

Nativity Seduced: Lyotard and the Birth of the Improbable¹

Stephanie Mackler
Teachers College, Columbia University

In recent years, philosophers of education have turned to Hannah Arendt's concept of natality to consider the human capacity to begin something new. Natality refers to the fact that humans arise unexpectedly into the world not only literally in birth or factual natality, but also, metaphorically throughout life. Arendt writes:

It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins....The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amount to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. With respect to this somebody who is unique it can be truly said that nobody was there before.²

Arendt thus sees in the uniqueness of each individual the potential to perform the improbable, that is, to alter the world in spite of its seeming certainty and intransigence.

Arendtian natality has itself appeared as a new possibility, a word that allows us to think differently about the educational experience. Natality refers to what most excites lovers of teaching and learning — the possibilities within each of us to begin and become something new. It also brings with it a new set of questions: What fosters natality? What makes us act unboundedly into the world? If new beginnings are against the odds, then how do they come about? Are teachers miracle workers, and, if so, then what does this mean for teacher education? Philosophers of education have begun to work with Arendt's idea of natality and questions like these. Some explicitly take up "natality," while others deal more broadly with Arendt's work.³ The recent proliferation of educational-philosophical thought drawing from Arendt suggests that natality and the worldview of which it is a part offers a rich vocabulary for educational discourse.

I attempt to join that conversation with a vocabulary that can extend our understanding of the birth of the improbable. To do so, I look to Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the *differend*. Whereas natality refers to the capacity for the new (and perhaps also to the moment of unexpected action), the *differend* refers to an event that calls forth the new. Though similar, natality and the *differend* are distinct moments in the coming about of the unforeseen and unforeseeable. My purpose is to explore the *differend* and consider its relation to natality in order to enhance our understanding of what Arendt and Lyotard call our attention to — moments where something new is born in the world.

I focus predominantly on Lyotard because good work on Arendt has been done lately. Moreover, Lyotard's work, and particularly its connection to Arendt, is less prominent.⁴ Furthermore, I am not convinced that Arendt's worldview is enough. If we are always capable of doing something new but often fail to do so, then it makes

sense to ask, What occurs to inspire us to act anew? Arendt does not give an account of what induces spontaneity, but Lyotard does. In what follows, I describe Lyotard's *differend*, which I posit as that which seduces or calls forth latent nativity.⁵

ARENDT AND LYOTARD TOGETHER: THE TERROR OF THE HOLOCAUST AND THE
HOMOGENIZING IMPULSE VERSUS THE POSSIBILITY OF THE NEW

Before I describe Lyotard on his own terms, I want to explain why I place these thinkers together. Arendt and Lyotard share similar concerns and passions. Both respond to the horrors of totalitarianism and worry that, to use Arendt's word, our "banal" orientations to the world can lead, to use Lyotard's word, to "terrorizing" consequences. They see in Nazism — and the Western culture it epitomizes⁶ — the impulse to destroy individuality, spontaneity, plurality, thought, discourse, and our ability to act ethically. For Arendt, anything that threatens possibilities for action is dangerous. Lyotard fears anything that impedes confrontations with the unfamiliar. Thus, they not only respond to the same historical phenomena, but they are concerned to honor experiences with the unforeseen. Finally, both optimistically describe parts of human life that might save us from ruin: Arendt's concept is nativity, and Lyotard's is the *differend*.

To describe these conditions of human life, Arendt and Lyotard draw from Kant's notion of the sublime in which the imagination trembles and marvels before the limits and possibilities of what it can think in the face of things it cannot understand. In the experience of the sublime, the mind becomes suspended from normal assumptions and explores new possibilities. Arendt links the sublime most directly to thinking and judging, but the sublime is also related to nativity, as the ability for action seems predicated upon the recognition of possibilities in the sublime experience. Likewise, the experience of the *differend* closely resembles that of the sublime.

Though later I will describe significant differences between the two thinkers, for now I suggest that nativity and the *differend* are two elements of the same part of human experience: the shift from ordinary thoughtlessness (being with the Heideggerian "they") to acting and speaking anew, or performing the improbable.

THE *DIFFEREND*, OR THAT WHICH SEDUCES NATIVITY

If nativity is the capacity to do something new, then the *differend* can be considered the experience that makes it likely for that capacity to become realized. We are unlikely to act unless we stop what we are normally doing — unless something strikes us so much that we are literally forced to do otherwise. The *differend* expels us from normality and stops us from carrying on as usual.

Lyotard locates the experience of the *differend* in the gap that sometimes rises between reality and our ability to describe it through concepts or language:

In the *differend*, something "asks" to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away. This is when the human beings who thought they could use language as an instrument of communication learn through the feeling of pain which accompanies silence (and of pleasure which accompanies the invention of a new idiom), that they are summoned by language, not to augment to their profit the quantity of information communicable through existing idioms, but to recognize that what remains to be phrased exceeds what they can presently phrase, and that they must be allowed to institute idioms [genres] which do not yet exist (*DF*, 13).

A *differend* occurs when our regular conceptual explanations for what happens to us do not suffice. In the face of the unfamiliar and struck by the inadequacy of at-hand categories and modes of expression, we feel compelled to make the event familiar: to create a new idiom, or “genre” to describe it. We notice, as in Kant’s sublime, that “it is happening,” but we only crudely recognize it.⁷

The inability to describe an experience in language becomes significant for us in an existential way. We experience it as a suffering: “a *differend* is born from a wrong [of not knowing how to talk, of the failure of our conceptual ideas] and is signaled by a silence, that the silence indicates that phrases are in abeyance of that becoming an event, that the feeling is the suffering of this abeyance” (DF, 57). We feel compelled to respond in language but pained by our inability to do so. Lyotard draws from psychoanalytic theory to describe this experience as a trauma. Once struck by the event, there is no undoing its blow; there is only moving forward. In the attempt to flee the feeling of trauma that we realize something has happened to which we have been made responsible: “And it is this flight, the feeling that accompanies it, which informs consciousness *that* there is something, without being able to tell *what* it is... The essence of the event: that *there is* ‘comes before’ *what* there is.”⁸ In this view, awareness and cognition of the event follow experience of it. Understanding is not a choice, but rather, a response necessitated by something that occurs *to us*.

This suggests a certain relationship between language and reality: language responds to something outside of it. “Nothing can be said about reality that does not presuppose it” (DF, 32). Language is important to Lyotard, but he emphasizes that language responds to a feeling. Furthermore, the fact that the *differend* is an experience for which we do not have language implies a potential impotency before language and understanding.

There are two ways we use language: as an instrument for our own pre-determined purposes, or to respond to the overwhelming unexpectedness of reality. In the former, language presupposes its own meaning. What the words mean cannot be in question because they are a tool for some use to which they must refer. In the latter, the *differend* calls us to “bear witness to” that for which we do not yet have language.⁹ In these instances, we realize that language is limited and beholden to an external world whose events exceed what we know how to say.

DIFFERENDS IN HISTORICAL REALITY

So far I have described the *differend* as an abstract concept. I have not yet situated it historically or explained its significance. Lyotard is concerned that we presently do not suffer enough because one way, or “genre,” of speaking — that of economic rationality — silences all others. We are less likely to experience *differends* under the hegemony of this genre, which aims to eliminate difference. We are, he warns, at risk of losing the possibility of talking in many ways:

The *differends* between phrase regimens or between genres of discourse are judged to be negligible by the tribunal of capitalism.... The economic genre’s hegemony over the others can certainly put on the garb of an emancipatory philosophy of history. More wealth, more security, more adventure, etc., there’s our answer to the canonical phrase of political ethics: *What ought we to be?* This ethical question is not asked, however, in the economic genre. In

it, you don't gain (you don't grab onto the stakes) because you listened to the obligation and welcomed it, but because you've gained some time and are able to gain some more (DF, 178).

In this quote, Lyotard argues that there is something inherent in the economic mode of speaking, doing, and thinking that negates the possibility of asking ethical questions. By feigning to offer freedom and other supposed goods, it offers answers to ethical questions which preclude the possibility of thinking otherwise. It eliminates the time (and space) for others ways of speaking to arise. Arendt similarly warns: "The end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective."¹⁰ Like Arendt, Lyotard traces the strands of our homogenizing impulse back to the Nazi terrors and argues convincingly for the connection between the genre of capitalism's elimination of difference and that of the Holocaust.

Nevertheless, Lyotard suggests that *differends* are inevitable, even if they are more rare under the hegemony of the capitalist genre. The *differend* is by definition linked to particular events, Lyotard provides a specific instance to help us understand this point. He takes the tragedy Auschwitz as a paradigmatic example of a *differend* to illustrate the experience of not knowing how to talk. Auschwitz is an exemplary *differend* because what happened there is so outside the realm of the probable and believable that we struggle to find the words to talk about it.¹¹

While this is an extreme case of a *differend*, Lyotard argues that *differends* are potentially everywhere because reality consists not of universalizable abstractions but of specific people and situations. Just as Auschwitz is so out of the ordinary that it demands special attention, any particular of life can demand the same. This argument resembles Arendt's insistence that the uniqueness of each individual provides the grounds of the inevitability of the improbable. Language and knowing cannot be comprehensive as there is an infinite supply of the particular. Further, each particular is itself indeterminate:

Reality entails the *Differend*. *That's Stalin, here he is*. We acknowledge it. But as for what *Stalin* means? Phrases come to be attached to this name, which not only describe different senses for it (this can still be debated in dialogue) and not only place the name on different instances, but which also obey heterogeneous regimes and/or genres. This heterogeneity, for lack of a common idiom, makes consensus impossible. The assignment of a definition to Stalin necessarily does wrong to the nondefinitional phrases to Stalin, which this definition, for a while at least, disregards or betrays (DF, 56).

No definition can be definitive because there is more to "Stalin" than any one genre — even the genre of "definition" — can say. Furthermore, because "Stalin" is not a static entity but a being within history, any description of him will be contingent upon the particular moment and place in which we catch him. *Differends* always can and will arise.

Similarly, there are limitless possibilities for how to talk, according to Lyotard. Each offers a distinct and equally worthwhile way to describe what happens. The suffering we experience in the case of the *differend* is a sign that we are searching for a new way to describe the particularities of life — a new genre to add to the conversation — because none ultimately suffices. The result cannot be a final genre

to trump all others, but rather, a best attempt to describe what happens to us. Thus, while we can be oblivious to the fact that events can happen for which we have no language, such events do not happen. Rather, it means we are blind to these particulars and to the limits of our language.

THE ETHICAL TUG OF THE *DIFFEREND* AND NATALITY SEDUCED

Although my account of the inevitability of *differends* and speech genres has been normative, there is an ethical component built into the structure of the *differend* as well. Lyotard suggests that the *differend* is like a prescriptive statement (“take two aspirins and call me in the morning”) whose structure addresses us and implies a required reaction. Because the event happens *to us*, we are already bound to it by the time we recognize it. This gives it prescriptive force. We feel wronged by an unwelcome intruder, an event that surpasses our ways of knowing how to cope with it but nonetheless demands that we cope. To respond to the *differend*, then, is to attempt to right the wrong with something we do not understand.

Lyotard likens this to the way the Ancient Israelites are chosen by and bound to God.¹² He says this is not a contract of equal partners, but rather, an unequal decree. They must follow orders given by situations in which God places them. They must, as Moses tells them, hearken before they understand. In this way, the *differend* is like a law dictated by situations in which we are placed — a law that requires observance but does not specify what is to be done. Because what happens is unfamiliar, at-hand responses are insufficient. In the grip of the *differend*, we have no choice but to heed its command and search for something new.

At the start of this essay, I asked: If we are always capable of performing the new but often fail to do so, then, what occurs to inspire us to act anew? If we do not “stop and think” — recognize the inadequacy of our tools at hand and realize the need for something new — then it seems unlikely that we will act. Instead, we will remain in clichés of self, language, thought, and action that do not respond to the particular. I have suggested that what occurs to stop us is the *differend*. However, Lyotard and Arendt suggest that we are at risk of not seeing the unfamiliar under the dim light of our era; we are at risk of banality. There is a chance we will not see, respond to, or perform the new.

And, yet, there is also a chance that we will. Our potency can come through response, but that means it comes to be only after we are first stunned by an event. It is because of this feeling of cognitive and linguistic weakness that natality is seduced. According to Lyotard, we can right the wrong by inventing a new idiom: “One’s responsibility before thought consists...in detecting *differends* and in finding the (impossible) idiom for phrasing them” (*DF*, 142). Action, the expression of our natality, could be one such way of finding or realizing that idiom — be it literally through speech (which Arendt places as central to action) or metaphorically in actions that express new understandings of the world. Lyotard helps us to see how our capacity for the new might be elicited because we feel our conceptual inadequacy before what happens. Once struck by the unfamiliar, we might be lured into natality — into performing the improbable as a result of our recognition that the world is not as we thought it was.

SOME GLITCHES IN THE SEDUCTION

So far I have conjoined Lyotard and Arendt smoothly for the sake of my overall argument, but it is not a natural partnership. To begin, Lyotard grounds his account in language, whereas Arendt's natality is linked to her work on action. Although Arendt includes speech as a significant part of action, she might be wary of Lyotard's sole reliance on it. Whereas Lyotard's account refers to visceral experience and draws from psychoanalytic theory, Arendt takes interest in appearances and disparages the non-appearing psychological. Lyotard might be offended by Arendt's inattentiveness to the fact that we not only act unboundedly into the world, but we also are acted upon. On a broader level, Lyotard's more postmodern approach does not mesh easily with Arendt's more modern one.

There is another problem here: Arendt's conception of natality does not necessarily allow for the question of what calls forth newness. For her, it simply *is*, and the attempt to imagine what induces or seduces it might be at odds with her sense that the new always appears as a miracle; attempts to bring about a miracle would be too behavioralist. Thus, she might oppose my project, as might Lyotard. Since both value the unexpected, any attempt to bring about such experiences might be counter-productive.

Admittedly, my project is more a thought experiment than anything else. There is no clear causal relationship between natality and the *differend*, but I pair Arendt and Lyotard because their work touches upon the same experiences and is more similar in some significant ways. Both emphasize the importance of plurality — of unique individuals and linguistic interpretations. Both cherish and urge us to pay heed to the new and unfamiliar, especially in what they agree are dark times.

Moreover, I do not think their differences preclude us from gaining insight into what they have in common. We can learn about the birth of the new by imagining how natality and the *differend* relate to one another. Specifically, I suggest that natality depends upon the experience of the *differend*, the experience that makes us stop and realize that we do not understand. If we are to act anew in the world, then we must know how to recognize a *differend* when one presents itself to us. Likewise, although I have implied a certain chronology in which the *differend* precedes natality, the same is true in reverse: Arendtian action is not only inspired by a *differend*, but it also creates one. Action's brings about events for which we have no language. In that way the *differend* seduces and is, in turn, seduced by natality.

LEARNING TO BEAR WITNESS: EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE *DIFFEREND*

It is for the sake of beginnings that education takes place; what is educed has not been seen before. For this reason, Arendt's concept of natality — the idea that the capacity for the new is a defining characteristic of human existence — speaks to philosophers of education. As others have asked what it might mean to educate for natality, I wonder what might it mean to educate for the *differend*?

Differends can occur at any time. Orienting ourselves to them is important. Part of what makes a *differend* what it is that it makes us stop and think; likewise, for us to stop, we must have an ability to notice a *differend*. In this way, though always

possible, *differends* rely on us to be prone to noticing them. This is what Arendt's men and women in dark times knew how to do.

Perhaps, then, educators should teach students to recognize and respond to the *differend*. Such an education would encourage students to become lights no matter how much the darkness hides the inevitable particularities of life. This would mean learning to become comfortable with rational, interpretive, and linguistic frailty. Rather than seek the comfort of certainty, this would entail embracing unfamiliarity, uncertainty, the unknown, and lack of control. It would mean learning to respond to the particulars of life simply by recognizing *that they are* and *that they call for an understanding response*. What that response should be is another question altogether. Whether it is necessarily linguistic as Lyotard implies, must be taken up elsewhere.

What matters here is that if we love the possibility of the new — and not just the new, but the unpredictable, unexpected, improbable, and miraculous — then we must know how to be (un)comfortable recognizing it and being in its grip. We might even want to learn to honor these events, to be grateful for all that happens to throw us out of the ordinary. Of course, this is no proverbial walk in the park. It requires suffering and trauma. It requires submission to what is unfamiliar, disorienting, and incapacitating. But perhaps it is through confrontation with what makes us suffer in this way that our capacity to perform the improbable is seduced, and new selves and worlds are born.

1. This essay was made possible by the generous support of the Spencer Foundation Dissertation Fellowship Program (2002-2003).

2. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 177-78.

3. See Gert J.J. Biesta, "Education, Not Initiation" *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1996*, ed. Frank Margonis (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1997), 90-98; Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998); Christopher Higgins, "Glück des Lehrers" ["The Flourishing of the Teacher"], *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* no. 4 (Summer 2002): 459-513; Christopher Higgins, "Teaching and the Good Life: A Critique of the Ascetic Ideal in Education," *Educational Theory (forthcoming)*; Natasha Levinson, "The Paradox of Natality: Teaching in the Midst of Belatedness," *Educational Theory* 47, no. 4 (1997): 435-52; Aaron Schutz, "Theory as Performative Pedagogy: Three Masks of Hannah Arendt," *Educational Theory* 51, no. 2 (2001): 127-50; and Mordechai Gordon, ed., *Hannah Arendt and Education: Renewing our Common World* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2001).

4. In the mid-late 1990s Lyotard's *differend* was more commonly discussed. For instance, see Pradeep Dhillon, "Lyotard: Of Fractious Traditions and Family Resemblances," *Philosophy of Education Yearbook, 1996*, ed. Frank Margonis (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1997), 142-50; Nicholas C. Burbules, "On Aporia: Webs, Passages, Getting Lost, and Learning to Go On," *Philosophy of Education Yearbook, 1997*, ed. Susan Laird (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1998), 33-43; Nicholas C. Burbules, "Deconstructing 'Difference' and the Difference This Makes to Education," *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1996*, ed. Frank Margonis (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1997), 114-23; James Marshall, "Performativity: Lyotard and Foucault Through Searle and Austin," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 18, no. 5 (1999): 309-17. Most of these authors focus on Lyotard's postmodernism, performativity, and cultural difference. Burbules's use of Lyotard is closest to mine, but his concerns are different. Further, none of these works put Lyotard in relation to Arendt or situate it as central to how something new comes into the world.

5. This is not to say that it is the only thing that does so.

6. Both see Nazism and totalitarianism as the epitome of Western rationality and as deeply connected to contemporary Western culture. For more, see Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973); Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the Jews,"* trans. Andreas Michel and Mark Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), and Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). For all subsequent references *The Differend* will be cited as *DF*.

7. In Lyotard and Kant, what is essential is that we are immersed in a moment that makes us realize the insufficiency of our concepts and thereby causes pain. Despite their similarities, however, I think there is a significant difference that makes Lyotard's *differend* more appealing than Kant's sublime. The latter emphasizes the triumph of the human mind to conquer what at first appears to it as a threat. While I like this idea of honoring the potential of the human mind, Kant's idea goes too far in the direction of declaring the triumph of man over nature. Lyotard, on the other hand, remains always humble before the event and before what strikes us. In both, we are struck by something – sublime or *differend* – but in Lyotard we never conquer that thing as we seem to do in Kant. See esp. Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* for more.

8. Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the Jews,"* 16.

9. Because Lyotard's concept is deeply tied to his understanding of the Holocaust, this language of bearing witness is deliberate and important for his argument.

10. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 58.

11. The argument is more complex than this. See Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the Jews"* for more.

12. *Ibid.*