

## When the Effect Validates the Cause: Studying as an End in Itself in Arendt and *Torah Lishmah*

Stephanie Mackler

*Ursinus College*

Among education scholars, especially educational theorists, it is common to critique educational discourse and policy for the ways they narrowly posit education as a means to economic ends. In opposition to what Neil Postman famously refers to as the “god of economic utility,” scholars often posit civic or moral ends for education.<sup>1</sup> Less common, however, is the argument that education ought not to have any end at all - that learning ought to be for its own sake. Indeed, in the instrumentalist mindset that dominates today, it is difficult to imagine that anything is not useful in some way. Recently even proponents of liberal education - that form of education historically defined in contradistinction to practical education - have apologetically couched their arguments for liberal learning in terms of how it prepares students for the so-called real world, as though what one does in the classroom is itself insufficient. Yet, learning without a predetermined end is precisely what Gad Marcus asks us to take seriously in his insightful article, which puts Hannah Arendt’s plea that we “stop and think” into conversation with the Talmudic idea of *Torah Lishmah*.<sup>2</sup>

Marcus’s “Being in the Gap between Past and Future: Hannah Arendt and Torah Lishmah” sets out to consider how to think in the “gap” described by Arendt through an exploration of the Jewish tradition of study for its own sake, or *Torah Lishmah*. Marcus’s skillful reading of Arendt through the lens of *Torah Lishmah* helps us to appreciate that privileging study for its own sake can help us develop - paradoxically, as he says - an appreciation for the way each individual can “become an active and creative part in the formation of past, present, and future.”<sup>3</sup> In so doing, he helps us to consider the complicated ways in which stopping to think - to *study*, as Marcus refers to it - ultimately has a great bearing on our actions in the world.

In what follows I wish to highlight the two dualisms Marcus explores and to gesture toward areas that would benefit from further scholarly attention: (1) studying with no end versus studying with a specific end; and (2) studying versus acting. Marcus takes an Arendtian approach in maintaining strict boundaries between the terms in each pair, but he also points to a more complex relationship between them, and this complexity is instructive.

First, Marcus explains that several parts of the Talmud contrast *Torah Lishmah*, study for its own sake, with *she’lo Lishmah*, which he translates as “study not for its own sake.”<sup>4</sup> He notes in passing that rabbis have debated whether there is any value to *she’lo Lishmah*. If we accept Marcus’s depiction of Talmudic thought, then we are confronted with a reversal of the hierarchy of values in mainstream, secular education. Imagine an educational policymaker or leader sincerely asking whether there is a value to study that is *not* for its own sake! Even more modestly, the very

notion that the differences between study for its own sake and study *not* for its own sake must be contemplated is itself striking.

What is important about this aspect of Marcus's paper is that it points to the need to develop a language for understanding learning for its own sake that has more depth than we ordinarily employ. A similar discourse has long flourished within the tradition of liberal education, contrasting, for example, *liberal* with *illiberal* (Aristotle), *inutility* with *utility* (Newman), *disinterested* with *interested* (McClintock).<sup>5</sup> Likewise, though Marcus does not discuss it in his article, Arendt makes a similar distinction between non-instrumental *thinking* (*Verstand*, which Marcus aligns with *Torah Lishmah*) and instrumental *cognition* (*Vernunft*).<sup>6</sup> I propose that further inquiry is needed into such conceptual distinctions between these two modes of intellectual engagement. In this case, Marcus has brought Talmudic debates together with Arendt's Kantian-influenced ideas, and he mentions briefly that these ideas extend to other traditions, such as the work of Walter Benjamin.<sup>7</sup> I wonder how expanding this inquiry further, to bring in other intellectual traditions, might further shed light on these distinctions.

In fact, Marcus already starts us on that path toward a richer conception of study for its own sake when he claims that, paradoxically, the beneficial outcomes of *Torah Lishmah* validate it. That is, the effect and the cause become one: "by depending on each other, they become one - i.e., *Torah Lishmah* only exists in a whole concept including the outcomes."<sup>8</sup> So, as it turns out, studying for its own sake is not precisely for its own sake. It is more complicated than that, Marcus explains:

We may wonder, therefore, how *Lishmah* can be understood to be for its own sake if there are such plentiful of benefits to be received for doing so. Is it not paradoxical to gain reward for an action that is supposedly done for its own sake? The Talmud suggests that this is not necessarily so. Rather, it is the case that the rewards are the natural outcome of studying for its own sake, thereby validating that the performance was indeed *Lishmah*, i.e. for its own sake.<sup>9</sup>

This complex understanding of an interrelationship between the outcomes of study for its own sake and that study itself merits further attention.

In particular, this kind of challenge to the dualism might be instructive to those who denounce economic ends and posit other ends but would never consider *no end* to be an acceptable option. Recently, as noted above, proponents of liberal education have emphasized learning for the sake of developing citizenship, virtue, empathy, adaptability in a changing world, workplace readiness etc. Indeed, these are important aims, as are the "personal benefits" Marcus cites for *Torah Lishmah*.<sup>10</sup> Yet, Marcus pushes us to consider that we can still say that study is for its own sake, while also acknowledging other worthy aims. Such discourse could offer a challenge, or at least add significant nuance, to the discourse about (measurable) outcomes in education.

In addition, I wonder if this complex interrelationship between the cause and effect of study offers an important qualification that can safeguard against the often myopic, self-satisfied nature of much academic work - the kind of "learning which fails to become life" of which Nietzsche warns us.<sup>11</sup> As academics, and perhaps especially philosophers of education, we enter our fields because we want to improve the world. Yet in saying that learning should be for its own sake, we theoretically

risk privileging precisely the kind of work we disdain. The default response to this fear is to narrowly apply our work or to make it explicitly political. Yet, Marcus's reading of *Torah Lishmah* suggests that study in itself is important because it helps the student to appreciate how much human action matters. And though he does not say how it occurs, he suggests that our intentions matter and that we know we studied correctly when the right outcomes follow. If we take this claim to heart, it suggests that we must study for the sake of study itself, but we must also be attentive to the outcomes of our work, for it is these that validate what we do. What these outcomes look like - and how they might or might not (I suggest they do not) resemble the outcomes listed on course or institutional assessment rubrics - is worthy of further consideration.

And this brings me to the second dualism to which Marcus calls attention: the relationship between studying for its own sake and acting. Of particular importance here is that Marcus emphasizes that, in the concept of *Torah Lishmah*, as in Arendt's thought, "study [or thinking] is of a higher value than actions ... because study will lead to action. The action is ultimately what we strive for and which will take precedence. However, because it is studying that leads to actions, it gets elevated status."<sup>12</sup> Note that thinking and acting are not collapsed into one, nor is thinking "applied" in action. Further, the relationship between thinking and acting is not immediately causal. Studying is necessary for action, and action is the ultimate goal, but the way of facilitating that action is circuitous. It requires prioritizing study without regard for action. Thus, it is not surprising that Arendt, whose early work focuses on political action, ultimately concludes with an investigation into thinking.<sup>13</sup> As Marcus says, "We then come to understand that what it means to settle or think in the gap is to realize how much our actions matter for they change the past and the future."<sup>14</sup> Thus, while both Arendt and Marcus want us to care for the world, they nonetheless privilege thinking and studying as ends in themselves. Our task is to dwell in this paradox.

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1. Neil Postman, *The End of Education* (New York: Vintage Press, 1996).

2. Marcus, this volume.

3. Marcus, this volume.

4. Marcus, this volume.

5. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 8, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 2121-2123; John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, ed. Frank Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). Robbie McClintock, *Homeless in the House of Intellect* (New York: Laboratory for Liberal Learning, 2004).

6. Hannah Arendt, *Life of the Mind* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt and Brace, 1978), 13.

7. Marcus, this volume.

8. Marcus, this volume.

9. Marcus, this volume.

10. Marcus, this volume.

11. Friedrich Nietzsche, "History in the Service and Disservice of Life," *UnModern Observations*, trans. William Arrowsmith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 109.

12. Marcus, this volume.

13. Traces of this concern appear earlier in her works, of course, but I refer here to *Life of the Mind*.
14. Marcus, this volume.