Chapter 2
Education for Education's Sake: The Idea of a Thing-Centred Pedagogy

The affirmative account of teaching we develop in this book is predicated upon a specific understanding of the concept of education which we draw to a large extent from Arendt's (1961) text, *The Crisis in Education*. In this essay, Arendt presents an uncompromising criticism of things that, in her view, go wrong in the American school system of the 50s, but her arguments could equally be read as a comment on many things that happen in the world of education today. Against this background, Arendt looks for a precise definition of what she calls "the essence of education", and it is to this intellectual exercise we turn in this chapter. We take from Arendt some fundamental insights, concepts and distinctions that lay the groundwork for the chapters to follow. More exactly, we take from her work the idea that education needs to be carefully distinguished from processes such as learning, instruction and socialization, but also from other spheres of life, such as family, politics and the sphere of work. More positively speaking, Arendt seems to provide a view according to which education is *good in itself*, and needs no external justification. Education is for education's sake. And, this is the main idea we want to develop in this book. Furthermore, we will build further on her understanding of education as an intergenerational meeting during which the existing generation passes over the 'old' world to the newcomers – out of love for our common world, but also out of love for the new generation. This, then, grants the opportunity to bring new beginnings to this world.

Although Arendt's own writing on education is quite limited, she has become today a major reference point for educational philosophy and theory (e.g. Gordon 2001; Levinson 2005; Lewis 2009; Masschelein and Simons 2013a; Bergdahl and Langmann 2017). This chapter contributes to the existing scholarship on her work in three ways. First, we develop Arendt's arguments in a 'materialist' direction. This is, we show that her defence of an autonomous sphere of education, distinguished from other dimensions of life, is dependent upon particular material and technological conditions. Our reading is also materialist in that we suggest that Arendt's renowned criticism of student-centeredness does not necessarily entail a return to teacher-centeredness. Instead, we argue, it involves a thing-centred pedagogy.

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Briefly put, this means that it is the concrete thing one studies in the classroom, i.e. the subject matter, which has authority over both student and teacher and which defines both as student and teacher.

Our second point is that this thing-centred approach goes together with particular forms of educational practice (e.g. studying (Lewis 2015b) and repetitive exercise (Cf. Vlieghe 2013)). It also entails a specific form of instruction, which Arendt briefly analyses in terms of "love for the world" and the specialization of the teacher in a particular subject matter (rather than in the art of teaching). What we essentially try to do in this book is to flesh out in much greater detail than Arendt suggests herself what this particular form of instruction comes down to – and for which we want to reclaim a language of *teaching* which has become increasingly problematic in our day and age (Cf. Biesta 2017). We will lay out its ontological structures, be it not in an essentialist way, but in terms of aspects of what it *means* to be a teacher.

Third, in this book we want to take up and develop a particular Arendtian 'methodology'. In her essay on the crisis of education, Arendt makes very sharp and unyielding claims about what is and what is not educational, and this has caused much criticism in readers, even those sympathetic to her main train of thought (e.g. Todd 2010). Nevertheless, as the subtitle of the book in which this text was first published indicates, in order to deal with the pressing educational issues our world is faced with, one needs to conduct "exercises in thought". Here this means: starting from bold and sometimes axiomatic statements, and to develop them rigorously, if not radically, in order to see how such an experiment might help us in coming to a better understanding of what education is. In this chapter, we follow Arendt's approach and start with conducting a similar and not less radical Arendtian exercise, with the explicit objective to see if – and to what extent – it speaks to the present world of education.

Hence, in a first section, we will carefully distinguish education from many phenomena that are 'educational' solely in a secondary or superficial sense. We do this because more and more *all* processes in which people acquire new knowledge, skill and attitudes tend to be immediately and without much thought identified as educational. However, for Arendt (1961, pp. 195–196) and ourselves, education has a precise beginning and an end,[1] and it is dependent upon specific spatial and temporal conditions – which we will call, following Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons (2013a), *school* conditions. Hence, in the second section, we define the school in terms of concrete and unique, formal and material characteristics, which can be traced back to the Ancient Greek world. Taking issue, in the third section, with Arendt's plea for the autonomy of the school and with her critique of constructivism, we develop in the last section a thing-centred perspective that is all about keeping alive the possibility of a rejuvenation of our common world.

[1] Saying this, however, does not imply an understanding of education as a process with precisely defined intentions and outcomes. What we mean here is that education requires a detachment from the family sphere, and so it has to start at a particular age. Moreover, it is essential for education to happen that students belong to a *new* generation, which means that education ends when one becomes an adult.

1 The Specificity of Education

At first sight, education might happen anytime and everywhere: parents demanding their children to be polite to other people, school teachers convincing students to eat fruit rather than candy bars, employees learning how to fill out a new form, and – why not – grandparents who are instructed how to operate a smartphone by their own grandchildren. However, none of these instances would count as education in Arendt's book. Although in all these examples much learning and instruction takes place, they cannot be called *properly* educational.

For Arendt, who follows Schleiermacher (2000) on this point, education is essentially something that happens when an existing generation gets involved with the new generation, by welcoming and introducing them to the world they commonly inhabit. Moreover, and here Arendt is close to Heidegger's (1962) analysis of the basic conditions (*Existentiale*) of human existence,[2] education is an inevitable dimension of our common humanity: it is an ontological rather than an ontic category.[3] We have no choice but to be confronted with the advent of new generations (unless of course our species would become infertile one day). Analogous to the way in which we cannot escape death (*Sein-zum-Tode*) or cannot avoid sharing the world with others that have very different opinions about how to lead our lives (*Mitsein*), we also must respond to the challenge we encounter with the arrival of each new generation. Whereas politics is the proper response to our being together with others (what Arendt [1958] calls *plurality*[4]), and philosophy and religion a way to deal with the fact of death, education is the answer we – the existing generation – must give to the advent of newcomers in an already existing world.

Therefore, adults can *learn* from children and they might learn many new things after leaving school, but in the last two examples we listed (learning how to fill out a new form, and grandparents taught by their grandchildren about smartphones), it does not make sense to say that they are being *educated*. The first two examples (learning to be polite and to eat healthy) come closer to what according to Arendt the essence of education is. Nonetheless, rather than being conducive to education, these cases concern *mere* socialization (Arendt 1961, p. 195): here children learn how to make it in life and how to live well in future society. They acquire the basic skills and knowledge necessary to make our societies safe and well-ordered envi-

[2] Although Arendt was quite critical of existential phenomenology, we will present her thoughts as closely related to the Heideggerian project of articulating the basic ontological structures of human life (Cf. Hinchman and Hinchman 1984).

[3] This is also a point which Klaus Mollenhauer makes in *Forgotten Connections*: even those (such as many belonging to the post-Second World War generation in Germany) who refuse to educate the new generation still educate. One cannot not educate (Mollenhauer 2013).

[4] Of course, Arendt also holds that politics is only possible thanks to the uniqueness of every *human* life, and hence predicated upon natality. However, in terms of answering to existential conditions it is possible to distinguish between the domains of education and politics by claiming that the last sphere inevitably deals with plurality, whereas – as we will show in this book – plurality doesn't play a key role in defining the former sphere. In *The crisis in Education* (1961, p. 174), Arendt literally states that the essence of education *is* natality.

ronments. However, for Arendt, there is more to education than solely ensuring the well-functioning of the society we live in. Education is also the passing on of the existing world to the next generation in such a way that the young can begin anew with this world. As such we respond to the existential condition of *natality* (Ibidem, p. 174). With every child that is born (in an ontic, i.e. biological sense), there is also the possibility of beginning all over again with the world (birth or newness in an ontological sense). Hence, education is about the possibility of transformation in a radical sense of that word – not about the continuation of an established order of things, as in the first two examples we listed.

Stated differently, whereas education (always) implies instruction and learning,[5] it is not the case that *all* forms of instruction and learning are educational. This is not to say that the four examples we mentioned are meaningless activities. On the contrary. But, there is a danger of an inflation of the meaning of the word education if we regard it as a synonym for learning and instruction. This is of the greatest importance, in view of the "learnification of education" (Biesta 2010a) we are witnessing today, as we already mentioned in the introduction. This is a tendency which has implications for the whole of society (Cf. the "pedagogization of society" as pointed out by Rancière (1991) and Masschelein and Simons (2013a)). Every societal issue is defined in terms of lack of competence and needs to be resolved in terms of the controlled acquisition of the necessary competences. For instance – as we have already mentioned – unemployment is no longer defined as a problem with societal or economic roots (e.g. there are not enough decent positions for everyone), but as a learning deficit in individual employees. To give another example, parenting is more and more dealt with as a learnable skill rather than as a state of being which comes naturally with becoming an adult: books, television shows and websites with professional advice abound, and the societal (and increasingly more also the governmental) pressure on taking this advice seriously is enormous (Cf. Ramaekers and Suissa 2012). In all domains of life, we are constantly addressed as subjects in need of learning. There is no escape. Even when visiting the toilet there is a poster hanging on the wall explaining us in detail how to wash our hands.

Clearly, adults taking a supplementary training to get a new employment, parents learning the latest expert knowledge on how to raise their children, or all of us being reminded of the simplest rules of hygiene are not educational in the sense Arendt defines it. For her, education is taking place between an existing and a new generation, and it involves the possibility for newcomers to begin anew with the world. The last examples of learnification and pedagogization of our society illustrate rather well that what is at stake here is the *continuation*, rather than the *renewal* of our world: we must learn things in order to become productive, flexible and reliable parts of a society obsessed with economic productivity and the avoidance of psychological and medical health risks (Cf. Sennett 2007). Whether we want to live in such a society and whether we could take the world in a different direction is not an

[5] To a more radical perspective, it is conceivable that there is education without learning, as defended in Gert Biesta's last book, where he develops the example of "adopting a concept" (Biesta 2017). In view of the stress we put on the thing of study, we would disagree with this point of view.

issue in a learnified society. In order for it to be possible for a society to really rejuvenate itself, and – for instance – to give up the idea that productivity and risk avoidance should be the structuring principles of a good life in common – we need education, and more precisely schooling (and certainly not just learning and socialization). We will come back to this possibility of renewal of the world in the last part of this chapter. First, we specify what we mean by *school* education.

2 The School as a Unique and Contingent Arrangement

So far, we have argued that education is a very specific and narrowly defined phenomenon. So is schooling. We are easily inclined to regard schools as institutions each and every society has, i.e. as if it concerns a necessary and universal phenomenon. Of course, it is most likely that every society needs a system of instruction to initiate the next generation into the world. However, it could be argued that only specific societies, thanks to the contingencies of history, have developed schools. This is to say that school is not so much an *institution* (i.e. something to be defined in view of a societal function), neither is it an *ideal* we should try to realize everywhere, but a unique *arrangement* of introducing newcomers to the world, i.e. a particular way of bringing together adult and young people, bodies and souls around a common subject matter (Stiegler 2010; Masschelein and Simons 2013a).

In order to give a more detailed explanation of this idea, first consider an analogical example: matrimony. From a sociological point of view, this could be considered an institution: a way of living together between adults (and children) in order to secure procreation and to resolve conflicts over claims on property when people come to die. Likewise matrimony could be seen as an ideal: a lasting and fulfilling way of going through life together – a dream we all cherish, but which hardly ever materializes (except in Hollywood films and popular songs). However, matrimony could also be regarded as a contingent arrangement of living together, because there have been societies which functioned very well without matrimony as we know it today (e.g. the ancient Roman *familia*). It is not a universal phenomenon. Moreover, it is an arrangement because once people are wedded their behaviour is automatically steered in particular ways: going alone on a holiday or lie-in till noon every weekend are less likely, if not impossible, when one has a partner and children to live together with. This arrangement makes us do particular things, and prevents other things from occurring.

Whereas matrimony is often these three things at once – institution, ideal and arrangement – the school is primarily an arrangement, and more specifically one that has effects that run counter to the logic of ideals and institutions.[6] Whereas the

[6] Nonetheless, in the course of history, the school has often become institutionalized and put at the service of political, economic, religious and other ideals. These attempts could be seen as strategies to tame and inoculate the school in its pure form, e.g. by making it into an instrument for socialization (Masschelein and Simons 2010).

matrimony arrangement is about closing off change in view of a stable society, school arrangements precisely foster possibilities for profound change. The school interrupts the functional logic of the self-reproducing society. And, the direction of this change is not specified. Therefore it doesn't make sense to speak about the school in terms of (future) ideals to realize. The analogy with matrimony thus only holds in so far the school is the name of specific material, spatial and temporal conditions. It is a particular way of bringing together the generations around a subject matter. It makes certain things possible, and it prevents other things. These things have certain formal characteristics which are absent (or less probable to happen) in the case of learning and instruction outside of school contexts.

Furthermore, the origin of the school is contingent: it has not existed always and everywhere. The school was invented in the Ancient Greek City State after the end of the Peloponnesian wars, and it has the shape we know it to have today thanks to decisive technological inventions, not in the least the creation of the printing press in the fifteenth century. Claiming that the very existence of the school is bound up with chance societal and technological evolutions is also saying that one day the school might disappear again, and in the digital day and age we are living in, this is no longer inconceivable (cf. Vlieghe 2015b).

Some of the unique features of the school arrangement should be emphasized in relation to the history of this remarkable phenomenon. First, the school as we know it today is unthinkable without the development of particular technologies of reading and writing. As Klaus Mollenhauer (2013) and Neil Postman (1982) have argued, the invention and spread of printed books at the beginning of Modern Times has substantially changed what we hold true about raising the new generation. Whereas education in Medieval times was a matter of *presentation* (children grew up alongside adults, and learned everything there is to know by observing and imitating their parents), it became ever more a matter of *representation* as a result of the proliferation of printed texts (Mollenhauer 2013). Rather than bringing up the young in the *immediacy* of the world (of their parents), education becomes increasingly *mediated*. Not only because of the fact that from now on specialized personnel (school teachers) got involved, but also because the world is increasingly accessed by the use of illustrated textbooks, rather than by direct experience. Comenius's *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (1658) was one of the first examples of this mediated relationship, and it counts as an archetype for many schoolbooks up until today. Encountering the world as represented means that the young are no longer just people who happen to be not-yet grownups: they become pupils and students. This also implies that it becomes the responsibility of the elder generation to define what aspects of the world will be represented (and which ones will be filtered away) and in which order – i.e. what will be included in a well-ordered curriculum. A major result of this is that specialized places for mass education were created[7] – which offered the

[7] As Postman (1982) has shown, this is also connected to the fact that with the massive spread of books society saw itself very suddenly confronted with an almost unmanageable growth in (specialized) knowledge. Learning to read and write became thus as indispensable as acquiring speech. Hence the need for mass schooling.

opportunity to be a student, i.e. to be fully engaged with a subject matter without the need to bother about the future adult life. These places were, of course, schools.

Historically speaking it is of course incorrect to hold that schools didn't exist before the invention of printing, as it is obvious that in Medieval times there were already cathedral schools, and universities originated as early as the twelfth century. Nevertheless, it is only with the development and proliferation of printing that the school got some of the essential characteristics that define it as a unique arrangement.[8] Its mass character (i.e. the fact that *everyone* within a certain age group is supposed to go to school, or that schooling is never a solitary affair, but a chance gathering of different people who have no particular ties with each other beforehand) is one of the most visible signs of its uniqueness. More importantly, as Mollenhauer argues, schools are also unique places where things can 'slow down' (Mollenhauer 2013, p. 31).[9] With this, he means that pupils and students are granted the opportunity of not having to behave as adults do (which was exactly what happened to most youngsters in the era of presentation when upbringing consisted of the mere imitation of adult life). They are allowed to 'lose time', and to occupy themselves with 'useless' things, such as devoting themselves to a subject matter for its own sake – even if this has no immediate importance for their future adult lives (Cf. Masschelein and Simons 2013a). Other typical features of schooling are also dependent upon the slowing down mode, such as the repetitive character of school practices or the prevailing of form over content: in the real world outside of school repetition is seen as a waste of time (or as something that we should maximally try to avoid), and a concentration on the formal stands in the way of getting results. In the school, however, it might be important to get mathematical formula right or to master the text of a poem without the slightest mistake by continuously repeating it (rather than using the same formula to solve real-world problems or asking ourselves what the added economic value of poetry is) (Cf. Vlieghe 2013).

Nonetheless, as we just indicated, it could also be argued that some of the unique characteristics of the school arrangement are much older than the beginning of Modernity. And so it is useful to go back even further in history, and more exactly pay attention to the first arrangements that were actually called schools – and from which, as Masschelein and Simons (2013a) have pointed out, its very name derives (*skholé*): the schools that where first created in the Athenian City State in the sixth century BCE (around the same time democracy and philosophy saw the light of day). Here, for the first time in history, people were gathered in disregard of their family or societal background (or at least to a certain extent, as women, slaves and immigrants were not allowed to go to school). In that sense schooling was a most revolutionary invention as in the former, archaic, period instruction was the privilege of the highest castes, and it was moreover aimed at the continuation of the existing (unequal) order of society (Cf. Marrou 1982).

[8] It is also worth noting that the introduction of writing with pen and paper in the nineteenth century, the importance of which is often ignored, might be of an equal importance (See Vlieghe 2015a, b).

[9] In the following chapters, we will explore the issue of the exceptionality of educational time in greater detail.

That is also why Klaus Mollenhauer (1986) most perceptively claims that before the invention of the school there were properly speaking *no educational issues* (p. 160). In archaic times society was organized in ways that are seen as naturally given, i.e. as unchangeable. And therefore, the sole commitment of the existing generation consisted of introducing newcomers into a fixed order of things, and leading them to their one and only destination – e.g. the position they are supposed to take according to their family and social background. With the invention of the school a time and place was created where society could reinvent itself in radically new ways.

Moreover, according to Harold Innis (2007), as long as knowledge was a monopoly for a select social category, innovation of existing ideas was less likely to happen. Not only because only a very small percentage of the populace could contribute to the body of knowledge, but above all because the ruling class had a great personal interest in keeping knowledge a secret affair.[10] Therefore, the school could also be considered one of the first *public* places. It formed a precondition for the rejuvenation of ideas about ourselves and the world – what we would call scientific progress today.

3 The Household, the Political and the School

Returning to the work of Hannah Arendt, we would like to draw attention to another unique and radically new element brought into existence with the development of the first schools in the Ancient Greek era. To do this, we first need to have a look at the sphere of politics. According to Arendt's (1961) understanding of things (seen through the lens of Aristotle), communal life was based on the sharp distinction between the life in the household, i.e. the private life oriented towards survival and economic prosperity (*zoé*) on the one hand, and the truly human life on the marketplace, the public or political life (*bios*) on the other hand. We can only have a good, i.e. democratic, life in common if we are willing to leave now and then the private sphere behind us and go to the *agora*, the city center,[11] to discuss with others about

[10] It is worth noting that today we witness a process of privatisation of knowledge (also pedagogic knowledge) leading towards the restauration of such secrecy and therefore to the suppression of education as such (Cf. Jendza and Zamojski 2015).

[11] The agora could also be translated as the market place. The fact that today the market firstly refers to a place of commerce (e.g. the 'free market') testifies, according to Arendt, to a deep perversion of Western culture. It signals that private forces have come to colonize the public sphere. The market place has lost its political role and has become an economic place. Interestingly, the very word 'economy' draws form the Greek words *oikos* (the home) and *nomos* (the law). Economy means first and foremost the art of conducting one's household. Therefore, for a citizen of the Athenian city state it would have been clear that economy is an activity we perform at home (a merely private pursuit that serves survival), but not something that contributes to the good life (perhaps this explains why indeed the Athenian citizens were relatively poor people). Incidentally, Athenians that preferred the life of the household over the good life, i.e. the political life, were called *idiotès* – from which our word 'idiot' derives (Arendt 1958). We come back to Arendt's concept of politics in Chap. 10.

how we should live together. It is of vital importance that this literally takes place in a different context than the household.[12] When we remain at home, we are too much preoccupied with our own interests, and with our own smaller and bigger duties (and those of our family members, i.e. of spouses, children and slaves). The *agora* is a place where we can fully engage ourselves in something that transcends our own private interests, i.e. the fate of the city (the world) we commonly inhabit. Moreover, this is also a place where we can appear to one another as *equals*: here we are willing to listen to others (even if they have strongly different ideas and even if they happen to belong to a minority group) and to come to decisions to which everyone can agree. So, it should be clear that truly democratic politics requires the strictest separation of the spheres of the private and the public, i.e. of the household and the political. The political is a sphere that – contrary to the private – is not natural. It is not just always there, nor does it come about spontaneously. The private is a sphere of necessity, which originates in *zoé*, in the fact of biological existence. The public is rather in excess of necessity. Here human freedom can realize itself, although this might imply to risk one's own life, and hence to go against the biological urge of survival. Hence, in order for the political sphere to appear, measures need to be taken, i.e. the appearance of such an excess has to be designed. In other words, the Athenian democracy could only function well thanks to what we have been calling an *arrangement*. There had to be a place specifically created for this kind of meeting to happen, and society had to be organized in such a way that citizens had the time and the opportunity to go and discuss there on an equal basis.[13]

This small digression is necessary to understand, with Arendt, that next to the rigorous separation between the domains of the household and the political, there is a third sphere in-between the private and the public (Arendt 1961, p. 188), which needs also to be strictly opposed to the private and the public. This is the sphere of education, *skholé*. The school is not an extension part of the family, nor is it the preamble of political life. It is something *altogether different*. It is an exceptional time and place where children were taken away from their family and temporarily gathered with others (unlike them) and with a representative of the elder generation (a teacher) – without having to be preoccupied with any worry about the good of neither the family, nor the city. Children literally had to move to another, new and perhaps uncomfortable place, *at a distance* of the safe and cozy place the family offers to take care after them together with those of the same ilk. At the same time, the world of adult responsibilities and the risk of political life (*agon*) were also placed *at a distance*, so that students had the opportunity to fully and truly devote themselves to the study of particular subject matters.

[12] It should be noted that Arendt is not opposed to the sphere of the household (or to economics for that matter). It is a necessity of life to look after our private needs and to find shelter. What is of importance is that this sphere has its proper place and should not interfere with other spheres of life.

[13] Hence the importance of the 'mask', which was not seen as a concealment of one's true identity, but as a precondition for equality to occur (Arendt 1958).

At this point, Arendt's words – written in the 50s of the last century – gain all their prophetic poignancy. Today, more and more the school has become colonized by both the logic of the family and of the public world (Cf. Furedi 2010). On the one hand, many today would argue that the school should be fundamentally reformed in order to cater pupils' personal, medical and psychological needs. The school should be a place where children feel at ease and where all pupils and students should be offered the service that meets their idiosyncratic conditions. Individualized learning programs should be set in place, as well special arrangements that are tailored to the many social, emotional and physical characteristics of each and every learner – with the sole objective of increasing wellbeing and student experience. Teachers should become facilitators, and learning should be student-centered and even student-led. Students should feel completely safe and comfortable, and being looked after as if the school were a home.

On the other hand, many today would defend the idea that the existing school is an otherworldly place, divorced from reality. Here, potentially productive people, just lose their time as they are merely kept busy with pointless things such as drilling on formula and memorizing facts of history. What is the point of carefully constructing a theorem if, in real life, it is only the application of mathematical insights that matters? Analogously, many would argue that studying history for the sake of history belongs to history: what counts is that we learn from history for the present. As such, the curriculum should be rethought in function of the needs of a fast changing world, and of whatever it is our society or our economy requires.[14] Likewise, in view of the many problems we are facing today, from an undeniable apathy vis-à-vis politics, over youth delinquency to Muslim radicalization, many expect the school to solve all these problems. Pupils should start as early as possible to become politically engaged and tolerant citizens, as well as responsible, productive and entrepreneurial agents of our society. To such a view the school should become a political instrument.

In both cases, the school is no longer allowed to be the unique time and place the Greeks designed it to be. First, defining the school in terms of the household means a reduction of the school to a mere biological function (Arendt 1961, p. 185). The school is only a means for survival, for making life more comfortable and for tending to particular needs. As such, Arendt argues, we remain prisoners of the realm of animality, or – on a more philosophical level – of the realm of necessity. If education was only about responding to needs and interests that are already given, then there would be no difference between the life of humans and the life of animals.[15] In this case, education is merely a matter of raising and upbringing, but it has

[14] In a sense, the economization of the school is a reduction of the school to both the sphere of the home *and* the world of politics. When we desire students to become preoccupied with what is economically worthwhile, we are asking them to follow private and egoistic interests (home sphere), as well as to take up a responsibility which should be reserved for adults only (public sphere). This goes in line with Arendt s diagnosis about the rise of the social sphere as the merging of the private and the public (Arendt 1961, pp. 38–49).

[15] We are summarizing here Arendt's ideas as set out in the 50s. In view of discoveries in the field of zoology, it has become clear that the sharp distinction she makes between humanity and animality no longer holds. If the criterion is changeability in ways of life, for instance, many counterex-

nothing distinctively humane. This is because our humanity depends upon being taken away from the sphere of the family, and – more generally – from our own direct life-world and singular needs and interests. What defines us as humans is our capacity to begin anew with the world, our *natality.*[16] But, as long as we stay within the safe surroundings of the home (or – for that matter – a school designed as a home) this capacity is stifled. This means that, as progressive as it may sound, looking at (and after) students in terms of their medical, social and psychological issues and disorders is actually taking away from their hands the possibility of educational transformation.

Second, defining the school in political terms is also going against the essence of education. For Arendt (1961), as we explained, politics is a sphere characterized by three features: active engagement, risk (*agon*), and unconditional equality. Citizens must leave their homes, take up responsibility, and potentially put their lives at stake for the sake of a common world. Moreover, this must happen in such a way that all have an equal chance of taking part in the public debate. The school however is characterized by the exact opposite features. It is a sphere of inequality, Arendt holds, because it is a place where the generation of newcomers meets the generation which already inhabits the world. As such, it is a fallacy to assume that bestowing political rights upon children is the next logical step in a long history in which, one by one, groups of disenfranchised people have been given a voice (i.e. slaves, vassals, women, immigrants, etc. having been emancipated), and that it is therefore high time to give children political rights too. This would go against the intergenerational essence of education (Arendt 1961, p. 188). Whereas the sphere of politics is defined by the absolute absence of authority, educational relations – if they are truly educational – are asymmetrical (Arendt 1961, pp. 189–190). For the time being, we will follow Arendt on this point, but we will come back to this claim in Chap. 4, where we argue that there exists a unique form of *educational equality* which is important for defining the school (Cf. Rancière 1991). We regard this as a necessary supplement to Arendt's views to which she stayed blind, because she *only* approaches the issue of equality from a political – and not from an inherently educational – point of view.

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amples can be provided, such as – for example – the recently discovered fact that orcas are the only animals apart from humans whose evolution is driven by culture (Cf. Foote et al. 2016). However, these considerations are not important for the argument set out here. What is at stake is not to know with certainty which creatures should be included under an extended concept of humanity and which not – an attempt which, as Agamben has argued in *The Open* (2003), is doomed to fail. Instead, what is at stake here is *humanization itself*: the possibility that creatures (no matter which ones) *can* escape the realm of necessity and give shape (in unexpected ways) to their own way of life.

[16] Here Arendt is – again – very close to Heidegger (1962). Animals, in her view, are fully defined by their nature, by their essence. That is why tigers, for instance, have always lived in the same way. An animal species' way of life remains the same throughout history (or only changes very slowly due to natural selection pressure). Humans, on the other hand, have no essence. Everyone, and every generation, has to find out what it means to be human. Hence the enormous variation in modes of life that characterizes human history and culture. Whereas most animals live exactly the same life as their ancestors did, say, 20,000 years ago, there is the possibility that human life changes radically in a generation's time.

More importantly, bestowing political responsibilities upon pupils and students comes down to the refusal by the elder generation to take up responsibility for the world, and to be exposed to risk themselves. Instead of dealing with the challenges we are faced with as adults, Arendt says, we hope that they might find resolve by passing the buck to the sphere of education (Arendt 1961, p. 191). For instance, instead of overcoming our own lack of political engagement we demand that schools instill civic virtue in the young by organizing citizenship education. Instead of asking ourselves – after the 2008 financial crisis – whether other than neoliberal models of society are desirable, we hope to safeguard the existing state of things from future catastrophe by starting to teach children how to invest money in a responsible way (Cf. Furedi 2010, p. 51).

As such, Arendt (1961, p. 192) claims, our culture is prone to a profound perversity. Whereas politics should be inherently progressive i.e. concerned with changing the world for the better, it has become utterly conservative: the existing generation has resigned to the task of imagining a more humane world and has reduced the art of politics to efficiently managing society according to economic imperatives. On the other hand, education has become the object of continuous reforms in the name of societal and political needs, whereas it should be essentially conservative (Cf. Furedi 2010). As Arendt famously holds, next to *protecting the child against the world* (for instance by not giving it yet the responsibility to change the world, so that it can study in the 'slowing down mode' and literally loose time, and by protecting it from the risk involved in the political life), the most important task of education consists of *protecting the world from the child* (Arendt 1968, p. 192).[17]

4 From Student-Centeredness to a Thing-Centered Pedagogy

The plea for conservatism formulated by Arendt might sound outright reactionary – i.e. given in by a militant zeal to stick to the world the way it is. In the remaining part of this chapter, we show that it is not. On the contrary. We first argue that what is really at stake in this plea for conservatism is a criticism of erroneous conceptions that have come about with the demise of the teacher-centered model of education. More positively speaking, it entails a plea for what we will call a thing-centered model. Second, we also defend the view that this qualified form of educational conservatism is actually a precondition for true societal change and renewal.

When Arendt wrote her small essay on the Crisis in Education in the post-Second War American Society, nobody could misunderstand its controversial message. This

[17] Another reading of this famous passage could be: on the one hand, there is the obvious biological function of protecting the child against the world, as task which has always been taken to heart by the sphere of the household (i.e. protecting the child from the world); on the other hand there is also the *properly educational* side of upbringing, which happens in school and which consists of protecting the world from the child.

was the heyday of experiential learning as advocated by John Dewey and proponents of child-centred education.[18] Educationalists had come to the insight that learning equals doing, and that it requires self-steered activities (exploration, questioning, inventing, experimenting, etc.). Therefore, we should give students the responsibility to take charge over their own education: they should be allowed to develop insight and skills on the basis of their own interests and needs, to explore the real world and real-life problems rather than to gain knowledge from dreary textbooks, to do things themselves and to connect new knowledge to their own life-world (rather than passively regurgitating information passed on to them). The idea of the know-it-all teacher as sage on the stage was exposed as a highly unnatural, inefficient pedagogy, as a form of violence, and as a suppression of the child's own voice and her/his innate capacities. Hence, the need for a shift from a century old teacher-centred model to the enlightened student-centred view on education.

Now, if the choice is between these two models, no one in her/his right mind would hesitate to defend the latter view. Therefore, Arendt – who did not shun criticizing student-centeredness – could easily be taken to be a traditionalist and reactionary thinker.[19] This view, however, is based on a misconception: it starts from the idea that education is *either* teacher-centred *or* student-centred. In fact, Arendt opposes both models, and her take on education would be better termed *thing-centred* (Cf. Vlieghe 2016a).[20] Education is *not* about the student, and her needs and interests. *Neither* is it about demanding youngsters to comply with the will of the teacher, and to passively take in everything s/he professes and to store it in their minds. Instead, education is a meeting between two generations, between students and teachers, in view of the passing-on and possible renewal of the world they both partake in. The dimension which defines them as students and teachers is the *thing* they study, i.e. a particular aspect of the world, a subject *matter*: languages, carpentry, mathematics, cooking, music, etc. The English terminology actually articulates very well what is at stake here – much more than in other languages, e.g. métier (French), vak (Dutch), przedmiot (Polish) or Fach (German),[21] education always takes place in relation to a concrete thing, something that has a materiality of its

[18] It is appropriate to note that Dewey (1938) timely objected to some excesses of progressive and child-centred education and one of the bone of contention regarded precisely the question of subject-matter (see ibidem, Chap. 7). This notwithstanding, the main thrust of the Arendtian position here endorsed pursues a view of the subject matter different also from Dewey's understanding, even if we recognize that he does not lapse into the simplifications of the most radical advocates of experiential learning.

[19] From this perspective, she could also be called a very ignorant thinker, as her views would go against much scientific research on the effectiveness of student-centred approaches. However, her argument is not concerned with the question which method would guarantee the best learning outcomes. Instead, her criticism of the student-centred model has to do with the philosophical conception of what education is all about in this model.

[20] This terminology refers to a basic model within didactics which conceives the educational process in terms of three points of a triangle: teacher, student and subject matter (Bönsch 2006).

[21] It must be said, however, that in German (and Dutch) there is an alternative way to refer to a subject matter which has this material connotation: *Stoff* (in Dutch: *stof*), which could be translated as stuff in English.

own. The fundamental task of the teacher is then to show that the thing of study actually 'matters'. In that sense s/he is not in authority, but gives authority to the thing in question. If s/he succeeds in showing that it matters, students are under the authority of the thing too (rather than under the authority of the teacher). This *material authority* is overlooked by both teacher- and student-centred views.

Our thing-centred reading of Arendt is to a large extent inspired by Martin Heidegger (2001) when he claims that a thing should be opposed to an object. We will come back to this in greater detail in Chap. 4, but it is important to note here that an object is always and fully determined by the use and function it has for human beings. Hence, objects constitute an 'environment' but not a world. It is only by relating to things that we relate to the world. This is essential to education as conceived by Arendt. In her understanding, education is not about the reiteration of the world (as it is the case in teacher-centred pedagogies), but about its rejuvenation. But, in order to be able to do so, it is absolutely imperative that the new generation first notices *that there is a world* – and this is a world of things rather than of objects. Rejuvenation demands that this generation is not just immersed in an environment consisting of objects, but that it establishes a relation with the world.

It must be emphasised here that we speak of the world, not of worlds. There are many things, phenomena, issues, themes, maybe even many realities, but there is only one world. This indicates a further problem with student-centeredness, as it seems to come down to locking up the new generation in their own world (Arendt 1968, pp. 180–181). Student-centered approaches assume that 'they' – the new generation – have 'their' world, and 'we' – the adult generation – have 'our' world. As if there are two separate worlds. Of course, there is much to say in favour of making this distinction: it sounds very friendly and warm-hearted (taking into consideration the child's vulnerability), and there are good psychological and sociological reason to say so (children perceive things differently from adults due to their biological constitution and the developmental stage they are in, children have their own preferences, habits and customs, etc.). However, from an educational point of view, *there can only be one world.*[22] The world is that what is given, that what is out there and in which we are all born. The existing and the new generation are literally living in one and the same world. The difference is that the first already inhabit it and should take up the responsibility of passing on the world to the next generation.[23] That is why Arendt says that education is not so much a bundle of processes of teaching and learning as it is usually taken to be. This would be a reductionist and superficial account of what is really at stake. Of course, even if education is always happening against the background of those processes, it is really a *moment that makes a difference.* What makes all the difference is that the educator does – or does not – take up this responsibility. The moment of education is thus the decisive

[22] This is, once more, a very Heideggerian (1962) idea: we are *thrown* in a world which is not of our own making (*Geworfenheit*). This is an ontological condition. We have no choice but to relate to one and the same world (even though on an ontic level we might construct many different 'worlds' – psychologically and sociologically speaking).

[23] Which, of course, they can refuse, as is clear from the contemporary politicization of education.

moment of showing that we actually *love the world* (ibidem, p. 196). The deeper meaning of education is the willingness of the inhabitants of this world to welcome the newcomers into it, so that this world becomes *our* world. Therefore, our love for the world is even more important than the love for our children (ibidem). We have, indeed, to protect the world against the child.

Obviously, with this Arendt doesn't mean that we should exclude children from the world (which would come down to installing again a two-world view). Instead, what is at stake is to expose children to the world – our world. This is, to give them the opportunity to study this world, to become interested in it, to see why it matters and to care for aspects of this world (subject matters). That is also why Arendt was opposed to the idea professed by many advocates of the student-centred movement that teachers should become specialists in teaching and learning rather than being experts in a particular discipline (ibidem, p. 182). For Arendt the art of teaching and learning (didactics) is only of secondary importance. The real important thing is that a teacher shows to her/his students that something in the world is worth of our interest. Therefore, as we will go on showing in this book, the teacher needs to testify to a genuine and unconditional *love for our world*.

This also means that the school is first and foremost an *attention machine*: it is a place where young people can come and see that particular stuff is fascinating, that it is worth of the effort of thinking, exploring, and exercising, and that it requires the investment of attention and care (Cf. Stiegler 2010). It is an arrangement that takes away children from their immediate life-world and from the sphere of the family to gather them between four walls, together with a teacher, i.e. with a representative of the existing generation who shows that a subject matters. S/he then gives students the opportunity to engage themselves devotedly, attentively and carefully with the world. The essentially educational gesture of the teacher comes down to this: putting herself/himself and students equally "in the midst of things" (Heidegger 1968, p. 5). This means that s/he provokes interest in the original meaning of that word, *inter-esse.* Interest literally means that there is something in-between us (an idea which we will elaborate further in Chap. 4). All this is predicated on the ontological assumption that there are things in the world that are simply good and meaningful enough to preserve for the future.

Again, this might sound overtly reactionary and traditionalist. However, the passing on of the world should also occur in such a way that *the new generation can begin anew with this world*. To make this point clear, we return a last time to Arendt's criticism of the student-centred model. Although this model seems progressive at first sight, it is in fact the most conservative in the worst possible sense of that word: rather than incarcerating the young within the walls of the classroom, it confines them to the merely biological, i.e. to the realm of necessity (Cf. Arendt 1961, p. 185). In the archaic times prior to the invention of the school (as we discussed at the beginning of this chapter), necessity referred to fixed positions and identities bestowed upon people by an established societal order (Mollenhauer 1986). The school precisely offered a way to leave this fate behind. However, it could be argued that necessity has returned today, be it in a far more surreptitious way: with the advent of student-centeredness, it is the student's interests (linked to her/his particular

life-world and social position) and her/his needs (linked to her/his specific medical and psychological conditions), which set what should and should not happen during education (Cf. Masschelein and Simons 2013a). A such, students might learn many things that will help them to strengthen their own individual position (which Biesta [2006], again, would identify as learnification). However, they no longer have the opportunity to live through a moment of *profound transformation*, as they are deprived of a chance to establish a relation with the world. Nonetheless, it could be argued that this is precisely essential to education As R.S. Peters beautifully puts it: education is to turn the eyes of students outwards, so that they may *travel with different eyes* (Peters 1973, p. 54).[24] For this to happen they need to be exposed to things that are not necessarily of interest at first. But, as we have shown, this requires particular *school* conditions.

Travelling with different eyes also entails the possibility to revitalize the world we live in. Educating under school conditions means that the world is presented in such a way that young people can form their own ideas and opinions about how to go further with this world: the world is literally shared with the new generation in the full consciousness that they are new and therefore might carry on in completely unforeseeable ways. Again, this is exactly precluded when education loses its autonomy, and when the sphere of the family or the sphere of politics dictate what should happen in school. In these cases, the newness which the new generation brings is put to use, if not exploited, in view of the continuation of already existing ideas about how to order the world and how to give shape to how we live together in this world (Arendt 1961, p. 177). If the sphere of the family is dominating the sphere of education this might mean, for instance, that education becomes religious education – securing that the new generation adheres to a particular worldview. If the sphere of politics takes over, this might mean – as happens so often today – that education becomes reduced to a means to secure productive and flexible workforce in the service of a global neoliberal economy.

For Arendt, however, the sphere of education must be radically autonomous. *Education is for education's sake*. For instance, studying cosmology or ancient languages just to know everything there is to know about these subjects – even if this study might lead the child of a religious family to become an atheist (or, why not, the child of fervent atheist parents to conclude that God does exist), and even if the study of Latin or Hebrew has no economic value whatsoever. To be clear, this is not to say that politics, economy and religion should be left outside the walls of the school. On the contrary. Whereas all this is indeed an appeal against religious or political education (which today comes down to a preparation for the existing economy), Arendt's work can also be read as a plea for educating *about* these fascinating aspects of this world. Within the parameters of a thing-centered pedagogy the new generation could be taught *about* religion, *about* economy and *about* politics – out of love for a world in which these phenomena matter. However, this should happen

[24] This is exactly suggested by the German verb *Erziehen,* which literally means "pulling someone out of something", i.e. giving people the chance to go beyond, or escape the limited sphere of their own immediate needs and interests.

in such a way that the new generation can begin anew with religion, economy and politics – possibly in ways that are different from the way in which these phenomena have been given shape by the existing generation. In that sense education, as the true welcoming of the *new* in the new generation, also means giving the world out of our own hands and offering others the opportunity to renew the world.[25]

In conclusion, education sets the world free, and sets us free from the burden of necessity.[26] It is thanks to special conditions during which we are given the chance to slow down and to fully devote attention to some-*thing,* that the world becomes an object of care and interest, and that one actually relates to the world. This means that we might start all over again with it. This is, we are transformed in fundamental ways (as we may move beyond needs and interest that are already there), at the same time that the world itself might be transformed. So, if the school is claimed to be conservative, it is so in a highly profound sense of that word: this conservatism stems from a profound love for the world, which opens the possibility of the world's rejuvenation – by welcoming the new generation and by turning this world into our common world.

In the next chapters of this book we will flesh out these ideas with the help of other authors. More precisely, in the third chapter we turn to the work of Agamben and Badiou to develop a more detailed account of *what it means to be a teacher* in view of the autonomous and internal logic of education we have articulated with Arendt.

[25] Another way of putting this, is that the new generation, in order to experience itself as a *new* generation, needs to be confronted with a generation that inhabits an *old* world.

[26] It could be said that educating under school conditions is in and of itself a *public* affair, as Masschelein and Simons (2013a) have argued in their work. Of course, this is not to say that education should become political – in the sense that Arendt thinks that 'public' and 'political' are synonymous. Instead, Masschelein and Simons would argue, with Agamben (2007), that the school is a time and place of 'profanation', i.e. a setting which grants the possibility of a *free* use of things – meaning that no one is in authority to decide what a good or a bad use might be. There is no time to go deeper into this here, but one of the constitutive feature of schooling, and more exactly that it concerns the gathering of bodies, could also throw a new light on the public character of schooling, as it implies that we are exposed in our full bodiliness to one another (See Vlieghe 2010 for an account of public education based on the work of Judith Butler).

Fig. 2.1
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