

## “But Some People Will Not”: Arendtian Interventions in Education

Natasha Levinson  
*Kent State University*

A recent study of the effects of peer involvement in bullying among elementary school children in Toronto reached the disturbing but not surprising conclusion that the behavior of children observing incidents of bullying tends to reinforce bullying.<sup>1</sup> The researchers' analysis of fifty-three videotaped incidents of bullying indicates that most the time, peer behavior contributed to the bullying, either actively, by cheering on the bully or modeling his aggressive behavior, or passively, by the inaction of those who stood by, “attending to the episode and not helping the victim.”<sup>2</sup> On average, onlookers spent only twenty five percent of their time actively intervening in the incident on behalf of the victims of bullying. According to the companion questionnaire filled out by students at the school, “forty one percent of students indicated that they ‘try to help’ the victim when they observe bullying.”<sup>3</sup> This study shows otherwise, marking a shift in focus of efforts to reduce bullying in the playground from a preoccupation with the psychological dimensions of the bully-victim dyad to a broader understanding of the immediate social context within which bullying takes place. Rather than viewing peer inaction as a peripheral matter in the problem of bullying, the researchers suggest that it plays a pivotal role in the dynamics of playground aggression and victimization. Effective intervention in bullying, the researchers suggest, is best achieved by raising peer awareness of the ways in which their unwillingness to intervene on behalf of the victim contributes to a climate of bullying.

Readers of the work of Hannah Arendt will not be surprised by these findings, for this was the central thesis of two of her most important contributions to our understandings of the disastrous effects of political inaction. In different ways, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* make the case that the devastating effects of the Nazi regime cannot be attributed simply to the mechanisms through which terror took hold of the populace but must be understood more broadly as a consequence of a profound failure on the part of most people to see themselves as active shapers of a shared world. This pervasive misunderstanding of the pivotal role of political action in the formation of the shared world is what propelled Arendt to examine the subject further in her more “abstract” writings in political theory: *The Human Condition*, *On Revolution*, and *Between Past and Future*. The diminution of the political is central to each of these texts, but while the tragic dimension is evident, each is also an attempt to resurrect the initial impetus for political action: the sense that human beings can effect the way the world stands between us, and that as a result of our efforts, we might be in a better position to confront the challenges of learning to live together in a shared world. In each of the aforementioned texts, Arendt attends as much to what is gained in those rare moments when people have the courage to act “on behalf of the world” as she does to what is lost when we forget that this “sharing of the world” is possible only to the extent that people are willing to act on its behalf.

Arendt's insights into the relationship between our capacity to act politically in the world and our efforts to learn to live ethically in the condition of human plurality are increasingly drawing the attention of educational theorists, although her work is still thought to be decidedly unhelpful to understanding what, if anything schools might do to foster political action.

In this essay, I want to explore one of the most interesting recent criticisms of this shortcoming in Arendt's thinking in order to think further about what her oblique injunction to act "on behalf of the shared world" suggests for educators and educational institutions.

In an essay presented last year, "Is Political Education an Oxymoron? Hannah Arendt's Resistance to Public Spaces in Schools," Aaron Schutz offers a provocative explanation for Arendt's failure to think about the educational implications of her political thought.<sup>4</sup> Rather than rehearsing the familiar argument about Arendt's naive cordoning off of education from political realities, Schutz attributes Arendt's neglect of educational matters to what he calls her "naturalistic" assumptions about action. There are two stages to Schutz's argument. First, Schutz claims that by "ontologically rooting" the capacity for action in "the fact of natality," Arendt is able to circumvent the problem of how to educate for political action. If the capacity for political action is rooted in "the conditions of human existence—life itself, natality and mortality, worldliness, plurality, and the earth," it appears that action is not a learned but an innate capacity. Simply put, there is something inexorable about action that suggests that it need not be taught.

This argument hinges on a double ambiguity that pervades *The Human Condition*. By rooting action in the "facts" of natality and plurality, Arendt appears to forget how tenuous these ontological "givens" are. Arendt's use of the term "condition" gets at the precarious basis of political action: while plurality and natality are conditions of action in that they make action possible, they do not guarantee it. The rise of totalitarianism showed how easily the conditions of action are squelched. This is why, as Lisa Disch has pointed out, the conditions of action are better understood as political *achievements* than as ontological givens whose existence is tied to the mere fact of human existence in the world.<sup>5</sup> The conditions of action are complicated phenomena upon which to ground action for another reason as well. They are not simply the *impetus* for action, they are also—paradoxically—*brought into being* only insofar as people act. In other words, the conditions of action are themselves contingent upon action's appearance in the world. This paradox is key to understanding Arendt's conception of action. It reminds us that it is one thing to suggest that action is conditioned by plurality and natality, but it is another thing to assume that its presence in the world is assured. For one thing, plurality itself is not ensured. It emerges only to the extent that individuals and groups have the courage to act in the world in ways that register their resistance to prevailing norms and assumptions. Similarly, as Arendt's reflections on "The Crisis in Education" make clear, natality refers to more than the mere fact of birth. Natality can be stifled, which is what happens when educators fail to "preserve" the child's capacity for newness in relation to the world. Natality is a condition that has

to be nurtured. Because the conditions of action are so tenuous, in the rare instances when people do act, action has a miraculous quality.<sup>6</sup>

This emphasis on the miraculous quality of action, its appearance in the world “as if from nowhere” also troubles Schutz. When Arendt writes that the story of the modern age “could be told in parable form as the tale of an age-old treasure which, under the most varied circumstances, appears abruptly, unexpectedly, and disappears again, under different mysterious condition, as though it were a *fata morgana*,” Schutz regards it as further evidence of Arendt’s naturalistic assumption that action simply happens and thus need not be taught.<sup>7</sup> The best educators can do is not suppress this quality, but we have no special need to find ways to nurture it within schools. While Schutz is right to wonder how Arendt expects children to make the transition from being taught about the world to sharing responsibility for the way the world lies between us, he is wrong to suggest that Arendt has a naturalistic conception of action. As I read her, Arendt is not a *naturalist* who takes the capacity for action for granted, but a *genealogist* of political action who is all too aware of the many ways in which the capacity for action has been suppressed, not only as a result of the rise of authoritarian regimes and the corresponding seductions of the private and social realms, with their emphasis on the bus(i)y-ness of life rather than their concern for the state of the shared world, but also as a result of the philosophical tradition’s evasion of politics.

This is not to downplay Arendt’s celebration of those historical moments when action does suddenly, unexpectedly, and abruptly erupt onto the world stage, but it is to point out that her exuberance is tempered by a certain wistfulness toward these rare efforts to restore “the lost treasure” that is synonymous with political action. Toward the end of *The Human Condition*, for example, Arendt writes, “it is quite conceivable that the modern age—which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity—may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known.”<sup>8</sup> Shortly after this, she makes the devastating remark that “action...has become an experience for the privileged few, and these few who still know what it means to act may well be even fewer than the artists, their experience even rarer than the genuine experience of and love for the world.”<sup>9</sup> Given this recognition of action’s rarity, it would not make sense for Arendt to discount the need to educate for action. But what exactly does the injunction to education for action require? Does it mean teaching about action—what it does, how it works and why it matters—or does it require educators to provide young people with opportunities for action. Schutz suggests the latter, invoking John Dewey in his defense, but I wonder if the turn to Dewey is necessary. It is possible that Arendt’s work contains within it the resources for thinking further about this quandary, although she herself chose not to apply her theory of action to the educational domain.

Arendt’s insistence that education not be conflated with politics does not mean that she downplays the role education plays in preparing the young for participation in political life. “The Crisis in Education,” makes it clear that education is an inherently political undertaking, although Arendt understands this to mean something quite specific. Education is “the point at which we decide whether we love the

world enough to assume responsibility for it, and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable.”<sup>10</sup> While taking responsibility for the world is a political undertaking—it requires one to act on behalf of the common world—Arendt does not think it right to ask children to take responsibility for the world until they have been properly—and carefully—exposed to it. Educators are those people charged with the heady work of deciding how best to guide the young into a world that pre-exists them and with doing so in a way that “preserves newness.” Nurturing the child’s capacity to bring about something new and unexpected is crucial to preparing the young for political life. To the extent that schools manage to preserve newness while helping the young to understand the world that precedes and surrounds them, they are genuinely educational spaces. It follows from this, of course, that not all schools are educational spaces.

It is one thing to say that schools ought to prepare students for participation in political life, but it is another to suggest that schools are—or ought to be—political spaces as Arendt understands them. Schools are necessarily spaces of inequality; in schools, children learn under the guidance of adults who have assumed the responsibility of deciding what should be taught and what ought to be learned. This is not to say that schools have the right to be authoritarian, however. In democratic societies, educational practices must be guided by the ideal of political equality, which means that the transition from being ruled to participation in political life must always be of paramount concern to educators.

This recognition that children need the support of adults is crucial to Arendt’s educational thinking. She is adamant that schools not expect children to have the same sense of responsibility for the world that she expects of adults. This is perhaps why both of her essays on education are addressed to adults and both are centrally concerned with the role that adults play in the education of children. Taking responsibility for the world is a risky undertaking. While children need to be prepared for this responsibility, they also require some measure of protection from it. Children need the sense of safety and security, the comfort and the assurances that are a necessarily preparation for political life but that are also, in crucial ways, antithetical to politics which is by nature a risky undertaking.

While it is true that “The Crisis in Education” is sharply critical of the techniques of progressive educators, her criticism of them is quite specific. She is worried about that aspect of progressive education that is so eager to create the conditions of equality that it downplays the need for adult guidance. In the course of avoiding authority, however, children are subject to the more terrifying “tyranny of their own group.” This “tyranny of the majority” pressures children to conform to the group. We know, of course, what this sort of conformity has led to in this century. Arendt regards action as that which breaks through conformity, and while there are always encouraging instances of children who manage to do this, the forces of normalization tend to prevail. Those few children who manage to break through these forces need the reassurance and guidance of adults precisely because it is unlikely that they will find this support amongst their peers. On this view, the role

of adults in educational environments is not to play the political gadfly but rather, to be a source of support to those few children who find themselves playing this role. The distinction is important. When teachers are gadflies, it is generally the case that we communicate to our students the perplexities we ourselves feel about the world. Our students, however, may well have different concerns. Our role is not to turn them into miniatures of ourselves but rather to support them in their own journeys of self—and world—discovery.

The challenge for teachers is to find the right balance between prematurely leaving students to their own devices and overly determining the course of their journey, but it would be irresponsible for adults to even pretend to turn things over to the young. *Actually* doing so is more likely than not to lead to the tyranny of the most vocal students, be they a majority or a minority in terms of actual numbers, but *pretending* to do so is equally problematic insofar as it gives students the illusion that fairness and tolerance are natural outgrowths of human being-in-the-world. In fact, to use Disch's phrase, justice and tolerance are *political achievements*, and it is probably more educative to draw attention to this fact than to pretend that they are effortless.

The question then, is not how teachers can create opportunities for action in school—such an activity can be too artificial and ultimately too institutionally constrained to allow for the eruption of genuine action. A better question, perhaps, is how to teach in ways that generate the sorts of insights into the world that might turn students into political actors. Such approaches would have to illuminate both the moral consequences of our failure to act on behalf of others as well as attending to the moral possibilities—and pitfalls—of political action. In short, an Arendtian take on the task before us is that it is not a matter of teaching action but the more modest undertaking of teaching about action in ways that foreground its ethical significance. This is not a simple undertaking, as Arendt's excavation of the traditions of moral and political philosophy indicates. Not only have theorists of the moral and political life misunderstood action, but political actors themselves often prove to be an unreliable source of understanding. This is not surprising given how fleeting an experience action is, and given the added difficulty of telling one's own story.

Arendt's opens her preface to *Between Past and Future* with a curious aphorism written by the French poet and former member of the Resistance, René Char: "*Notre heritage n'est precede d'aucun testament*—our inheritance was left to us by no testament."<sup>11</sup> In this one puzzling statement, Char has managed to compress both the tragedy of the twentieth century and the possibility that such tragedies might in future be forestalled. The tragedy is that people did not seem to remember (or perhaps they had never known) that to live ethically in a shared world requires that one act on its behalf in those moments when the "in-between" of the common world has been dissolved and whole groups of people are expelled from—or denied entry into—the community of nations. The remarkable thing is that despite the "lack of inheritance" that Char bemoans, a few men and women had the fortitude to become "challengers" in a nation that had capitulated to Nazi domination.<sup>12</sup> The inheritance

to which Char refers is of fairly recent vintage; it is the legacy bequeathed us by the revolutionary spirit of the eighteenth century. Yet, as Char's aphorism indicates, no sooner had the first French revolutionaries learned what political action could do than they became too caught up in their activities to leave a testimony to guide future generations. As a result, the men and women of the resistance had to learn about action for themselves.

Their interventions were crucial. They served to remind the European public that capitulation was not the only option; resistance was possible. Their actions opened space within the public consciousness for alternative ways of thinking and acting within the context of French acquiescence to Nazi domination. Although the specifics of their activities had to be carried out in secret, the results were visible reminders to a public that had forgotten—or perhaps had never quite understood—that they could play a part in the shaping of the shared world. The moment people joined the resistance, they learned that they “had become ‘challengers,’ had taken the initiative upon themselves and therefore, without knowing or even noticing it, had begun to create that public space between themselves where freedom could appear.”<sup>13</sup> Ironic indeed that these children of the French revolution had to learn this anew and as if for the first time, but not surprising given that they had “been left no testament.” Arendt attributes this loss less to historical circumstances and “the adversity of reality” than to the fact that no tradition had foreseen the need to pass the memories of those political experiences down to future generations. The resistance fighters managed to restore lustre to the “lost treasure” of the revolution, but Arendt is aware that we cannot simply rely on this almost miraculous appearance of action in the world:

The testament, telling the heir what will rightfully be his, wills past possessions for a future. Without testament or, to resolve the metaphor, without tradition—which selects and names, which hands down and preserves, which indicates where the treasures are and what their worth is—there seems to be no willed continuity in time and hence, humanly speaking, neither past nor future, only sempiternal change of the world and the biological cycle of living creatures in it.<sup>14</sup>

To “will past possessions for a future” is to leave a legacy for future generations. This legacy is not an unbroken chain of ideas and practices passed down through the ages; it is a much more deliberate undertaking. As Arendt understands it, remembrance is not a simple matter of tracing an unbroken line of thought backwards and forwards in time; it is a more complex process of culling from the past stories that help to illuminate “humanity in dark times.”<sup>15</sup>

*Eichmann in Jerusalem* tells two such stories, one about an individual, Sargent Anton Schmidt, who refused to blindly follow the policies of the Nazi regime though it cost him his life, and the other about a nation that refused to capitulate to Nazi demands. When asked to require Danish Jews to wear the yellow star on their lapels, the Danish government told their German occupiers that “the King would be the first to wear it.” Danish and stateless Jews residing in Denmark were shipped to neutral Sweden at Danish expense rather than being handed over to their occupiers as requested. What stands out about the Danish resistance was its public nature. In other countries, oppositional forces tried to undermine Nazi occupation largely by



subterfuge. The Danes made their opposition public, and this made all the difference, not only to the Jews whose lives were saved, but also, according to Arendt, to the Germans who came into contact with this principled resistance. So astounded were they by the depth of Danish conviction that they revised the wording of their declaration of victory over the Danes, arguing that “the objective of the operation was not to seize a great number of Jews but to clean Denmark of Jews, and this objective has been achieved.”<sup>16</sup> This story, writes Arendt, should be “required reading in political science for all students who wish to learn something about the enormous power potential inherent in non-violent action and in resistance to an opponent possessing vastly superior means of violence.”<sup>17</sup>

These stories of principled resistance to evil speak to the tremendous courage on the part of people who sought to intervene actively in wrongdoing. Schmidt helped several hundred Jews escape their fate; the Danes helped hundreds of thousands. Nonetheless, in her essay in praise of Lessing, Arendt makes it clear that however heroic the actors, the tales these stories tell remain tragic. These brief illuminations of the courage of a few individuals and rare nations should not be understood as an attempt to achieve mastery over the past. Although the telling of stories “shapes history, [it] solves no problems and assuages no suffering; it does not master anything once and for all.”<sup>18</sup> But stories help us to remember by giving memory narrative shape. Once written, and for as long as these stories continue to be repeated or even revised and reinterpreted, spaces of remembrance are held open and the future is given a testament. Stories are a large part of each generation’s inheritance: “no philosophy, no analysis, no aphorism, be it ever so profound, can compare in intensity and richness of meaning with a properly narrated story.”<sup>19</sup>

These stories of exemplary figures and exemplary moments in history are a form of remembrance that is oriented toward the future. They serve as signposts in that they take “into account that man is a beginning and a beginner.”<sup>20</sup> An Arendtian curriculum would not simply consist of uplifting stories, however, since stories shed as much light on the courage of a few as they do on the complacency of the many. This is why the curriculum must be protected from becoming a compendium of virtues such as have become popular in recent years.<sup>21</sup> Just as the absence of stories can be debilitating, so an abundance of them can become misleading. Too many stories in the same vein will dim a particular story’s capacity for illumination and diminish its revelatory quality. Action’s exemplary aspect will be lost. Even the most inspiring moments in political life—the American Revolution or the Civil Right’s Movement—can be recounted in ways that are deadening rather than inspiring. A few months ago, National Public Radio broadcast a segment of Ira Glass’s *This American Life* that followed a group of high school students to the capitol where they were to listen to Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Far from being inspired or even moved by the speech, the students voiced their intense boredom. Their comments made it clear that the speech is too familiar to them. They have heard it far too many times. The story their teacher sought to tell them had lost its capacity to illuminate. It is crucial that the stories we tell retain their revelatory quality. The moment stories become a litany, they are more likely to lull us into inaction than to spur us into action.

The exemplary quality of action suggests that the curriculum should not seek to make action commonplace. This probably seems strange given that the problem is precisely that action is such a rare occurrence. Perhaps this is best understood as a paradox that cannot—and must not—be resolved. Arendt is not so naive as to think that everyone will be willing to take the risks of action, and indeed, there is a sense in which the world itself could not be sustained in the face of action's perpetual disruptiveness. The American Revolution is a case in point. No sooner had the revolutionaries achieved their unprecedented independence than the revolutionary leadership set about establishing a constitution that would stabilize and provide an orderly basis for the life of the new nation.<sup>22</sup> Arendt was intensely attuned to this human need to create “islands of predictability” in the world, but she is equally aware that it is precisely this need for stability, order, and predictability that gets us into trouble. It creates the exact sort of complacency that leads most people to become unthinking participants in wrongdoing. Nonetheless, having told the story of Sergeant Anton Schmidt's resistance, Arendt writes:

[T]he lesson of such stories is simple and within everybody's grasp. Politically speaking, it is that under conditions of terror most people will comply but *some people will not*, just as the lesson of the countries to which the Final Solution was proposed is that “it could happen” in most places but it did not happen everywhere. Humanly speaking, no more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation.<sup>23</sup>

This is the larger lesson Arendt wants to teach us. It is a difficult lesson for democrats who want more than anything to believe that everyone can be taught to think and act politically. Arendt points to a different legacy: “most people will comply but *some people will not*.” What is not known—and indeed, can never be known—is who these few “challengers” will be. This is why an Arendtian approach to education for action proceeds as though all students will one day take it upon themselves to become active shapers of the shared world: not because they will all do so, but because we cannot know in advance who will have the courage to act “on behalf of the shared world,” nor when and under what circumstances they will see the need to do so.

---

1. Paul O'Connell, Debra Pepler, and Wendy Craig, “Peer Involvement in Bullying: Insights and Challenges for Intervention,” *Journal of Adolescence* 22 (1999): 437-52.

2. *Ibid.*, 448.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Aaron Schutz, “Is Political Education an Oxymoron? Hannah Arendt's Resistance to Public Spaces in Schools,” in *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002).

5. Lisa Jane Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 55.

6. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 246.

7. Hannah Arendt, “Preface: The Gap Between Past and Future,” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 5.

8. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 322.

9. *Ibid.*, 324.

10. Arendt “The Crisis in Education,” in Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 196.



11. Arendt, "Preface: The Gap Between Past and Future," 3.
12. Ibid., 4.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 5.
15. This phrase is the title of Arendt's address to the Free City of Hamburg which awarded her the Lessing Prize. "On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing" is collected in Arendt's *Men in Dark Times* (San Diego: Harvest/HBJ, 1968), 3-31.
16. Arendt *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 175.
17. Ibid, 170.
18. Arendt "On Humanity in Dark Times," 21.
19. Ibid, 22.
20. Arendt "What is Freedom?" *Between Past and Future*, 170.
21. I am thinking here of William Bennett's very popular collections of moral tales, *The Book of Virtues* and its sequel, *The Moral Compass*. While the stories and poems aim to inspire, these books make no effort to provide a context against which the exemplary quality of these virtues can shine.
22. See the chapters entitled "Foundation I" and "Foundation II" in *On Revolution*, 141-214.
23. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 233.