

# What if "Dynamic Society" becomes the Norm? The Arendt Dilemma and Its Way Out in Contemporary Ethical and Educational Life

Chuanbao Tan  
*Beijing Normal University*  
Beijing, China

**Abstract**—The Arendt Dilemma, one of the greatest dilemmas in contemporary ethics and education, is that we have abandoned almost everything, but meantime we cannot break away from some premise of the certainty at any time in our ethical life and moral education. This Arendt Dilemma is manifested not only in the subversion and struggle of traditional ethics in our personal life, but also in the question and confusion of traditional political identifications in our social life. The core root of this trouble can be summed up in the fact or feature of our society that the "dynamic society" has become the norm in this era. Understanding and dealing with this Arendt dilemma properly requires us to develop the comprehensive judgment rather than single judgment in ethical life, and construct rather than destroy the educational logic in the educational process.

**Keywords**—Arendt Dilemma, single judgment, comprehensive judgment.

Hannah Arendt in [1] *Between Past and Future*, formulates a universal problem of modern society—"The problem of education in the modern world lies in the fact that by its very nature it cannot forgo either authority or tradition, and yet must proceed in a world that is neither structured by authority nor held together by tradition."

As far as I am concerned, what Hannah Arendt has formulated is not just confined to a social fact of a certain "modern world"; more importantly it reveals one of the most significant dilemmas of contemporary ethics and education: we can negate almost everything, whilst ethical life as well as moral education cannot be separated from the premise of certainty. The above situation is the so-called Arendt Dilemma addressed in this article. And the way to understand and cope with Arendt Dilemma has become one of the most important issues that contemporary society and education has to face.

## I. THE FACTUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ARENDT DILEMMA

Within the context of our daily life, the most specific and salient representation of the above-stated Arendt Dilemma can be depicted through the following two aspects:

### A. *The Personal-Life Domain: The Holistic Subversion of Traditional Ethics and the Ensuing Struggle*

In traditional ethical life, an individual will consciously or unconsciously abide by certain definitive ethical rules. For instance, Chinese society has once followed "the Five Cardinal Relations" (五伦 FIVE LUN) for a long period of time: Between parent and child, there is to be affection QIN);

between ruler and minister, rightness YI); between husband and wife, differentiation BIE); between elder and younger, precedence XU); between friends, trust (信 XIN) [2]. According to Mencius, education-related institutions were established in the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties (2146BC-256 BC), respectively, all functioning to teach people the Five Cardinal Relations, albeit with different titles. People of three dynasties learnt the same set of ethical rules together, and that was how people got to know the wisdom of human relations well. Accordingly, many Chinese thinkers, especially those of the Confucian school, put special emphasis on the education of human relations. The Chinese people lived in this system of ethics for more than two thousand years, until the advent of modern society. Yet in contemporary China, the relation between the ruler and minister no longer exists, and the rule regarding the other four relations has also been wholly subverted. The relation between husband and wife is a good case in point. If we discuss such topics with an urban youth (in Beijing, Shanghai, or Shenzhen), who happens to be at an age for marriage, he or she will in turn asks us: why do we have to get married in the first place (why does 'relation between husband and wife' necessarily exist)? And we will be at a loss for words.

In contemporary times, the phenomenon of holistic moral subversion is not unique to China. Globally speaking, homosexual, bi-sexual relationships and its marriages have been "tolerated" or accepted by an increasing number of people in some societies, and even the self-destructive lifestyles such as drug-using is regarded as within the domain of personal freedom and thus deserve to be "de-morally-labeled" by some philosophers.

Ethical life and its educational foundation have been shaken to its core in contemporary society. However, people cannot live their life without the existence of basic regulations, and moral education should not use the method of not imparting any moral positions to children, nor should it adopt a position that resonates with the school of Values Clarification, which only requires the teacher to help children to clarify their pre-existing values (and thus only eschews, rather than solve, the value problems). This is one of the most conflicted conditions that experienced by people in the contemporary society.

*B. The Social-Life Domain: The Absolute Questioning and Its Ensuing Confusion of Traditional Political Identification*

The so-called traditional political identification can be simply categorized into two main types: the identification with political institutions, and the identification with national states. The former is based on political ideology, while the latter is based on lineage and culture. Currently the two main types of political identification are all subject to unprecedented crisis of uncertainty.

Around the globe, although the forces of inertia of capitalistic discursive hegemony still exists strongly, not only the real-life events such as Occupy Wall Street Movement and the worldwide financial crisis (which, in my view, is by nature a kind of crisis of political institutions), but the universal distrust towards the certainty of capitalistic ideology initiated by post-modernism, implies the gradual decline of definitive or absolute utopian thinking that started from the Enlightenment. Therefore, the 'thin democracy' resides in different societies in different forms (political indifference and non-participation, or violent, destructive participation). Within the nation-state identification dimension, characteristics which are represented by "the Rose Revolution" kind of thinking all boil down to the fact that political identification takes precedence over the nation-state one (in terms of this, we are able to detect similar logics in certain radical political claims recently from Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China). The problem is that the misery of nation-states will eventually reverse some simple and radical political ideological choices, the proof of which can be easily found in the "political revolutions" in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. Within the grand China, this conflict manifests itself in a more absolute sense: on the one hand, China as a nation-state has been at its peak in terms of economic and social development, and on the other hand, the pro-independence of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Sinkiang (Xinjiang) and Tibet will at times grow rampant. More absurdly, in Hong Kong and Taiwan, some people are not only against the Communist Party and Socialism system politically, but become opponents of national identification such as "China", "Chinese", "Chinese culture" and so on.

The two above-mentioned negations of traditional political identification are at once the cause and the consequence of education. Thus, to explore the ways out of the dilemma is the responsibility of education, and it further requires the efforts of the society at large. In terms of education alone, undoubtedly the essence of ethical life is about the appropriate negotiations of relations between one and his self, one and his counterparts, as well as one and the society. If an individual's identity cannot be confirmed, and that the relationship between the individual and the nation or state is in intense tension and uncertainty, how should we answer the basic questions of moral education, such as who should teach? Whose values should be taught? Who should receive the teaching? What kind of characters should be cultivated? This is the second representation of the Arendt Dilemma.

## II. THE SOCIAL ROOTS OF THE ARENDT DILEMMA

The social roots and the crux of the Arendt Dilemma can in fact be attributed to the reality that the particular traits of a "dynamic society" have become the common scene of the society, which is a characteristic of our times.

*A. The "Dynamic Society" Means More Than a Kind of "Turbulent Times"*

Along the course of human development, "turbulent times" such as the Spring and Autumn Period, the Five-Dynasty Period (in ancient China) and the French Revolution always exist, and a society of such times can be seen as a certain "dynamic society". However, this "dynamic society" in the sense of "turbulent times", is by nature nothing more than the transitional period of two stably-developing eras. In stark contrast, in terms of both the economic basis and the superstructure, in contemporary times, the "dynamic society" has become the norm, or a kind of stably-existing societal or epochal characteristic: some traditional industries, which have lasted thousands of years, disappear rapidly, whereas some newly-developing industries that have never been heard before are quickly burgeoning; a pre-existing interpersonal relationship has not been reinforced, whilst a new relationship has already taken place; some traditional ideas have been thoroughly overthrown, yet the some new values and ideas are filled with uncertainties in themselves...Therefore, the previously stated phenomenon, namely the holistic subversion of traditional ethics in the personal-life domain and the absolute questioning of traditional political identification in the social-life domain, is nothing but a demonstration that "dynamic society" has become the norm.

*B. The Other Side of The "Dynamic" Nature of Modern Society is the So-Called "Diversity"*

Actually, we can say that "dynamic" and "diversity" are two sides of the same coin, serves mutually as cause and effect of each other. Since values are uncertain, then different choices of values are justified to exist logically. In a sense, one century ago Dewey's empiricist analysis of ethical rules illustrated the "dynamic" of human life, as well as signaled the "diversity" of values that might come out of the differences in experience.

Therefore, as far as contemporary education and social life is concerned, the most urgent question is as such: how do we deal with the Arendt Dilemma when the "dynamic society" has already become the norm?

Many scholars in China responded that education should "teach young people how to choose", including promoting moral education and establish the spirit of openness, democratic styles and the awareness of self-examination and so on [3]. However, the abstract principles such as "the spirit of openness, democratic styles, the awareness of self-examination", albeit correct, have not absolutely, specifically and concretely answered the question of how "teach young people how to choose" can be achieved in the contemporary "dynamic society".

## C. THE POSSIBLE WAYS OF DEALING WITH THIS ARENDT DILEMMA PROPERLY

Following the above question, what are the possible ways out for ethics and education when the "dynamic society" has become the norm? Moral education is simultaneously "morality" and "education", and thus logically speaking, we may need to search for solutions according to the two dimensions, namely the construction of ethics and moral education.

### C. *Comprehensive Instead of Single Judgment in Ethical Life*

In certain specific historical epochs, because the society itself is stable (even when it is

‘turbulent’ it is the transitional period of two stable eras), a certain mode of thought can fit the need of societal development to a great extent. For example, the Confucian ethics used to be the dominant culture of the Chinese society for more than two thousand years, and the political philosophy of Liberalism and the ethics of Deontology have had dominant influence on the establishment of capitalist civilization in some Western societies. And exactly because of this, enlighten the mass like seers and saints used to be the essential pursuit of function of many ideology constructions.

However, as the “dynamic society” has become the norm in contemporary society, it has led to the changes, pluralism and complex ethical situation, and many value problems cannot be solved by a single value judgment, and comprehensive judgment has become an inevitable choice in the face of the changes and complex situation. For instance, in terms of making ethic-related choices, we particularly need the comprehensiveness resulted from Deontology, Utilitarianism and Virtue Ethics which have been critiquing each other for a long time. We not only need to maintain reverence and deference towards ‘Categorical Imperative’ from the stand point of Deontology, but also need a thorough evaluation of moral consequences with the help of Utilitarianism; and whether it is the observance of Categorical Imperative or the evaluation of moral consequence, certain generally-acknowledged virtues on the part of the behavioral agents are needed. From the perspective of political philosophy, political stances such as Liberalism, Republicanism and Communitarianism, throughout their long-time mutual oppositions, not only reveals each other’s shortcomings, but also illustrates the rationality of viewing public life in a comprehensive manner. The contemporary construction of political life not only requires the combination of wisdom of Liberalism, Republicanism and Communitarianism, but also requires a thorough consideration of the historical rationality inherent in the socialist political propositions. It is very tough, but only by achieving this can we explain and transform the society effectively.

There is a very interesting case in studies on mainland China. Many Western political scientists, especially the liberal fundamentalists, generally regard the socialist China as “the demon of totalitarianism”. But meanwhile in the Western world there is also such a person as Naisbitt in [4] who openly announces that China has been developing a kind of “Vertical Democracy” (Naisbitt maintains that the political decision-making of China has been struggling to reflect people’s will, through a combination of “from top to bottom” and “from bottom to top” ways), and that the form of democracy is far from the Western “Horizontal Democracy” characterized by separation of powers and checks and balances. And in order to cope with the unprecedented complexity of contemporary society as well as its development, based on Naisbitt’s opinion, maybe the future China still needs to accomplish the combination of “Vertical Democracy” and “Horizontal Democracy”. The so-called “Chinese path” can be understood to be a

“comprehensive judgment” in the sense of political philosophy which is based on the complex reality.

In a nutshell, gone are the days when we would preach the single truth (single judgment) in a godlike manner in terms of value selection. Considering different modes of thinking, and initiating a comprehensive judgment which caters to both the theoretical correctness and the real-life possibilities is the proper way to deal with challenges caused by the transition of the society as well as the diversely-developing values. Of course, the so-called “comprehensive judgment” not only possess openness in terms of space, but also in terms of time, and thus the increasing variables of time should also be taken into consideration even if the complexities of the current stage have been explored to the fullest. Specifically, when it comes to the selection of contents of moral education, only when moral education is open and dialogue-inclined towards the young can it elicit value consensus of a definitive nature, and the ‘morality’ that is taught by moral educators can be sincerely accepted by the new generation.

### D. *Adopting a Constructive Rather than Destructive Educational Logic*

In moral education, adopting a constructive rather than destructive educational logic on the

‘pedagogic’ level or in terms of formality is as important as making comprehensive instead of single judgment in terms of contents.

Since the dynamic society has become the norm, moral education, or even all areas of education should regard “teach young people how to choose” as their mission, and cultivating “critical thinking” has become the consensus globally. However, due to many people’s misunderstandings of the “critical thinking”, the educational life has gradually formed a kind of destructive educational logic: Critical thinking is doubting and denying everything. This point can be easily confirmed through a series of phenomenon, such as moral nihilism caused by the immoderate negations of ethical rules, the political life that is filled with “angry citizens”, as well as the either-or, throat-cutting spiritual states of difference political stances.

“Critical thinking appears as a primary aim of education over most of the world today. It is often described as a detached, skeptical, and analytical process, and many people believe that its main use is to win arguments. However, critical thinking is best thought of as a dedicated search for meaning and understanding [5] as Noddings and Brooks told us recently. More than a decade ago, Terry McLaughlin, the late president of Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, professor of Institute of Education, University College of London, also specifically pointed out during his speech in China that critical thinking itself needs a certain standard, and that if we attempt to doubt or challenge all standards critical thinking can no longer stand. Hence, critical thinking does not equal pure negation, but instead implies certain bottom lines of civilization; critical thinking should be about criticizing and challenging pre-existing conclusions and at the same time contains constructive innovation. In order to help students develop a complete form of criticality, and to enhance them to think as owners and mature citizens rather than slaves or coldblooded ‘others’, thinking and practices regarding independence, cautiousness and constructiveness are of great

significance. Therefore, some educators in China believe 'critical thinking' should be translated into Chinese as "cautious thinking" (慎思) and "a cautious mode of thinking" (审慎性思维).

The complete understanding of "critical thinking" is but one example of a constructive rather than destructive educational logic. A constructive rather than destructive logic is a kind of idea of education practices, and should be implemented in all the parts of education. In *Between Past and Future*, Arendt has actually provided a very constructive way out for the dilemma facing contemporary ethics and education from an educational perspective: "That means, however, that not just teachers and educators but all of us, so far as we live in one world together with our children and with young people, must take toward them an attitude radically different from the one we take toward one another. We must decisively divorce the realm of education from the others, most of all from the realm of public, political life in order to apply to it alone a concept of authority and an attitude toward the past which are appropriate to it but have no general validity and must not claim a general validity in the world of grown-ups." Arendt in [1] at the same time she emphasized: "Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to the own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world" [1].

Naisbitt in [4] especially appreciates an argument of Thomas Kuhn, which is "You can't use an old set of language to understand a new paradigm." I believe this adage of Kuhn is also suitable for our understanding of contemporary society and moral education, in that we obviously cannot utilize the thinking experience of any past time, stable or turbulent time, to analyze the contemporary society and moral education in which the dynamic has become the norm. Although to get more specific and definitive answers we are still in need of more and deeper efforts, in order to understand and cope with the Arendt Dilemma, we should undoubtedly develop a comprehensive and proper ethical thinking as well as an educational logic that is suitable for the characteristics of contemporary society.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Arendt, H. (1977). *Between Past and Future*. London: Penguin Books.
- [2] Pak, S. (2008). *Prime for Youth*, in Bary, W. (Eds.) *Sources of East Asian Tradition*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- [3] Wu, K.N. (1999). *Teach student how to choose: The inevitable path of school moral education facing 21st century—based on sociological reflections (In Chinese)*. *Journal of East China Normal University (Educational Sciences)* 17(3): pp.10-18. facing 21st century—based on sociological reflections. *Journal of East China Normal University (Educational Sciences)* 17(3): pp.10-18. In Chinese.
- [4] Naisbitt, J.D. (2010). *China's Megatrends, Pillar 2*, NY: Harper Collins Publisher.
- [5] Noddings, N. & Brooks, L. (2017). *Teaching Controversial Issues: the Case for Critical Thinking and Moral Commitment in the Classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.