Introduction

‘Research matters’— of course it does! But how does research matter and what is ‘research’? Are these questions we know how to answer? We have governments that seem positively mad for universities to do research, more and more of it. Yet when we look at how government provides a framework for the institutional design of research, the research that matters appears to be research that is tied to an ethos of performance, productivity, and rational problem-solving. In respect of this ethos, research matters only when it is seen to be ‘performing’, contributing to economic productivity, or enabling a project of human mastery of reality. This is of course a large topic – the way in which, within a short historical period of time, academic research has been harnessed to what Lyotard (1984) called ‘performativity’. Performativity is short-hand for the production of value of a kind that seems to have floated free from anchorage in reality—this is an abstract and empty idea of value as something that is not limited by the determinations of reality, as something that can overcome these determinations. Value so understood is exemplified in the pursuit of wealth for its own sake, in an orientation to technological advance so that each improvement is to be superseded by the next one in an infinite series, and in the idea that technical mastery of life (both human and non-human) is both achievable and desirable. Each of these aspects of the idea of value that I want to call into question is surely very strange when we stop to think about it. The pursuit of wealth for its
own sake evades the question of what is wealth for? What is the kind of wellbeing that wealth can serve? And what aspects of wellbeing cannot be served by wealth?
The notion that technological improvement is a self-evident good seems to make sense for surely if a technological device now works faster and more efficiently than the last one, that is an obvious good in terms of enhanced usefulness. Yet usefulness when reduced to a simple idea of efficiency—the maximisation of output in relation to input—is an attenuated and debased conception of usefulness. It leaves out the qualitative dimension of usefulness, which must, among other things, raise the question of how is this technological device situated within the human life world and its wider environment? How does it affect the quality of this life world and its wider environment? Finally, the idea that knowledge should be harnessed to a project of technical mastery of life belongs to a dangerous and distinctly modern fantasy of control that is destructive of the complexity, undecidability, unpredictability and constantly changing nature of life.

Critique of the harnessing of knowledge to the modern project of productivity, technological improvement, and mastery of life is urgent at this time. Yet if we are to engage in such critique, we shall need to consider how to approach the question of the value of knowledge—what is it that knowledge should serve? This is no small undertaking. The ubiquity of the ethos of performativity in our time indicates that the best and the brightest among us seem to have difficulty in avoiding implication in this ethos. After all the ideas of productivity, ongoing technological improvement and rational mastery of reality are compelling. Surely it is not a matter of rejecting science or knowledge, and the technology such knowledge informs.
Let me give you a small taste of the difficulty. Consider medical science that is ethically oriented to the value of preserving human life. Current technical advances in medical science make it possible to preserve human life at times when it is not obvious that this is in the interest of the person in question nor sustainable in terms of the resources that will be expended in this effort. There are doctors who are willing to meet the ethical challenge of judging when it makes sense to preserve human life and when it does not, but it is fair to say that at this time they are not supported by a societal acceptance that such judgment is necessary. Instead there is flight from the necessity of such judgment because it cannot be grounded in knowledge; there is no scientific way of determining who should benefit from medical science’s capacity to keep people alive.

Let us take another example of how the sophistication of modern knowledge and technical mastery makes it difficult for us to know how to engage in the activity of judging value. It is well known in relation to the spectre of potentially catastrophic environmental degradation that even if the science is clear, opposing societal interests make it impossible to develop a coherent, constructive and effective policy response. One might extend this point to suggest that almost all of us right now inhabit a deep incoherence: on the one hand we have a growing awareness of potential environmental catastrophe and of what it is we must do to halt it; on the other hand, we are engaged in ‘business as usual’. There are social and political scientists who are practiced in creating different kinds of deliberative democratic forum where citizens can come together to consider the issues, sometimes in dialogue with
organized interest group advocacy, sometimes not—this helps to create a non-partisan political capacity to consider and deliberate on complex issues, a capacity that we sorely need. Some of these advocates of deliberation are proposing constitutional change so that alongside the executive and legislative branches of government there be a deliberative branch (Hendriks et al 2007, 378) while others are arguing that old institutions of deliberation like the parliamentary committee system should be reinvigorated (Marsh 2008). I consider these proposals to be very important; they should be given more public visibility and discussion. Yet one point seems worth emphasizing: we will use deliberation creatively to find new ways of acting only if we are willing and able to engage in the difficult, non-consensual and contextually specific activity of judging questions of value.

Hannah Arendt called this activity ‘understanding’. She distinguished between knowledge and understanding. In this she was not unlike Max Weber. Both agreed that the extraordinarily difficult and inherently equivocal activity of judging questions of value is a distinctively modern challenge arising in a context where the authority of tradition has broken down. To my mind Arendt explores the challenge of ‘understanding’ more deeply than does Max Weber, though bear in mind as a member of a generation younger than Weber, she could work with his insights indebted as they were to the work of Nietzsche by which she was also influenced.
Arendt’s conception of understanding

In her essay ‘Understanding and Politics’ subtitled ‘The difficulties of understanding’, and first published in 1954, Arendt proposes that:

Understanding, as distinct from having correct information and scientific knowledge, is a complicated process which never produces unequivocal results. It is an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world (pp. 307-8).

Later Arendt clarifies what it is she means by understanding: in seeking to understand or ‘try to be at home in the world’, we are engaged in the interpretive art of making meaning: ‘The result of understanding is meaning, which we originate in the very process of living insofar as we try to reconcile ourselves to what we do and what we suffer’ (309).

Like Weber, although more in tune with the phenomenological approach of Heidegger, Arendt proposes that knowledge presupposes understanding: ‘knowledge cannot proceed without a preliminary, inarticulate understanding’ (310). In other words, knowledge has to be oriented within an horizon of meaning that gives it purpose and significance: ‘Preliminary understanding, which is the basis of all knowledge, and true understanding, which transcends it, have this in common: They make knowledge meaningful (311)’. Arendt trusts preliminary understanding as far as it goes, it being merely ‘preliminary’, and she argues it is always expressed in popular language. New phenomena that pose the question of understanding (what are they? how should we act in relation to them?) are always registered in ordinary language—consider in this connection our ordinary language expression of the environmental crisis, the phrase ‘climate change’ for example. Left to itself, however,
preliminary understanding is unconsidered, undigested, not subject to the activity of what Arendt calls *selbstdenken*, a necessarily individual activity, the activity of thinking for oneself.

Arendt does not want to discount the role of knowledge in relation to understanding. She wants understanding to be informed by knowledge – knowledge of facts. Specifically she wants understanding to stay attune to reality. Preliminary understanding harbours an apprehension of reality but it is intuitive, implicit, unexamined, and not asked to give an account of itself. Accordingly, it cannot provoke publicly accountable and shared understanding of a kind that might supply a meaningful orientation for our worldly conduct. If left to its preliminary mode of existence, understanding can all too readily be converted into populist sound-bite jargon of a kind that shuts down the activities of thinking, judging, and engaging in public dialogue. For ‘preliminary’ understanding to become ‘true’ understanding, Arendt seems to suggest that the relevant facts have to be available—knowledge, that is, must supply them—to these activities.

**The breakdown of the authority of tradition**

Before I say something further of these activities of thinking, judging and engaging in public dialogue, it is important to understand why Arendt considers that we—in a modern context—are faced with the challenge of understanding. In contexts where the authority of tradition still holds, it is tradition that supplies the work of understanding by providing a horizon of meaning that constitutes the common
sense—a shared sense of reality, of what is valuable, of what is ethical—in a society. Tradition, when its authority is intact, bridges present, past and future by making it seem a sensible thing to act now in accordance with how things have always been done which, in turn, will secure the future in its relationship of continuity with the past. The modern context is distinguished by the breakdown of the authority of tradition. Arendt, I think, assumes that it is the nature of a lasting tradition to have earned its authority because it represents a set of powerful achievements in this particular society’s capacity to adapt to, and work with, reality. The tradition is worth conserving not for its own sake but because of the inheritance of understanding and knowledge that it represents and which is worth preserving. Accordingly, when tradition is handed down from one generation to another, it demands of novitiates that they engage in a disciplined process of learning the knowledge and understanding that is embodied in the tradition.

There are a number of related reasons why the authority of tradition breaks down in the modern context. Arendt emphasizes the role of the modern project of substituting human artifice (man-made things) for reality—a project that is expressed both in the industrial revolution and in Nazism—in bringing about the loss of the authority of tradition. Consider this statement of hers in the Prologue to her (1958) *The Human Condition* that begins with reference to the launching of Sputnik in 1957:

>This event, second in importance to no other, not even to the splitting of the atom, would have been greeted with unmitigated joy if it had not been for the uncomfortable military and political circumstances attending it. But, curiously enough, this joy was not triumphal; it was not pride or awe at the tremendousness of human power and mastery which filled the hearts of men, who now, when they looked up from the earth toward the skies, could behold there a thing of their own making. The immediate reaction, expressed on the spur of the moment, was relief about the first ‘step toward escape from men’s
imprisonment to the earth’. And this strange statement, far from being the accidental slip of some American reporter, echoed the extraordinary line which more than twenty years ago, had been carved on the funeral obelisk for one of Russia’s great scientists: ‘Mankind will not remain bound to the earth forever’. (HC, 1)

Arendt provides an even clearer statement of what she considers to be at stake here in the next set of passages in the Prologue:

The earth is the very quintessence of the human condition, and earthly nature, for all we know, may be unique in the universe in providing human beings with a habitat in which they can move and breathe without effort and without artifice. … For some time now, a great many scientific endeavors have been directed toward making life also ‘artificial’, toward cutting the last tie through which even man belongs among the children of nature. It is the same desire to escape from imprisonment to the earth that is manifest in the attempt to create life in the test tube, in the desire to mix ‘frozen germ plasm from people of demonstrated ability under the microscope to produce superior human beings’ and ‘to alter [their] size, shape and function’; and the wish to escape the human condition, I suspect, also underlies the hope to extend man’s life-span beyond the hundred-year limit.

She continues:

This future man, whom scientists tell us they will produce in no more than a hundred years, seems to be possessed by a rebellion against human existence as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere (secularly speaking), which he wishes to exchange, as it were, for something he has made himself. There is no reason to doubt our abilities to accomplish such an exchange, just as there is no reason to doubt our present ability to destroy all organic life on earth. The question is only whether we wish to use our new scientific and technical knowledge in this direction, and this question cannot be decided by scientific means; it is a political question of the first order and therefore can hardly be left to the decision of professional scientists or professional politicians. (HC 2-3).

It will be clear, will it not, why it is that this desire to substitute a man-made order of existence for earthly life not just disrupts tradition but ensures that it loses authority: as I have said, it is the nature of tradition to represent the accumulation of a continuous process of using the human capacity for artifice to creatively and intelligently adapt to what Arendt calls ‘the basic conditions under which life on earth
has been given to man’ (HC, 7). Once tradition has lost authority, Arendt proposes, a gap between past and future opens up; it is no longer bridged by continuous tradition. Instead either we have to face the question of meaning or to evade it. If we face the question of meaning, then we will assume responsibility for understanding. If we evade the question of meaning, we surrender such responsibility. In this context it seems to make sense to give our selves and our society over to continuous scientifically informed and man-made improvement even if it is at the expense of the integrity of our earthly world.

The activities of thinking, judging and engaging in public dialogue

As I have said, with the breakdown of the authority of tradition, there is a sense in which each of us finds our self to be alone—if we are to engage in understanding, then we shall have to risk becoming an individual in the sense of someone who engages in the practice of selbstdenken or thinking for oneself. In her writings, Arendt emphasizes two things about this practice: firstly, there is nothing automatic about it. In context of asking how it is that ordinary Germans went along with the new Nazi construction of rules and values, Arendt suggests that the reason for this is their unthinking adherence to what ‘Society’ seems to ask of them:

… Among the many things which were still thought to be ‘permanent and vital’ at the beginning of the century and yet have not lasted, …[are] the moral issues, those which concern individual conduct and behavior, the few rules and standards according to which men used to tell right from wrong, and which were invoked to justify others and themselves, and whose validity were supposed to be self-evident to every sane person either as a part of divine or of natural law. Until that is, without much notice, all of this collapsed overnight, and then it was as though morality suddenly stood revealed in the original meaning of the word, as a set of mores, customs and manners, which could be exchanged for another set with hardly more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of an individual or a people. (‘Some Q’s of Moral Philosophy’, 50)
The second thing Arendt emphasizes about the practice of thinking for oneself is that the fact of being educated does not necessarily lead one to engage in this practice. Again, with reference to the rise to power of the Nazi party in Germany, she argues that ‘the members of respectable society’ ‘were the first to yield’ (‘Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship’, p. 44). She goes onto suggest that the precondition for engagement of the human capacity to think for oneself ‘is not a highly developed intelligence or sophistication in moral matters, but rather the disposition to live together explicitly with oneself, … to be engaged in that silent dialogue between me and myself which, since Socrates and Plato, we usually call thinking’:

This kind of thinking, though at the root of all philosophical thought, is not technical and does not concern theoretical problems. The dividing line between those who want to think and therefore have to judge by themselves, and those who do not, strikes across all social and cultural or educational differences (‘Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship’, 44-45).

If one is willing to engage in thinking for oneself, one is willing to engage in the practice of judging, that is deliberating on the value or meaning of things. The practice of judging is what Arendt calls ‘understanding’. While she is absolutely clear that understanding, implicating as it does these linked activities of thinking and judging, cannot occur without the person daring to become their own individual who opens up an interior space for conversation with oneself – what Arendt calls the two-in-one (‘Socrates’, 20-21)—she is also clear that such internal conversation has to become open and accountable to engagement of the self with its others in relation to the world that they share.

Questions such as ‘what do I think?’, ‘What do I value, and why do I value it?’, ‘How do I weight this value in relation to that one?’ and ‘how could I live with myself
if I did that?’ are matters of inner dialogue. Arendt suggests that one can assume existence as a moral being only if one is willing to engage in the practice of inner dialogue. In this she invokes Socrates’ proposition that ‘living together with others begins with living together with oneself’ (‘Socrates’, 21). In asking these questions, the person assumes existence as a self who discovers his or her unique perspective on reality—reality as it is disclosed to me, a disclosure that is unique to me because how I am positioned in relation to reality is distinctive. In her essay on Socrates, Arendt seems to be arguing that the discovery of one’s own perspective on reality—what she calls after the Greek term doxa or ‘opinion’—needs the facilitation and provocation of a teacher like Socrates who asks in a process of public conversation, what do you think, why do you think it, and are you aware of the consequences of thinking in that way? Put differently, while Arendt proposes that one cannot engage in public dialogue with others unless one is prepared to think for oneself, she seems also to suggest that both the provision of a space for and the facilitation of public dialogue is central to the conditions of possibility of inner dialogue. In her Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy, Arendt says more of how in the public airing of one’s opinion, one is asked to offer an account of why and how one has formed this opinion in relation to one’s others, each with their own perspective on reality. Here she also suggests, following Kant, that it is possible for the capacity to think for oneself to be trained to take into account the opinions of others, and in this way to practice ‘enlargement of mind’.

Remember though that for Arendt understanding is ‘unending and therefore cannot produce final results’ (‘Understanding and Politics’, 308). It is associated with what for her was the nature of freedom, the principle of beginning. In understanding, one
makes a new beginning, in finding meaning that was not there before and in such a fashion as to bring together the uniqueness of the person and the uniqueness of his or her historical context. It is precisely because of this that our understanding shifts with changes in our orientation of perspective and sense of self.

If understanding is individual, it can be shared so that in public conversation we develop the kind of common sense that is anchored not in tradition but in understanding. I think this is what Arendt is suggesting. It is an inherently fragile and evanescent common sense but its existence is central to the conditions of possibility of a collective assumption of responsibility for the world.

**Understanding and Research**

We may ask how far our contemporary culture of research cultivates understanding as distinct from knowledge, and, in turn, how far it cultivates a dialogue between understanding and knowledge. If understanding is to be valued alongside and in relation to knowledge, what would university teaching and research practice look like? What would government policy for research look like? How are people to be nurtured and developed as individuals who can think for themselves? What is the practice of public conversation and how can it be cultivated? How do those who have committed themselves to the craft of thinking offer their insights so as to cultivate the capacity to think in others?

Arendt, again not unlike Weber, suggests that it is the nature of the unending activity of understanding to disrupt political action, the moment of decision that depends on turning meaning into something fixed for the time being. She insists on an inherent
tension between the philosophical comportment of understanding and the political comportment of action, but she is also insisting on the importance of keeping this tension in play. Listen to this passage in the essay on Socrates where she is suggesting that when the philosopher enters public life, s/he will always find herself in conflict with the opinions of the many:

… since his own experience of speechlessness [wonder] expresses itself only in the raising of unanswerable questions, he has indeed one decisive disadvantage the moment he returns to the political realm. He is the only one who does not know, the only one who has no distinct and clearly defined doxa to compete with other opinions, the truth or untruth of which common sense wants to decide—that is, that sixth sense which we not only all have in common but which fits us into, and thereby makes possible a common world. If the philosopher starts to speak into this world of common sense, to which belong also our commonly accepted prejudices and judgments, he will always be tempted to speak in terms of non-sense, or… to turn common sense upside down (‘Socrates’, 35-6).

References


