Individualization, Singularization and E-ducation
(Between Indifference and Responsibility)

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ABSTRACT: It is commonly supposed that acting and judging ought to rest on a community-wide, binding definition of what is right and respectable, that is, a substantial consensus. Such consensus is thought possible only when we engage shared values and criteria, when we use knowledge and abilities appropriated through education. On this view, education deals with the reproduction of consensus and, hence, with the passing on of traditions and norms. On my view, we need to question the framework in which the debate over social erosion takes place. I take a cue from remarks of Hannah Arendt and question the presupposition that acting and judging in a right way requires both common values and the appropriation of what we call ‘knowledge’ of criteria and principles. I do not suggest that ‘knowledge’ has nothing to do with acting and judging. Rather, I wish to draw attention to (Arendt’s concept of) thinking as a condition for acting and judging. Here, thinking has nothing to do with knowledge or with appropriation. Rather, it has to do with living-together with somebody. Education for thinking is, then, a ‘public thinking’ which leads out of the self and into communal responsibility. On this treatment, the educator is to be a ‘faithful guardian’ of this calling out into responsibility.

KEY WORDS: Arendt, knowledge, thinking, meaning, judgment, self

1.

In the modern age, people often refer to the phenomena of individualization and social erosion as threats to society. The loss of common orientation, norms, values and beliefs is especially deplored. It is precisely this privation in commonality which is thought to be at the bottom of contemporary social indifference (as expressed in racism and violence). Behind this diagnosis lies the idea that, when we share – and emotionally identify ourselves with – common standards and norms or common representations of what is humanly dignified and valuable, we are able to act and judge ‘humanly’. Only then is human co-existence thought to be possible. It is supposed that acting and judging ought to rest on a community-wide, binding definition of what is right and respectable, that is, a substantial or formal consensus. On this view, education deals with the reproduction of the consensus and, hence, with the passing on of traditions and norms. The aim of education is, then, to enable people to act and judge by themselves in concrete sociohistorical situations in ‘a right way’. ‘Right’ here means not merely ‘technically correct’ but also (and, perhaps, above all) in a human way, as a human. The idea is that this rightness is possible only when we engage shared values and criteria, when we dispose of relevant knowledge and abilities appropriated through education.
In my opinion, we need to question the conceptual framework in which this debate - over social erosion; and about the need for shared values - takes place. In the following, I can put forward some rudimentary elements of the questioning and I can only suggest a further direction in which they might be pursued.

II.

At issue here is the idea that education has to do with the faculty to judge in a 'right' or human way. Taking off from remarks by Hannah Arendt, I intend to question in a particular way the presupposition that this requires both common values and the appropriation of what we could call a(n implicit or explicit) 'knowledge' of criteria and principles. I do not want to suggest that this 'knowledge' has nothing to do with acting and judging. Rather, I want to draw attention to another - possibly more important - condition for acting and judging in a concrete situation, namely, thinking.

It is to thinking that Hannah Arendt points. She asks, "Might the problem of good and evil, our faculty for telling right from wrong, be connected with our faculty of thought? To be sure, not in the sense that thinking would ever be able to produce the good deed as its result, as though 'virtue could be taught and learned' - only habits and customs can be taught, and we know only too well the alarming speed with which they are unlearned and forgotten when new circumstances demand change in manners and patterns of behavior" (Arendt, 1978, p. 5). But perhaps it is connected to human co-existence in a different sense, which needs to be clarified. To be sure, this condition of thinking is largely neglected. This may be due to the fact that, in the first instance, thinking is commonly confused with knowing or mistaken for a "method" of arriving at knowledge. Secondly, the act of thinking is difficult to grasp and cannot be 'learned'. As Arendt points out, the space of thinking, "the path paved by thinking . . . , unlike the world and the culture into which we are born, can only be indicated, but cannot be inherited and handed down from the past; . . . every new human being . . . must discover and ploddingly pave it anew" (Arendt, 1961, p. 13). This, however, doesn't mean that thinking has nothing to do with education. On the contrary, I would like to suggest that we should consider education as a kind of 'public thinking', in which we conceive of the educator not as the one who 'knows' and transmits knowledge, who provides norms, values and principles, but rather as a 'faithful guardian', to use a term suggested by Derrida (1983, p. 20). Let me try to elucidate this.

III.

Do we need to know about norms and values? Do we need to know principles and/or criteria? Or, to put it in another way, do we need to know the differ-