

Becoming a Subject of Thinking: Philosophers *in* Education

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First and foremost, I applaud Bruce Novak for calling attention to the influence Karl Jaspers had on Hannah Arendt. The studies on Arendt that have emerged in our field have essentially ignored that influence. Novak has pushed us to reread Arendt in light of Jaspers, and, as such, has invited the field to move down new paths of scholarship. By doing so he is extending the scholarship of Lewis Hinchman and Sandra Hinchman, who make a compelling argument that Arendt was in fact most at home in the existentialist tradition, specifically the one established by Martin Heidegger and Jaspers.¹

Under the influence of Søren Kierkegaard's famous dictum, "Subjectivity is the truth,"² Jaspers talked of a leap into *Existenz*, where the self stands out, or *ex*-ists, through action and decisions that are seen, heard, and felt by others. *Existenz* is the unique *being* of each person actualized or revealed through speech and deed that is stirred by thinking. Like Jaspers, Arendt placed herself in the legacy of Kierkegaard who declared that it was our task to "'become subjective,' a consciously existing being constantly aware of the paradoxical implications of his life in this world."³ And like Jaspers, Arendt understood our leap into the truth of subjectivity as one spurred by thinking. Indeed, this leap is, to borrow a description from Arendt, the "sheer activity" of thinking itself.

Thus, when we take up Novak's call to reread Arendt in light of Jaspers we are led immediately to raise a question regarding Novak's fundamental move, that is, to derive a formula or a policy under the influence of Arendt and Jaspers' thought. Can such philosophical *thinking* lead us to an educational policy? For many in the field at large, including some working on Arendt, this move from theory to practice, from philosophy to policy, is a fairly standard one. But I argue it is not a move consistent with Jaspers, nor Arendt, despite the former's defense of democratic institutions. Indeed, I am consistently perplexed by the philosophy to policy move, and it is with this sentiment that I have turned to Arendt again and again to argue that the proper role of philosophers *in* education is to protect the kind of thinking that arises through what Arendt called reason (*vernunft*), that is, that meaning-creating capacity that fulfills the Kierkegaardian quest "to become subjective." Philosophy *in* education is that thinking that serves no purpose, from an instrumental point of view, other than to create meaning. Thinking for thinking's sake is what the philosopher in education must cultivate and protect.

As I have argued elsewhere,⁴ the purpose of philosophy in education is to engage students in those activities that are placed among what Arendt identified as "those *energeiai* which, like flute-playing, have ends within themselves and leave no tangible outside end product in the world we inhabit."⁵ In turn, there are no natural implications for thinking in the political sphere, and democracy is not the *telos* of education. Thus, to call educators into a "mass movement" in the name of thinking,

as Novak has done, is to become caught up in the very logic of the social, where the individual is relinquished of their very capacity to think, to make meaning, to take the leap into *Existenz*. When one foregrounds educational thinking with democratic politics eclipses the possibility to take the Kierkegaardian leap, because it truncates what Arendt is asking educators to do when she calls on them to conserve what is new and revolutionary in each child. As I argued in “Thinking Differently,”⁶ Arendt’s call to educators is to let *be* thinking, and to take a leap, with their students into *Existenz*, into the truth of subjectivity. A pedagogy of letting-be implies a deconstruction of democratic pedagogy as a system of knowledge that attempts to teach the student to speak and act in predetermined ways. To let-be the thinking of their students, teachers must let-go of their own desire for specific outcomes, especially those that are identified as “political” outcomes. Even if we follow the Jasperian–Arendtian critique of the early Heidegger and insist upon a public realm where the revelatory character of subjective truth can shine forth in the appearance of the public realm, it remains the case that education, for Arendt, *is not* and should never be mistaken *as* that public realm. Rather, it is what we might call a *conservatory*, where the singularity, or natality, of each student is preserved and cultivated.

My point, to use Arendt, is that educators *as* educators, specifically the kind of philosophical educators that Novak is so passionately calling us all to *be*, must take pains to avoid falling into the functionalism of educational policy makers. In essence, if we are interested in working out educational practice under the influence of Arendt, especially the Arendt inspired by Jaspers, then we must be guided by the very Kierkegaard who insisted that the quest for the truth of subjectivity is one that moves against the crowd, “in order to disintegrate the crowd, or to talk even to the crowd, though not with the intent of educating the crowd as such, but rather with the hope that one or another individual might return from the assemblage and become a single individual.”⁷ When philosophers speak as policy makers, they talk as if “educating” the crowd.

I believe Novak heeds the same call, but is too quick to move from the singular to the collective. To speak, as Novak does, of “thinking together,” is to erase the very equation that links thinking with plurality, and, thereby, to unwittingly advocate on behalf of the social “blob.” And this is precisely what we are always dangerously close to communicating when, as philosophers speaking as policy makers, we articulate on behalf of the so-called “masses of educators,” or the “masses of humankind.”

My critique of Novak is based on the restraint placed on thinking by both Arendt and Jaspers. This restraint calls our attention to the impotence of thinking with regard to action, and disrupts the possibility of drawing policy or political consequences from philosophy. And this restraint captures the essence of Kierkegaardian subjectivity. Jaspers was quite emphatic on this point, writing,

Philosophy has no institutional reality and is not in competition with the church, the state, the real communities of the world. Any objectification, whether it be the formation of schools or sects, is the ruin of philosophy. For the freedom that can be attained in philosophizing

cannot be handed down by the doctrine of an institution. Only as an individual can man (*sic*) become a philosopher. From becoming a philosopher he derives no claims.⁸

The dis-connection Jaspers identifies between the philosopher and the policy maker emerges from his placing of thinking within what Arendt calls a spiritual realm. The philosopher's invisible realm of the spirit is the proper dwelling of thinking. And this realm, as Novak, citing Arendt, called attention to, is "not something to locate and to organize." It is not a dwelling for policy making. Echoing Jaspers, Arendt emphasizes the impotence of thinking vis-à-vis politics by drawing on Heidegger, who said, "thinking does not produce usable practice wisdom,"⁹ because the activities of the mind "yield no results and do 'not endow us with the power to act'."¹⁰ This injunction is forgotten by Novak, as he insists on a "public philosophy of education." I am deeply concerned about this kind of forgetfulness, especially when philosophers of education are identified romantically, but in my view dangerously, as the "unacknowledged legislators of humankind."

Rereading Arendt through Jaspers, and in concert with Heidegger, I am led, again, to recognize her demarcation of thinking from acting as analogous to her separation of education from politics. Arendt described the thinker as like a spectator, removed from the immediacy of the events of the world. And such distance, or restraint, offers up a different kind of imperative for educators; namely, a call for a pedagogy of *gelassenheit*, of letting-be. What is central here is fidelity to the student's natality, to their capacity to think something new, and thus to *be* someone new. If education is intent on conserving what is revolutionary in each child, then thinking for thinking's sake, and not for the renewal of democratic politics, must be the primary aim of educators. Arendt insisted that we must be "conservative" as educators, and I, like others, understand this not in cliché ridden ideological terms, but in the sense of conservation. That is why I liken an Arendtian inspired education to a conservatory of thinking, which is best understood a place where each individual student can learn to *ex-ist*, to become a subject of thinking, and thereby develop into what Novak calls persons, ready and willing to take the leap into *Existenz*.

1. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, "Existentialism Politicized: Arendt's Debt to Jaspers," *Review of Politics* 53, no. 3 (1991): 435–68. See also Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman, "Hannah Arendt's Phenomenological Humanism," *Review of Politics* 46, no. 2 (1984): 183–211.

2. Walter Kaufman, ed., "Soren Kierkegaard" in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Plume, 1975).

3. Hannah Arendt, "What is Existentialism?" in *Essays in Understanding: 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 1994), 173.

4. I make this argument in Eduardo M. Duarte, "Educational Thinking and the Conservation of the Revolutionary," *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 2 (2010): 489–510. See also Eduardo M. Duarte, "The Eclipse of Thinking: An Arendtian Critique of Cooperative Learning," in *Renewing our Common World: Essays in Hannah Arendt in Education*, ed. Mordechai Gordon (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2002).

5. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1977), 129.

6. Eduardo M. Duarte, "Thinking Differently," in *Philosophy of Education 2009*, ed. Deborah Kerdeman (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009).

7. Kaufman, "Soren Kierkegaard," 97.
8. Walter Kaufman, ed., "Karl Jaspers" in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Plume, 1975), 163.
9. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*. It is worth noting that these lines from Heidegger are the preamble for the volume.
10. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 129. This is a point I make in Duarte, "Educational Thinking."