

# Asking for the essence of education with and beyond Arendt: Philosophical perspectives on education, non-instrumentality and educational responsibility

Julien Kloeg<sup>1\*</sup> and Liesbeth Noordegraaf-Eelens<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Erasmus University Rotterdam

## ABSTRACT

We here aim to formulate the importance of a philosophical perspective on education, as a particular way of proceeding in educational theory. We view educational theory more generally as a way of making explicit concepts and commitments that are (implicitly) present in educational practices and exploring these argumentatively. The philosophical approach is characterized by reflecting on education as such, rather than exploring specific educational practices and reflecting on specific concepts and commitments within education. Hannah Arendt provides a fruitful philosophical approach to education by defining its “essence” in terms of natality: the new that each person brings into a pre-existing world. At the same time Arendt’s position on education, which relies on political theory, needs to be transformed in order to fully live up to her own views on natality. We describe specifically educational responsibility as a further development in a philosophical approach to education.

## KEYWORDS

Hannah Arendt;  
Educational theory;  
philosophy of education;  
natality; world;  
educational responsibility

## Introduction

Philosophers have discussed and appealed to education since the inception of philosophy. That is no coincidence, since for instance a moral theory, to the extent that it takes itself seriously as a guide to life, entails that others should be instructed into it (Dilthey, 1961, pp. 203-204). In classical political thought, too, the design of an ideal state in order to complete, needs to secure its own continued existence. This helps to explain why works such as Plato’s *Politeia*, which elaborates a series of reflection on justice and the just polis, largely concern how citizens are to be brought up within such a polis. In this sense it has been said that “from the modern critical perspective the final word of philosophy is pedagogy; for all speculation is for the sake of action” (pp. 203-204). While this general connection helps to make ourselves attentive to the hidden or manifest educational stakes of philosophy, it also

---

✉ \*Contact: Julien Kloeg, [kloeg@esphil.eur.nl](mailto:kloeg@esphil.eur.nl), Erasmus University, PO Box 1738, Rotterdam 3000 DR, The Netherlands

exposes a risk. Education itself is positioned in terms of the inculcation of given values and the maintenance of an “ideal” political system which are defined elsewhere. In that sense, education assumes the nature of a “technical doing” (Bollnow, 1959), a generic process which need only be steered in terms of its effectiveness and how well it serves to attain the ends set out for it in advance. In other words, pedagogy may be the final word of philosophy in one sense, but education itself largely evades our view if we adopt this approach uncritically and “from the outside-in”, thereby instrumentalizing education. The alternative would be to start from the point of view of education itself and ask not only why philosophy tends to have need of pedagogy, but also in which sense and under which conditions education in theory and in practice would have need of a philosophical perspective.

This question of theory is itself at the same time practical. We understand educational theorizing as springing from educational practice and seeking to shed light on it by turning the implicit arguments inherent in educational practice into explicit theoretical reflection. This can be direct, for instance when we are arguing for the pros and cons of a particular pedagogical format, or indirect, when we are attempting to settle arguments concerning the nature of education itself and how educators should seek to respond to the world at large. The commitment to elucidating educational practice is always there, as well as a normative stance with regard to what education is for, even where this is not articulated fully or at all, and even where this is explicitly denied. The “indirectness” of the latter style of educational theory should not be taken as a disqualification but as a way of seeking out fundamental concepts or commitments in order to more fully understand and practice education. That is where we propose to locate a specifically philosophical approach to education. As an overarching category, the more general theoretical approach to education brings out and reflects on a specific educational practice and the arguments implied within it. In this article the consequences of taking natality as a starting point for educational practice will be explored.

An undeniable aspect of education as it is practiced across the world, by all types of educators and at all levels of education, is that its practitioners are faced with the question of how to approach the next lesson, the next lecture, the next seminar; how to address the students in front of us in this moment. Many of us strive to inform ourselves with respect to “what works” based on empirical evidence, for instance with regard to the effectiveness of specific educational formats. Even to the extent that we are able to successfully adopt such formats – and education is always in part a wager, which includes the possibility of failure (Bollnow, 1959) – we still have to make choices with regard to how we implement these formats, which words, sounds, and visuals we choose and how we choose to emphasize them, how to respond to pupils or students, how open we are to deviate from our best-laid plans. For these reasons, educational practice is involved with making choices and filling the gaps in the script. This is not just a matter of making any decision at all; educators strive to make decisions that will help them to best explain the subject matter at hand, to communicate effectively with their pupils or students, to respond to what is happening at every moment inside the classroom or lecture hall and outside of it. In these and other ways we try to make the best possible decisions, and our educational practice in that sense takes the form of an implicit set of arguments concerning what we feel matters

most in education, how educators should conduct themselves, and how education should relate to the outside world. In this sense it can be said that educational practice itself has a pre-conceptual structure (see Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2014). This clarifies one aspect of the relationship between theory and practice in education. At specific moments we may change our minds with respect to what works or what is valuable; or the context may change in such a way that we feel we are better off trying something else. This iterative nature is itself an aspect of the permanence of choices to be made in practical situations; even where we try to “stick to the script” and to what has been shown to work in the past, we will continually have to reinvent our formats, our lesson plans, and ourselves as educators. Theory makes this interpretive (re)invention explicit.

So far, we have described education as a practice that requires continual decision-making by educators, who strive to do the best they can and precisely for that reason continually have to reorient themselves. Because of the pre-conceptual nature of educational practice, this reorientation can take the form of theoretical reflection which provides an explicit reflection on our commitments and our practices. The philosophical approach to education takes up both educational theory and practice as such, by inquiring after the nature of education itself.

In that sense our aim is twofold: first, understanding the meaning and value of this philosophical approach to education. What are we doing when we are formulating the nature of education itself, and how is this related to its practice? Second, we seek to avoid the pitfall of an uncritical approach, which would seek to impose itself on education from the “outside-in”. In that case, education would be reduced to an instrument meant to secure an outcome. These two aims can be in tension with one another, to the extent that to define a nature or essence of education is to impose a philosophical perspective on education. In the following sections, our aim is to introduce this tension and to make it productive.

Our theoretical starting point in doing so is the work of Hannah Arendt, in particular her essay on *The Crisis in Education*, where she does indeed define an “essence of education”, namely in terms of natality (Arendt, 1961, p. 185). Yet natality itself is understood as counteracting instrumentalization. By combining these two aspects systematically and following Arendt in this sense, we gain a foothold to disclose educational theory and practice in particular and valuable ways, so that her essay can serve as a model case of a philosophical approach to education. Yet there is more to the tension between our two aims. We think Arendt’s perspective is particularly valuable, but this does not mean that we take her to be the golden standard of educational theorizing. Another part of the value of her work lies in the way that from an educational perspective, important starting points of her own interpretation of education can be criticized and thus sharpened. Our goal in offering this criticism stems from our starting remarks: to serve the goals of educational theory, which in turn are in the service of elucidating educational practice. Arendt’s approach can be criticized from a contemporary perspective both on the grounds of educational practice itself, once more taking seriously its pre-conceptual structure, and in view of the outside-in approach to education which Arendt cannot fully avoid because of her reliance on (her own) political theory. In this sense, we will argue that the essence of education as natality itself requires us to move beyond certain aspects of her approach to education. This is a step further than the usual moniker of “with Arendt against Arendt”

(Lefort, 2002), though we are still inspired by Arendt's position, even where we are critical of it.

The question that arises is thus: what constitutes meaningful engagement with a text like Arendt's in order to arrive at and demonstrate the importance of a philosophical approach to education? In this contribution, we first present the structure of Arendt's *Crisis in Education*, after which we move to its relation to (non-)instrumentality and its resistance to goals and aims imposed on it from other domains. We then aim to develop the notion of education as natality by showing how it impacts a central but undertheorized concept within Arendt's own argument, namely specifically educational responsibility. This engagement stems from Arendt's text, but at the same time requires a transformation of Arendt's starting points, in some moments against the spirit of her original work but without losing touch with its central commitments and modes of orientation. This is done in the hopes of further developing the nature and value of a philosophical approach to education, with and against Arendt.

### **Arendt's *Crisis* essay and “the essence in education”**

Hannah Arendt, while a towering figure in philosophy and political theory in the twentieth century, would not have considered herself primarily an expert in education. On particular questions of pedagogy and learning, she remarks: “All these are particulars (...) that must really be left to the experts and the pedagogues”, and adds that “in the specialists' sense”, she knows nothing since she is not herself a “professional educator” (Arendt, 1961, p. 196; p. 174). Indeed, Arendt produced two short essays on the topic, making education a relatively minor topic in her oeuvre. The essays are *The Crisis in Education* (Arendt, 1961, pp. 173–196) and *Reflections on Little Rock* (Arendt, 2003, pp. 193–213). The latter provides a controversial reading, then and now, of enforced desegregation in schools (see Kloeg, 2022). The former essay, *Crisis*, is a relatively brief text, originally conceived in German in 1958 (Berkowitz, 2020, p. 27), in which Arendt reflects on the necessary connection between education and the world of culture and institutions shared and maintained by human beings. Both essays refer primarily to education in the sense of schooling up to the “college level”, but it is instructive that Arendt's original German speaks of *Erziehung* (as distinct from *Bildung*), which implies a broader pedagogical context including the parent-child relationship (see also Kloeg, 2022). In this contribution we mostly have the usual sense of “education” in mind, though we think the argument can be extended, *mutatis mutandis*, to other pedagogical contexts. The most important inheritance from Arendt's understanding of education is the distinction she draws between education as world-introduction and specialized “learning” in a specific field, which for her come apart (Arendt, 1961, p. 196).

The “crisis” she refers to diagnoses US education as standing apart from the world, becoming its own “mini world” with its own rules. In this context, Arendt develops her argument concerning the responsibilities of education. Briefly, Arendt claims that the continuance and preservation of the world are the main aims of education and that this requires the educator to introduce newcomers to the world. This is “conservative” in the sense that educators do not seek to imprint their own ideals or their own future onto the next generation: it is the world as it is that should be taught. For parallel reasons, neither is

it the case that the educator should seek to restore a mythical past, which would likewise be a case of “imprinting”. As Arendt (1961) puts it, educators should refrain from “striking from the [newcomers’] hands ... their chance at the new” (p. 177). Renewing the world is up to the student and not up to the educator. This implies that Arendt’s view runs counter to both conservative and progressive-critical pedagogies and analyzes them in terms of an instrumental approach to education (Noordegraaf-Eelens & Kloeg, 2020). She thus poses the question, both in her own historical context and for educational theory and practice today, whether pedagogies of conservative and progressive-critical pedagogies can avoid instrumentalization and to what extent this should be seen as a fundamental problem for them.

From this initial overview of her position on education, readers of Arendt’s political works will recognize several central concepts and concerns. The notion of the world as a human artifice, as distinct from the material earth, stems from her work on human activity and political theory in *The Human Condition* (1998 [1958]), published during the same period. Equally consistent is Arendt’s central emphasis on the renewal of the world and the importance of the notion of “the new” in general. This makes it quite natural to suppose that Arendt’s thought on education is derivative from her work on politics—even while standing at a remove, since for Arendt the central category of action (which renews the world) should be set apart from education. Following the argument by pedagogical thinker Pierre Meirieu, we will argue that this is true in a qualified sense. In order to make this case, however, we need to first understand more fully Arendt’s own understanding of education, not in terms of occurrent characteristics but in terms of its essence.

A first point is how sharply Arendt herself makes this distinction, in the same passages where she distances herself from any specific expertise when it comes to education. Both of the points in the text where she reflects on the “essence” of education involve a juxtaposition to specific, subject-matter expertise and the practice of education. First in terms of Arendt’s own motivation: her most “cogent” reason for involving herself with the crisis in education in the first place is the “opportunity” it provides, in stripping away “facades and prejudices”, to “explore and inquire into whatever has been laid bare of the essence of the matter, and the essence of education is natality, the fact that human beings are born into the world” (Arendt, 1961, p. 174). Second in terms of the relationship to expertise with respect to education:

“What concerns us all and cannot therefore be turned over to the special science of pedagogy is the relation between grown-ups and children in general or, putting it in even more general and exact terms, our attitude toward the fact of natality: the fact that we have all come into the world by being born and that this world is constantly renewed through birth” (Arendt, 1961, p. 196).

Thus, what has been laid bare in the crisis, which is normally not as readily observable, is that education as such involves a particular relationship with the fact of birth, which in Arendt’s technical and political-theoretical vocabulary is understood in terms of natality – and this is precisely not a matter of specific(ally) educational expertise or practice.

It is in that sense instructive that in order to understand the essence of education, we are directed to political theory. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt (1998, p. 9) writes

that “natality” is the primary category of political (as opposed to metaphysical) thought. However, this does not mean that a substantial political program (i.e. of natality) is here imposed on education. Rather, the “fact of birth” for Arendt is at a principled distance from such substance. The human condition itself is counterpoised to the idea of a human nature which would seek to pinpoint a speculative essence of the human being as such (Arendt, 1998, pp. 9–10). The idea of the human condition, by contrast, expresses the ways in which human beings are shaped by and themselves actively give shape to their environment. This is how we can understand her typology of human activity in terms of labor, work, and action. While the latter is most important to understanding specifically political activity, Arendt (1998, p. 9) notes that natality is an aspect of all three types. For our purposes, it is important to gain a clearer understanding of the notion of “world”, which is also introduced as a technical concept in *The Human Condition*, and to situate it with respect to the essence of education as Arendt understands it.

Fundamental to Arendt’s understanding of “world” is its distinction from the material earth. In the first type of activity, labor, the human being appears in its animality (i.e. as animal laborans) insofar as it is subjected to natural necessity in the form of biological needs such as eating food. This type of activity invokes the earth in Arendt’s sense. In work, the second type of activity, the human being appears not as an animal, but as specifically human (i.e. as homo faber). For Arendt this means that we produce durable artefacts – including material but also cultural artefacts, shared meanings, and political institutions – and in so doing construct a specific human-made realm which we inhabit: this is how she defines the notion of world (see Arendt, 1998, Chapter 1). It is also this world-definition that features prominently in Arendt’s work on education and is part of her definitions of the essence of education (as quoted above), even though this is easy to miss given our everyday usage of the terms which Arendt injects with a decidedly technical meaning. In the current debate on how best to conceive of education, Arendt’s position here lends support to arguments that seek to move away from the contemporary hegemony of student-centered perspective on education, while also avoiding the difficulties of earlier, teacher-centered approaches. This can be developed in the direction of world-centered education (Biesta, 2021) or thing-centered education (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019), but it can also be argued that Arendt does not consolidate the educational importance of the world into a further “center”, but that an important feature of her position lies in holding in tension the traditional “peripheries” of the pedagogical triangle (Kloeg & Korsgaard, 2025). For that reason, we here articulate Arendt’s position in its own right.

In keeping with the concepts we have articulated thus far, the essence of education for Arendt is to mediate, namely between the established sphere of human artifice in the form of the world, which is to be conserved (Arendt, 1961, p. 192), and the radically new that comes to the stage with each new generation. It is this combination of two forces pulling in two different directions which characterizes education rather than the fact of birth as such: the essence of education is the birth of a unique individual into the shared realm, into which they are introduced in and through education. This characterizes not one specific practice within the broad field of education, but addresses education as such in terms of its importance for the human condition. This is one answer corresponding to our first aim, namely to formulate a philosophical approach to education which is able to define

it as such. But in classical philosophical approaches to education, education has tended to become instrumentalized by philosophical theories, as we briefly described above. One important reason for us to consider Arendt's version of the essence of education is that she does not fall victim to this kind of instrumentalization, at least not in its classical form. Nor is it the case that she avoids instrumentalization by chance. Rather, her understanding of the essence of education is designed to be non-instrumental. This systematic linkage between education as such and education as non-instrumental is what we now have to explore further. What does it mean to avoid instrumentalization, and does Arendt succeed in her attempt to avoid it?

### **Arendt's (non-)instrumental approach to education**

In a general sense, for education to be an instrument in the service of something other seems difficult to avoid. Is education not always and necessarily there to reach some type of outcome, whether this is defined in terms of future employment, economic growth, or as promoting humanistic values (Bojesen, 2019)? However, there are probably other types of activity which serve such outcomes more straightforwardly or more efficiently. Future employment can be served by job training or by targeted courses; economic growth and education are not necessarily the best of friends; humanistic values can be promoted through media campaigns or even, in cynical cases, through indoctrination. Yet according to most theorists education is distinct from these activities in the sense that it cannot be reduced to them (see Biesta, 2015). As indicated above, Arendt (1961) briefly comments on the distinction between education and learning: "one can quite easily teach without educating, and one can go on learning to the end of one's days without for that reason becoming educated" (p. 196). This of course has to do with the understanding of education as the introduction of the new into the world. It is possible to learn many things without thereby finding one's way in the world, as the collective realm of human artifice. In the same connection, Arendt wants to avoid the pollicization of education: "We must decisively divorce the realm of education from the others, most of all from the realm of public, political life (...)" (p. 195). She insists on this in the context of the necessity of authority in education (Kloeg & Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2022), which is an implication of her asymmetrical view of the situation. The educator must already have access to the world, else they are no educator; the newcomers by definition do not have access to the world.

Arendt (1961) emphasizes that the task of the educator is not to prepare for a future world or to teach students how to live, since this would be to lose sight of the dimension of natality that emphasizes the new. In this spirit, Arendt warns against the temptation to "strike from [the newcomers'] hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us" (p. 196). More positively, we have to introduce them to the world as it exists, precisely so that they can then renew it. Education cannot take place without making contact with the world as it exists. Arendt's argument is thus designed to combine a worldly orientation with a non-instrumental approach. Yet there is still an important point here: the whole structure of Arendt's argument, from the idea of the world as that which requires setting right and must be conserved for future generations, to natality as the fact of birth which is actualized fully in political action, and also the background of Arendt's initial project of arguing against forced desegregation of schools, builds a political

logic into her analysis of education (Meirieu, 2008, Chapter 7), so that there is still an element of outside-in constitutive to it. While this may appear to be a purely abstract type of argument, it also has clear implications for Arendt's views. Because Arendt distinguishes strongly between labor and work in *The Human Condition*, education must be interested in the world, while the earth is a much less obvious point of connection (Swillens & Vlieghe, 2020). Because of the necessity of this world-introduction, the newcomers have no say and carry no responsibility for what goes on, while the educator has all the authority in that they are able to "stand for the world". And the clearest political "importation": since Arendt writes against politically enforced desegregation, her argument takes on the shape of keeping political considerations based on equality (a political ideal) out of education (Kloeg, 2022). Our position is that this approach does not take education itself as a starting point: rather, it makes education adhere to what is and what is not desirable given a prior, underlying analysis of the different societal "spheres" (Arendt, 2003, pp. 193-213). Perhaps we should take Arendt's hint that she was not a "professional educator" and in that sense speaking from a position outside of education, as insightful as her work on education may be in many other respects.

At this point we are able to advance Arendt's own argument in a direction "unforeseen by her", to vary her own description of the possibilities that natality as the essence of education affords. If we take seriously the idea that to educate is to introduce newcomers into the world, then this itself becomes a reason to go beyond Arendt's framework. We propose to start from the idea that natality, as the capacity for the new of each "newcomer" and their introduction into the world, is the essence of education conceived on its own terms. In that way we take a further step in advancing our twin aims of providing for a theoretical account of education as such and doing so without reducing education to an instrument meant to secure an outcome or, as we can now add, adhere to a set of terms and conditions which stem from elsewhere and are used to constrain education in advance. To make the same case in reverse: Arendt (2003) wants to keep politics out of education because of her analysis of separate societal spheres. When we start out from the educational point of view, it is clear that private and public dimensions are both already there (Meirieu, 2008, Chapter 7), and so is politics. While there are good reasons to avoid conflating any of these with education itself, it is also not helpful to define these factors away in advance and for external reasons. If we take seriously the idea that educational practice is itself pre-conceptual in its structure and that it implies arguments for the choices that are made, then it is difficult to justify from a pedagogical perspective to keep education "separate" from the lives of students or pupils and from the political affairs of the day. For this reason, in the next section we address an aspect of Arendt's work on education which is both at the center of her argument and unable to be articulated fully, namely educational responsibility, which is to be understood in distinction from its component parts. Arendt does mention these, but leaves their interrelation a mystery: these are what we in previous work have called personal responsibility, aimed at the newcomers, and political responsibility, aimed at the world (Kloeg & Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2024). Further developing the philosophical approach to education that we have argued for in this contribution, we can also here provide a new contribution to thinking about educational responsibility on its

own terms. More concretely: we have to analyze what educational responsibility requires of us as educators.

### **Educational responsibility beyond Arendt**

The concept of responsibility takes on an important but at the same time unclear role in Arendt's *Crisis*-essay. At first approach, it is clear that responsibility is related to all other key concepts in such a way that it becomes an integral part of her argument. This is because responsibility flows directly from natality. Arendt sees natality as the essence of education – this then explains her emphasis on the introduction of newcomers into an existing world, as itself bearing witness to a kind of birth (considered as the new coming into the world). The educational aim of attempting to cultivate what is new without making it subservient to predefined outcomes by the same token requires connection to the world. The concept of responsibility comes in from the side of this worldly orientation, namely from education as an undertaking set upon by the “adult generation”, as represented by the educator – conversely, the educator through their authority is able to “stand for” the world. Responsibility here means actively taking on an attitude of “protection and care” (Arendt, 1961, pp. 185–186) with respect to what we are responsible for. Arendt mentions care only once, but it seems appropriate to her more general aims. Yet rather than a singular relationship with clear requirements, responsibility can be (and as we will argue, must be) a site of conflict:

“Human parents (...) have not only summoned their children into life through conception and birth, they have simultaneously introduced them into a world. In education they assume responsibility for both, for the life and development of the child and for the continuance of the world. These two responsibilities do not by any means coincide; they may indeed come into conflict with each other. The responsibility for the development of the child turns in a certain sense against the world: the child requires special protection and care so that nothing destructive may happen to him from the world. But 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.” (Arendt, 1961, pp. 185–186)

Arendt here remarks that the two responsibilities “may come into conflict with each other”, but given our analysis so far it seems clear that such conflict is in fact necessary and endemic to education. The new cannot be left to roam on its own terms, and education is only conceivable insofar as we do not “leave [our children] to their own devices” (Arendt, 1961, p. 196). Conversely, non-instrumentality implies that the world is not to be simply brought to bear on the newcomers on its own terms: the point is rather to renew the world. Arendt's hesitancy in facing up to conflicting responsibilities is connected to the difficulty of situating both responsibilities in terms of Arendt's argument, given that she herself neither defines responsibility in general nor distinguishes between its different forms. This casts a shadow not just on the concept of responsibility in her argument, but because of its integral role this lack of clarity also destabilizes the concept of natality and hence Arendt's understanding of education as such.

In previous work we have developed Arendt's use of responsibility in terms of personal and political responsibility (Kloeg & Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2024): the former defines responsibility with respect to the individual newcomer, the latter responsibility with

respect to the maintenance and renewal of the world. It seems clear that political responsibility flows directly from the worldly orientation of education as such, and it has a clear meaning in its role in making sure that the “setting-right” of the world remains “actually possible, even though it can, of course, never be assured” (Arendt, 1961, p. 192). However, personal responsibility is not as easily situated and, in our view, should be more broadly understood than in terms of the well-being of the newcomers alone. Personal responsibility raises the question of the protection of and care for the new as such – this too appears to be obscured in Arendt’s own language as quoted above. In view of this more general relationship with the new, personal responsibility can be understood in terms of a withdrawal from the world in the form of holding oneself to the standard of thinking (Kloeg & Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2024). Thinking is part of Arendt’s moral considerations and implies the question of how we relate to ourselves – whether we could stand our own company having made a certain decision (Arendt, 2003, p. 45; pp. 94–95). This implies a reflective activity on the part of the educator which intercepts the demands of the world. This is, in our view, why the world is not imposed on newcomers on its own terms.

Personal responsibility in education is indeed a moral matter (“for lack of a better term”, as Arendt (2003, p. 278, n10) puts it insofar as personal responsibility is not a matter of obedience, but of support. “An adult consents where a child obeys; if an adult is said to obey, he actually supports the organization or the authority or the law that claims ‘obedience’” (p. 46). Without this provision, there could be no taking of responsibility, as is evident from the attempted defense maneuver that one was merely following orders. As educators we must constantly ask ourselves: can I support and take responsibility for that which I am being asked to teach? (Kloeg & Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2024) In our current times, where education is under constant pressure from political and technological angles, this seems at least as relevant as when Arendt wrote. One example of this is the debate surrounding the content of education, in which the question is raised as to whether Western, male-dominated perspectives are not too dominant, thereby putting pluralism under pressure. This makes it difficult, or perhaps impossible, to avoid politics, since the political dimensions of knowledge are increasingly made explicit.

There are thus several shortcomings to be identified in Arendt’s account when it comes to responsibility. The concept itself, while it is crucial to the undertaking of education as such, is not defined, other than important but partial links to the renewal of the world and the authority needed to represent the world to the newcomers (for critical discussion, see Kloeg & Noordegraaf-Eelens, 2022). Furthermore, Arendt does not provide a clear account of the different types of responsibility, and their conflict is left to chance, while it is in fact necessary. What is more, Arendt’s lack of clarity with respect to what we have called personal responsibility leads to a limited understanding of what this entails. It seems likely that here, too, Meirieu’s diagnosis that a political (rather than an educational) logic and framing is at work in Arendt’s *Crisis*-text proves its relevance. As before, we can here turn the tables on Arendt. She seems to take for granted that there exists a general political responsibility to take care of the world, which can then be transposed to education where it may clash with another type of responsibility. Instead, we should start from the perspective of education itself. This is what the concept of educational responsibility is

meant to accomplish: to formulate a perspective from which both personal and political responsibility are both necessarily at play and in conflict in the context of education.

Yet given the preceding argument we can improve on this view of educational responsibility. Education is not the intersection of two independent types of responsibilities, as if the educator were a curious hybrid of forms occurring “in the wild”: say a parent (taking personal responsibility) combined with a politician (taking political responsibility). Some further elaboration may illustrate the importance of this point.

In introducing personal responsibility as a (general) point of reflection, holding the world somewhat at a distance, we do not yet know what is supposed to counter or offset the demands of the world. However, when we assume the perspective of educational responsibility as our starting point, we are able to answer the question immediately: as educators we hold the world somewhat at a distance, precisely so that the new can be cultivated. In the same way and conversely, we cannot leave the new to roam free on its own terms, so that we also take up distance with respect to its demands, again precisely in view of our commitment to the world. These are two aspects of the same attitude. That is what educational responsibility consists in: actively taking up the role of care and protection in such a way that neither the demands of the world nor of the new can fully claim it as their own. This distancing gesture is not negative, however: it is one of making time and space. The world appears as that which threatens to intrude and at the same time as that which has to be conserved when cultivating the new; the new appears as that which needs guidance and as that which has to be respected, including when the world would have it otherwise. In concrete cases there is still a place for conflict between different commitments that result from living up to educational responsibility. This can also be taken literally. For example, by addressing in education the potentially tense relationship between personal commitments and the importance of contributing to a sustainable world (Noordegraaf-Eelens, [2025](#)). In that sense, the language of personal and political responsibility likewise remains valid. But in considering education as such, that is, from a philosophical perspective, educational responsibility itself should be our frame of reference.

This shows the considerable insight at the heart of Arendt’s account, as well as some of its pitfalls. More generally, however, this shows the importance of the philosophical approach to education. Only when taking that perspective on board can we define and understand our responsibility not given a certain curriculum or set of learning outcomes, but our engaged and conflicted responsibility as educators *tout court*.

### Concluding remarks

Education as a practice is about making iterative decisions, and in that sense, it “lives” an answer to the question of what education should be. Educational practice is also pre-conceptual in nature; educational theory brings out the implicit concepts and arguments for explicit theoretical reflection. We have introduced the philosophical approach as a way in order to reflect on education as such, as distinct from reflecting on particular educational practices or concepts. In this contribution, Hannah Arendt’s *Crisis*-essay has served as a model for the philosophical approach; both in her own work and in the transformations needed to “reactivate” it for present concerns. We had two aims in introducing her work. First, to show the value and importance of a philosophical approach: Arendt defines the

essence of education in terms of natality. Second, to avoid instrumentalization, conceived as an outside-in approach to education which then reduces it to a means to attain an end defined elsewhere. At first approach there is a tension between these two aims: defining education as such comes with the risk of imposing a philosophical framework on education. On our analysis this is true for Arendt herself in a qualified sense since her starting point is in political theory. Yet her account of natality can be used to improve on her own argument by starting out from education instead, including its pre-conceptual nature. In order to show the importance of that line of argument, we have considered Arendt's views on responsibility, which are undertheorized and one-sided. Arendt sees a possibly conflicting type of responsibility, while it is in fact a necessary conflict. We have attempted to make this conflict productive. In addition, Arendt focuses on the political aspects of responsibility and presents a limited view of its personal aspects. Our perspective allows for the formulation of a truly educational responsibility, which unifies political and personal aspects of responsibility in a specific (namely educational) way. Throughout this contribution, we have sought to show that a philosophical approach to education, in our case represented by an Arendtian perspective, intervenes in the theory and hence the practice of education. This approach brings into view the in equal parts engaged and conflictual nature of education as such, which if correct in theory should be part and parcel of educational practice.

### Competing interests

The author(s) declare none.

### References

- Arendt, H. (1961). *Between past and future: Six exercises in political thought*. Penguin Books.
- Arendt, H. (1998). *The human condition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Arendt, H. (2003). *Responsibility and judgment* (J. Kohn, Ed.). Schocken Books.
- Berkowitz, R. (2020). Public education: The challenge of educational authority. In W. Veck & H. Gunter (Eds.), *Hannah Arendt on educational thinking and practice in dark times: Education for a world in crisis* (pp. 17–31). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Biesta, G. (2015). Teaching, teacher education, and the humanities: Reconsidering education as a Geisteswissenschaft. *Educational theory*, 65(6), 665–679. <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12141>
- Biesta, G. (2021). *World-centred education: A view for the present*. Routledge.
- Bojesen, E. (2019). *Forms of education: Rethinking educational experience against and outside the humanist legacy*. Routledge.
- Bollnow, O. F. (1959). *Existenzphilosophie und Pädagogik: Versuch über unstetige Formen der Erziehung* (Urban-Bücher, Bd. 40). Kohlhammer.
- Dilthey, W., & Bollnow, O. F. (1961). Pädagogik: Geschichte und Grundlinien des Systems. In *Gesammelte Schriften* (3., unveränd. Aufl). Teubner; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Kloeg, J. (2022). Where is education? Arendt's educational philosophy in between private and public. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 56(2), 196–209. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12662>
- Kloeg, J., & Noordegraaf-Eelens, L. (2022). Ambiguous authority: Reflections on Hannah Arendt's concept of authority in education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 54(10), 1631–1641. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2021.1930864>
- Kloeg, J., & Noordegraaf-Eelens, L. (2024). In-between child and world: Educational responsibility with and against Arendt. *Educational Theory*, 74(4), 512–528. <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12637>
- Kloeg, J., & Korsgaard, M. T. (2025). The many centres of education? A plea for *in-between thinking*. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 57(8), 742–752. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2024.2444426>

- Lefort, C. (2002). Thinking with and against Hannah Arendt. *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 69(2), 447-459. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2002.0056>
- Meirieu, P. (2008). *Pédagogie: Le devoir de résister*. ESF Éditeur.
- Noordegraaf-Eelens, L., & Kloeg, J. (2020). Insisting on action in education: Students are unique but not irreplaceable. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 39, 549-558. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-020-09716-x>
- Noordegraaf-Eelens, L. (2025). Caring for educational concerns. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 44(6), 1544-1557. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2025.2514499>
- Swillens, V., & Vlieghe, J. (2020). Finding soil in an age of climate trouble: Designing a new compass for education with Arendt and Latour. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 54(4), 1019-1031. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12462>
- Vanassche, E., & Kelchtermans, G. (2014). Teacher educators' professionalism in practice: Positioning theory and personal interpretative framework. *Teaching and teacher education*, 44, 117-127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.08.006>
- Vlieghe, J., & Zamojski, P. (2019). *Towards an ontology of teaching. Thing-centred pedagogy, affirmation and love for the world*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16003-6>