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Ambiguous authority: reflections on Hannah Arendt's concept of authority in education

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ABSTRACT

For Hannah Arendt, authority is the shape educational responsibility assumes. In our time, authority in Arendt's sense is under pressure. The figure of Greta Thunberg shows the failure of adult generations, taken collectively, to take responsibility for the world and present and future generations of newcomers. However, in reflecting on Arendt's use of authority, we argue that her account of authority also requires amendments. Arendt's situating of educational authority in-between past and future adequately captures its temporal dimension. We make explicit another, spatial, dimension: authority in-between world and earth. Arendt's neglect of the material earth also has implications for the relational dimension of authority. Arendt's authority depends on a dichotomy between the private (education, the child) and the public sphere (politics, the adult). This is problematic. First, we agree with Arendt's feminist critics that the personal can be made into the site of the political. Second, we point once more to Thunberg, the child, taking the public stage, thereby contesting the division between public and private. In response, we situate the relational dimension of authority in-between private and public. The three dimensions of educational authority taken together imply that it is situated in-between domains that cannot be reduced to each other or taken as absolutes: past and future (time), world and earth (space), and the private and public sphere (relation). This brings us to our concept of ambiguous authority, which expresses the Arendtian nature of our reflections and the ways in which we seek to renew her original insights on educational authority.

KEYWORDS

Authority; hannah Arendt; ambiguous authority; in-between; public sphere; sustainability; Greta Thunberg

Introduction

Institutes of higher education, researchers and policymakers aim for a closer link between education and society. This is expressed in university strategies that stress the importance of impact, in new ways to fund research projects which make societal embeddedness a requirement, and in the increasing involvement of stakeholders in education and research. In a general sense, education is asked to take responsibility for the world. Yet it is unclear how such a responsibility could be expressed. It is clear, however, that adults, taken collectively, are presently failing the new generation and generations to come. This is the case even though many individual adults have devoted their lives to the future of our planet. The collective falling-short of adults has made it

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necessary for Greta Thunberg to assume a political role precisely by breaking out of the standard educational structure by means of her ‘school strike’ (Veck & Gunter, 2020, p. 5). We will return to Thunberg on multiple occasions, as she represents a momentous challenge for thinking about educational authority.

The work of Hannah Arendt offers a fruitful avenue to reflect upon what educational authority could mean and entail. In this article we therefore take Arendt’s views of authority as a vantage point, without undertaking a more general analysis of authority in education. Arendt critically analyses the connection between society and education in her own historical context. Arendt’s article *The crisis in education* (Arendt, 1961) expresses her view that education in the United States has increasingly lost its connection to the world. ‘World’ should here be understood in Arendt’s sense: as a specifically human-made sphere that is home to culture and institutions, and distinct from the material earth (Canovan, 1992, pp. 105–112). Arendt’s project becomes restoring the lost connection to the world, namely through *authority*. Authority is, for Arendt, the shape that responsibility assumes in education (Arendt, 1961, p. 189; Berkowitz, 2020, pp. 18–19). This responsibility concerns both the student or newcomer and the world into which they are introduced (Arendt, 1961, p. 188). The authority of the educator enables them to take responsibility for the world as it is, and at the same time to make room for the world’s renewal, so that it can be sustained (Berkowitz, 2020, p. 22). Authority therefore links past (the world) to future (the new), valuing both. Next to this *temporal* dimension, there is, we theorize, an additional *spatial* dimension to authority due to its world-conserving features, which Arendt stresses. Although Arendt’s conceptual repertoire provides a promising starting point for reflecting on this spatial dimension of authority, she herself does not take on this task. Instead, Arendt limits the world that is to be conserved to “the locus of tradition, culture and authority” (Berkowitz, 2020, p. 20). We propose to amend Arendt on this point. In times of ecological crisis, we stress that an Arendtian commitment to the continued existence of the world should not be seen as distinct from a similar commitment to the natural world (Noordegraaf-Eelens & Kloeg, 2020). This point of view is reflected in the public speeches and appearances of Thunberg as well as in philosophical work by Donna Haraway and many others. In response we position the spatial dimension of authority in-between world and earth, in recognition of their interdependence.

With these accounts of temporality and spatiality as dimensions of educational authority in hand, we can better appreciate how authority gives shape to the relationship between student and educator. Relationality is therefore the third dimension we discuss. Arendt positions authority on the dividing line between the private and public spheres: for her this determines the educational setting. This is not a position in space, but a specific *relation* that is central to the purposes of education. For Arendt, in a public (or: political) setting everyone is each other’s equal. On the contrary, in an educational setting there is a hierarchical difference between educator and student due to authority. The educator connects the student and the world, while also protecting both from each other (Arendt, 1961, p. 165). In line with feminist critiques and with further reference to Thunberg, we argue that Arendt’s dichotomous distinction between public and private is problematic. Thunberg makes this very explicit by calling upon students to strike and thereby taking position in public space instead of sitting in class. What education requires is an in-between where students can practice politics and contest the demarcation between the public and the private domain. This line of argument leads us to further analysis of educational settings, and the concept of authority. Our proposal is to designate the educational setting as an ambiguous zone (based on the use of this concept by Giorgio Agamben (2005) in a different context), thereby redefining the relational dimension of authority as well as giving room to the in-betweenness in the spatial and temporal dimension.

In order to establish this position of the educational setting, we first provide an overview of the ways in which Arendt intends to use the concept of authority, from its political roots to its educational role. We then consider authority in its temporal dimension, in between past and future, by looking at Arendt’s distance with respect to both conservative and progressive

pedagogies. Arendt sees education as conservative in a specific sense, namely conservative of the world. This leads us to inquire further into the spatial dimension of authority and more specifically the importance of worldliness, and, amending Arendt, earthliness. We then consider the relational dimension of authority. Critiquing Arendt's dichotomous approach to private and public, we analyse educational authority as taking place in an ambiguous zone in between public and private which offers room to contest authority. We close by attempting to bind the three dimensions together into a single concept of educational authority, which we introduce as *ambiguous authority*.

1. 'In-between': situating education and authority

In her diagnosis of the "crisis" in US education (1961, p. 181; Gordon, 1999, p. 166) Arendt shows that said education is no longer able to address the world. Education affected by this crisis takes place in a separate, isolated space that lacks in the "common sense" of the world (Noordegraaf-Eelens & Kloeg, 2020; Noordegraaf-Eelens et al., 2019). Common sense here implies the assurance that "my perception of the world is shared by others (...)" (Veck & Gunter, 2020, p. 5). Authority is a mode of connecting to the world that Arendt sees as crucial to education, allowing students to become rooted in the world (Veck, 2020).

In order to understand the role of authority in education, we must first investigate Arendt's concept of authority more generally. She insists that it is a historical concept that has assumed various shapes. It "grew out of the Roman experience of foundation and was understood in the light of Greek political philosophy" (Arendt, 1961, p. 141). In Roman political culture, the greatness of ancestors and in the final instance the foundation of Rome itself was invoked as a source of authority, which 'authorized' societal hierarchies and commands issuing from those who command to those who are commanded. The term 'authority' itself derives from the Latin *auctoritas*, which was understood by the Romans as implying augmentation (Arendt, 1961). The augmentation in question is the new enactment and addition to the original foundation of Rome; in that sense, its refoundation. This is how revolution and foundation are connected according to Arendt (1961, 136). For us this connectedness is a political insight that comes with educational consequences, as we will analyse below.

The imperatives that come from the 'authoritative' source are *in between* persuasion and coercion: not permitting an argumentative exchange on an equal footing (Arendt, 1961, p. 93; Gordon, 1999, p. 164), while also not requiring force to be effective. This is what distinguishes authority from "power or violence" and "any external form of coercion" (Arendt, 1961, p. 93). Arendt diagnoses the waning of this type of authoritative relationship: its disappearance threatens Western culture (Arendt, 1961, p. 93) and politics, creating space for totalitarian regimes which are 'unrooted' (Arendt, 1956, p. 403). At the same time, for Arendt authority has no place in today's political world. Political action is based in egalitarian relationships, while egalitarian relationships preclude authority (Arendt, 1998, pp. 32–33). Within education, the permanence and durability offered by authority cannot be missed. It is required to enroot students in the world: as with the Roman bearer of authority and the foundation of Rome, authority allows the educator to 'stand for' something external. The educator is asked to introduce newcomers to the world; for that reason, the educator must stand for the world, according to Arendt. Education is the only context in which authority still has a role. Therefore, for Arendt we must "decisively divorce the realm of education, where authority has a place, from all others, most of all from the realm of public, political life" (Arendt, 1961, p. 195).

Arendt claims that the very separation between education and politics allows for the application of "a concept of authority and an attitude toward the past which are appropriate to [education]" (Arendt 1961, p. 195). This claim of appropriateness is supported by appeals to both "natural needs, the helplessness of the child" and "political necessity, the continuity of an

established civilization” (Arendt 1961) which stands in need of education. Education is to stand *in between* in a similar way to authority, namely in between the world (common sense and human culture as a whole) as the ‘old’ and the newcomer (the source of action) as the ‘new’. Therefore, authority implies a specific temporality, also of the *in-between*, which involves a specific relationship with past, present, and future. This will be the subject of the next section.

2. Temporality: in-between past and future

In thinking about the position of educational authority with respect to temporality, there are two opposed options that Arendt seeks to mediate. In her essay on authority, she criticizes conservative and liberal accounts of politics (Arendt, 1956). On our analysis, these criticisms are paralleled by two different accounts of pedagogy: conservative versus progressive. First, many educational accounts of temporality are conservative in the usual sense. Such conservatives seek to restore societal forms from the past and to encapsulate them within the present. Conservative pedagogy need not be oriented exclusively toward the past: it may be involved in conserving an element of tradition, authority, or religion of today. In both of these past- and present-oriented varieties of conservative pedagogy a specific time-slice, past or present, is held constant. Moreover, this time-slice is seen as something that can be implemented more or less seamlessly into future societies. We thus find a type of continuity between past and present, but also between present and future. Examples of such an account are the pedagogies of Wynne and Bloom (Gordon, 1999).

The main educational implication of this continuity-view is that the selected time-slice acquires an ahistorical quality: one might say that it becomes reified, an ‘agenda item’ that functions as a self-sufficient and self-evident given that only needs to be implemented. There are two such moments of implementation: from educational theory into a specific educational programme (1), and from educational practice (within the programme) to the minds and lives of students (2). Education is thus imagined as an instrumental activity used to ‘instil’ a specific educational content taken from a past or present configuration, yet with little intrinsic regard for historical discontinuities. This type of education is aimed at producing a specific fit or adaptation. It therefore cannot see challenging the object of adaptation as an educational aim. The conservative pedagogue sees the open-endedness of the future as a problem and wants to fill it up with the past.

Second to this there are accounts that travel almost in the opposite direction. These are progressive or critical pedagogies which place their hopes, rather, on a specific present-future that they hope to establish as discontinuous with the past-present. Because of the specificity of the future scenario, which education should realize, this type of progressive pedagogy runs parallel to conservative pedagogy in that it imagines education as an instrumental activity, albeit that the ‘instrument’ differs between the conservative and progressive sides of the argument. For conservative pedagogy, the instrument is restorative in nature: there is a given past-present, knowable by historical and/or sociological facts, which should be re-realized. However, for progressive pedagogy, the instrument is revolutionary in nature: there is a given present-future, knowable by philosophical, literary or other means, which should be realized for the first time. Examples of such an account are the work of Freire (Noordegraaf-Eelens & Kloeg, 2020), McLaren and Gur-Ze’ev (Biesta, 1998).

According to Arendt, educational processes should not think in this restorative (conservative pedagogies) or determinative mode (progressive pedagogies), as for her “natality is the essence of education” (Arendt, 1961, p. 174), where natality is mankind’s capacity for renewal. According to Arendt, the world is a joint human creation that action, as the world’s renewal through the initiatives of ‘newcomers’, takes as its starting point (Arendt, 1998, pp. 7–9). For Arendt renewal through action is perpetually necessary, and as she puts it “[t]he problem is simply to educate in

such a way that a setting-right remains actually possible, even though it can, of course, never be assured" (Arendt, 1961, p. 193). Setting-right remains necessary because "we are always educating for a world that is or is becoming out of joint, for this is the basic human situation, in which the world is created by mortal hands to serve mortals for a limited time as home" (Arendt 1961, p. 193). As we will discuss in the following section, the present ecological crisis expresses the fact that this out-of-jointness affects not only the world, but equally the material earth.

Arendt's attitude towards the past sets her apart from conservative thinkers, in the sense of conservative pedagogy described above (Gordon, 1999). This is represented clearly in Arendt's *Crisis in Education*, in which she states that as a response to this crisis "[o]ne cannot simply go on nor yet simply turn back. Such a reversal will not bring us anywhere except to the same situation out of which the crisis has just arisen (...). On the other hand, simple, unreflective perseverance (...) can only, *because it surrenders to the course of time*, lead to ruin" (Arendt, 1961, p. 194: emphasis added).

Arendt's own position can be captured in the metaphor of the pearl diver, a Shakespearean image she uses to discuss Walter Benjamin's work (Arendt, 1970; Baluch, 2020). The point of the metaphor is that remnants of the past have been "sea-changed" into "pearls and corals" which the pearl diver brings to the surface (Arendt, 1970, p. 206). According to Gordon, and we agree, educators need to help students to become pearl divers and find the crystallized forms – "those ideas and values that, though they have undergone change, have survived in a different form and can be used to interrupt, critique, and transform the present" (Gordon, 1999, p. 170). The temporality invoked here is conflicted in that the past that is brought to light is not really the past: it is a collection of pearls that is able to upset the present precisely because of the "violence" it has undergone as the pearls have been interpreted in such a way that they now carry "the 'deadly impact' of new thoughts (...)" (Arendt, 1970, p. 201). The past must be taken seriously and brought to light in order to renew the world, which is always becoming out of joint – yet not the past *as* the past but *as* new thoughts that intervene in the present. Against the conservative pedagogues: we cannot simply continue doing what we are doing or were once doing. Yet the future cannot by itself serve as our touchstone either: we cannot predetermine the future and "strike from the newcomers' hands their own chance at the new" (Arendt, 1961, p. 177). This is the sense in which Arendt is a conservative: education should concern the world that is, rather than the world that was or is to come.

Arendt's educational conservatism completes our discussion of temporality within the context of educational authority. It is in orienting towards the present that we can make sure renewal remains-possible. In our terms, this means keeping open the future-oriented *possibilities* of education (Noordegraaf-Eelens & Kloeg, 2020); not by teaching the future but the present, pearls and all. As such the in-between is one that should be thought of as an interdependence between past and future. Yet by temporally placing education *in between* past and future¹ we have not yet adequately considered the question *what it is* that is supposed to be conserved. Conservative of what? The answer to this question – the world (Berkowitz, 2020, p. 26), which is itself rooted in the earth – leads us to consider spatiality as an element of Arendt's engagement with educational authority. Arendt herself does not explicitly distinguish between temporal and spatial dimensions of authority: yet standing for the world is distinct from standing for the present. It is not just that we should wish to avoid the conservative and progressive pitfalls: we need to take account of the fact that preparing for action also means a commitment to the world, which is Arendt's central concern. In our times, climate change shows that this in turn implies a commitment to the material earth, though presumably Arendt herself would have resisted this implication. Let us take the pearl-diving metaphor more literally: in bringing sea-changed corals and pearls to the surface of the present, we are relying on the shared human world and the culture that came before, but equally on the earth and its seas. The maritime metaphor matters: educational authority stands in-between world and earth, in recognition of their interdependence.

3. Spatiality: in-between world and earth

The spatial dimension enters the scene when Arendt describes educational responsibility as conserving the world in order to renew it. The responsibility for renewing the world is closely related to natality, which according to Arendt is “the essence of education” (Arendt, 1961, p. 174). Natality refers to the newness introduced by human beings, both in their first birth (as biological creatures) and in their second birth (through action, which as remarked realizes the newness of the ‘first birth’). For Arendt, all human activity (which jointly forms what she calls *vita activa*) should be understood as an expression of natality, action being its most direct expression. However, action is essentially connected to the other modes of human activity she describes, and this brings out the spatial dimension of authority, which is missing from Arendt’s own account of authority, and crucial for understanding responsibility for the world in education and its expression in authority.

Action is the ultimate possibility of human activity, in extension and with essential reference to the other aspects of human activity: labour and work. Labour is the activity of human beings insofar as it addresses immediate biological needs, such as eating or sleeping (Arendt, 1998, p. 40), which is circular in nature and concerns the human being as *animal laborans*, active on the earth. Work denotes a more specific category because it is goal-oriented and terminates in the fabrication of an object of a certain permanence or what she calls a “worldly object” (Arendt 1998, p. 91). We are here concerned with *homo faber* rather than with *animal laborans* (Arendt 1998, p. 91) and with the world as distinct from the earth. The sphere of work remains beholden to the instrumental register of means and ends (Arendt, 1998, p. 228). Action emancipates itself from this instrumentality: as the renewal of the world it has no predetermined end or goal, nor can its outcome be predicted beforehand (Gordon, 1999, p. 165). Labour, work and action relate to each other as “nested layers” (Sterling, 2010) so that Arendt’s tripartition of human activity can be used to illuminate the idea of sustainable education (Noordegraaf-Eelens et al., 2019). In addition, Arendt helpfully suggests that “[l]abour and work, as well as action, are also rooted in natality in so far as they have the task to provide and preserve the world for (...) the constant influx of newcomers (...)” (Arendt, 1998, p. 9). This means that the world, as the sphere of work, has a place in education both directly and indirectly; directly *qua* that which needs to be conserved for newcomers, indirectly as a nested layer that holds up and supports action.

While the idea of nested layers might be intended by Arendt, it is only there implicitly, as she does not explore the idea of the world in depth in her discussions on education. We bring out the implicit spatial dimension to authority, which we furthermore position in-between world and earth. Our inclusion of the earth aligns not only with the call of Thunberg, but also with the call of Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway, among others, that we are in need of “Gaia stories” or “geostories” that position human beings in their interdependencies with other living beings on the earth. In such stories “all the former props and passive agents have become active without, for that, being part of a giant plot written by some overseeing entity” (Haraway, 2016, pp. 40–41); “the world as an active subject” (Haraway, 1991, p. 199). This implies that the material earth, as much as the human world of culture, institutions, and common sense, should be the subject of the renewal that is at stake in education (Swillens & Vlieghe, 2020).

Arendt herself seems to be in two minds when it comes to claiming a place for the earth, or even to resist the idea (Swillens & Vlieghe, 2020). That is not to say that there is no ground for a ‘green’ interpretation of Arendt (Whiteside, 1998). In the context of discussing the roots of the concept of culture, Arendt discusses the connotation of “the intercourse between man and nature in the sense of cultivating and tending nature until it becomes fit for human habitation” (Arendt, 1961, pp. 211–212). She continues: “As such, [culture] indicates an attitude of loving care and stands in sharp contrast to all efforts to subject nature to the domination of man” (Arendt, 1961, p. 212). The fact that for Arendt “earth alienation”, symbolized through the conquest of space as a ‘leaving behind’ of the earth, is a specific problem alongside “world

alienation" or worldlessness (Macaulay, 1996, see also Arendt, 1973, p. 298), is seemingly also in support of a 'green' interpretation. However, the domination that opposes loving care seems built-in to the notion of *vita activa*, namely in the activity of work. Arendt describes "man the maker and fabricator" (*homo faber*) as he "whose job it is to do violence to nature in order to build a permanent home for himself" (Arendt, 1998, p. 304; see also Macaulay, 1996, pp. 119–120). Arendt also describes "labouring" as a "constant, unending fight against the processes of growth and decay through which nature forever invades the human artifice, threatening the durability of the world and its fitness for human use" (Arendt, 1998, p. 100). This latter passage suggests that Arendt's 'attitude of loving care' seems to extend not to nature and the earth as such, but to the activity of cultivating it, or, as one would state "from the viewpoint of nature", doing violence to it (Arendt, 1998, p. 100). Interpreting these passages jointly, labour seems to be in a permanent and unending fight with nature (hence its circular features), while work concerns a violent transformation of nature into culture (taking the fight to nature itself). When referring in such a way to nature, it always seems to appear as a passive scene, there to be transformed by active human beings.

In response to Arendt on this point, we insist on the image of nested layers, thereby stressing their interdependency. That is to say that work should not merely be understood as violence *against* nature, but also as necessarily taking place *within* nature, such that the earth constrains the world. One cannot sustain the world without tending nature – not in order to subsume it under culture, but as a 'place' of its own (see Macaulay, 1996, p. 125 on "natural places" such as woods and seas). This extends to the idea that the initiative taken in action *takes place* in a natural context that is itself active and dynamic. The spatial dimension of authority is thus not a matter of being 'extended' in space but a matter of taking up a specific 'place' on the earth.

If cultivating the new is the task of the temporal dimension of educational authority, sustaining the world and the earth, as well as realizing their interdependency is its spatial counterpart. We cannot pre-empt the new world, which we must leave to the newcomers; but this is important for the purpose of renewing the world rather than for the purpose of the newcomers' subjectivity as such (Noordegraaf-Eelens & Kloeg, 2020; Duarte, 2020, p. 144). Arendt's ultimate commitment is to the world, and we argue that this should be extended to the earth. In its spatial dimension, authority does not recall the foundation of Rome or the greatness of ancestors, but rather the coming-to-be of the earth. As Arendt suggests in her dissertation on St. Augustine, *initium* – the individual initiative, or action – follows *principium*, which for Augustine is understood as "creation" (Arendt, 1996, p. 55). Acting in the name of this coming-to-be as educators, we can stand for the earth. This is the precondition of any act of taking responsibility, since the earth itself is the precondition (at least materially) of any kind of human activity, however conceived.

Arendt shows us the importance of connecting education to the world as a specifically human sphere. We argue that a further dimension of the crisis of education is the inability to see the interconnection between nature and one's own way of life or culture, and the dependence of the latter on the former. At the same time, human activity cannot be reduced fully to nature but retains its own specific 'logic'. In a phrase: human activity relates to nature from within nature and thereby changes it. While we cannot argue this point in full here, the central implication for educational authority is that educators are always endowed with *auctoritas* both for and in-between world and earth, in their interdependency.

Authority does not only mediate in time and in space. We are now in a position to introduce the third dimension. The educator stands for the present and for both world and earth. But how does she then position *herself* with respect to her students? For Arendt, authority is expressed through the relationality between student and educator. This relational dimension of authority is based on Arendt's rigid separation of the public and the private domain. We will claim that in line with, and in order to make room for, the temporal and spatial dimensions of educational authority, in-betweenness is also required here. This is demanded by our argument up to this

point: in no longer exclusively focusing on the world but also on the material earth, we are by the same token problematizing the view that the public sphere is rigidly separate from the private sphere, so that the private never becomes public and *vice versa*. Instead, we are moving toward our own conception of ambiguous authority, which unites the temporal, spatial and relational dimensions of authority in education.

4. Relationality: in-between public and private

How to situate the student-educator relationship in terms of educational authority? Greta Thunberg's appearance in public, encouraging other students to go on a strike because the adults did not take responsibility, contests the relationship as envisioned by Arendt. When starting from Arendt we see that she makes a distinction between child and adult to position the student-educator relationship. This leads to a 'developmental' approach to education: students (children) are within the realm of education (hence not politics), being prepared for politics by their educators (adults). Education takes place in the private sphere. Adults are within the realm of the public sphere and politics (hence not education), having been sufficiently formed for their political role through their past education (Biesta, 2015). In this sense education and adulthood are mutually exclusive.

The hierarchical aspect that comes with authority in this relationship is efficacious in the division of accompanying responsibilities. Educators take responsibility for the world as it is, and for offering room for the newcomers to conserve the world through its renewal after they have been educated. Students *qua* students do not change the world: such changes take place in political and public space. Education concerns a preparation of newcomers for action in a responsible way – with the educator in a position of authority 'for now'. This also means that students are 'for now' shielded from the demands of public life, thus protecting newcomers against the world (Arendt, 1961, p. 188). It is for this reason, on our analysis, that Arendt insists that education and politics are separated (Arendt, 1961, p. 195; Berkowitz, 2020, pp. 28–29). Politics happens outside of the classroom, in a public environment. Within this public environment all participants have an equal say, according to Arendt. While students act as equals to each other within an educational setting, and are thus faced with a certain plurality, educational settings are not characterised by equality: the relationship between student and educator is a hierarchical one. This inequality is required to protect the student from the world, and the world from the student.

Arendt's argument here depends on a set of clear distinctions, which has proved to be contentious. We argue that there is no set boundary between private and public in education, but that the roots of authority as *auctoritas*, i.e. as practice of augmentation, can be applied to making the distinction between private and public as well: the cut-off point must remain contestable (Honig, 1993). For an educational context, this does not yet answer the question *from whence* such contestation is possible. We offer the concept of the ambiguous zone, in-between private and public, in response. This defines the relational dimension of educational authority.

Bonnie Honig (1993) takes stock of feminist critiques of the overly rigid distinction between the private (that is: household, homely, 'womanly') sphere and the public sphere (that of 'men of politics'). From a feminist point of view, it is often of the utmost importance that the personal is or be made political (Benhabib, 1993; Pitkin, 1981). The interdependency that we have mentioned in previous sections is here at stake as well. The personal and the political interact with each other and are dependent upon each other; private issues are transformed into political issues belonging to the realm of the public sphere. Current or former demarcations of the private sphere can and will be contested in view of the renewal of the world. Think for instance of the historical admission of women to universities. Such contestation intervenes in the spatial and temporal dimensions of educational authority as well. The aforementioned call for 'Gaia stories' by Haraway and Latour is a good example of such an intervention. So is, on a more practical

level, the figure of Greta Thunberg, who contests the lack of responsibility for the earth demonstrated by adults. Arendt's thought would seem to be an obstacle to any such contestation, referring private matters back to the private sphere. Honig suggests a politics of augmentation in order to overcome this problem. For Arendt, as we have seen, the original (political) meaning of *auctoritas* is precisely augmentation. This means that the *specific* demarcation between private and public should always remain "contestable" (Benhabib, 1993; Honig, 1993; Pitkin, 1981). We think this is a convincing amendment to Arendt (using Arendt's thoughts). We agree with Arendt's feminist critics; the personal is or can be made political, and the educational setting is well-situated to strike the balance between private and public. An educational setting can offer a zone to practice with the private/public relevance of specific issues and to reflect upon and contest where the boundary is situated. It is of great importance that education offers such a zone, where the relation with society is at stake. If not, the social order and its attendant hierarchies cannot be fully brought into view as a potential object for criticism. Therefore, we think that the augmented approach to authority Honig proposes fits the mediating view that we presented in the previous sections. Educators encourage students to relate to and where necessary displace societal and personal issues, thereby looking beyond the merely private-public dichotomy.

It remains an open question, however, *how* or more precisely *from whence* these augmentative interventions would take place. If we simply identify augmentation with authority it would be the educator who decides how far her authority extends. This would entail an implosion of the very distinction between private and public. Arendt herself diagnoses and criticizes the mediating effect of a "social sphere in which the private is made public and *vice versa*", so that the distinction between both is "discarded" (Arendt, 1961, p. 188). We likewise oppose the mutual transformation of the two terms so that they become indistinguishable. Instead, we propose to see education as an "ambiguous zone" (Agamben, 2005, p. 29) in which the specific interrelation of private and public is *suspended*, and both make themselves felt² and are open to be contested.

This implies that the concern for the life and growth of children which is properly part of the private domain (Arendt, 1961, p. 188) enters into the educational setting with full force. Yet so does concern for the world, which Arendt opposes to concern for individual life: "life *qua* life does not matter there" (Arendt, 1961, p. 186). This fundamental ambiguity justifies Arendt's remark that education assumes "responsibility for both, for the life of the child and for the continuance of the world" (Arendt, 1961, p. 184). She continues: "These responsibilities do not by any means coincide: they may indeed come into conflict with each other" (Arendt, 1961, p. 184).

The resulting ambiguity defines the educational setting and thus the relational dimension of authority. Authority, as the shape educational responsibility takes, is in-between private and public. As a result, the educational setting marks a demarcation between private and public without itself being completely beholden to either sphere. However, this does not mean that the distinction between private and public is blurred in education, or that authority is lost in today's world so that we have to hope for an authority *as if*, as Roger Berkowitz has argued (2020, 31). Rather, within the educational setting private and public concerns are fully present, also when they are in tension with one another. In this ambiguous zone those involved must *decide* the ways in which private and public concerns will be received in education. This also means that education itself cannot be reduced to either the private or the public sphere. In turn, the decision to be made is neither only the students' nor only the educator's: the interrelation of students and educator is in part what is at stake in each decision. The specific decisions that are made, that is, the ways of demarcating between private and public that are accepted within a specific educational setting, are always subject to augmentation. This means that authority continues to be questioned *and* exercised, with the ambiguous zone of education as the starting node of its specific relational dimension. That is why combining the temporal, spatial and relational dimensions of authority as analysed above yields a specific concept of educational authority: ambiguous authority.

5. Conclusion: ambiguous authority

For Hannah Arendt, educational responsibility assumes the shape of authority. In this paper, we have tried to show that this authority, in current times, operates in different dimensions. We propose three dimensions – temporality, spatiality and relationality. Within all three the central (and mediating) importance of authority has been developed. When it comes to temporality in an educational setting, we propose that possibilities for the future should be developed with reference to the past in all of its ‘deadly impact’, but without simply restoring the past (conservative pedagogy). At the same time the future must remain open, so that education is not reduced to an instrument to realize a specific future (progressive or critical pedagogy). The temporal dimension of educational authority is therefore expressed in *the present*. The second dimension, spatiality, turns on the interdependency of the world and the earth. Whereas Arendt points out that the world should be conserved, and that this implies change, or better action, we added that with this world comes the earth. The spatial dimension of authority therefore stands for both *world and earth* in their interdependency. In other words, the question of sustainability is always implicated. The third line of demarcation is about relationality in an educational setting and takes the distinction between private and public as used by Arendt as a starting point. Her overly rigid demarcation between private and public runs into valid concerns, for instance from a feminist perspective. Following Honig, we claim that it is the augmentation of authority that is at stake within the educational setting. In her analysis, however, it remains unclear from whence augmentation can take place. We argue that private and public interests both make themselves felt, in full, in the educational setting: their relative weight within it is subject to revision and contestation. The relational dimension of authority is therefore captured by the *ambiguous zone*. There is no blurring of the boundaries between private and public. Rather, their ambiguity requires us to pay heed to potential conflicts and tensions with respect to responsibility. Thereby we do not only reject the dichotomous distinction made by Arendt: we also offer room for a broader range of perspectives on where the public and the private begin and end for the purpose of education.

Our consideration of the different dimensions of authority in education has thus led us to criticize Arendt’s use of the concept in important respects. In order to both make explicit the temporal, spatial and relational commitments of authority and mark our differences from Arendt’s views, we propose the concept of ambiguous authority. We started off by asking how educational responsibility could be expressed. The concept of ambiguous authority provides a threefold answer to the question. Ambiguous authority gives room to both the interdependency and the possible conflict in-between past and future, world and earth and public and private. It provides a focus on the present, on the world and in turn the earth, and issues from the ambiguous zone of the educational setting. These are, in other words, the different dimensions of the shape that responsibility assumes in education. Two main challenges lie ahead: first, to define more clearly Arendt’s concept of educational responsibility as such, rather than its expression through authority; second, to formulate the impacts of ambiguous authority for educational practice.

Notes

1. See Arendt 1996, 13-15 for Arendt’s take on the Augustinian theory of time. E.g.: “It is only by calling past and future into the present of remembrance and expectation that time exists at all” (Arendt 1961, p. 15).
2. In Agamben the ambiguous zone is a response to the problem of the ‘state of exception’, which is a political term that situates polemics between thinkers such as Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida on the theme of the interrelation of law and violence, which Agamben explores. The use of the term in education suggests a complex political positioning of education, which we accept but cannot explore here.

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