

Raising a Human: An Arendtian Inquiry into Child-rearing in a Technological Era

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“In the case both of dogs and children, we find the quest for technique.”¹

“It is a significant mark of our contemporary culture that no longer seems to tolerate the ‘messy’ character of raising children, and tries to keep it under control both by scientific research and the enhancement of parental expertise”²

INTRODUCTION

Ask any new parent how her baby is doing, and you’ll likely be privy to a list of all the Internet searches she has done in the wee hours of the night: how to get baby to sleep, which solid foods to introduce first, which kind of baby carrier is best, and so on. The explosion of the baby- and child-rearing industry into how-to books, mobile apps, newspaper columns, parent blogs, websites, training coaches, and a seemingly endless supply of gear designed to solve all childcare problems has become so normal it is taken as a given for many parents today. Even the pregnant mother is expected to follow rules on, for example, what (not) to eat to avoid food allergies, how to talk to the fetus, and how to give an in utero massage. Indeed, it seems there is no parenting question for which there is no answer, and all it takes to be a good parent is to find the right parenting method or gear—the right technology—to solve any problem that arises.

The trouble is, as many philosophers of education and other scholars in recent years have cogently argued, the turn from being a *parent* as a *noun* to *parenting* as a *verb* signifies a larger, problematic shift toward a technical,

instrumental approach to the adult-child relationship. As Stefan Ramaekers and Judith Suissa argue, “the notion of ‘parenting’ cannot be simply used as a neutral description of what parents are generally engaged in, in the course of their relationship with children.”³ Rather, being a parent, or *parenting*, has come to be defined in terms of how one finds and applies universal solutions to the particular problems posed by the child. Ramaekers and Suissa write: “The perspective reflected in several ... policy initiatives and parenting self-help works is that *what* parents, and on this view all adults, should be doing for children has already been resolved by the work of experts, with the implication that all we need is more help and support in showing us *how* to do it.”⁴ By extension, this view perceives the child as an object to be acted upon in order to get some pre-determined, pre-valued results. As the parent’s role becomes ever-more prescribed and subsumed under technique, it is not surprising that it can be replaced by technology — first, by the baby video monitor and the so-called educational technology, and now most recently by the iPal Robot!

While the sleep deprived parent’s urgent need for answers can be understood, this larger trend toward converting child-rearing into a technical enterprise is cause for concern. All those rules about when to put a baby in a crib for a nap — as the experts tell us, when he’s sleepy but not yet asleep — presuppose a problematic view of what it means to rear — and thus to be — a human. That the humanness of both the child and the parent is at stake in our technological conception of the parent-child relationship should be clear by the fact an Internet search engine and a robot would appear to know well what a parent should do. Yet, as Suissa puts it, being a parent is “essentially an existential notion” and, as such, we must “develop a concept of education that acknowledges the complexity and centrality of the parent-child relationship.”⁵ I aim to do just that.

The purpose of what follows is to, first, call attention to some excellent critiques of the technical mode of parenting offered in roughly the last decade and, second, to introduce a conception of the parent-child relationship that better recognizes the humanity of children and parents. In particular, I suggest that the work of raising a child is defined by a tension between the

world in which the parent lives and the constant threat posed by the “natality” of the child, as Hannah Arendt calls it. Far better than applying any one parenting method or another is developing the ability to recognize, navigate, and perhaps even embrace the disruptions to the world caused by the inherent natality in all children. Doing so responds more appropriately to the natality in children and adults alike, something no robot or parenting method can do.

CRITIQUE OF THE ONE-SIZE FITS ALL TECHNICAL APPROACH TO CHILD-REARING

There is a good deal of work emerging across humanistic and social scientific disciplines that responds to the roughly century-long dominance of scientific and psychological research and discourse on the topic of child-rearing. For instance, Alison Gopnik’s popular work, *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, draws upon philosophy, evolutionary theory, and psychology to argue against a goal-oriented, technical approach to parenting (the “carpenter”) in favor of a more phronetic, responsive approach (“the gardener”) that accepts the inevitable messiness of the relationship between adult and child. Rima Apple’s *Perfect Motherhood*, which offers an historical account from the 19th century to the present, points out the strangeness of our current obsession with technical expertise and shows how the development of pediatrics and obstetrics overlapped with a developing dependency of mothers upon experts on the care of children.⁶ Frank Furedi’s *Paranoid Parenting* asserts a sociological critique of the rise of anxiety among parents today that includes discussion of reliance on “expertise” and technological solutions as part of the problem.⁷

Within philosophy of education, there has also been a groundswell of critique of the rise of the expert, building on Judith Suissa’s 2006 “Untangling the Mother Knot.”⁸ Philosophers of education have tended to (1) situate the critique of the technical approach to parenting within a larger philosophical critique of instrumental reason and, as such, (2) point out how the discourse of “parenting” creates problematic boundaries around what can be done, thought about, or valued in the parent-child relationship.

For example, Richard Smith's "Total Parenting" argues that the work of parents has been subsumed by the "language of instrumental reason."⁹ He describes an "obsession with efficiency and effectiveness, with improving the input-output ratio, with exclusively instrumental reasoning — and in particular with these values in areas of life where they are (sometimes spectacularly) inappropriate."¹⁰ Nancy Vansieleghem is concerned with the problematic self-understanding of parents that results from this shift. She contends that expert advice on parenting makes parents dependent on others and limits what a parent thinks their job is.¹¹ As she puts it: "parental services and monitoring systems ... have the effect of installing a particular horizon — that is, they exercise a kind of sovereign power that controls, to a certain extent, what can be said or thought."¹² Geertrui Smedts similarly draws upon Heidegger's concept of Enframing to argue that parents have come to be seen as "mere executors of technologization" rather than as people with "independent practical judgment."¹³ As Smedts writes, the logic of this technical approach ends up creating boundaries around what we can think and do as parents: "... being a parent is *reduced* to adoption of what works according to the manual, i.e. the fit-for-purpose educational books. Parenting does not involve thinking through the directions at one's disposal — *just do it!*"¹⁴

I offer the above representative survey to recognize some of the work that criticizes the trend toward the technologization of parenting. Though this body of work is thoughtful, it is relatively minimal and marginal within philosophy of education. Further, it is predominantly concerned with children's rights and state-sponsored policies and initiatives toward child-rearing within Europe, even while grounding such concerns in a wider philosophical context. I worry that the focus on particular policies can obscure from a more general audience the importance of considering what it means to be a parent, and further that such policy critiques can seem less relevant in Canada and the United States, where arguably it is the "mom blogs" and other non-governmental experts that seem to exercise the most control over parents. Further, many philosophers of education are concerned that techniques of parenting "take the place of debates about norms and values"¹⁵ and call for an ethical inquiry

into parenthood. Ethical concerns are certainly important, but I worry that in emphasizing values, norms, and ethical deliberations, we risk missing philosophical-anthropological and existential concerns. In this vein, I aim to take up Suissa's call to consider what it means to parent, humanly speaking. Can we push the boundaries of our Enframing to find another way to think of what we are doing when we are raising children?

PARENTING BEYOND TECHNIQUE

So far, I have characterized what being a parent is *not*. It is not a technical act that requires expert advice, universal methods, or special gear. I want to consider now what being a parent *is*. Of course, being a parent is many things, but I focus here on what I find to be a central task of being a parent: giving a world to a child who constantly questions the value — indeed, the existence — of that world. As such, the parent must continuously justify the world as is, or consider re-conceiving the world, in response to the disruption posed by the child. To be a parent is to exist within this tension between world as we thought we knew it and challenge to the world posed by the child. That is, the funny thing about children is that they do not yet know, or do not yet care about, the way the world is and the way it works. The question is not whether the world will get re-made (by virtue of being re-thought) in response to the child, but rather, whether the parent will do so thoughtfully. As Vansieleghem writes, paying attention to a child “... is an invitation to reinvent education [child-rearing], in such a way that we think again what it is that the world *says*.”¹⁶

As mentioned above, my understanding of the parent-child relationship is grounded in Arendt's notion that natality is constitutive of the human condition. Although Arendt claims that all people have this inherent capacity to begin something new and unexpected, the child seems to possess and enact natality in a very special way because the child has not yet committed to the world. And this natality, I contend, is a problem for the parent. As Richard Smith claims: “Many of the features of our conceptions of being a parent

as a matter of ‘parenting’ ... can be viewed as examples of our discomfort with natality.”¹⁷ Our insistence on technique arises precisely because we are uncomfortable with the work it takes to constantly respond to the challenges to the world as we know it caused by the child, or to what I have elsewhere called the “banality-natality dialectic,” referring to the way the world always has the potential to need interpretation.¹⁸ Following this idea of the pull between thinking we already understand things and realizing we need to understand anew, I am suggesting that children are a special case that throws us into that dialectic. In a non-Arendtian vein, in her study of Simone de Beauvoir’s notion of childhood, Clementine Beauvais similarly suggests that childhood is a solution to facticity because it pulls us out of bad faith. Beauvais paraphrases de Beauvoir’s claims this way: “Childhood is the moment when the ambiguity of being emerges; yet it also provides the opportunity to learn to negotiate this ambiguity, to accept it, indeed to *relish* it.”¹⁹ It is this relishing, I want to suggest, that is essential to the work of being a parent, though I readily admit it is more often frustration and exasperation one feels.

To understand this tension between the adult world and the challenge the child poses to it, it helps to understand a bit more about how Arendt conceives of the adult’s and the child’s relationship to the world. For Arendt, there has to be an adult world, and adults have to take responsibility for bringing children into it: “education ... is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands the chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.”²⁰ In this quote, we see her commitment to bringing children into the world so that they can change it in ways we cannot predict. It is easy to misread Arendt as being a certain kind of conservative thinker who simply wants to prepare children to reproduce the world. But to read her that way is to miss her appreciation for newness and for the potential that all people possess to re-make the world. In light of her interest in the renewal of the world made possible by the child’s natality, it becomes clear that a technical approach to parenting does not make sense within an Arendtian

framework. Pre-determined plans presuppose a generic child, not a real one who will inevitably surprise us by virtue of his natality. Indeed, Arendt herself expresses suspicion about the scientific approach to children: "What concerns us all and cannot therefore be turned over to the special science of pedagogy is the relation between grown-ups and children in general or, putting it in even more general and exact terms, our attitude toward the fact of natality: the fact that we have all come into the world by being born and that this world is constantly renewed through birth."²¹

Of course, it must be noted that Arendt writes about teachers, not parents. While much has been written about Arendt's ideas as they pertain to schools and teachers, little has been said about the parent's role in giving a world. Yet, the kind of world-giving Arendt talks about pertains to parents equally as much as to teachers, if not more so. The teacher is responsible for an agreed-upon curriculum with relatively firm boundaries upon it while the parent has unbounded, ongoing, and primary responsibility for the day-to-day explanation of what our world is like, how to make sense of it, and how to live within it. And while Arendt might say the work of parents is more private and perhaps limited to what she calls *labor*, I contend that any time an explanation about the world is made it has the potential to become enacted in public and, as such, the world-giving done by parents should be considered within an Arendtian framework, even if she herself did not do so.²²

More specifically, there are two instances in which the differing orientation to the world becomes an issue for the parent: First, the child represents a threat to the world as we know it, because the child does not know and/or does not care how the world is. As a result, the parent has to come to terms with her understanding of the world as she recognizes the disruption to it posed by the child. Second, the parent has to make a decision about how to represent the world. In what follows I aim to lay out these two aspects in broad strokes in the hope of introducing a general framework for conceiving an essential aspect of being a parent.

“THE WORM DIED” AND “BUT WHY IS THE ROAD BUMPY?”

I said above that a parent must, first, recognize the threat the child represents to the world as the parent knows it, and then, represent the world in response. In saying this, I am moving from a description of how things are between parent and child to a normative claim about what a parent should do. To understand the first half of this prescription, it helps to consider that from the moment a child is born, life as the parent knows it is not the same. The extraordinary disruption to one's sleep patterns serves as the most obvious sign, but there are countless other ways in which the parent must re-evaluate their life, from their daily schedule, to their supermarket shopping list, to their deepest values. As such, it could be said the literal natality of a human being — the fact that we are born — is *the* paradigmatic reminder of the fact that our world is always up for grabs. Recognizing this perhaps, rather than seeking online solutions to this “problem,” would represent a different orientation to the work of raising children.

An example might help illustrate: We are late for an appointment, and I am yelling at my daughter to hurry up because “it's not polite to be late.” Meanwhile, she is crouched down in the driveway mourning a dead worm. Her simple action prevents me from going about my business as usual. When I'm yelling at her, it is because I am clinging to my world, the one I share with other adults. The responsibility of the parent, at least in an Arendtian context, is to introduce the world to the child, not to succumb to the child's version of how things should be, so that the child's own natality can erupt in surprising ways in the future. But my daughter has already renewed the world in a sense by challenging me to do so. That is, to recognize my daughter's behavior as representative of this tension between adult world and child's natality is to recognize the chosenness of the world as we adults know it and, as such, to have an invitation to reify that world for the child in a meaningful way. I can only really come to the conclusion that I want to rush her along because I have first acknowledged the natality she represents when she stops to mourn the worm and thereby halts my plans. Otherwise, I am just seeing her actions as behavioral problems to be solved, rather than as a different, uninitiated orientation

to the world. Alternatively, I could wait and arrive five minutes late to our appointment. After all, even in the adult world we are constantly navigating competing goods. What is important here is that, first, I understand her actions as a challenge to the world as I know it and, second, I take responsibility for the world in response.

While the above example illustrates the ways a child's mere being in the world qua child forces the adult out of her normal comings-and-goings, I am most interested in the ways in which discussions with children ultimately demand that parents take responsibility for the way they describe the meaning of things in language. In fact, I would argue that much of the interesting and challenging work of being a parent involves having to describe the world in some meaningful, coherent way. One inevitably hears one's language reflected back by the child, as when my daughter recently began several sentences throughout the course of one day with the phrase, "It turns out that..."; in such instances, the parent hears the way the child is developing a means of making sense of the world through the language provided by adults. Responsibility for this language, then, is essential to the work of the parent and arises as a particular issue for us precisely in those moments when children call into question our understanding of things.

For example, when my son asks, on our daily drive to school, "Why is the road bumpy?," I realize that I had not thought about the road at all and, by extension, had no idea why it was bumpy. Why, indeed, is the road bumpy? His very question poses a threat to the world as I know it and shows me that my world is lacking. Here, an Arendtian might argue that I have diverged too much from Arendt's sense of the world as the shared understanding among adults, but I use the term *world* more broadly to refer to the sense I make of things, which certainly emerges from a context I share with others but also takes a personal form as I interpret, or fail to interpret, parts of my life.

As I consider possible answers, I realize that what I say matters. For instance, I could say the earth upon which the road is paved is uneven and thereby provide an explanation of the topography of the land, emphasizing for him something about the natural world. Or, I might answer that the road

was initially smooth but has bumps due to the changing weather conditions that, over time, corrupt the nature of the pavement, emphasizing the inter-relationship of the human-made pavement with climatic factors. Or, I might explain that our city does not have sufficient funds to re-pave this road. Then again, I might consider my own car, its shocks (Are they old? Are they perhaps designed to be tight for a particular driving experience?), and explain how my car hits the road. And, still there are other possible answers. What I want to suggest here is that in answering this seemingly simple question, I am making decisions about how to make sense of the world. His question has forced me to consider my own role in representing the world to him. What type of world do I want to give my child, and why? Which explanation is most correct? Which explanation will make the most sense to him? Which things do I want him to think about?

As it happens, in this particular instance, I became aware of the sense I had made for my son only belatedly, when I heard him say daily for weeks that “The road is bumpy because no one fixed it.” I found myself questioning whether I had been too unsympathetic to the city and its workers and whether the real issue that I should appreciate is the inevitable demise of the physical world. After all, don’t I want my child to understand that all material things eventually decay? In this example, my son has shown me that I do not necessarily know the world as well as I thought I did (just as above my daughter showed me I could not have the world I thought I wanted), or that how I make sense of the world might need some re-thinking. I become aware in the process of answering his question that there is sense to be made of something I otherwise either did not notice, or noticed but thought I already understood. In recognizing my own uncertainty about how to make sense of the bumps in the road, I end up taking responsibility for making sense of it for him in a particular way. In so doing, my particular response to his particular question ends up representing a more universal stance I want to take about how one *should* understand the bumps in the road.

RAISING A HUMAN

It is probably not surprising from the examples above that the impetus for my inquiry into what it means to be a parent was my frustration with all the self-help books I foolishly consulted when I first became a parent. Further, I have grown increasingly uncomfortable with the discourse around me — in the media, from other parents, from childcare professionals — about what a parent is “supposed” to do. What started as a personal matter has become much greater than that, as I have come to believe that the predominant language with which we describe the work of rearing children is highly problematic.

If how we talk about what we are doing when we raise children is based on a distorted sense of what it means to be human, then arguably any parent can benefit from inquiry like this one. Of course, I know it is doubtful this work will reach most parents, but my hope is that this can serve as a call to other philosophers of education to broaden our work beyond the scope of institutional schooling and to take more seriously inquiry into the philosophy of the parent-child relationship. Within our scholarly circles, we might think more seriously about what it means to be a parent, and we might also consider our responsibility to provide a richer discourse around parenting beyond our journals and conference room meetings.

Arendt is well known among philosophers of education for her provocative claim that: “Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable.”²³ We philosophers of education have thought a good deal about what this means relative to schooling, but I have asked here that we consider it in regard to the parent and their child. When we recognize our child’s challenge to how things are, we are offered a chance to re-make the world. As such, the parent’s work to provide a world for children can be a most human and humane act.

- 1 Richard Smith, "On dogs and children: judgements in the realm of meaning," *Ethics and Education* 6, no. 2 (2011): 171-180, 175.
- 2 Bert Lambeir and Stefan Ramaekers, "The Terror of Explicitness: Philosophical Remarks on the Idea of a Parenting Contract," *Ethics and Education* 2, no. 2 (2007): 95-107, 106.
- 3 Stefan Ramaekers and Judith Suissa, "The question of 'parenting'," *Ethics and Education* 6, no. 2 (2011): 101-108, 198.
- 4 Ramaekers and Suissa, "The question of 'parenting'," 108.
- 5 Judith Suissa, "Untangling the mother knot: some thoughts on parents, children and philosophers of education," *Ethics and Education* 1, no. 1 (March 2006): 65-77, 71, 75.
- 6 Rima D. Apple, *Perfect Motherhood: Science and Childrearing in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006).
- 7 Frank Furedi, *Paranoid Parenting: Why Ignoring the Experts May Be Best for Your Child* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2002).
- 8 Suissa, "Untangling the Mother Knot."
- 9 Richard Smith, "Total Parenting," *Educational Theory* 60, no. 3 (2010): 357-369, 360-361.
- 10 Smith, "Total Parenting," 357.
- 11 Nancy Vansieleghem, "The Residual Parent to Come: On the Need for Parental Expertise and Advice," *Educational Theory* 60, no. 3 (2010): 341-355.
- 12 Vansieleghem, "The Residual Parent," 353.
- 13 Geertrui Smedts, "Parenting in a Technological Age," *Ethics and Education* 3, no. 2 (2008): 121-134, 122.
- 14 Smedts, "Parenting in a Technological Age," 127.
- 15 Paul Smeyers, "State Intervention and the Technologization and Regulation of Parenting," *Educational Theory* 60, no. 3 (2010): 265-270, 266.
- 16 Nancy Vansieleghem, "Children in Public or 'Public Children': An Alternative to Constructing One's Own Life," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 1 (2009): 101-118, 116.
- 17 Smith, "Total Parenting," 368.
- 18 Stephanie Mackler, "Educating for Meaning in an Era of Natality,"

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19 Clémentine Beauvais, "Simone de Beauvoir and the Ambiguity of Childhood," *Paragraph* 38, no. 3 (2015): 329-346, 343.

20 Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 196.

21 Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," 196.

22 Thanks to the anonymous PES reviewer for raising questions about the move from applying Arendtian thought from schools to parents.

23 Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," 196.