# Thinking in the Gap: Hannah Arendt and the Prospects for a Postsecular Philosophy of Education

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, scholars from a variety of fields and disciplines have become acutely interested in the notion of the "postsecular." While the concept has been a point of analysis for decades,[1] and efforts to develop an explicitly postsecular philosophy date to the late 1990s,[2] only in the past few years have educational theorists taken up this inquiry.[3] The most recent example of this is a volume edited by Philip Wexler and Yotam Hotam, who suggest that the challenge for education is to address "what has been mostly left out by critical thought: the relation between religion and society, the secular and the sacred, faith and political action, and to engage and influence accordingly new lines of work, theoretically, empirically, and practically."[4]

Inquiry into the postsecular, however, is complicated by the fact that there is no consensus regarding even the most fundamental terms in question; that is, the literature attests to multiple modernities,[5] secularities,[6] and postsecularities.[7] As Rosi Braidotti summarizes in her analysis of the postsecular turn in feminism, "different forms of secularism may be engendered by multiple models of modernity. … [Further,] the postsecular condition is quite diverse and internally differentiated."[8]

Nonetheless, I suggest that the complexity and plurality of the postsecular is actually the key to its fruitful theoretical development and pragmatic engagement. By way of showing this, I offer that Hannah Arendt's portrayal of and response to the gap between past and future provides both theoretical and practical resources for philosophers and practitioners of education as they confront the postsecular. First, I read Arendt's account through the work of Mircea Eliade and Pierre Hadot to show how it can be seen as an instantiation of postsecular thought. In particular, I suggest that Arendt allows us to see the spiritual character, per Hadot, and the religious quality, per Dewey, of life in the gap. Second, extending Aaron Schutz's work on the performative and pedagogical dimensions of Arendt's writing, I discuss how this "gap-thinking," as it were, helps us effectively understand and engage the phenomenon of the postsecular in education. Taken together, these analyses lead me to two related insights into the relevance of Arendt's gap for postsecular thinking: 1) at least in some ways, the postsecular might be better rendered as the postscientific; and 2) this in turn entails certain imperatives for doing philosophy of education and pedagogy. Namely, that a postsecular philosophy of education (or, perhaps, philosophy *as* education) might substantively involve a range of extra-cognitive dynamics, such as performativity, affect, spirituality, and existentialism. I end by briefly discussing some practical implications of this approach as it concerns a few exemplary dilemmas of education in a postsecular age.

THINKING AND EXISTING IN THE GAP:
SACRED TIME AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICE IN ARENDT'S ANALYSIS

Concerning Arendt's understanding of the temporality of the gap, what is most relevant and striking for my purposes is how Arendt describes the interval of time between past and future as somehow distinct from (continuous) historical time. As she explains, "the appeal to thought arose in the odd in-between period which sometimes *inserts itself into* historical time."[9] This interval in time actually breaks the continuous flow of time and thus exists as a sort of separate temporality in which humans live: "Seen from the viewpoint of man, who always lives in the interval between past and future, time is not a continuum, a flow of uninterrupted succession."[10]

This break in time is paradoxically defined in relationship to the past – "things that are no longer" – and the future – "things that are not yet"[11] – and yet is discontinuous with the flow of historical time. Emphasizing, as Arendt does, that this gap is *inserted into* historical time, the comparison can be made to Mircea Eliade's rendering of sacred time. In his classic *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Eliade explains that sacred time, as "*a primordial mythical time made present* … is indefinitely recoverable, indefinitely repeatable."[12] As such, sacred time does not "pass" in the manner of linear historical time. Rather, sacred time "appears under the paradoxical aspect of a circular time, reversible and recoverable, a sort of eternal mythical present … "[13]

According to Eliade, then, "religious man" does not live in what we are apt to call the "historical present." Instead, the religious person seeks to live in sacred time, which on Eliade's account "can be homologized to eternity."[14] Arendt's gap shares these essential features. She explains that "this time construct is totally different from the time sequence of ordinary life."[15] And just as Eliade invokes the notion of an "eternal present" to describe sacred time,[16] Arendt denotes the gap as constituting "an immovable present, a *nunc stans* [eternal present]."[17]

In short, granting these similarities, it becomes possible to view the gap between past and future as possessing a sort of sacredness over against the profanity of ordinary, historical time. In addition, Arendt opens the door to locating a spirituality in her conceptualization of what it means to live and think from within this gap. This is found in her suggestion that thinking in the gap should be understood as a practice, as exercises in thought.

In delineating her understanding of the situation that results from the break from tradition, Arendt explains that the forces of both the past and the future converge in the present so as to create a third directional force. That is, they do not collide squarely but at an angle, and the direction and force of this new diagonal line is the "perfect metaphor for the activity of thought."[18] Arendt suggests, however, that in the absence of a guiding tradition, it is unlikely that humans will be able to locate this path for thought and escape the clash of the forces of past and future. The challenge, then, is to figure out how to live and think from within this gap, between these "fighting forces."[19] She goes on to declare that this can be accomplished "only through practice, through exercises." In fact, she describes her entire book as a series of essays

existing as just such *exercises in thought*. In addition, she specifies that she is not so much concerned with discerning the truth or dictating *what* should be thought, but "*solely with how to move* in this gap."[20]

Arendt further clarifies that the practice and exercise of thinking within the gap "is different from such mental processes as deducing, inducing, and drawing conclusions whose logical rules of non-contradiction and inner consistency can be learned once and for all and then need only to be applied."[21] Here I find a striking similarity to the ancient conception of philosophy as a way of life as detailed by Pierre Hadot.[22] Hadot stresses that ancient philosophy was not dedicated so much to conveying encyclopedic knowledge, formal systems, or abstract concepts for mere cognitive engagement, but with learning how to practice philosophy as an art of living: "The philosophers of antiquity were concerned not with ready-made knowledge, but with imparting that training and education that would allow their disciples to 'orient themselves in thought, in the life of the city, or in the world.'"[23] Likewise for Arendt, the primary concern is not discerning truth or maximizing the rationality of one's theoretical commitments, it is simply "how to move in [the] gap."[24] Moreover, this emphasis on praxis in the ancient world was regarded as a spiritual undertaking. Philosophy's "goal was nothing less than an art of living, and so spiritual exercises were exercises in learning to live the philosophical life. Spiritual exercises were exercises because they were practical, required effort and training, and were lived; they were spiritual because they involved the entire spirit, one's whole way of being."[25]

For Arendt and the philosophers of antiquity, then, there is a premium placed on figuring out how to live, and this is to be accomplished through approaching thinking as an exercise or practice. Importantly, the invocation of the notion of *spiritual* here is not meant to grant back-door access to supernatural or theological belief where it does not necessarily belong. Rather, the express intention is to recapture a sense of the spiritual and the sacred that can be usefully employed in the development of a postsecular philosophy of education. In order to do this, however, it remains to show how the co-constitutive binary of the religious and the secular can be interrupted such that each term might be newly defined. In other words, I am claiming that the postsecular character of Arendt's gap-thinking stems neither from an essential religious quality nor from an essential secular quality. To make this clearer, I will examine two ways in which the postsecular might be found in Arendt's thought. The first corresponds to a distinction between religion proper and the *religious quality* of experience, as parsed by John Dewey. The second involves what might be called the *postscientific* dimensions of Arendt's writing and pedagogy.

### THE RELIGIOUS QUALITY OF THINKING IN THE GAP

In Dewey's *A Common Faith*, he endeavors to open a space between what were, in his time, the two dominant approaches to religion. On the one hand were the traditionalists who identified the religious with the divine, metaphysical, and doctrinal or theological. On the other hand were those who saw the advance of science and culture as rendering the supernatural obsolete.

Dewey proceeds to stake out his own position by first distinguishing among *religion*, *a religion*, and *the religious*.[26] First, Dewey has little use for *religion* as a general concept or category, noting that the variety of and differences among the world's religions "are so great and so shocking that any common element that can be extracted is meaningless."[27] The second term, *a religion*, simply refers to a concrete, historic manifestation of religion, such as Roman Catholicism. The third, *the religious*, is what most interests Dewey and is what I want employ for my purposes here. In fact, Dewey presents an explicitly normative stance on this question: "I am not proposing a religion, but rather the *emancipation of elements and outlooks* that may be called religious"[28] from their identification with and entrapment in a supernatural approach to religion. He squarely asserts that genuine, authentic religious experience is stifled by institutional and organized forms of religion, especially those that insist on defining the religious in terms of the supernatural or metaphysical.[29]

For Dewey, the crucial distinction is that rather than speaking of *religious experience* as an independent type of experience identifiable in the abstract, we should instead speak of all types of experiences as potentially possessing a *religious quality*. As he summarizes, "all religions … have dwelt upon the power of religion to introduce perspective into the piecemeal and shifting episodes of existence. Here too we need to reverse the ordinary statement and say that whatever introduces genuine perspective is religious, not that religion is something that introduces it."[30] On this account, aesthetic, scientific, moral, educational, and political experiences can be *religious in quality*.[31]

By incorporating Dewey's account of a non-theological religiousness with Eliade's account of sacred time and space, it can be seen how Arendt's gap-thinking indeed possesses a sacred or religious quality in this alternative sense. Recalling Eliade's account of sacred time as distinct from ordinary, profane time, his explanation of sacred and profane *space* likewise compliments Arendt's understanding of the nature of reality in the gap between past and future. For Eliade, profane space/reality is formless, amorphous, homogeneous, and thus chaotic.[32] As such, it prevents humans from acting, for without an orientation, "nothing can begin, nothing can be *done*."[33] This resembles the gap as characterized by a loss of tradition, the absence of that which guides, orients, and bridges the gap.[34] Arendt, as noted above, is concerned with how to think and move within this gap, a liminal space discontinuous with the past and future. In responding to this reality through exercises in thought, Arendt is providing a way of orienting ourselves, or at least making it possible to think and act. This enabling of thought and action is precisely what, for Eliade, defines the sacred. The sacred is simply that which orients us in time and space and allows us to break out of the continuity and formlessness of profane time and space. Likewise, for Dewey, it is that which introduces genuine perspective that is religious in quality and in need of emancipation from institutionalized religion. From this perspective, Arendt's strategy of enabling thought within the gap by engaging thinking as an ongoing exercise can be said to possess a religious or sacred quality, but only in the non-theological, non-doctrinal sense advocated by Dewey. It is this sort of "secular

spirituality" that fits the ethos of the postsecular, and which I propose can be engendered through a reappraisal of ancient philosophy as an art of living.

### The Postsecular as Postscientific

It might be objected, however, that simply helping to orient and guide thought and action is a general feature of any worthwhile approach to philosophy or theory. What is so unique about Arendt's approach, and why insist on its possessing a religious – not to mention postsecular – quality? I suggest that the truly distinctive and fruitful elements of Arendt's work can be illuminated by analyzing the postsecular under a slightly different guise, or at least different emphasis, namely the *postscientific*. Though as yet underdeveloped, an emerging subset of the literature on the postsecular understands the concept in terms of the postscientific. For Gregg Lambert, this "occurs when the subject of philosophy is grounded in something resembling a 'form of faith' and no longer on a scientific principle of reason ... "[35] Other scholars, such as David Lewin,[36] have also incorporated this theme into their work on the postsecular, or contemplative, dynamics of educative experiences.

What might be considered the postscientific aspects of Arendt's thought and writing have been largely unaddressed by educational theorists, with the principal exception of Aaron Schutz. In an article describing Arendt's theory as "performative pedagogy," Schutz argues that "one of the most important aspects of Arendt's work resides not in its explicit content but instead in its *form*."[37] He reads her work as being performed through three different yet co-dependent personas or masks, three pedagogical roles that she devised in the effort to confront the challenges of the modern world and to close the gap between theory and practice.[38]

According to Schutz, however, the rhetorical dimension of Arendt's performance of these roles is not "mere" rhetoric (in the contemporary sense of being only expressive flourish and lacking meaningful substance); rather, he argues, they stand as a substantive aspect of her theoretical claims. Noting Arendt's statement in *Between Past and Future* that the occurrence of "fundamental and flagrant contradictions [found] in the work of great authors [actually] lead into the very center of their work and are the most important clue to a true understanding of their problems and new insights,"[39] Schutz suggests that the same can be said of Arendt herself. He argues that in her writing we find a "series of contradictions. And this is how it should be."[40] It is as it should be because a theory containing inconsistencies, contradictions, and ambiguity can actually be "more true to the world than any consistent system could ever hope to be."[41] Indeed, Joanna Scott and Judith Stark write that Arendt, in the manner of her mentor Karl Jaspers, understood that "the task of philosophy is not to set out a complete system of knowledge and reality, but to engage in the process of illumination and disclosure that often reveals oppositions, contradictions, limits, and boundaries."[42] In fact, Arendt declared *Beyond Past and Future* her best book precisely because it was not systematic.[43]

This proclivity for – and even encouragement of – allowing contradictions and inconsistencies to remain in theory reveals the postscientific element of Arendt's work. Schutz summarizes this concern, explaining that Arendt "feared … that the proliferation of statistical thinking during her time was increasingly destroying not

only our ability to see contingency and unpredictable agency in the world, but our very ability to engage with the world as unique and unpredictable actors."[44] This further reinforces Arendt's counsel that, in facing the uncertainty and perplexity of the gap, we should not prioritize discerning the truth or maximizing the rationality of our theories, but rather focus on figuring out how to move within the gap as it stands.

THINKING IN THE GAP AND THE POSTSECULAR MOMENT: THE VALUE OF ARENDT

In drawing together all of the preceding insights, I want to show how Arendt's approach to thinking in the gap has implications for how to most effectively engage the postsecular temporally, conceptually, and methodologically. After delineating these implications, I will end by applying these insights to a few particular challenges that educators must face as part of the postsecular moment.

One immediate question that should arise with the notion of the postsecular is what exactly is meant by the prefix *post*. Most literally, of course, it indicates something coming after something else in the progression of time. However, I have contradicted this meaning insofar as I have compared the postsecular to the gap between past and future. While seemingly emerging after the past, the gap, as explained above, is actually best understood as possessing a temporality separate and distinct from linear historical time. As a fundamental *break* in this historical continuity, the gap should be understood not so much as coming *after* the past or *before* the future, but as an eternal moment existing as a distinct temporality.

I think that the "post" secular is also best understood this way. As such, the *postsecular moment* is a more apt descriptor than the *postsecular age*, and this has significant implications for how we attempt to engage it conceptually and methodologically. This means that whatever might truly be regarded as postsecular is not simply that which remains or emerges upon the ending of a secular age. Indeed, I would be inclined, along with Charles Taylor, to designate the current age a secular one, but not in the modern sense of secular as non- or anti-religious.[45] Acknowledging the abstruse language of this formulation, it would follow that what we are facing is a postsecular moment within a secular age. Conceptually, this would thus require a redefinition of both the secular and the religious, such that novel phenomena as they occur in the world today (assuming they are novel – an assumption not without its own problems) can be analyzed in their idiosyncrasies and not reduced to what are arguably the anachronistic – or at least simplistic – categories of religion (as non-secular) and secular (as non-religious).[46]

Methodologically, this means, à la Arendt and the philosophers of antiquity, that an appropriate approach to the postsecular moment would not be concerned with "figuring it out" – in the sense of logically systematizing it – as much as it would be with devising ways of thinking and acting in the face of contradictions, ambiguity, paradoxes, and uncertainty while simultaneously permitting such dynamics to persist, not as a threat to understanding but as key indices of the nature of the moment. Indeed, I suggest that such dynamics are not obscuring elements of the postsecular but are constitutive features of the moment, and to the degree that we can appreciate it as such, we will better understand it.

If this seems to lead merely to a state of chaotic nonsense, it is again Arendt who comes to our aid and shows how we can productively seize such a moment. As Schutz notes, Arendt employed this basic approach in her study of Saint Augustine's concept of neighborly love. In her dissertation on the topic, she ultimately refrained from synthesizing his writings into any neat, logical scheme or system. In doing so, however, she was not therefore automatically implying or promoting a meaningless muddle of meandering thoughts. Rather, as explained above, she viewed the contradictions in Augustine's thought as more faithful to the questions he was addressing than a clear and consistent analysis could be. She concludes the introduction to her dissertation by commenting on the incongruities in Augustine's thought thusly: "We must let the contradictions stand as what they are, make them understood as contradictions, and grasp what lies beneath them."[47]

I argue that in addressing the postsecular moment, philosophers of education should adopt a similar approach. At the same time, this sort of analysis should be complemented, as it is in Arendt's work, with the effort to open new avenues for thought, despite our inability to locate the metaphorical diagonal representing a clear path out of the gap. But in the absence of any guiding tradition, how can this be done? Arendt suggests that it is the gap itself that allows us to "discover the past for ourselves – that is, read its authors as though nobody had ever read them before."[48] As Mordechai Gordon explains, for Arendt "the task is not to revitalize our ties with tradition and the past. It is rather to discover those ideas that, though they have undergone change, have survived in a different form and can be used to interrupt, critique, and transform the present."[49]

In the spirit of Arendt, then, who urges that "each new generation … must discover and ploddingly pave anew the path of thought,"[50] I have endeavored to show how Arendt's gap-thinking contains valuable resources for philosophers and educators as they confront the enigma of the postsecular. The enigma involves both more conceptual work as discussed above, and a set of immediate and practical issues facing educators around the world. To give just a few examples, these include the growing awareness that as many as four out of five college and university faculty consider themselves spiritual in some sense (and where higher levels of spiritual/religious interest are found among racial and gender minorities);[51] that a majority of undergraduates in American higher education are pointedly interested in questions of spirituality;[52] that spirituality and religion are correlated with student engagement and academic success in higher education, especially for students of color;[53] the implicit Eurocentrism and xenophobia of staunchly secular feminisms;[54] and the potentially racist implications of contemporary Western secular philosophy.[55] In addition to these more particular phenomena is the general trend that in the face of a reality sharing the characteristics of Arendt's gap, many are newly donning or returning to religion, but in many cases in its fundamentalist garb.[56]

It would be unrealistic and pretentious to claim that I could offer a comprehensive response to the range of phenomena and dynamics I have explored above. Nonetheless, two general suggestions might prove helpful. First, the empirical realities of our secular age – and especially the postsecular moment – demand that

educators and philosophers take seriously the historical and ongoing role of religion in shaping the contexts and identities through which educative encounters occur. In short, I maintain that it is no longer feasible nor responsible for educators to assume or promote their work as a thoroughly secular enterprise in the sense of entirely neglecting and excluding religious (very broadly conceived) considerations, both in theory and practice. Second, from a different yet related perspective, I suggest that the postsecular moment opens the opportunity for reconsidering the place of spirituality and performativity in education and pedagogy, whether of a more traditional religious character or along the lines of a secular spirituality.[57] This latter notion I have only begun to explore here, again most intentionally under the guise of the postscientific. Following this decidedly preliminary study of such prospects, of course, much work remains to be done, and I encourage any efforts to do so, wherever they may lead. Indeed, in staying true to Arendt's approach to theory as noted above, I offer that a plurality and even contradictory set of approaches to the postsecular in education would be welcome and most fruitful.

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3. See especially Shlomo Fischer, Yotam Hotam, and Phillip Wexler, "Democracy and Education in Postsecular Society," *Review of Research in Education* 36, no. 1 (2012): 261-281; Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, eds, *The American University in a Postsecular Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Yotam Hotam and Philip Wexler, "Introduction: Education in Post-secular Society," *Critical Studies in Education* 55, no. 1 (2014): 1-7; David Lewin, *Educational Philosophy for a Post-Secular Age* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

4. Wexler and Hotam, "New Social Foundations," 9.

5. Peter Berger, *The Many Alters of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age* (Boston: DeGruyter, 2014).

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8. Rosi Braidotti, "In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism," *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 6 (2008): 1-24, 10.

9. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 9 (emphasis added).

10. Ibid., 11.

11. Ibid., 9.

12. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1987), 68-69 (emphasis original).

13. Ibid., 70.

14. Ibid.

15. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking* (New York: Harcourt, 1978), 205.

16. Eliade, *The Sacred*, 70, 89.

17. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 207.

18. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 12.

19. Ibid., 13.

20. Ibid., 14 (emphasis added).

21. Ibid.

22. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995).

23. Quoted in Davidson, "Introduction: Pierre Hadot and the Spiritual Phenomenon of Ancient Philosophy," in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 21.

24. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 14.

25. Davidson, "Introduction," 21.

26. Ibid., 3.

27. Ibid., 7.

28. Ibid., 8.

29. Ibid., 2, 8-9.

30. Ibid., 22.

31. Ibid., 10; 24.

32. Eliade, *The Sacred*, 20-23.

33. Ibid., 22 (emphasis original).

34. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 14.

35. Gregg Lambert, "The Unprecedented Return of Saint Paul in Contemporary Philosophy," in *Transformations of Religion and the Public Sphere: Postsecular Publics*, ed. Rosi Braidotti, Bolette Blaagaard, Tobijn de Graauw, & Eva Midden (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 116.

36. David Lewin, "Heidegger East and West: Philosophy as Educative Contemplation," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 49, no. 2 (2015): 226-227.

37. Schutz, "Theory as Performative," 127.

38. Ibid., 129.

39. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 25.

40. Ibid., 127.

41. Ibid., 128.

42. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark, "Rediscovering Hannah Arendt," in *Hannah Arendt, Love, and Saint Augustine*, ed. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 199-200.

43. Ibid., 141.

44. Ibid., 141-142.

45. Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

46. On the contingency, ambiguity, and mutuality of the categories of the secular and religious, see Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

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48. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 204.

49. Gordon, "Introduction," in *Hannah Arendt and Education*, 3.

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54. Braidotti, "In Spite of the Times," 4.

55. Shannon Sullivan, "The Secularity of Philosophy: Race, Religion and the Silence of Exclusion," in *The Center Must Not Hold: White Women Philosophers on the Whiteness of Philosophy*, ed. George Yancy (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 153-166.

56. Berger, *The Many Alters*, 8-15.

57. See e.g., Rosi Braidotti, "The Residual Spirituality in Critical Theory: A Case for Affirmative Postsecular Politics," in *Transformations of Religion and the Public Sphere*, ed. R. Braidotti, B. Blaagaard, T. Graauw, E. Midden, and T. de Graauw (London: Palgrave, 2014).