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# An Ontological Notion of Learning Inspired by the Philosophy of Hannah Arendt

James M. Magrini

## Introduction

Macdonald (1975) points out that many educational theorists working in curriculum “feel epistemology or knowledge is too limited a base for an adequate curriculum theory,” and indeed as the *reconceptualist* movement grows and expands, questions concerning the “relevance of social, human, and personal qualities would appear to lead to broader vistas in order to cope comfortably with curriculum decisions” (9). The continued concern in education, with respect to the privileging of “knowledge-forms” in the curriculum and empirical-scientific and evidence-based quantitative research, the concern with epistemology eclipses the ontological aspects of authentic education. Tragically, as Grumet (1992) observes, this leads to “further depersonalization and fragmentation of human experience,” with the effect of distorting our experience of the world and estranging us “not only from each other but from ourselves as well” (31). Turning to Arendt’s philosophy for insight into the practice of education represents an instance of qualitative, phenomenological research, wherein “lived texts” (the educator’s experience of life and education) and the philosophical text (Arendt’s phenomenological descriptions and interpretation of education, politics, etc.) and brought together to afford insight into the search for the “essences” of the phenomenon of “learning,” or the phenomenon’s *invariant ontological structures*, which are instantiated in the empirical unfolding of the phenomenon of learning wherever it occurs, but these “essences,” or structures, must be “wrested from concealment” by the phenomenological-hermeneutic method.<sup>1</sup>

“Teaching,” states Heidegger (1968), “is even more difficult than learning,” this is because teaching requires that educators allow students the freedom to “learn,” and according to Heidegger, the educator is “ahead of his apprentices in this alone, that he still has far more to learn than they – he has to learn to let them learn” (15). But what does it mean to *let students learn*? To respond to this query demands that we ask an original question about the nature of “learning,” something like: *What is the essence of all learning*? That is, what is it that defines instances of authentic learning that pre-dates and is antecedent to the form of “learning” confined to the formal institutions of “learning,” i.e., the schools? I believe that there is something valuable,

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<sup>1</sup>This is precisely what van Manen (1990) claims allows us to combine our lived experience through dialogue, or *conversational relation*, with writers and thinkers, which enables us “to reflect more deeply on the way we tend to make interpretive sense of lived experience” (75, emphasis in original). This is what Arendt does, and she takes her lead from Heidegger (1962) who initially branched off from Husserl’s (1982) phenomenology as a philosophical science, and contemporary educational researchers such as van Manen have continued this tradition and further modified it to suit their needs and wants as pedagogues and researchers. What they all have in common, although described using various terms, is expressed within van Manen’s description of searching for “essences” as is common, in one form or another, to all phenomenological research: “Phenomenology asks for the very nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes a some-“thing” what it is- and without which it could not be what it is. The essence of a phenomenon is a universal which can be described through a study of the structure that governs the instances or particular manifestations of the essence of that phenomenon. In other words, phenomenology is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience, A universal or essences may only be intuited or grasped through a study of particulars or instances as they are encountered in lived experienced” (10).

from an ontological perspective, which educators can learn *about learning* from Arendt's formal philosophy of education, on the one hand, and her ontological-phenomenological elucidation of "action" and the "space of appearance" on the other. However, it must be noted that because Arendt makes a hard and fast distinction between the private and public realms, not only in her philosophy of education but also, and perhaps more importantly, in her philosophizing of the "political," synthesizing her divergent views concerning the education of children and the learning that occurs among adults appears problematic. With that said, in this essay, in addition to the phenomenological analysis of the essence of "learning," the rapprochement between these seemingly irreconcilable aspects of the "human condition" is also attempted.

In *The Human Condition* Arendt (1958) develops and explores the notion of the *vita activa* and the various components comprising this unique way of Being-in-the world, which include labor, work, and action, all of which comprise the "human condition." Despite the fact that this work is concerned with the "political" and not a work concerned with formal education, there is a notion of learning, albeit in an ontological, and as such, a primordial sense, which is strongly and undeniably suggested, as in the following passage:

The lifespan of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the *faculty of interrupting* it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but begin (Arendt, 246, my emphasis).

And again in this passage, as related to ontological origin of the human's power and potential, through "learning," to usher in, and beyond, embody, "new beginnings":

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, "natural" ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born (247).

Here, located in Arendt's rich phenomenological description is a notion of authentic learning that I will develop for the reader. The practice of interrupting the flow of history, which always consists of "learning" about our existence, amounts to establishing and reestablishing the web of relationships through word and deed, and this we call the phenomenon of "world," which allows us to learn new things about ourselves and others, whose presence is essential for self-revelation. In "The Crisis in Education," Arendt (1961a) claims that children, within the formal setting of the classroom, must be prepared through the "authority" of the teacher in such a way that this sense of original "learning," which is linked intimately with the way in which we "interpret" existence in meaningful ways as we enact our finite transcendence by initiating "new beginnings" amid the unfolding of our Being-in-the-world, is nurtured, protected, and preserved – *children must first learn how to learn*. Might we learn something from Arendt's notion of "formal learning" as educators that relates to the unfolding of our Being-in-the-world? Is there something she has to share with all educators if we consider all types of situations that involve learning? I believe there is, and so this essay works to elucidate an original notion of learning that might be related to both the private and public realms, to both formal education and the learning that occurs in the public space of appearance, where human beings commune freely in word and deed.

The essay unfolds in three parts: (1) I explicate Arendt's unique view of education and relate it to the political. Arendt's view of education seeks above all to shelter the miracle of natality and prepare the young student for her transition from the realm of the private to public. Arendt's philosophy of education requires the reinterpretation of the notion of "conservative" in its relation to "authority" in teaching; (2) I challenge Arendt's hard and fast distinction between the private (*oikos*) and public (*polis*) realms, I show that it is possible to understand all learning in a way wherein it transpires through the existential structures ordering the sphere of "action," and so indicate that there are already crucial elements of the "public" at work in the "private" realm; and (3) I draw on her philosophy of both education and the "human condition" and relate Arendt's formal view of education to the human being, which includes both the "child" and the "adult"

conceived in terms of a primordial or ontological learner. I suggest a notion of “learning” wherein we must work preserve the experience of natality by means of repeating (*Weiderholen*)<sup>2</sup> it within our engaged activities, i.e., authentic “action,” which is never at an end and authentic “thinking,” which continually works to disrupt the world as it is and to inspire its continued recreation in word and deed. This section includes a detailed analysis of “action” and the manner in which it breaks open the space of appearance within non-formalized, existential learning experiences. These primordial learning experiences as I describe afford valuable insights into the nature of authentic learning from which educators might benefit.

### Arendt’s View of Formal Education

In “The Crisis in Education” Arendt (1961a) makes the distinction between “education” and “learning” when stating that, “education, as distinguished from learning, must have a predictable end” (195). Here, we immediately, encounter a distinction that might be related to “work” as an ontological function of the human being to construct a world through “artifacts” and “institutions” and “action,” as related to the authentic realm of the political, which is expressive of freedom and plurality; we also encounter the distinction between the private realm of the home, hearth, and necessity and the public world of authentic politics, freedom, and plurality. According to Topolski (2008), education, as conceived by Arendt, “is not first and foremost a political issue and therefore should not be interpreted as belonging to a political context (259). For Arendt, there exists a goal and aim of authentic education, and although it is certainly not the *instrumental* view that contemporary *neo-liberalism* holds, as found in Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005), namely, the production of an ideal citizen to contribute to the perpetuation and economic growth of the capitalist democratic society, it does have a teleological trajectory, and unlike Arendt’s (1958) notion of authentic “action,” the end or goal (*telos*) of the student’s formal “education” might be said to reside outside the processes of education itself: Education serves the purpose of granting the safe passage of the child from the private realm to the realm of the public, for children are not yet prepared for their entrance into the realm of politics.

Formal education for Arendt (1961a) shelters, fosters, and nurtures natality, or the ontological potential of the human to initiate new beginnings, and this represents the “essence of education” (174). Formal education takes into consideration two factors, which are essential if the child, as harboring natality, is to one day become a participatory and contributory member of the public realm as conceived in terms of the authentic enactment of politics: Arendt is concerned with (1) the preservation of the tradition of the past for student reinterpretation, which presupposes student initiative, change, and the potential of new and renewed beginnings, and (2) the understanding of the present community with an eye toward its future development, with the fore-knowledge that authentic change is indeed possible. “Insofar as the child is not yet acquainted with the world, he must be gradually introduced to it; insofar as he is new, care must be taken that this new thing comes to fruition in relation to the world as it is” (Arendt, 1961a, 189). This “conservative” view of education presupposes that children who are to be enlightened and awakened to their potential as “new beginnings” are in need of guidance and require “authority”; it also demands that teachers assume the role of authority figures; lastly, this view stresses “learning” above “doing.” All of this contributes to Arendt’s insistence that education must facilitate the transition from the private realm to the public, wherein the asymmetry between adults and children is marked out and maintained, and in this transition there is a tension between the pull of the private and the lure of the public, which represents

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<sup>2</sup> There is an undeniable Heideggerian ambiance radiating from the German term *Wiederholen* that is linked to *Being and Time* and the notion of Dasein’s authentic *historizing* in the moment of the *Augenblick*, which for Heidegger represents Dasein’s authentic “history,” which has been given as heritage and yet chosen freely, and in doing so, Dasein repeats, in a new way, a possibility of its past in light of its future projects. I relate to my possibilities only by handing them down to myself for appropriation, in that I retrieve the possibilities that are distinctly mine and implicit in my heritage in order to catch a glimpse of what I am not yet in relation to my indeterminate future that is always on the approach. “In repetition,” writes Heidegger (1962), “fateful destiny can be disclosed explicitly as bound up with the heritage which has come down to us. By repetition, Dasein first has its own history made manifest” (438/387).

the paradox of particularity and plurality that defines the human realm. Not only is [education] an introduction to difference, dissent, plurality, a child's education also has as its somewhat contradictory task to teach children about their society's shared history, its source of stability – the past – to prepare the for the unpredictability and uncertainty of their future (Topolski, 2008, 270).

According to Arendt (1961a), the crisis in education is grounded in the blurring of the distinction between the private and public realms along with the phenomenon of the rise of the “social,” and there is a danger in this occurrence. For in the private realm the “child requires special protection and care so that nothing destructive may happen to him from the (public) world,” and, as she goes on, “the world, too, needs protection to keep it from being overrun and destroyed by the onslaught of the new that bursts upon it with each new generation” (186). It is clear that for us, in the age of *standardization* and *high-stakes accountability*, education is not only infiltrated by the public realm of politics, it literally functions as an arm of national and state bureaucratic governmental agencies. In addition, educators such as Shor (1992) and Kincheloe (2001) advocate for the transformation of classrooms into “microcosmic” political spaces where economic issues and issues of racism and political oppression are woven thematically into the curriculum. This is not to diminish Arendt's belief in the importance of battling such issues head-on, but it is within the realm of the political, the public space of appearances, where “political” issues should be debated among equals, whose plurality is represented in their distinctness, and not in the classroom; children should not be used as pawns for manipulation within the political games that adults play. Contemporary education might be classified in terms of a “social” institution that has been *politicized*, representing what Arendt (1961a) describes as inauthentic politics. For in contemporary education we experience “a battlefield of partial, conflicting interests, where nothing [counts] but pleasure and profit, partisanship, and the lust for domination” (263). Here, the notion of “beginning something entirely new” is sacrificed to the *instrumental* purpose of “producing” ideal democratic citizens. That which is lost or ignored, the ontological potential to be *as new*, distinct, and unique represents the essence of authentic education for Arendt.

It is possible at first glance to be critical of Arendt for her decidedly conservative view of schooling with its focus on authority as playing a crucial role in children's education. However, these terms, and more importantly, her worldview, must be understood within the context of her philosophy as related to two forms of educational philosophy, namely, conservative hermeneutics as represented in Hirsch (1982) and critical hermeneutics as found in the writings of Giroux (1994). Although Arendt stresses that the historical tradition must be preserved by educators within the curriculum, she is not suggesting that educators force students, by means of their superior authority, to slavishly accept in an uncritical manner the past as it is, e.g., as we find in Hirsch within his oppressive notion of the Western canon representing authentic “cultural literacy” for all students. She is also not setting up an asymmetrical, domineering, and oppressive relationship between educators and students, i.e., the types of power relationships of which those from the “social justice” movement such as Giroux are critical. For Arendt, students are not inferior or oppressed in the sense that might be defined in the absolutist “political” context of rulers and ruled, those with knowledge (teachers) and those without (students), those with power and those utterly bereft of power, etc.

Gordon (2001) addresses the critique of Arendt's “conservatism” in education and states that her view is far from being “conservative” in the traditional sense because it is “heavily influenced by her existential convictions,” and thus her view of education manifests in terms of an “unusual blend of a traditional view of authority with an existentialist approach to politics” (38). Indeed Arendt (1961a) conceives “conservatism” in the unique “sense of conservation,” which seeks to “cherish and protect something,” namely, the child's safe passage through *education* as the intermediary between the passage from home to public life (192). This understanding of “authority” is similar to that of Freire (1999) with his marked distinction between “authority” in education, in terms of the guiding and directive actions of the educator, who sees to it that he and the students “become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow,” and the “authoritarian” educator, who strips students of their freedom. According to Freire, “in order to function, authority must be *on the side of freedom, not against it*” (80).<sup>3</sup> Arendt defends a notion of what an authentic

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<sup>3</sup> The comparison of Arendt and Freire (1999) is not without its problems, with first and foremost being the case that Freire explicitly states that all education is inherently political and embodies “the practice of freedom” (81). However, there is a similarity in

teacher is, and it is not to be found in his qualifications or expertise in his field of study, although these are important, rather it is to be found in his wiliness to be *as* an authority, which for Arendt requires that he accepts “responsibility for the world” (189). Although the teacher’s authority “consists in knowing the world and being able to instruct others about it,” more importantly “authority rests on his assumption of responsibility for that world” (189). For Arendt, as Gordon points out, her conservatism with its emphasis on authority functions simultaneously on two fronts: (1) education must protect the young from the world and the conventions of the *status quo* that might undermine the child’s blossoming sense of natality for new beginnings and (2) education must protect the world from the child *as* a new beginning, i.e., preserving “the new and revolutionary in the child while simultaneously conserving the world as a permanent home for human beings” (47). Thus, the “conservative” education of Arendt might be conceived in terms of a sheltering and conservation of human natality and world, this is because

Arendt insists that education involves assuming responsibility for both the world and our children in order to protect them from harm and preserve the possibility for renewal. The common world needs to be protected from the actions of human beings, and children require a safe environment to enhance their development. The conservative attitude, applied to both world and young, helps to bridge the gap between the old and new in education (52).

To review, Arendt’s (1961a) notion of formal education is related to the private as opposed to the public realm, which is the authentic realm of politics and is the space wherein educators, by means of their authority and knowledge, shelter, preserve, and facilitate natality in students (children) who are not as of yet prepared for the autonomous responsibilities of entering the public sphere of discourse - the sphere of freedom and plurality. Three key points characterize Arendt’s notion of formal education: (1) the classroom is not to be turned into a theatre where political dramas play out, thus it is unlike critical hermeneutics (critical pedagogy); it is also unlike conservative hermeneutics (scholar academic ideology) in education, wherein a single tradition is privileged and lionized for transmission to and assimilation by students; (2) pedagogy works to introduce students to their inherited past, and this we might link to Heidegger’s (1962) and Huebner’s (1975) notion of “heritage,” with the realization that this past is there for student’s reinterpretation and re-appropriation in terms of a “new beginning”; (3) pedagogy looks to the future focused on the ecumenical efforts that will be required in order to change the trajectory of our history by initiating new beginnings as members of a collective speech community. Children are “educated” in a way that adults cannot be, and this is the formalized notion of education in Arendt.

However, what about “learning,” in terms of interpreting our world in meaningful ways, which might occur within both the public and private realm, is it possible for the human being to be engaged in instances of learning wherein a strong sense of authority is not yet present, wherein necessity and freedom have not yet been sharply demarcated? Arendt makes clear that a formal education requires “teaching” in terms of authority, and such a notion of education can never be devoid of “learning” or else it is an empty and vacuous exercise in “emotional rhetoric” (196). She also states that there can be instances of teaching, which are not linked specifically with the “authority” of the pedagogue within the setting of formal education. Finally, she indicates that, “one can go on learning to the end of one’s days without for that reason becoming educated” in a formal sense of the notion (196). Although education for Arendt is concerned specifically with “the relation between grown-ups and children,” in terms that are more general and more exact, “learning,” when conceived in terms of a unique human activity, might be said to relate directly to “our attitude toward the fact of our natality: the fact that we have all come into the world by being born and that this world is constantly renewed through birth” (196).

To this end, recall the distinction introduced earlier between “education” and “learning” and imagine how this notion might be related in an ontological way with the human “faculty of interrupting” – *as*

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the belief that educators importantly must possess a sense of authority, and as Roberts (2000) writes about Freire, “Authority derives from the educator’s knowledge of his or her subject, and from the responsibility the educator has for coordinating, structuring, and facilitating the educative process. The teacher’s authority is necessary for freedom to develop” (61). It is the case that in instances where “teachers renounce or deny their authority, freedom becomes license; where they forget the freedom of students altogether, authority becomes authoritarianism” (61).

*interpreting* - our life and world as we initiate new beginnings, the single faculty of the human condition that shelters us against utter “ruin and destruction.” Perhaps, learning might be conceived differently, in a way where it is related, but is indeed antecedent, to the formal education of which Arendt writes. Moving through Arendt’s philosophy, I envision the phenomenon of an *ontological context of learning* wherein the “space of appearance” (world) is disclosed, which represents “new beginnings,” or instances of finite human transcendence through communal learning, whereby we discover the world, self, and others. As Arendt (1961a) states, “The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location,” that is, its so-called “walls” are really contingent upon activity of world-disclosure occurring through “the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose no matter where they happen to be” (198). I believe that something similar might be said of authentic education, or learning, that in an ontological way it predates and precedes the construction of the institution’s walls, or education’s formalization, and, in addition, is antecedent to the formal categorizations of both private and public realms. In the sections that follow, I elucidate Arendt’s philosophy for educators who are never only *teachers*, but also, and more primordially, always and forever *learners*, first and foremost.

### Challenging the Distinction Between Private (*Oikos*) and Public (*Polis*) Realms

Arendt (1958) excludes the realm of the private, home, hearth, and necessity from the public space of appearances, which embodies authentic action and speech. In *The Human Condition* she makes the now famous *oikos/polis* distinction and this emerges from her deconstructive (Abbau/Destruktion) readings of the ancient texts such as those of Aristotle and Seneca: “The distinction between a private and public sphere of life corresponds household and the political realms, which have existed as distinct, separate entities at least since the rise of the ancient city-state” (28). This distinction rests on the difference between the “natural,” which is a concern for life’s daily needs and the “political,” which arises only out of a concern for the communal, and hence, public life. The private realm is crucial for the eventual move into the bright light of revelation that is the public sphere of the *polis*. This transition from necessity to freedom grounds her philosophy of education as presented above. In Long’s (1998) description of the household’s function in Arendt, the reader will recognize the initial definition of education as a process that culminates in a distinct end: “The household has its end not in itself,” as does the space of communal disclosure in the *polis*, “but rather in the establishment of the *polis*” itself (87). This is why it was mentioned earlier that the processes of formal education, in Arendt’s (1961a) philosophy, as a private phenomenon, terminate when the student’s transition is made to the public sphere as adult, for in the public realm, “one can neither educate adults nor treat children as if they were grown up” enough to participate authentically in that realm (195). Action in the realm of the *polis*, which belongs to the public sphere, unfolds through communal discourse and breaks open the space of appearance (world), lives only as long as the discourse is maintained, it is an end-in-and-of-itself, as it were.

Action, and its potential for revelation, is linked to “world,” the web of relations and meanings manifest in speech and deed, in which the human is disclosed, not in the “what” of his existence, but rather in the “who” of his existence, i.e., not in terms of his qualities or characteristics but rather in terms of the ontological potential to *be* and *become* a distinct and unique being. Long (1998) writes the following: “For Arendt, therefore, action requires a plurality of people existing together in equality; in other words, it requires a truly ‘public’ realm in the sense of the Greek *polis*” (89). Thus, in the private realm there is no space of appearance wherein the authentic “world” manifests, which makes it difficult to talk of something resembling the “world” of the family in terms commensurate with the *polis*, the space of freedom, and plurality. Long, however, locates a fissure in Arendt’s work in the sharp distinction between the *oikos* and the *polis* and argues for an affinity between the realms, and shows that it is possible to “ascribe a creative worldliness to the family,” and he demonstrates that the “family is indeed a realm where action and speech are vital” (87). Although grounded in Arendt’s philosophy, Long acknowledges at the outset that many of his conclusions are decidedly non-Arendtian in character, in great part this relates specifically to Arendt’s insistence that the strict definition of action demands the element of “glory,” or emblematic immortality

(*kleos*), which is “endemic to a truly public space of appearance for its existence” (100).<sup>4</sup> Despite this, Long goes on to add that

there are a *remarkable number of structural affinities* between Arendt’s description of the public sphere and a non-idealized vision of the family, which allow us to speak in terms of a “family world,” and therefore import the conditions of action and speech into this realm. Once this has been accomplished, the categories of justice and accountability leak into the family from without, so to speak (100, my emphasis).

Long focuses on “worldliness” when suggesting a different way of conceiving the private realm, which makes the phenomenon applicable to the “family.” His overarching claim might be understood in the following terms as related to the themes of this essay: The ontological-existential structures of the “in-between,” “plurality,” and “permanence,” related to the ontology of “action,” are not only restricted to the public world, but cut across, and in fact, obliterate, the hard distinction between the private and public because “worldliness” is an original phenomenon that manifests in both realms.

He begins with an analysis of “love” and shows that for Arendt (1958), love is “worldless,” in that there is not an ontological distance between (*in-between*) lovers as there would be within the “world” of the public-political sphere: “Love, by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates and separates us from others,” and this is a crucial requirement for the *ontic* enactment of the *ontological*-existential of the “political” (242). Long (1998) argues against this conclusion in two ways: First, he claims that this represents an “idealized” version of love, and thus, is exceedingly restrictive. For love, when experienced and analyzed, “is only possible on the condition that an attempt ever again is made to traverse the distance, to meet other as other, without attempting to assimilate and reduce the other’s independent and unique perspective to one’s own,” and thus there is never a “complete destruction of distance between unique individuals, and so love does have “a certain ‘worldly’ character to the extent that there always exists between two people a space of disclosure” (93). Secondly, adopting the *reductio ad absurdum*, he states that if we accept Arendt’s claim that love, in the idealized fashion presented, is “worldless,” it might be said that with the birth of the child into the family that the phenomenon of “world” is first thrust open, for the child, and this according to Arendt (1958), now represents the “in-between” for the lovers (242). But, what Arendt means by this must be understood in terms of her philosophical perspective and view to education: although the child “is an indication that they will insert a new world into the existing world,” it is the case that the child will actualize its “potential natality” *only* when it is ready to enter the public sphere, when it has been prepared for such an entrance by the family or the formal processes of education (242). However, Long interprets the event of birth in terms of the “unexpected” arrival, in terms of the never-before-imagined, namely, in terms of the “miracle” of natality and the “new beginning,” because

the essential worldlessness endemic to love has, with the birth of a between, been destroyed. Thus, the condition of natality, a characteristic Arendt thematizes in the section concerning *action*, plays a vital role within the family as well [...] Thus, not only is a child born into a world, but this birth itself signifies the birth of a world [...] Not only is the child born into a world, but more specifically, into a family. The family itself is the site of the ‘startling unexpectedness’ and “infinite improbability” which is inherent in the birth of a beginner and endemic to the “existential” of action [...] the insertion of a between into the love relationship marks the emergence familial world which is the condition for the possibility of speech and action. In fact, natality, as the actualization of a beginning may be considered the very paradigm example of action; for like all action, it is an activity by which the agent inserts himself/herself into the world (95, emphasis in original).

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<sup>4</sup> Long (1998) admits that the notion of “publicity” in Arendt is a difficult concept to relate neatly to the private realm of the family, although he does agree for the conception of words and deeds being immortalized on a smaller, more intimate scale in that they might be passed down through generations by means of narratives and images. He admits that Arendt’s first definition of the “public” in terms of “publicity, though over-invested in the Greek conception of glory and greatness, retains its significance by pointing to an ineluctable difference between the public and the private. There is a certain breadth of reality inherent to the public realm conceived as publicity with which the private realm cannot and should not compete. The family is, by definition, excluded from this conception of the public” (90).

In addition to the “in-between” of the world, the family also demonstrates plurality and a sense of permanence. Although the family lacks the scope of plurality we experience on a grand scale when involved with public affairs, in a limited, but certainly not inauthentic sense, the family “may be spoken of as a space of appearance in which reality emerges as distinct individuals meet one another in all their similarity and uniqueness” (97). In short, to view the family, as does Arendt (1958), in terms of the “prolongation or multiplication of one’s one position with its attending aspects and perspectives,” is false in a phenomenological sense, for family members are all unique persons with their own outlook and despite the fact of blood-relatedness, they can never be reduced to representing a single perspective, they are each and every one a unique individual with discrete aims and goals (97). Family members “retain their irreducible uniqueness within the private sphere,” and thus the “family may be spoken of as a space of appearance in which reality emerges as distinct individuals meet one another in all of their similarity and uniqueness” (Long, 1998, 97). There is also a sense of permanence within the family, because the family “retains a continuity through generations,” and in this way the family acquires a sense of permanence, like the public realm, in that stories handed down from family member to family member “continue to reveal *who* of ancestors long since dead” (97). How might Long’s critique of the *oikos/polis* dichotomy be related and protracted to the realm of education? I briefly address this issue considering that Arendt’s (1961a) philosophy of education is grounded in the strict delineation between the private and public spheres.<sup>5</sup>

Long’s (1998) analysis argues for the fact that in the family both the objective and the subjective aspects of the “in-between” are embodied. For my purpose, I am interested in what Arendt (1958) refers to as the intangible “in-between,” which “for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common. We call this reality the ‘web’ of human relationships, indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality” (183). This phenomenon of authentic “world” I identify as cutting across, or better, predating Arendt’s distinction between public and private. It represents the ontological distance, or *existential proximity*, which lies between each human being as a plurality, as a “distinct” human being. It is a form of “otherness” but not identical with it, and this ontological distance makes possible “world,” when conceived in terms of revelatory, educative activities that seek an understanding of existence, and within which self-revelation, or the phenomenon of reflexivity, occurs. The essence of education, or learning, is to be found in the essential “in-between” of human beings. The activity of learning might be said to also demonstrate the authentic characteristics of “action” and “speech” as described by Arendt, because plurality (distinctness and equality) and permanence also structure the context of learning when learning is conceived, and how can it be otherwise, in terms of a communal endeavor, and as such, contains undeniable “public” elements.

Learning is structured around both the “objective” and “subjective” *in-between*, i.e., it contains both *ontic* and *ontological* aspects. We seek to learn about objects, or entities, in the world, the “what” of existence, and we seek to learn about others and ourselves in relation to others, most specifically their Being-in-the-world, or for Arendt (1958), the “who” of their existence. For example, the “objective” *in-between* in the classroom might be concerned with the artifacts of education as they are employed to “teach,” such as textbooks, workbooks, computers, videos, and such. We might also imagine the physical and intellectual construction of objective artifacts as the “works” of our learning. The “subjective” *in-between* might be represented within the *ontological* relationship between educator and student, or more appropriately, between human beings, and although “intangible,” this “in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common,” which for my purpose is really the existential-ontological relationship between human

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<sup>5</sup> I would consider reevaluating this interpretation of the *oikos/polis* distinction if the ontological conditions that she sets forth for the enactment of “the political” – through authentic politics – obtained, i.e., if “authority” as she describes was not bastardized and misinterpreted by those engaging in “political” dialogue, which is clearly grounded in oppressive “authoritarian” modes of power-knowledge struggles, and, as stated earlier, these power struggles ultimately find their way into the democratic system of education. It might be said that contemporary politics and education has the effect of destroying the “revelatory quality of speech and action,” and this occurs “whenever human togetherness is lost, that is when people are only for or against other people” (Arendt, 1958, 180). In the state where the “social” has eclipsed both the public and private realms of existence, discourse “becomes ‘mere talk,’ simply one more means toward the end,” it becomes in her words, “propaganda,” and in this state “words reveal nothing,” and hence what is revealed eludes authentic speech and it is the deed, the work itself that discloses the human, and such deeds leading to the production of mere artifacts “cannot disclose the ‘who,’ the unique and distinct identity of the agent” (180).

beings engaged in the common endeavor of learning (Arendt, 1958, 183).<sup>6</sup> Learning is also grounded in “plurality,” in terms of a gathering of distinct human beings, each with their own history, goals, wants, and needs, who are directed toward the ecumenical endeavor of learning, or the deepening of their understanding of things. The permanence of learning arises out of the continuity that has been established, albeit temporarily and without utter certainty, through the collective process of thinking, questioning, and interpreting, and thereby establishing, the world, or the “web” of human relationships, which is nothing other than the referential totality of meaning and intentions gleaned and connected through the “educative” and heuristic activities of interpretation, understanding, and discourse. In and through learning there is a “world” established, and this *worldliness* associated with learning is not restricted to what is commonly called the “world of the classroom,” or curriculum it is already occurring wherever and whenever people are gathered in community with the purpose of questioning existence as it relates to their Being, and this is learning as it arises “out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be” (198).

In conclusion, the main purpose of this section is not to point out the contradictions or inconsistencies present to Arendt’s distinction between public and private realms, rather I try to imagine a way in which it is possible to envision a form of learning taking place, as it is rooted in “action,” plurality, and freedom, with the potential of natality to break open new spaces of disclosure manifesting the “worldliness” of authentic communal discourse that defies, or at least pre-dates, the *oikos/polis* dichotomy. Considering the ground covered in this section, it is possible to intimate a sense of learning that is always and already taking place in private and public spaces, during intimate moments when the family is gathered around the hearth or moments when those who meet in the agora to discuss the public states of affairs have the larger communal “good” in mind, or, as is my concern, envision education, as “learning,” transcending not only the boundaries of formal education, but also transcending the distinction between public and private realms, because interpretation as an activity, or better, an “action” focused on revealing the phenomenon of world in ways that it has meaning for our existence, *is* a primordial and ontological mode of Being-in-the-world, which lives at the level of the original question “asked of every newcomer: ‘Who are you?’” (178). Learning thus conceived, represents one of the *existentials* that might accompany Arendt’s phenomenological interpretation of the *vita activa*, and it might be said that if action is rooted ontologically in natality that “learning” shares an ontological connection with “action,” for it is impossible to *become as new* without in some way learning about ourselves and the world with others. Now, with educators in mind, I turn to elucidate what might be termed the “ontological learner” as inspired by Arendt’s philosophy.

### **The Tradition, Action and the Space of Appearance, and Authentic Thinking**

There are several components of Arendt’s (1958) description and analysis of the *vita activa* that should be of concern to educators, which can enhance their understanding of *learning* in an ontological manner, that is, in a way that transcends the limited and highly restrictive empirical methods that are commonly employed to structure the curriculum and control learning. For example, the *How People Learn* (HPL) framework, developed by the 2000 National Academy of Science, is recommended to organize what educators need to “know” about student learning in the effort to define, gauge, and predict the outcomes of “effective” and “efficient” learning (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005, 41). While educators should be familiar with learner-centered views, meta-cognition, and the basic cognitive processes, this should not be the end all and be all of attempting to understand how students learn and what activities, techniques, and

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<sup>6</sup> Here again, I turn to Freire (1999), because it is clear that in learning, or as I put it, deepening our understanding, we are enacting a finite sense of human transcendence, we are becoming other to and than ourselves. The context of learning, which is rife with potential to enact such changes, and this is “learning,” might be related to Freire’s notion of “problem-posing” education, “which breaks with the vertical patterns characteristic of banking education” (80). This is because the model he philosophizes does away with the traditional notion of “teacher” as a *power-epistemic* authority and establishes human beings in the process of learning together: “Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-student and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach” (80). This model, I think, quite nicely expresses the notion of the “original happening” of learning.

methods are best employed to accomplish the end of “learning.” None of these aspects touch on or are rooted in the actual “lived experience” of learning, or the *lebenswelt* of education. As related to Arendt’s thought, such an understanding of how students assimilate knowledge, or data, through the unfolding of cognitive processes says nothing about (1) what it’s like to have a past and a heritage that “lives,” into which we are born and against which we struggle, in loving contention, to forge an ecumenical future with others; (2) what it’s like to be *as* potential for the new, the ontological potential to enact our unique possibilities in communion with other “distinct” humans, learning “who” we might *become* in an autonomous manner, as opposed to being told “what” we are; and (3) what it’s like to engage in an authentic form of thought that is uncertain of all things save for its limits, a form of thought that is *meditative* as above *calculative*, concerned more with embracing the ontological issues of life as opposed to solving once and for all the mere problems of our empirical existence.<sup>7</sup>

### *Authentic Learning Embraces the Tradition as Authentic “Heritage”*

Engaging Arendt’s thought it is possible to relate it to the various strands of curriculum-making and educational philosophy, e.g., Scholar Academic, Social Efficiency, Progressivism, and Critical Pedagogy, and to tease out critiques of each based on a reading of her philosophy. I will focus on the first form of educational philosophy, because of the unjust critiques that misunderstand Arendt’s use of the terms “conservative” and “tradition.” Scholar Academic ideology understands these terms in a markedly different manner than does Arendt, for its view of education and curriculum-making is grounded in what I term the “lionization of the past,” a view to the past that selects a single aspect of our tradition, e.g., the Western canon of books, and exalts it for praise, worship, and ultimately its transmission to students. Educators embracing this view of “tradition” preserve essential components of our cultural past in an immutable, unquestioned, and unchallenged form in order to acculturate students through transmission and indoctrination into the dimension of the tradition that so-called experts, or scholars, have deemed worthy (Schiro, 2008). This philosophical view has pejorative implications for the conception of knowledge (knowledge is objective), pedagogy (X teaches Y to Z rather than X learns Y from Z), assessment (X demonstrates a mastery of Y which has been transmitted by Z), and, perhaps most importantly, the overarching view to the human (almost exclusively in terms of a detached mind or intellect). For my purpose, this view is also bound up with a limited and erroneous view of the past or history. Scholar Academics view history in terms of a discipline that studies the past, as *historiography*, which approaches the past as something that is behind us, as opposed to an Arendtian view which is more in line with Heidegger’s (1962) understanding of “historicality,” which is expressive of the ontological way that we “live” and enact our destiny *as* history in moments when we attach meanings to the events of the past, and through repetition (*Wiederholen*), we affirm/reaffirm aspects of our “heritage” in light of our present needs as we are projected out beyond-ourselves into the indeterminate future.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout Arendt’s work she is asking what Heidegger (1995) terms questions in the original sense of questioning, and such questions belong to the realm of metaphysics and represent a concern, as stated above, with “original” questions that are always bound up with our Being or the way-of-our-Being’s-unfolding (Heidegger, 1935, *Introduction to Metaphysics*). She makes the point when stating that metaphysics, as a discipline that has fallen into a state of disrepute, has forgotten how to ask questions, the right questions, for it is not that “the old questions which are coeval with the appearance of men on earth have become ‘meaningless.’ But the way they were framed and answered has lost plausibility” (420). For example, in line with Arendt’s (1971) phenomenological ontology of the “human condition,” we might understand Arendt’s question, “What is thinking?” in the following manner: She’s not proposing that this question be given an answer in terms of propositional discourse, in terms of a factual or dictionary definition, what she is really asking is a more original question that “lives” at the level of the infinitival, “What is the nature of thinking?” or, perhaps better, “What is it to be engaged in thinking in relation to the unfolding of our Being?” This question cannot be answered by providing a quantitative response – it lives at another epistemological, and of course, ontological level. Arendt’s practice of philosophy is in many ways reminiscent of Heidegger’s rendering of metaphysics in 1929: “Metaphysics is a questioning in which we inquire into beings as a whole, and inquire in such a way that in doing so we ourselves, the questioners, are thereby also included in the question, placed into question” (Heidegger 1995, 12-13/9).

<sup>8</sup> It is also possible to link this view of history and tradition in education with Freire’s (1999) view of liberating pedagogy: “The movement of inquiry,” for Freire, “must be directed towards humanization – the people’s historical vocation. The pursuit of full humanity, however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity” (85). This “historical

Arendt (1961b) gives a beautifully poetic description of the way in which history and tradition lives for us in her essay on critical theorist Walter Benjamin, wherein she likens us to pearl divers who enact the process of excavating the sea bottom for “pearls,” for elements of the tradition that must be taken up, but certainly not accepted wholesale, in order to interpret their meaning for our lives, which holds the potential, but is never the iron-clad guarantee, of enriching us through the encounter with the tradition:

Like the pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past – but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages [...] in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things “suffer sea change” and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up to the world of the living (205-206).

Arendt avoids the tendency in contemporary education to preserve the tradition in order to save the contemporary world from nihilistic decay, which is to say, to preserve the tradition in such a way that we attempt to “ape” it or imitate (*mimesis*) it rather than assume the monumental responsibility for not only creating a future through engaging the past, but as well, facing the fact that we are responsible for changing and directing the course of our history, which presupposes that our “history” has not yet been written. As Gordon (2001) states, “The challenge is not to revitalize our ties with tradition and the past, as one would mend a worn out seam. It is rather to discover those crystallized forms and shapes that have survived the forces of destruction so that we can use them to interpret and critique the present” (49-50). For Arendt does not view history in terms of a linear phenomenon, which connects one generation seamlessly to the next, rather she views it as a radical series of breaks, fissures, interruptions, and innovations that occurs in a non-determinist fashion as individuals (who are ontological sites of natality), through ecumenical action, insert themselves into the historical processes as “new beginnings.”

The task for educators concerned with authentic learning as inspired by Arendt is to introduce students to the past with the understanding that what has crystallized and hardened has arrived at this stage by way of assuming various forms, and they can be analyzed creatively with an eye to a new future, interpreted in new ways that have meaning for our lives. These pearls, these treasures of the past, are “tools that enable us to critique problematic aspects in the present and help generate fresh initiatives” (50). We might call them “living treasures” as opposed to monuments of the past, as opposed to the “mummified ruins of the past.” For educators this might inspire questions concerning the traditions in educational philosophy along with considering the educational implications of the “artifacts of learning,” for they too are components of education that come to us with a history and tradition in tow. It would be inappropriate to judge their value on their time-honored status, such as we find in conservative hermeneutics of “Cultural Literacy” or the “Great Books Program.” However, we would do an injustice to Arendt’s philosophy if we were to simply dismiss the aforementioned educational programs as useless and pernicious examples of “cultural elitism,” “racism,” “logocentrism,” or “phallogentrism,” for if we are inspired by her thought we would see that these things too are part of our shared educational and cultural heritage. Thus, rather than simply dismissing them out of hand, or studying them with an unwavering reverence and respect for their historical *ethos*, which conservative educators want to preserve and return to in order to seamlessly weave the past with the present, Arendt (1961b) wants us to search the past in order to find and appropriate the

living eyes and living bones that had sea-changed into pearls and coral, and as such could be saved and lifted into the present only by doing violence to their context in interpreting them with “the deadly impact” of new thoughts (201).

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vocation,” however, is not something that is given in advance in terms of the tradition as conceived by Scholar Academics, but rather it “corresponds to the historical nature of humankind” (84). In Freire’s rich description we experience the movement of history that spans time, and indicates that while that past cannot be changed, it can be taken up anew and reinterpreted in light of our unique projects, and such a view “affirms women and men as beings who transcend themselves, who move forward and look ahead, for whom immobility represents a fatal threat, for whom looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so they can more wisely build a future” (84).

*Authentic Learning Preserves the Ontological Potential of Learners as “New Beginnings”*

Authentic learning must be concerned with the “who” of the individual, which reveals our “unique personal identities,” and this revelation is “implicit in everything somebody says and does,” as opposed to merely the “what” of our existence (Arendt, 1958, 179). The former, we might say, is an *ontological* concern while the latter is an *ontic* issue. “What” we are can be explicated through propositional discourse, stating emphatically “that X is the case,” the former, however, defies such expression in apodictic terms, because it lives at another epistemological level due to its unique ontological status. “Who” we are is linked intimately with Arendt’s notion of “plurality,” for we are not merely “other” than the various biological entities we encounter, or different, we are, more importantly “distinct” from other humans because each and every person is an individual that is unlike any one that came before or will come after, possessing a unique perspective on the world and potential-for-Being. Through speech and action humans “distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct [or other]; they are modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men” (176). Distinctness is the ontological mode through which we appear to others in terms of what existentialists call our “potential-for-Being,” however, in relation to Arendt, it is perhaps better to refer to “distinctness” as our ontological *potential-for-new-beginnings*, in that we are beholden to or released toward an impulse that springs from the primordial beginning “which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative” (177). This is original sense of beginning (*archein*) is neither prompted by necessity (labor) nor utility (work), but related to the *existential* of “action,” because through word and deed this beginning is “not the beginning of something,” but rather the beginning of “somebody, who is a beginner himself” (177).

Learning, as an original phenomenon, occurs through word and deed and facilitates our insertion into the world through “interrupting” the flow of history and breaking open the communal space of appearance by means of speaking and acting in “informed” or enlightened ways, and this is linked to “natality.” Learning, or deepening our understanding of the world, ourselves, and others might be said to have the “characteristic of startling unexpectedness,” and since it cannot be predicted or “expected from whatever may have happened before,” the “new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle” (178). Thinking about learning in these Arendtian terms, it is clear that its conception is far a field from our contemporary notion of learning within schools, which are far more focused on the instrumental aspect of learning and knowing, and research, as a quantitative affair, is more concerned with “statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical purposes amount to certainty,” rather than with the unexpected and unpredictable elements of learning (178). Contemporary education shows no concern for “natality,” the ontological *potential-for-new-beginning* inherent in all humans, and is more interested, and beyond, obsessed, with asking such generalized questions as: What is an efficient teacher? What is a successful student or learner? These kinds of questions concerning learners and students that contemporary education is asking “leads us astray into saying *what* he is,” and in this educators get “entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him,” education thus describes through a process of induction and abstract generalization, “a type or ‘character;’ in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness [distinctness] escapes us” (181). And this misses entirely the ontological question of “who” the person is, which is directly linked with Arendt’s conception of “action.”

“Action,” one of the three ontological-*existentials* structuring our Being-in-the-world, is rooted in *freedom* and *plurality* – freedom is the ontological potential to begin, or initiate, something new, something unexpected, something that has perhaps never been dreamt before; plurality is the condition of our rootedness in the world, or the human condition of Being-with-others as a member of a speech community. In and through “action,” in word, deed and thought, we establish and reestablish our connection to the world and others, and in doing so, through a process of interpreting our lives our understanding about our unique and ever-evolving place within the world is changed and deepened. In short, we *learn new things about others, the world, and ourselves*. There is, however, a paradox associated with the activity of initiating new beginnings, and it is linked by Levinson (2001) to two features of natality and this suggests that we “learn” about things in an authentic manner only when we are aware of the following conditions structuring the space of appearances, or context of learning as dis-closure:

First, there is the simple and yet disconcerting fact that the world does not simply precede us, but effectively constitutes us as particular kinds of people. This puts in the difficult position of being simultaneously heirs to a particular history and new to it, with the peculiar result that we experience ourselves as “belated” even though we are new comers [...] The second feature of natality that has the paradoxical effect of acting against the new is the fact that our efforts to initiate the new take place always in the midst of other acting beings whose very presence mitigates against our actions coming to fruition (13-14).

The paradox of natality described above relates to what I have already said about learning and its intimate connection to history, tradition *as* authentic “heritage,” and *temporality*, but there is also an indication here about the “unpredictability” of learning and knowing associated with initiating the new and interrupting the flow of history along with the element of the “irreversibility” of our actions, and here, Arendt suggests a possible redemption from these predicaments is to be found in the “faculty to make and keep promises” and the “faculty of forgiving” (237). The former allows us to look to the future in a way that mitigates the uncertainty bound up with action in the attempt to establish limits in advance. The latter allows us to look to the past in order to absolve the actor from what might be the unintended results of his deeds. Arendt states the following about the promise:

The unpredictability which the act of making promises at least partially dispels is of a two-fold nature: it arises simultaneously out of the “darkness of the human heart,” that is, the basic unreliability of men who never can guarantee today who they will be tomorrow, and out of the impossibility of foretelling consequences of an act without a community of equals where everybody has the same capacity to act (244).

And with respect to forgiveness she says

Only through this constant mutual release [forgiveness] from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great power as that to begin something new (24).

I agree with Arendt’s claim that “education” might be conceived of as primarily a process of sheltering and facilitating the other’s (child’s) natality, although I would prefer to say that original learning is more about preserving, by means of repetition, our ontological *potential-for-new-beginnings*. For clarification, it must be noted that what I am disagreeing with emerges from my reading of Arendt’s philosophy of education in relation to the critique of the *oikos/polis* dichotomy presented in the second section of this essay, namely, that learning, or education, is not limited to the private sphere. Learning as I conceive it is already taking place in a viable and legitimate manner wherever people are together disclosing the world in authentic moments of speech and action, whether this is occurring privately or publicly. Thus, I am attempting to move beyond what I see as Arendt’s somewhat limited definition of “education,” because it is inconsistent with the notion of “action” that I am elucidating, which might indeed apply to both the realms of the private and public, and indeed, pre-date them in a primordial manner. To reiterate, it is clear that Arendt’s view of education is one that terminates when the child is mature enough to enact her own ontological *potential-for-new-beginnings*, thus it is possible, and this claim is in line with her philosophy, that Arendt’s notion of education might be linked with a form of “work,” in that the process of education in a formal sense terminates when it reaches or accomplishes its goal or *telos* - the goal of education thus lies outside the processes themselves. The “learning” she describes as transpiring in formal education smuggles in a notion of education that is more than slightly reminiscent of a model for curriculum-making and pedagogy grounded in *techné*, which like all “product-process” models, embraces a form of knowing that is a “seeing as already having seen,” i.e., much like the craftsman or artisan, the educator catches a glimpse of the finished product (*ergon*) and employs the appropriate techniques, the *poietics* of informed construction, in order to reach the end or *telos*, i.e., the finished product as *ergon* (McNeill, 1999).

The disclosure of the “who” through the initiation of a “new beginning” in action, as the revelation of a unique individual, and here is where my interpretation of learning runs counter to Arendt’s notion of formal education, is already happening in the world opened by those involved in instances of learning about

their existence in new ways. Recalling Long's (1998) interpretation of the "family," if the child represents the *in-between* of the two lovers who are experience the disclosure of the world for the first time, it is possible to understand the transcendental ontological drive to find meaning through interpretive activities as representing the "intangible" *in-between* that unites people in "action" to continually and in ever new ways learn about the world, others, and themselves. Conceived in this way, authentic learning, ontologically rooted in "action," *is never at an end*. Original learning is always unlike our various labors and processes by which we produce our works. Learning, as I am conceiving it, might be understood in terms of an activity that occurs only as long the processes of communal dialogue are maintained, "it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever" (199). Authentic learning, as we can conclude, as a process of deepening our understanding of our existence, might be said to occur only in and through action itself, it never lies beyond it nor does it have an end (*telos*) proper to it. Rather than Arendt's conception of formal education it is her description of "action," "power," and the "space of appearance," which best captures what authentic learning might be like. If learning is authentic we must certainly be able to count it among the "greatest achievements of which human beings are capable," and might be thought of as relating to Aristotle's notion of *energeia*, or actuality, in such that it designates "all activities that do not pursue an end (*are ateleis*) and leave no work behind (no *par' autas erga*), but exhaust their full meaning in the performance itself" (206). It is possible to describe authentic learning in terms of the paradoxical notion of "end in itself," for as Arendt states,

In these instances of action and speech the end (*telos*) is not pursued but lies in the activity itself which therefore becomes an *entelecheia*, and the work is not what follows and extinguishes the process but is embedded in it; the performance is the work, is *energeia* (206).<sup>9</sup>

This is not to indicate that the processes of learning yield no tangible results, there are certainly a number of lasting works that are produced through our experiences of authentic learning, but these works or artifacts, like all works of art, endure beyond the process or act of creation and they have "no more meaning than is revealed in the finished product and [do] not intend to show more than is plainly visible at the end of the production process," and, importantly, the work of art "cannot disclose the 'who,' the unique and distinct identity of the agent" because it always discloses more about itself than those that made it. The ontological "who" of humanity's distinct disclosure is never properly achieved through the "physical" products that arise from and have been inspired by the learning process (180). However, it is not the case that objective and physical works of art or artifacts play no substantial role in the phenomenon of world, indeed they do as they comprise the form of the "objective" *in-between*, and this importantly brings me to Arendt's notion of world with its two distinct modes in which action engenders an "agent-revealing capacity" as related to education and learning (182).

Seeking out categorizations for ideal learners based on quantifiable data, "standardized" education ignores what Arendt calls the "revelatory quality of speech and action," because in defining the learner at a remove from the authentic world, or potential space of appearance, it remains blind to the conception of world in Arendt, the ontological aspects of human existence, and the fact that all learning happens only "where people are *with* others" in moments of "sheer human togetherness" (180, emphasis in original). However, even though teachers and students are together in the classroom, this does not guarantee the type of "togetherness" that Arendt philosophizes in relation to "action" as a process of authentic self-disclosure, for here, there is a misinterpretation of the two-fold character of the "world" as a "web" of human relations, as the original space of appearances and disclosure. Contemporary education tends to be more concerned with the tangible and measurable products of education, and, to reiterate the point, although Arendt states clearly that the "objective" products of word and deed that humans create "physically [lie] between them and out of which arise their specific, objective, worldly interests," constitutes "the world's most literal

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<sup>9</sup> The process of authentic learning through the unfolding of "action" might be analogous to certain aesthetic activities, not, however, as related to the plastic arts, but rather as related to dance or music. The words of Nietzsche (1977) seem apropos, because this is precisely the manner in which, contra Arendt, I have argued for an understanding of education conceived in ontological terms: "*End and goal*. – Not every end is a goal. The end of a melody is not its goal; but nonetheless, if the melody had not reached its end it would not have reached its goal either. A parable (278)."

significance,” it is not the case that these products represent the ontological “in-between” that unites humans in terms of their “acting and speaking directly to one another,” in terms of the disclosure of humans in the “who” of their existence, “as distinct and unique persons” (182-183). This is the aspect of “worldliness” in Arendt that is ignored in contemporary education, and to “dispense with this disclosure, if indeed it could ever be done, would mean to transform men into something they are not,” that is, into something inhuman. (183). Authentic learning unfolds through moments where the duplicitous aspects of “world” are embraced and embodied, wherein one aspect is neither privileged above nor separated off from the other, because learning, if we are to draw our inspiration from Arendt’s philosophy, must acknowledge the inseparability and original *belonging together* of both the *ontic* and *ontological* aspects of world, or “the ‘web’ of human relationships” (183). When we are aware and sensitive to the invariant ontological structures, like natality, of which our “lived” activities instantiate, the potential emerges (*presences*) for our learning experiences and interpersonal relations to be simultaneously enriched.

It is possible to link the disclosure of the agent in speech and action, within instances of authentic learning, with what Arendt (1958) states about the *polis*, but rather than conceiving the public realm exclusively, imagine a more original form of learning that “arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space,” *the space of learning*, “lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be” (198). Arendt does in fact appear to intimate the type of learning that I am describing when talking about the space of appearance and the disclosure that pre-dates our construction of political institutions and governments, namely, a form of human disclosure that might be said to also pre-date the sharp distinction between private and public realm:

The space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner and speech and action, and therefore *pre-dates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm* and the various forms of government that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized (199, my emphasis).

In a late essay, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” Arendt (1971), and I think quite correctly, comes close to capturing the authentic notion of learning as I am conceiving it when writing on the dialogues of Plato and the dialectic-as-discourse of Socrates, wherein “none of the *logoi* the arguments, ever stays put; they move about, because Socrates is asking questions to which he does not know the answers sets them in motion,” and there is no end to process of the dialectic, because as the discussion is just about to draw to a close Socrates “cheerfully proposes to start all over again and inquire what justice or piety or knowledge or happiness are” (419). And hence there is an “aporetic” quality to authentic learning, for it is never-at-an-end, but there is also, as Gadamer (1980) points out, in association with authentic learning in Plato, an “experience of advancing insight, the *euphoria*,” or *good way through* (119, my translation). We might also liken authentic learning to the eloquent description of philosophy we find in Jaspers (1951), wherein philosophy is represented in terms of its always being *on-the-way* to understanding, this because its “questions are more essential than its answers, and every answer becomes a new question,” and it’s space of disclosure, we might say, is forever thrust open and held open by a community of thinkers and learners as related to the potential of “power” as Arendt describes, which might be expressed, not in terms of “force” or “coercion” or “strength,” i.e., in terms of an *agonistic* contest or *polemos*, but rather in terms of “persuasion,” which might represent the process, as Jaspers writes, of the “communication of every aspect of truth from man to man, in loving contest” (12).

Earlier I introduced the notion of preserving natality by means of repeating it and renewing it time and again within the space of authentic learning, and this might be understood in the following manner: In moments of authentic thought, speech, and action we are faced with the truism that transcendence, or becoming other (or “new”) to ourselves, entails that we momentarily catch a glimpse of our ontological potential for new beginnings – moments which are repeatable, albeit unique and unexpected, each and every time we interrupt the flow of history and disclose ourselves through interpreting our existence and disclosing ourselves as “something new.” A child learns how to ride a bike, as a new beginning, and the adult perhaps learns of his ability to demonstrate patience and hold his fear and hesitancy in abeyance when first helping the child learn to ride, and thus the experience of learning represents a new beginning for both. Later, the teenager learns to drive a car, and in a similar manner, but by no means identical, learning transpires and a

space of disclosure is opened, and the repetition of the human's potentiality-for-new-beginnings is once again enacted, renewed, and preserved. This represents the ontological *in-between* of child and adult with the common, ecumenical task of learning "something new," serving as the metaphysical conduit to the overarching and original process of learning, and Arendt (1961a) intimates this boundary-destroying notion of learning when she cautions that the "line drawn between children and adults" must not be allowed to "grow into a wall separating children from the adult community as though they were not living in the same world and as though children were an autonomous state capable of living by its own laws" (195). And this represents the "wall-less," shared world that emerges through learning wherein instances of *sheer human togetherness* are actualized. This undoubtedly represents an example of the type of structural affinity that Long (1998) argues exists between the public and the realm of the family, and it is also indicative of education, or learning, as I have described, to exhibit or display this affinity. As Arendt (1958) reminds us, our authentic *rootedness* within the world is grounded in action, through which we locate ourselves anew in "an already existing web" where the transformative consequences of speech and action are experienced, and the disclosure of the "who" of the human being is effected by and concomitantly affects "uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes in contact" (184). The space of learning is always essentially communal, for we are dependent on the other, be it child or adult, not as mere other, but rather as an ontologically distinct and unique person, for crucial insight into our Being, for within any and all authentic moments of self-disclosure, it is "more than likely that the 'who,' which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself" (179). This catching sight of the "who" in communion with others is at once the repetition of our ontological *potential-for-new-beginnings* and the preservation of this ontological potential because it is an authentic act of conservation within an authentic community we inhabit with others.

#### *Authentic Learning Facilitates Meditative Thought*

It has been argued by many philosophers that education, whether related to Scholar Academic ideology or Social Efficiency, favors a mode of thinking and knowing that is linked with the scientific-mathematic-technical epistemological cluster, e.g., Huebner (1999); Eisner (1998); Grumet (1992); Greene (1989).<sup>10</sup> To provide but one example of how this form of thinking and knowing dominates the educational landscape, we look no further than standardized, high-stakes testing, or tests that in general attempt to quantify, rather than qualify, a knowledge-base that is used to determine the intellectual development, and beyond, the "worth," of students. In addition, test results are employed to gauge the effectiveness, and hence "worth" of teachers, educational programs, methods, and the like. There is the drive in contemporary education for teachers to "teach-to-the-test" and students to "prepare-for-the-test," clearly because there are "high-stakes" involved, tests can determine - *the very opposite of freedom* - the lives of those involved, and not simply the life we associate with academics, or life within the school. Here I am speaking not only of standardized intelligence and skills tests that are administered to grade school children or to high school students, in the form of college admissions tests such as the Standardized Achievement Test (SAT), I also include graduate program admissions testing such as the Graduate Records Exam (GRE). These tests all have one thing in common, they function, proximally and for the most part, in terms of a limited epistemological model, which favors a form of thought that we might term "calculative," after Heidegger (1958) – it is a model grounded in what philosopher's refer to as "apodictic" discourse, i.e., propositions that can either be determined true or false, rooted in *Either/Or epistemology*. What Macdonald (1975) states about "curriculum knowledge" in the 1970s still obtains today:

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<sup>10</sup> It must be noted that the mathematical-scientific-technical cluster mentioned is linked with thought that is both empirical and axiomatic, it is a type of thought-knowledge that holds the power to "objectify" or "thematize" the world. For example, Dreyfus (2000) is highly critical of this mode of world-disclosure that favors "theory" and calculative thought (*modes of objectification*) above other practical forms of world-disclosure. Theory, thus conceived, is responsible in great part for our current nihilistic situation. According to Dreyfus, this leads to the false view that the mind is not only superior to the physical world, it also suggests that people primarily live and comport themselves through the use of their minds, and once a context-free world picture is formed at a remove from *factual* experience, our worldly, embodied, experiential practices lose "meaning and authority" (512).

Essentially [...] the rationale for the priority of disciplines lies in the assertion that *man's essential nature* is most reasonably fulfilled by his symbolic capacities with priority on general ideas and especially those most teachable and learnable. Thus, the curriculum needs to be fundamentally grounded in a conception of those general structures of symbolic systems which can be most communicated to and learned by others (9, my emphasis).

As expressed by Macdonald, as related to what I have written about ontology, this form of thinking engenders a disingenuous and limited view of the world and the human being, i.e., there are ontological implications associated with this form of thinking in education that bears on the understanding of Being-in-the-world as suggested in the foregoing section on “action” and natality. It is a form of thinking that is all but lost, not only to education, but sadly, to the world at large.

Arendt (1971) makes the crucial distinction between “thinking” and “intellection,” which leads into the distinction between “understanding” and “knowledge.” In Heidegger (1958) this is similar to his distinction between *meditative* and *calculative* thought, and both Gadamer (1989) and Marcel (1970) suggest this type of distinction between modes of world-disclosure. Within contemporary education, whether in the grade schools or the institutions of higher learning, we encounter a form of thinking that is *instrumental* in nature, and is valued because it produces results and solves “problems.” Indeed, Gadamer (1992) laments the loss of authentic thought in the universities, where “bureaucratized teaching and learning systems dominate the scene,” wherein the educational art of “living with ideas” has been sacrificed to the rote tasks of “attending lectures and completing good essays on small research assignments for seminar” (53). This type of thought that “lives with ideas,” if we link it to a *meditative* form of thought, need not be “high-flown,” as Heidegger (1959) was fond of saying, and indeed Arendt (1971) makes the same point when stating the following:

Thinking as such, not only the thinking about extraordinary events or phenomena or the old metaphysical questions, but every reflection that does not serve knowledge and is not guided by practical purposes – in which cases thinking is the handmaiden of knowledge, a mere instrument for ulterior purposes – is, as Heidegger once remarked, “out of order” (424).

Education today engenders the conditions wherein *meditative* thought, thinking *as* the “quest for *meaning* – rather than the scientist’s thirst for knowledge for its own sake – can be felt to be “unnatural,” as though men, when they begin to think, engage in some activity contrary to the human condition” (424, my emphasis). Part of the problem lies in the fact that the type of thinking that Arendt and other philosophers are advocating<sup>11</sup> is bound up with uncertainty and hence cannot produce categorical results, and so we lose the sense of security that trusted “explanations” provide, because rather than giving us a sense of closure to our inquiries, the type of thinking Arendt philosophizes possesses the “chief characteristic” of interrupting “all doing, all ordinary activities no matter what they happen to be” (423). And this might be linked with my remarks on natality from above, for there is an undeniable sense of a new beginning when thinking disrupts the flow of our world and history, for when we start thinking authentically, “on no matter what issue,” it is as if we “move into a *different world*” (423, my emphasis).

Arendt offers the unique view that *erose* might be antecedent to authentic thinking. *Erose*, as opposed to an emotion or psychological state might be understood in terms of what Heidegger (1962) calls “attunement,” one of the three ways of *Being-in-the-world*. The attunement of *erose* might be interpreted as the philosophical mood (*Stimmung*) par excellence of “thinking” for Arendt, at least in her essay, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” in that those who engage in authentic thought are attuned to the understanding that they are not in possession (and indeed can never be) of that which they seek. *Erose*, “love which is primarily

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<sup>11</sup> Maxwell (2010) advocates for education in terms of what he calls “wisdom-inquiry,” which is opposed to “knowledge-inquiry” – which is exclusively concerned with “knowledge and technological know-how” and the belief that “once they are acquired they can be applied to help solve social problems” (84). Wisdom-inquiry, on the other hand, is more concerned with helping people to “reason what is of value for life,” and as related to Arendt, wisdom-inquiry takes seriously philosophically “cooperative actions” (84, emphasis in original).

a need – it desires what it has not,” inspires Socrates’ view of the “examined life” as a life that is always *on-the-way* toward deepening human understanding, which, unlike the god’s wisdom, is always fragile and finite. (437). Arendt states, “Love by desiring what is not there, establishes a relationship with it,” and this resonates with the “ontological distance,” or epistemological proximity, with which we are set in relation to the understanding of the things we inquire into – wherein there is the simultaneous *ontological-epistemic* phenomenon of dis-closure-*cum*-concealment, due to our ontological relationship with “truth” (Heidegger, 1962). Arendt draws out the distinction between the tangibility of knowledge’s products and the intangibility of authentic thought, which might be said to produce nothing, stressing the difference between “utility” and its opposite by turning to Kant. Thinking, as she draws out of Kant, is the activity that pushes “beyond the limitations of knowledge,” and allows us to “do more” with our “intellectual abilities,” our “brain power,” than to merely “use them as an instrument for knowing and doing” (421). What is powerful about this example is that for Kant, the most meaningful things in the human’s life, God, free will, and morality all reside in the realm of the *noumena*, beyond the *phenomenal* realm of rational thought and the empirical sciences.

As authentic thinking unfolds, it does so in such a way that it is “self-destructive” and bound up with this notion is the “danger” associated with authentic thinking: “the business of thinking is like the veil of Penelope: it undoes every morning what it had finished the night before” (425). Here we encounter not only the groundless nature of thinking, but its dual propensity to upset any ground that it has brought to stand - this ground, it must be understood, is precarious, shifting, and ephemeral. Because, as Arendt states, thinking “will not find out one and for all, what ‘the good’ is, and it does not confirm but rather dissolves accepted rules of conduct” (445). One important aspect of the type of “meaning” or understanding she is philosophizing is that it is difficult to bring to language; it is impossible to parse in terms of propositional (apodictic) discourse, and her reference to Plato’s *Letter Seven* underscores this claim. The discipline of philosophy and its so-called “truth” (*alēthos estin on* – “the truth of Being”), cannot be communicated in the manner of other disciplines, and as such is often construed as producing only “negative results.” Here we understand why thinking is the most “dangerous and resultless enterprise” because of its propensity, if misinterpreted, to give birth to a nihilistic attitude. She claims that thinking, in its essence, is not dangerous because it “thinks dangerous thoughts,” it is dangerous in its nature and very unfolding because it produces no results “which would make further thinking unnecessary” it is dangerous as well to “all creeds and, by itself, does not bring forth any new creed” (434-435). Education, in the contemporary world, turns away from forms of thinking and knowing that do not produce definitive results and shuns forms of thinking and knowing that cause an agitated sense of disquiet, of uncertainty, and even fear. It might be said that contemporary educational thought, knowledge, and language exhibit the predisposition to control not only students, but the environment as well, and the implementation of technical and scientific language, along with the conceptual schema within which this type of language grounded, is representative of the push for certainty and control along with safety and security.

It is possible to view much of contemporary education (*neoliberalism*) with its drive toward empirical knowledge and research that seeks the equivalent certainty of a social or behavioral science as alienating people from thinking in an authentic and *meditative* manner. Education, by “shielding people against the dangers of examination, teaches them to hold fast to whatever prescribed rules of conduct may be at a given time in a given society,” and thus merely accepts the tradition as opposed to engaging it in order to make in new again (435-436). And here, we come full circle back to my remarks on tradition as authentic “heritage,” for thought the is *calculative*, which seeks nothing but sure, certain, and quantifiable results, i.e., results that are time-honored, results that are objective in that they transcend the passing of time in order to assume the status of eternal “truth,” embodying the *sub species aeternitas*, embracing the metaphysical and epistemological view that all things are really without any authentic past or future as a species of eternity. And this belies a disingenuous view of the manner in which our Being authentically unfolds along with an erroneous conception of history, or tradition. With her notion of authentic thought Arendt confirms her view of history within *The Human Condition*, embracing history in terms of a developing and evolving “living” phenomenon. As related to contemporary education as *standardized* institutionalized system, students are denied the freedom to authentically think through and beyond the standard curriculum that is forced upon them, with its limited forms of knowledge, and its denial of authentic tradition, or *heritage*. Ultimately, as Arendt warns, in such a stifling educational environment, rather than teaching for success, or facilitating the

unfolding of authentic learning, an endeavor that embraces the sheltering of natality, the student's ontological potential *as* a "new beginning," educators are merely "training" students who are getting "used to never making up their minds" (436).

### Concluding Remarks

Although I argued against Arendt's distinction between private and public spaces, which in turn places Arendt's conception of formal education as a private phenomenon in question, this essay attempted to draw an Arendtian conception of ontological learning based on certain aspects of her philosophy – i.e., I related the existential components of her philosophy to education, or "learning," by incorporating many works that lacked an explicit connection to "education." Reflecting on the journey undertaken and the path traversed, it might be said that this essay represents *die Auseinandersetzung* of philosophical interpretation, which according to McNeill (1999), represents a "setting apart from [and of] one another" and is sometimes represented as "confrontation" (translator's notes, 174). However, in this present context, its meaning is "less 'polemic,' and carries more of the sense of a dialogical exchange between two parties," and should be understood more in terms of a "critical encounter" (174). We must discard the traditional notion of censure associated with "critique," for the notion of critique that is bound up with *Auseinandersetzung* does not represent an encounter with a writer and thinker, which attempts to tear down his position, but rather it is a meeting wherein one thinker draws inspiration from another through elucidating the power of the other's position, the rich and fecund thoughts, which at times remain as "unthought" or "unsaid" that exist in the other's philosophy, and clearly this is a sense we get from Heidegger within his famous "encounters" with the great philosophers and poets of the past, e.g., Nietzsche, Kant, and Holderlin. The essay literally participates in the enactment of a new beginning through my returning to the past, the philosophical tradition that I encountered through Arendt with an eye to the present and future of teaching, learning, and education – with the understanding that the thought within this essay might inspire potential "new beginnings" for educators not familiar with her philosophy with its thoroughly ontological roots.

If we take Arendt's (1958) thoughts to their logical conclusions, it is correct to state that both contemporary politics and education are inauthentic because their ontological roots have been severed, which for Arendt represents an ontological crisis, namely, the loss of freedom that is intimately linked with the condition of natality. Attempting throughout to explicate the ontological implications of this potential for being *as* a new beginning, I conclude briefly by examining Arendt's choice of terms for naming humanity's "beginning," namely, the Attic Greek infinitive, *archein*, which she informs us means "to begin," "to lead," and eventually "to rule" (177). What is crucial about this beginning might be elucidated through an etymology of the term *archein* - a masterful "deconstructive" move on Arendt's part - for it is not only understood as a beginning, or origin (*Ursprung*), it also represents a primordial source of control, as Heidegger reminds us – what immerses from the *arche* is also guided and directed by this *originary* force, which constitutes the *arche*, which indicates that this force permeates, penetrates, and inspires our words and deeds (*prattein* – "to achieve," "to finish"), but only by those for whom it is meaningful, and thus we understand natality as an *originary* source of the human being. To ignore natality, the human's ontological *potential-for-new-beginnings*, is to ignore the potential meaning of human existence as it is conceived in its ontological unfolding: Freedom is lost, thoughts become shallow, speech degenerates into rote forms of communication, and our deeds represent empty gestures and impotent action – all that is destined to ontologically reveal "who" we are as authentic human beings is sacrificed in the service of rote efficiency on the altar of instrumentalism.

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