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Rita A. Gardiner
rgardin2@uwo.ca

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Leadership, Authenticity, and the Arendtian World by Rita Gardiner

In thinking about community and dissent, I want to consider notions of authenticity in relation to leadership. Too often leadership has focused on the few over the many—the one percent over the rest of us. I want to contend that this is because leadership focuses on an inauthentic self, one that chooses conformity over dissent. Rather than focusing on the self, I will argue that leadership needs to acknowledge our interdependence on one another, as well as our embodied understanding of what it means to live in the world. I turn to the work of Hannah Arendt because her conceptualization of uniqueness, as well as her critique of social conformism, may prove fruitful in bringing to light some of the problems with leadership discourses that focus on the self. I begin by considering a new management discourse known as authentic leadership, which is characterized by its focus on a leader's self-knowledge (Avolio et al.; Shamir and Eilam). I compare key ideas put forward by leadership scholars and bring them into dialogue with Arendt's insights on education and politics. My main contention is that leadership requires not just a moral purpose that emanates from the self, but a sense of caring for others to ensure that leaders acknowledge, and learn from, perspectives different from their own. I conclude by looking at what leading authentically might look like within an Arendtian context.

Much of the literature that discusses what it means to lead authentically focuses on the importance of self-knowledge. It is argued that through

this understanding, a leader is better able to articulate her vision in such a way that others wish to follow her. For instance, R.W. Terry regards a leader's ability to persuade others to share her vision as critical, because "[a] truly visionary leader teaches, providing insight so that people understand" (Terry 37). Linking authentic leadership to the Aristotelean concept of eudaimonia, Boas Shamir and Galit Eilam argue that a person's life activity should always be in harmony with his or her beliefs. They define leaders as authentic when "they act and justify their actions on the basis of the meaning system provided by their life-stories" (Shamir and Eilam 396). Seen from this perspective, to be authentic, a leader must act out of personal conviction so as to encourage others to share in his or her vision. The problem with this viewpoint is there are many times when a leader's convictions may have been "authentic" but have led to disastrous results. In fact, we need to ask ourselves: would a world populated by authentic leaders necessarily be a better one? I will return to this question.

While Arendt might concur with Boas and Shamir's notion that a person's life story is integral to her identity, she would disagree vehemently with their focus on self-knowledge as a predictor of someone's authenticity. Self-knowledge is always a partial understanding for Arendt. This is because a person can never know his- or herself in the same way that others do. No one is the author of her own life story, since, as Arendt argues in *The Human Condition*

and elsewhere, it is impossible to grasp fully who someone is until after his or her death. Furthermore, the desire for self-knowledge encourages the notion of inward depth versus inauthentic surface, which, according to Arendt, is a fallacy. As she states, “our common conviction that what is inside ourselves, our ‘inner life’ is more relevant to what we ‘are’ than what appears on the outside is an illusion” (*Mind* 30). From this perspective, then, self-understanding seems to be something of a chimera.

For Arendt, it is only what comes into appearance—meaning that which we can see and hear—that can be discerned. A person’s thoughts do not belong to the world in the same way as their actions because they have no outward sign. As such, they do not appear in the public realm. It is only when we express our thoughts aloud in deed or word that they can be comprehended by others. Hence, the clearest indication of a person’s uniqueness, or authenticity, lies in his or her actions. As Arendt states, “[i]n acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities” (*Human Condition* 179). It is, therefore, through deeds and words that a person expresses his or her uniqueness, or authenticity.

This unique identity is always to be understood as both relational and embodied because each time we act and speak we do so within an already existent web of human relationships. Thus it is plurality, not singularity that defines who we are, not least because “everybody sees and hears from a different position” (*Human Condition* 57). Because of these different ways of experiencing the world, we cannot focus on self-knowledge as a primary way of explaining how leadership works in everyday life. For example, it does not take into account the ways in which the opinions of others affect who is perceived as an authentic leader. Neither does it acknowledge how em-

bodiment affects leadership. A self viewed in isolation from others represents a solipsistic model of individuality, one that is in contradistinction to an Arendtian concept of uniqueness. This is why we cannot base a theory of leadership on the self, since it is not robust enough to account for the ways we live in the world.

Being able to effect change is often regarded as a fundamental aspect of leadership since it demonstrates a leader’s ability to share a vision with others. Yet persuading others to share in one’s vision is one of the most difficult leadership tasks for reasons that are not always immediately apparent but have, as I will demonstrate, much to do with social expectations concerning what constitutes a good leader. For instance, in everyday interactions, there are often tensions between a leader’s beliefs and a community’s willingness to agree with that position. In any community, then, a leader’s views have to connect in some manner with the values of others. Without that necessary relation between leader and followers a person’s ability to lead may be regarded as going against the general will. In fact, showing vulnerability, rather than being seen as an expression of authenticity, as Donna Ladkin and Steven Taylor suggest, may be interpreted as a sign of weakness in a leader who does not fit social expectations as to what constitutes an authentic leader. Indeed, Alice Eagly contends that leaders who make their values apparent risk losing their jobs when others disagree with them (462).

Dissent becomes covered up by assent because it appears that if a leader is to be successful, within an institutional context, he or she needs to acquiesce to majority opinion. I would argue that this is one way that social prejudice asserts itself, yet most leadership scholars ignore the “fault lines that exist in communities between people who differ in gen-

der, social class, education and ethnicity” (Eagly 460). What this means in practice is that those who are not considered to be traditional leaders have problems being perceived as authentic. As an example, Eagly points to the problems that can occur when a woman leader displays a lack of stereotypical feminine behaviour by being aggressive or autocratic (464). Because of her gender, rather than her action, a woman leader may be castigated for what would, from a male perspective, appear to be normal leadership behaviour.

But it is not only gender that needs to be taken into account. In thinking about what it might mean to lead authentically, I contend that an array of intersectional factors have to be considered. In line with Arendt, I suggest that each individual, because of his or her life experiences, has a unique way of perceiving the world. This uniqueness, however, is always filtered through the lens of the social world. Thus, our way of being is constantly impinged upon by social factors, many of which we remain unaware. Nevertheless, this background knowledge has an effect not only upon the way that we perceive the world, but also on how we interpret the actions of others. Depending upon the particular situation and national context, different axes of identity are foregrounded. In some instances, a leader might be discriminated against because of her gender, while in another context a male leader might experience discrimination because of his race or sexual orientation. In short, context matters. But context is often overlooked and, as a result, differences fade into the background. The result of this is that notions of uniqueness are ignored.

In her essay entitled “The Crisis in Education,” Arendt looks how education is a form of social control that serves to deny uniqueness in favour of conformity. To begin, she asks the reader to consider the

obligations that education places upon society (185). In America, for example, Arendt argues that many people regard education as an inalienable right. The problem with linking education with rights is that matters of education are considered to be political. Arendt sees an implicit connection with Rousseau’s belief that education should be “an instrument of politics” (176). Contra Rousseau, she insists that education cannot be the starting point for trying to change unfair social systems. In Arendt’s opinion, it is the role of politics, not education, to effect social change. For instance, she suggests that a fundamental aim in the founding of America was illustrated by John Adams who wanted to “emancipate the slavish part of mankind, that is, to get rid of the poverty and oppression that had ruled the lives of many Europeans” (176). Despite such a worthy declaration to eliminate suffering, the world remained as it was, that is, replete with poverty and oppression. This was not only the case in Europe, but also in the new republic itself. It is, therefore, impossible to found a new society without addressing the systemic problems that exist in society. No republic is a *tabula rasa*; each exists within a world full of human suffering.

Arendt states that the notion that one can change a political system through education has been a common philosophical assumption since antiquity. For example, she sees a similarity between the Enlightenment desire to found a new world order in America and political utopias, like Plato’s Republic, that appointed guardians to rule over others. An essential part of the guardian’s role was the education of the young who, unlike adults, are perceived to be more pliable because their opinions are still in formation. It is argued that training children how to think is easier when they are separated from their biological parents. But Arendt regards

this separation as damaging because it leads to a distancing between a child's understanding of the world and his or her heritage. For uniqueness to flourish, each of us needs to be able to comprehend our social and cultural past. Indeed, Arendt suggests that the ability to learn from one's past is an important facet of education if authenticity is to be fostered (193). Without it, each one of us is being inculcated to think in a particular manner. Put simply, the ability to think for oneself is a central tenet of freedom, something that is implicitly denied when one creates a new society that ignores the past.

In democratic societies, it is commonly believed that we teach children to foster uniqueness. However, Arendt's account of education would suggest differently. In this regard, she asks why it is that we assume it is good for a child to be educated apart from the world of adults. Arendt maintains that this separation forces each child to become part of a group (181). As a result, each child has to downplay his or her individual uniqueness in favour of fitting in with others. Oftentimes, the child is faced with the unenviable choice of being in a minority of one and becoming a social outcast, or joining with the rest of the group, and, in doing so, losing part of his or her individuality. In Arendt's opinion, it is difficult for a child to go his or her own way in this situation, and the child is forced to conform to the dominant view of the group. Time and again, Arendt seeks to question the contradictions between what a society says and what it actually does. For instance, she is concerned with the notion, arising from theories of modern psychology, that if a person learns the right skills, it will be possible for her to teach any subject regardless of ability, or interest. This encourages a belief that learning is a process whereby anyone can master a particular subject if he or she follows a particular curriculum. In Arendt's opinion, not only

does this ignore individual ability, it transforms education into a set of "how to" skills. But when the "how" questions increasingly dominate the "why," technique takes over from wonderment. Hence, she argues it is precisely because technical know-how has taken over from other ways of knowing that the theory and practice of education have become separated from our understanding of what it means to care for the world ("Education" 193).

This failure to take the world into account derives from our preoccupation with the self, which Arendt saw as a fundamental problem facing humanity. In her opinion, self-preoccupation leads to an alienation from the world. Here, it is important to note that the Arendtian notion of world is not to be confused with the natural environment, but is rather what she calls the "human artifact," that is, that which is common to all of us (*Human Condition* 52). At the core of the Arendtian notion of world is a communal zone that is "developed through authentic relating between individuals in which they establish a common world and common sense" (Betz Hull 108). Within this context, common sense refers to our shared experiences of the world. For Arendt, then, education is a two-fold decision that involves taking care of children by giving them an understanding of our shared world, as well as being willing to take responsibility for the world. Both decisions entail our willingness to care for, and respect, each other.

This ability to care for one another as unique individuals is eroded constantly by prejudice and social conformity. In 1958, Arendt published a controversial article on her "Reflections on Little Rock" for the journal *Commentary*. Her main claim was that marriage laws that bar blacks and whites from marrying in twenty-nine of the forty-nine states are far more reprehensible than segregated schools. But

as we saw earlier, for Arendt, education cannot be the starting point for trying to change unfair social systems. The primary issue for her, therefore, is not desegregation but equality before the law. She suggests that it is unfair for children to suffer the burden of an unjust system. In her opinion, it is wrong to begin to dismantle systems of privilege with education because children are put in the humiliating position of being forced to join schools where they are not wanted. This is why she regarded the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) as misguided in its focus on social issues such as “employment, housing and education” (“Little Rock” 252). Instead, she maintains that denying the ability to marry who one chooses, as a fundamental human right, was more reprehensible than segregation.

In Arendt’s opinion, it is not the social custom of segregation that is a problem so much as its legal enforcement by Southern states. In fact, she regards political rights such as voting to be less important than what she terms fundamental human rights such as “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (“Little Rock” 236). As Peg Birmingham points out, “the right to have rights” is critical to an Arendtian worldview (1). This does not only mean equality under the law but the ability to choose whom to marry and how to live one’s private life, rather than as society dictates. Sadly, Arendt contends that as a society becomes more equal, economically and socially, “the more [differences will] be resented” (“Little Rock” 234). But civil rights legislation alone cannot change people’s prejudices because one cannot abolish discrimination and force equality upon society. This is because “rules of uniqueness and exclusiveness are, and always will be, in conflict with the standards of society precisely because social discrimination violates the principle, and lacks validity

for the conduct of private life” (“Little Rock” 239). Having a home and being able to marry whom one chooses is, Arendt argues, an unquestionable human right. This is why the laws against mixed marriages are so important to social change.

For Arendt, it is only in the political realm that we are all equal. Conversely, within the social realm, people discriminate against each other constantly by belonging to certain groups, and by choosing their friends and lovers. She contends it is vital for the body politic to uphold individual rights rather than allow social prejudice to rule, because the “moment social discrimination is legally enforced it becomes persecution” (“Little Rock” 240). In her opinion, social conformism is one of the root causes of prejudice. She regards social conformism as a phenomenon characteristic of modernity. Rather than real equality for all, she argues we have a kind of “no-man rule” where society dictates what we do and how we think. Within this framework, action is subservient to behaviour because we do what is expected of us. This normalization tends, in her opinion, “to exclude spontaneous actions or outstanding achievement” (*Human Condition* 40). Thus, what we might think of as authentic ways of being are nothing more than societal constructs. What this means in practice is that individual freedom can be trampled by majority opinion. Seen in this way, individual freedom is curtailed when we believe we are all equal, but fail to take into account that we are all equally distinct. Arendt maintains that there can never be true equality wherever there is a system based on the ruler and the ruled. As she states in *The Human Condition*, equality originally was free from rulership (33). Yet Arendt maintains that ever since the death of Socrates, we have lost this way of thinking. In its place, we are left with a hierarchy of relationships, and “just as the philosopher-king commands

the city, the soul commands the body and reason commands the passion" (*Human Condition* 224).

Earlier I posed the question, "would a world populated by authentic leaders necessarily be a better one?" This is not an easy question to answer, since history is littered with examples of leaders who have been certain they were right only to be found wanting by posterity when the untold suffering of their single-minded belief is considered. So while, in our ironic age, it is easy to regard attempts to think about authentic leadership as somewhat naïve, a greater honesty in actions and relationships with others would seem to be a worthwhile endeavor. The challenge is to create a conceptual framework strong enough to encompass a myriad of contexts. Such a conceptual framework would need to consider how leadership is affected by the intersections of identity, as well as the ways in which social factors work to enhance, or impede, a leader's authenticity. I submit that thinking with Arendt can help us develop a leadership model that is respectful of equality and difference.

If we adopt an Arendtian framework, authentic leadership would need to account for a multiplicity of viewpoints. It would involve caring for another's perspective as well as believing in one's own. Instead of thinking outside of the box, we would adopt the Arendtian approach of "thinking without banisters," that is, enlarging our own perspective with the views of others. Perhaps we could go further than this and suggest that there is no place for an authentic vision if it means violating another's rights. This violation can occur in many different ways. In terms of leadership, it occurs whenever there is a focus on what I would term as "one above others," which stems from an hierarchical way of relating to another which is so deeply entrenched within our cultural modes of being that we fail to grasp how damaging it can be to

thinking about what it means to live in the world. In considering what it means to lead authentically, any leadership theory needs to account for our interdependence on one another, as well as acknowledging the embodied nature of what it means to live in the world. I argue that Arendt's work can deepen our understanding of what constitutes authentic leadership.

Each person's uniqueness is crucial to an Arendtian worldview. Such uniqueness, or authenticity, has always to be tempered by others not in the sense of tacit agreement but in the ability to always take self and world into account. This duality between caring for self and world is fundamental to her notion of plurality and represents a way of thinking that could be described as an ethics of authenticity. Indeed, Alessandro Ferrara makes an important distinction between what he calls an ethics of autonomy versus an ethics of authenticity (7). In his opinion, ethical autonomy focuses on correct conduct such that there is reconciliation between a society's moral dictates and a person's duty. From this perspective, one does one's duty because it is the right thing to do. An ethics of authenticity, however, complicates this by showing that there is often an ethical tension between doing the right thing and being ourselves. So, for instance, we may act in a way that conforms to moral principles even though we do not agree. Doing right is not always a truthful response to circumstances, and this gets to the crux of the matter. Authenticity requires not just a moral purpose, but also a caring for another such that one takes into account different perspectives than one's own. An ethical engagement with others is the foundation of the Arendtian worldview. Being ourselves requires us to take into consideration the opinions of others as well as try to understand our own actions. Arendt's rallying cry was to think what we are doing, and she was

insistent that one of the problems in modernity is that we fail to take the time to consider our actions. It is by reflecting upon our interdependence with one another and on the world that surrounds us that a leader could gain insight. Leaders can learn from different cultural models as well as the lessons of the past. Rather than focusing on self-knowledge, then, it is necessary for leaders to engage with other perspectives and rethink some of the problems inherent within notions of leadership that do not address adequately issues of difference.

Arendt maintains that in *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant offers a way of thinking that enables us to take account of the opinions of others without losing our own unique perspective ("Culture" 221). In this regard, she suggests that the purpose of judgment is to arrive at an accord, not just with oneself, but with others who may or may not agree with your position but with whom you need to come to a consensus. It is only when we take other viewpoints fully into account that we can lead in a way that is authentic because it is responsive to the needs of others as well as our own. While it is not helpful for a leader to equivocate on decisions, nonetheless, it is important to take time to listen to other perspectives, especially when they differ from one's own.

As unique human beings with different experiences and viewpoints, we do not see things the same. Nevertheless, we can develop a shared understanding of what constitutes authentic leadership. As a gesture toward considering alternative viewpoints, I want to conclude by thinking with Heidegger who states that we can only learn if we are willing to "radically unlearn what thinking has been traditionally" (Thinking 8). Learning is not the same as being taught skills because it requires much more. Genuine learning requires that we come to terms with our own prejudices and past injustices, as well as recog-

nizing the myriad ways in which social factors influence issues of authenticity and leadership. It is by doing so that we can start to understand, collectively, whether or not authentic leadership has any place in a global world. It is, I believe, a conversation worth having.

University of Western Ontario

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