does not possess roots and, for not having them, does not have limitations, it can reach inconceivable extremities and dominate the whole world” (p. 160).

We would like at this point to propose a brief pause to give an example drawn from the work with education’s field. We expect from that to propose a reflection concerning what it seems to be the author’s view and try to extract some consequences to think the connection between moral and politics.

Once, when supervising graduation’s internship of psychology students in a São Paulo’s EMEF [Elementary School of Municipality], one situation went under the spotlight. The interns told the school had performed a paid tour to a park, and, during this day, a company had photographed children in different moments of fun. After a few days, the school delivered these photos in classroom for children who might want to buy them to bring a certain amount of money, or to return them to the school. This situation produced a certain distress: some children took the photos and did pay for them, others returned them, and others yet took them home and didn’t pay at all.

In a meeting we had with the group of teachers that was close to the internship, we talked about this event. One of the teachers said she felt bothered with the fact that children’s parents set as example for their kids that they could take photos without paying for them, once they took them home. The subject of *robbery* enters the scene and some manifestations relate bad example or bad education these children received at home to the behavior they manifested in the school.

We tried to resume the parents’ three answers: return the photos, pay for them or take them without paying. When dealing with these positions as answers, a question became relevant: if they are answers, what they can tell us? They would be a reply to what? Another teacher talks then about her extreme discomfort, and tells us she was openly against delivering photos to the students, once she did not considered this a pedagogical activity. She finished saying the thing that had personally outraged her was the fact that teachers who could sell “x” photos would be awarded with a watch.

This example opens a path for us to revisit some statements already announced in this brief essay.

Let’s take up what we have developed concerning evil’s triviality, which consists of doing something because *this was what was requested from me*. The nature, the purpose does not matter, what matters is that *I did my job*. It is interesting that some teachers’ argument manifest a moral vision of the other, so to speak: certain mother sets a bad example for her son, or yet the explanation of some of children’s behaviors is found in an *outlaw* attitude coming from parents.

There is no thought, no quiet dialogue, there is not any implication of these professors in the events. They had simply delivered photos for the students. They did their job.

This dimension is emphasized when one of the teachers refuses to perform such a task. Arendt (2004)

affirms that “morally, the only reliable people at crisis or exception moments, ‘when letters are all on the table’, are those who say ‘I cannot’” (p.143). We can think that in fact there is, within this teacher’s position, the enunciation of *I cannot*.

The author affirms that the decisions concerning right and wrong depend on who we choose as company. She is afraid, above all, that one may say one does not care, any company will do just fine. “In moral terms and even political, this indifference, though quite common, is the biggest danger” (Arendt, 2004, p. 212). To this, one may add the refusal to judge.

From the refusal or the incapacity to choose one’s examples and one’s company, and from the refusal or incapacity to establish a relation with others for judgment, *skandala* appears, the real obstacles that human power cannot remove, because they had not been caused by human or humanly understandable reasons. Here lies the horror and, at the same time, evil’s banality. (Arendt, 2004, p. 212)

As Carvalho (2002) highlights, the best form of cultivating and transmitting democratic values and also of taking part in citizens’ ethical formation is “to be present not only in words, but also in our actions as teachers and education professionals” (p. 166). When she opposes to deliver the photos, the teacher conveys ethical values through her action. In this sense, “principles and values characteristic of school institution are in learned contents, in the own forms of knowledge taught and, therefore, are embodied by teacher’s activities and practices, which materialize them as didactic contents” (p. 165). The emphasis is here in the dimension of these *embodied* values, not only in pedagogical contents, but above all in *actions* performed at the school’s territory. We see here some resonances of the importance the “example” has in Arendt, as a way of proposing a certain behavior. According to the author, “we judge and distinguish right and wrong because we possess in our spirit some incident and some person, absents in time or space, which had become examples” (Arendt, 2004, p. 211).

The refusal to choose and to judge places this person in an irresponsible position concerning his or her own choices (which would be considered *non choices* in a moral point of view). According to the example mentioned before, teachers had only delivered the photos, they had only done what they have been asked to do, what could also be seen as an efficiency signal: they are good employees. This planification of man as *one*, and not two in one, results in the fact that people may not take roots in the world, and, at the limit, that a destruction project such as Nazism may find a fertile ground.

What then would remain for politics? Let’s wonder for a moment that it would be possible for men to choose to be compliant with the world rather than with themselves. And that this was a choice, fruit of a dialogue with themselves and, moreover, the expression of a judgment. In other

words, somebody that may decide for the world. Passos (2013) states that Arendt alerts in several moments of her work that “politics assumes as its main task the world’s – and not men’s – care, because aiming at men overlooking the world is a contradiction, as far as we are individuals *in and of world*.” (p. 252).

We understand Socrates himself certifies that same point, once he recognizes that he should not escape from *Polis* even if this meant to be judged and condemned. The emphasis “in his defense before Athenian citizens and judges were in the fact that his behavior aimed at good of the city” (Arendt, 2002, p. 91-92). Socrates is not able to persuade them with his speech. Arendt (2002) sees in this episode the opening of an abyss separating philosophy from politics: “The spectacle of Socrates submitting his own *doxa* to Athenians irresponsible opinions and being supplanted for a majority of votes, led Platão to disdain opinions and to yearn for absolute standards”. (p. 92).

This hypothesis highlights the fact that, either on the side of the world or on the side of the self, the activity of the thought, the dialogue with the self, is a condition for judgment and positioning of the *self* in the *world*, from this very judgment. The teacher who enunciates *I cannot* next to her pairs assumes the responsibility for the world when she places herself publicly from her judgment of what it would be pertinent at the educative environment.

Let’s return to Socrates for a moment, for whom “the reason for which we might not kill, even when we cannot be seen by anyone, is that we do not want, by any means, to be close to an assassin” (Arendt, 2002, p. 103). This is in perfect agreement with his statement that “living with the others has its starting point on living with oneself” (p.102). In other words, “an assassin is not only condemned to the permanent company of his own murderer self, but he or she will see everyone according to his or her own action. This person will live in a world of prospective murderers”. (Arendt, 2004, p. 113). We have here another point of relation with school scene. It is interesting to remark that the teachers who had performed their work well, sold the photos and, as a compensation, won a watch, found the bad example in familial relations. We can paraphrase Arendt herself and substitute the *murderer* expression, employed by her, for *cheater*. The fact that the teachers were considering families as cheaters would not be saying that, once they had been the opportunist ones and had taken veiled advantage, they would be considering all the others as prospective cheaters?

As Arendt (2002) warns us, the Greeks understood *Polis* as a public-political field, “where men reach their full humanity, their full reality as men, because they do not just *exist* (as in the privacy of the house): they also *appear*” (p. 102). It is not just the isolated act – homicide, according to the example – that has political relevance, but this dimension of how it *appears* in the world, contained in the advice of Socrates: “‘Be as you would like to appear to others’, which means, appear to yourself as you would like to appear when you are seen by others” (p. 102). The advice,

resumed by the author, carries not only self-commitment, but also the dimension of being in the world. We see herein a specific indication of Arendt's thought between ethics and politics. According to her reading of Socrates, the important thing for mortals would be "to speak in such a way that the truth in the opinion of a man is revealed *for this person* and for *the others*" (p. 100).

In "The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance" (Arendt, 2005b), the author affirms that "the judgment is, if not the most important activity, one of the most important where this share-the-world appears" (p. 276).

In this text, Arendt considers the work of art as "the most mundane of all things" (p.262). She highlights the *work of art* and not *making art*, because the work of art requires the public space, as well as political acts. Work of art and political acts are very close from each other, in other words, "culture indicates that art and politics, in spite of all its conflicts and tensions, are interrelated and come even to depend on each other" (p. 272). The magnitude of political products, which are acts and words, "can last in the world in the measure they are endowed with beauty" (p. 272).

To judge what is beautiful, it is necessary to be free, so that one can establish a certain distance between the self and the object. This distance can appear in an adjusted situation, which means, once the necessities of the individual have been fulfilled. Seen in these terms, if the watch (the prize for selling the photos) was as a true life necessity for teachers, we could say that they could not have, in that situation, the necessary distance to position themselves in the world as a result of a judgment.

When forgetting himself or herself and taking the necessary distance to the judgment, man will be free for the world. The connection between judgment and world is clear in Arendt (2005b) when she affirms that such attitude of disinterested joy "can only be experienced after the necessities of the alive organism had been supplied, so that, discharged of the necessities of life, men can be free for the world" (p. 263).

Art convokes judgment, and judgment, according to the reading the author proposes of Kant, is "the ability to see things not only from the individual's own point of view, but under the perspective of all those that may be possibly present" (Arendt, 2005b, p. 275).

Although when judging I take into account the others, this does not mean that I adapt myself, in my judgment, to the judgment of others. I still talk with my own voice and do not count votes to reach what I think it is right. But my judgment is not subjective, in the sense that I would draw my conclusions taking only myself into consideration. (Arendt, 2004, p. 207).

So "the judgment to be valid depends on the presence of the others" (Arendt, 2005b, p. 275), without meaning thereby that the judgment of a person is universal, or

yet reducible to the judgments of the others. It is, perhaps, the "most important activity where this share-the-world may occur" (p. 276).

These brief considerations help us to replace the issue that triggers this article: if education is a commitment with the world, could it be thought, for Arendt, as a linkage between politics and ethics?

First, we should make one reservation: works of art "are not manufactured for men, but for the world which is destined to survive to the life of mortals and to generations' influx" (Arendt, 2005b, p. 262); that is to say they would be something that men conceived to last more than human life, as something that would resist the vital process of consumption. Regarding to philistinism – "a mentality that judged all things in terms of immediate utility" (p. 253) –, the objects of culture are increasingly being appropriate as objects of entertainment, therefore consumable. Education would not be immune to world's consumption risk, to serve to the entertainment of the masses, which would condemn it to ruin. Diving into this specific issue, however, would deviate us from the principal object of this study. It is worth highlighting that education could be seen, within the perspective of entertainment, in terms of its immediate utility, what would drive us out of the ethical-political linkage proposed herein.

In her essay on "The Crisis in Education", Arendt (2005a) introduces in the first paragraph the American scene. It is truth that she considers the crisis in American education both on its particular elements, and as an opportunity to investigate the essence of education that, according to her, is "the natality, the fact of humans *are born* for the world" (p. 223).

In America, as the author explains, education would play a political role incomparably more important than it would do in other countries. The reason of that may be in the fact that America is a country of newcomers (immigrants) and, above all, in the function of a World's New Order², on which there would be an enthusiasm for the new rather than for the Old World.

The political role education effectively plays in a land of immigrants, the fact that schools do not only serve to Americanize children but also to affect their parents, and that here people are in fact guided to get rid of an old world and to enter a new world, everything nurtures the illusion that a new world is being built through children's education. (Arendt, 2005a, p. 224)

The illusion that the construction of a new world passes through children's education is a thesis that will be discussed by the author over the text. Following up her argumentation, she will propose the question is not at all about that, once that, exactly in America, the world

2 "For America, the decisive point was always the motto printed in every dollar bill – *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, the World's New Order". (Arendt, 2005a, p. 224)

to which children are introduced “is a pre-existing world, built both for the living and for the dead” (Arendt, 2005a, p. 226). She would yet add the prominence given to the role equality plays in the American life, which tries to erase all differences as much as possible, including the one related to students and teachers.

According to Arendt, when we talk about the political scope, we are necessarily talking about equality between subjects of this relation. The role of the teacher next to children is marked by an asymmetry that would serve as a condition for children’s introduction in the world. Students and teachers would not be in an equality position concerning the responsibility for the world (Carvalho, 2014).

Conservatism would be in the essence of the educational activity, whose task would be to protect “the child from the world, the world from the child, the new from the old, the old from the new” (Arendt, 2005a, p. 242). The authority of the professor is in the responsibility that this person assumes for the world, and not in professional qualification. Although this is indispensable, it “can never make by itself the authority” (p. 239).

Our hope is hanging always on the new that each generation may bring; it is precisely because we base our hope only on that, however, that we destroy everything if we try to control the new in such way that we, the old ones, try to dictate its future appearance. Precisely for the benefit of what is new and revolutionary in every child education must be conservative: it must preserve this newness and introduce it as something new in an old world, which, however revolutionary it may be on its actions, is always, under the following generation’s point of view, obsolete and close to destruction” (Arendt, 2005a, p. 243).

Therefore, the author places the new in the future, without stating thereby that children’s education aims the revolution. It is in this sense that, in *benefit of the new*, the education will have to be *conservative*.

Arendt proposes, consequently, that education would be pre-political, establishing a distinction based on the asymmetrical function of the teacher’s authority, figure who would have the responsibility to introduce the child in the world and, at the same time, to make possible that this is renewed through birth. Teacher’s tasks would consist of:

Take responsibility for children’s initiation process in this public inheritance of practices, languages and knowledges that a political community – or a society – chose to preserve through school transmission. Appropriating it means to create bonds of belonging to a *common world* and to develop *qualities* and *talents* through which each new being that

comes to the world can disclose his or her singular *unicity*. (Carvalho, 2014).

Here we see an ambush that the term *pre-political* used by the author may stimulate. If education distinguishes itself from politics, and equality ideal enters here as a watershed, this does not mean that the education is *non-political*. We should “allocate *pedagogical relation* in an intermediate scope between these fields: in a *pre-political* sphere that, even of great relevance for *political action*, might not merge with it” (Carvalho, 2014). It is exactly for protecting political commitment of the responsibility for the world that the author highlights this difference.

The school,

such as Arendt understands it, corresponds to the public dimension of education, which watches out more for singularity’s fullness than for structuring vital welfare, which is also its task. Everything relates in some level to politics, but it possibly concerns first of all the fact that the love to the world, indispensable so each foreign newcomer can increasingly make the world his or her home, becomes surely less possible without a tender invitation to take responsibility for it. (Correia, 2010).

Arendt, when talking about education, emphasizes this invitation to the responsibility for the world proposed by the adult to the child. But as Carvalho (2014) remembers, the teacher-student relation may not contain the totality of experiences that occurs at school. The very example we analyzed through this text highlights the political dimension of a teacher’s action in the face of his or her pairs.

It is possible, taking as a basis the theoretical connections proposed herein, to extract some consequences of Arendt’s (2005a) affirmation: “The education is the point where we decide if we have enough love for the world to assume responsibility for it” (p. 247).

The Socratic two in one, in the reading proposed by the author, disclosed on its commitment to be with itself and to appear in the world. In this article, we underpinned this development in terms of a linkage between politics and ethics.

In addition, the author put the stress not in *making the good or the evil*, but she introduces judgment as a central issue on the decision that each one makes concerning *who one may desire to be close to*. There is a responsibility in the choice for “Bluebeard” (Arendt, 2004, p. 212), as the example she employs, but the refusal to judge would be still worse, if “somebody said that he or she does not mind, and that any company would do just fine” (p. 212)

With these considerations in mind, we can affirm that the choice for the world is the choice and responsibility for sharing the world: “this is the world”. It is to be in the world with oneself and with others. We highlight herein

an alert the author makes in the last sentence of the text “Philosophy and politics” (2002): “it is not good for men to be alone” (p.115).

Political responsibility of people who educate is, therefore, dual: with a common and public inheritance of knowledges, institutions and relations, and also with the young that initiates on it; with the past in which the world takes roots and with the future that safeguards its durability. That’s why, for Arendt, under the perspective of those who are new

in the world, educators and school institution *represent* the world, and they must assume responsibility for it. (Carvalho, 2014).

Education is an act of love to the world. “It is with acts and words that in we enter the human world; and this entrance is like a second birth, on which we confirm and assume the original and singular fact of our original physical appearance” (Arendt, 1997, p.189). It is a way to impart movement to the world; otherwise, it would be as mortal as ourselves.

Eu não ando só: Hannah Arendt e o compromisso da educação

Resumo: Este artigo apresenta considerações acerca da relação entre o eu e o mundo, ou ainda entre ética e política, no pensamento de Hannah Arendt. O propósito é analisar a afirmação da autora de que o educador assumiria uma responsabilidade pelo mundo ao apresenta-lo à criança. Temos como hipótese que a educação, esse ato de compromisso com o mundo, pode ser sustentada como uma articulação de política e ética no pensamento de Hannah Arendt.

Palavras-chave: Hannah Arendt, 1906-1975, educação, ética, política.

Je ne marche pas seul: Hannah Arendt et l’engagement de l’éducation

Résumé: Cet article présente des considérations sur la relation entre le moi et le monde, ou entre l’éthique et la politique dans la pensée de Hannah Arendt. Notre but est d’analyser la déclaration de l’auteur affirmant que l’éducateur assume une responsabilité envers le monde en le présentant à l’enfant. Nous avons l’hypothèse que l’éducation, cet acte d’engagement envers le monde, peut être comprise comme l’articulation de la politique et de l’éthique dans la pensée de Hannah Arendt.

Mots-clés: Hannah Arendt, 1906-1975, éducation, éthique, politique.

No camino sola: Hannah Arendt y el compromiso de la educación

Resumen: Este artículo presenta consideraciones relativas a la relación entre el yo y el mundo, o entre ética y política, en el pensamiento de Hannah Arendt. El objetivo es analizar la declaración de la autora de que el educador asumiría la responsabilidad del mundo al presentarlo al niño. Planteamos la hipótesis de que la educación, este acto de compromiso con el mundo, puede sostenerse como una articulación entre política y ética en el pensamiento de Hannah Arendt.

Palabras clave: Hannah Arendt, 1906-1975, educación, ética, política.

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