

The Nursery and Biopolitics of Care

Denise Egéa-Kuehne
Louisiana State University

Zelia Gregoriou opens her text with a quote from Hannah Arendt's controversial book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, in which the phrase "politics is not like the nursery" are words the judges of the Nuremberg trial might have said, if they "had dared to address their defendant," Eichmann, in those terms.¹ In this context, these words do not refer to childish nursery play, but underscore the fact that throughout his trial, Eichmann denied all responsibility, claiming that he had merely followed orders. Hence the second part of the quote: "in politics, obedience and support are the same."²

In Arendt's text, the reference to the nursery is not to liken Eichmann's actions to a game of "building blocks" nor to any "innocent play," but to stress that, in a sanctioned context, obedience is expected, and rewarded, like it is in a nursery when dealing with young children. In politics, Arendt asserts, "obedience" means "support." This is where she saw "the banality of evil": a seemingly ordinary man with a penchant and the skills for carrying out orders, however horrendous and horrifying their consequences may be. Hence it is not a matter of Arendt "[excluding] the nursery from the realm of politics." In the context of Eichmann, it is simply not this kind of connection.

This being said, I propose to turn to the distinction Gregoriou makes between the private — where she understands the nursery as the essence (*ousia*) of the private — and the public (the *polis*). This distinction is not new and both Arendt and Gregoriou refer to Aristotle's elaboration on "the concepts of *oikos* and *polis*." Arendt writes: "According to Greek thought, the human capacity for political organization is not only different from but stands in direct opposition to that natural association whose center is the home (*oikiri*) and the family."³ She further cites Werner Jaeger who affirms that "there is a sharp distinction in [every citizen's] life between what is his own ... and what is communal."⁴ For Aristotle, only two human capacities constituted what he called "the *bios politikos*, namely action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*),"⁵ a concept already expressed in the *Iliad*, in which Achilles was educated "to be a speaker of words and a doer of deeds." Excluded from the *bios politikos*, was the "realm of human affairs," all matters of economic concern, anything deemed "necessary" or "useful," anything having to do with home and family life. In the section of *The Human Condition*, titled "The Polis and the Household," Arendt writes: "The distinction between a private and a public sphere of life corresponds to the household and the political realms."⁶ Both are distinct from the more recent "social realm, which is neither private nor public."⁷

In her essay, Gregoriou uses the nursery as a metonymy for the private, what has previously been called "the household," to address the concept of biopolitics, and more precisely, of "biopolitics of care." She is concerned about the consequences of "[excluding] the processes of life ... from the realm of politics." She believes that

this exclusion “carries significant political ramifications for how we perceive respect and care for humanity.” She calls for a biopolitics of care “to provide an informal economy of flexible care,” in which women need to relinquish the care of home and children to help from outside the household. Fiona Williams believes that the state has a role in constructing markets for care for children, but also for the elderly.⁸ The problem then becomes twofold: (1) Covert racism manifests itself in the selection of the carer who must show such characteristics as “‘caring,’ ‘warm,’ ‘docile,’ ‘natural housekeeper,’ ‘happy’”⁹; generally migrant women, mostly “of color,” from the “Global South”; and (2) the private sphere is then breached with the intrusion of this “outsider” into the nursery, into the household, who is thus doubly othered and held in exclusion within the very household.

This new social realm, “neither private nor public,” has much to do with the field of philosophy of education which is called upon to help us gain a better understanding of those issues linked to biopolitics of care, from the viewpoint of the families, the children, the carers, and the educational community. As philosophers of education, we can shift the focus from what Gregoriou calls the “paradigmatic fields for philosophy of education,” that is, “state educational policy, classroom pedagogy, ideals and values, and teacher-student identities and relationships” to the topics of biopolitics in general, but also to question our own position regarding biopolitics of care.

1. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 278.

2. *Ibid.*, 279.

3. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 24.

4. Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, in *Volume III: The Conflict of Cultural Ideals in the Age of Plato*, trans. Gilbert Highet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 111, cited in Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 25.

5. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 25.

6. *Ibid.*, 28.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Gregoriou cites Fiona Williams, “Trends in Women’s Employment, Domestic Service and Female Migration: Changing and Competing Patterns of Solidarity,” in *Solidarity Between the Sexes and Generations: Transformations in Europe*, eds. Trudie Knijn and Aafke E. Komter (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2003).

9. Gregoriou cites Bridget Anderson, “A Very Private Business: Exploring the Demand for Migrant Domestic Workers,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 14, no. 3 (2007): 253.