

Table v. Chair

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Let's say you were trying to understand the human condition; which piece of furniture would you choose? If you were Hannah Arendt, it would be a table because it is her preferred metaphor for the shared something that unites us. We humans, says Arendt, depend on one another for meaningful lives, which must be collective in order to be lasting. If you were a grandmother, you would agree with Arendt about both the collective and the lasting. My first thought on seeing my first grandchild was that I would not see her become a grandmother.

She made eye contact, making believable all the myths and fairy tales from the Middle East to Mary Poppins about the omniscience all humans are born with. Such was her newborn sentience that I wish she could have spoken to me. Minutes before, my daughter had been at the last stage of labor: pushing. The last time I had been that terrified was sitting by my dying brother's bedside as the interval between one breath and the next became progressively longer.

Endings mark a boundary to an unknown and unknowable just as beginnings do. Terror, like awe, straddles the ostensibly conflicting emotions inspired by those unpredictables. Terror is terrible and terrific; awe is awesome and awful. Once religions monopolized those feelings and the divine was the preferred metaphor for the collective and the lasting. But the divine is merely supernatural, supplying a transcendent explanation for the natural world; the table explains the human one. How is it possible for people to be both separate and together?

The terror and awe I felt, my daughter saw as a granny's perfect joy. She emailed me the photo that her husband had taken of me in those first moments, looking into her daughter's eyes. She hadn't heard what I had said to her baby and I never told her. What if NASA had scripted those words I had uttered with my first granny steps? The third-person would have sounded like the collective; invoking Grannykind would have been to invoke something lasting. The Arendt who famously

observed that evil is banal should have said the same thing about joy. My daughter was right. "Have fun," equals the banality of joy. I uploaded the photo to Facebook as my profile pic. Why let the momentous overwhelm the moment?

The first man on the moon had to substitute the third-person generic for his first-personhood and so transformed his singular act into a collective one to be absorbed into the perpetuity of the species, albeit men only. Arendt is also guilty of mistaking the male part for the human whole, but I prefer not to attribute the same chauvinism to Arendt that I do to NASA. Arendt was simply arrogant. She could pronounce authoritatively on the human condition because she was totally confident that there was such a thing as a single human condition about which she knew everything. She had no doubt that she could speak for modern man, whatever its gender.

Even back in those days before cultural relativism and multi-genderism, an indignant English critic protested that Arendt's purportedly universal theory of history and politics applied only to the United States. Had he read the part about shoes? Is it only in America that the possessor of many unused pairs of shoes takes solace from the fact that shoes have an existence separate from their owner? Or maybe he believed that only in America does pain isolate. Only here is pain an essential part of living life fully? I am also wrong to treat Arendt's claims to universality as a beard for her eccentricities and experiences.

Tables are universal. When Julia Child said that it is impossible to imagine a civilization without onions, she was assuming that there would be a table to chop them on and eat off of. My civilization has become unimaginable without that once-omniscient newborn, now a person with a learning curve like the rest of us. Now my granddaughter is almost the age her mother was the time that she wanted to sit with her feet on the table at dinner: the incident of the two-year-old vs. the table.

She lost of course. There is no suspense to ruin. No child has a chance against what Arendt argues are the “customs and habits of intercourse between men and things and between men and men.” Nor did her mother. After all, those customs and habits go all the way back to the first people who used the first table and, before that, to the need for one another. So says Arendt. If she is right, if that need, that dependence on and craving for others, truly pre-existed the table, then the mother need not feel so remorseful that she squelched her little girl’s heroic defiance.

Not that she took her feet off the table when her mother listed all the friends and family for whom it was neither habit nor custom to do so. I seized on this strategy instantly, reluctantly. My little nonconformist was proudly resting her red sneakers where no sneaker had rested before. She was giddy with the daring of her bold step, her unhygienic and precarious bold step. Listing all the friends and family who loved her seemed natural. I had always done it. It seemed like the right thing to do whenever she needed comforting. But that loving, even playful, impulse was, in truth, a lesson about her need for others. I was teaching her that she needed other people in order to withstand life’s pains. By the age of two, a reminder of that need was superfluous, a rebellion was a luxury she could neither afford nor enjoy. Tables are as universal as the pain that precedes and necessitates them.

In exchange for the company of her loved ones, she abandoned her rebellion. She could have left her feet on the table even though it was impossible for her to continue eating in that position. She could have taken her food elsewhere, having proved to us that sitting at a table does not require conforming to the “customs and habits of intercourse between men and things and between men and men.” She didn’t. The table won, as Arendt would have predicted. Nonetheless, my remorse remains.

And yet, now that she is the mom, she asks me for advice. She doesn’t remember this incident. She has other things on her mind. She asks for recipes and wants to know how I got everyone to sit down at the table together every evening, how to recreate those family meals she remembers so fondly. The other kids join in, too, wanting to recreate for their niece what they once

loved. And again, I’m the authority on all things family. So with all the power invested in me as a granny, I chose my granddaughter’s chair.

Arendt is wrong. The table is not the piece of furniture that most helps us to understand the human condition. She is right about how “weird” (her word) a séance would be without one, right that the table is the perfect metaphor for those shared beliefs that unite, and right, too, that it is more than a metaphor. Things provide us with the spaces, the architecture, of our lives. The table, by giving us a place to sit, teaches us how to sit together. The lesson is not optional. Chairs resist the tyranny of the table. Chairs are a metaphor for autonomy, the base to the table’s superstructure.

Chairs are also more than metaphor. I got my granddaughter a chair that would tilt the balance of power in her favor for the simple reason that the seat and footrest were adjustable, so that a child could sit comfortably at a table whose height and proportions were designed for adults. Physical discomfort, I now realize, played a role in sparking her mother’s rebellion.

The chair, while it does resist the table’s tyranny, nevertheless forces us to meet the table on its own terms. Chairs arrange our bodies in a position, an unnatural one, to fit the table’s shape. Without a chair, we could not sit at a table. Even with one, our bodies protest. Adults complain of their aching backs and sore knees. They stand up with difficulty.

Children endure the isolation and confinement of the high chair or they balance unsteadily on their booster seats. Their feet dangle; their legs are pressed against the table. Such discomfort does not drive my granddaughter to her mother’s mischievous innovation. Her chair, adjusted just for her, allows her to sit at the table like an adult: her upper body close to the table, her legs angled beneath it, and her feet resting on the small adjustable platform designed for that purpose. A year later, she continues to adopt the position she took the first time she sat in her new chair: slightly sideways and resting her bent arm on the back of the chair.

Precocious darling! This is a pose adults take as they relax after an enjoyable dinner. They lean back, putting some distance between themselves and the table, survey those around them, and make a humorous observation. I imagine her sitting that way even when I

cannot observe her anymore at a table and on chairs I cannot imagine. She and her grandchildren will invent their own customs and habits that will nevertheless feel like “the price they pay for plurality and reality, for the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all.” Each of us is both table and chair.

Arendt writes:

The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world.

I still wish that I had let those red sneakers remain on the table. The uniquely new takes daring. Arendt says that we cannot forgive ourselves either. This is one more way that we are dependent on the presence of others. We need the forgiveness of others if we are to take the next step, or else we are doomed to repeat ourselves, like so many sorcerers’ apprentices, constrained by the magic we have initiated but cannot control or stop. The consequences of our actions should be unforeseeable. I want my granddaughter’s life to be unpredictable even if her next, new step could lead to a tumble. In that moment of terror and awe lies possibility. The unexpected is frightening. “You are very, very, brave,” my daughter and her husband tell their little girl when she needs comforting. Nothing takes more courage than a new life.