

Time, Thinking, and the Experience of Philosophy in School

Walter Omar Kohan

State University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

INTRODUCTION

The 2016 PES Conference Call for Papers invited submissions on the theme of “philosophy of education in ‘the gap between past and future’.” The phrase comes from Hannah Arendt’s preface to *Between Past and Future* and “urges us to think carefully about the challenges of preparing young people for an unforeseen future in light of these fissures in time.”² Arendt argues that the gap is opened up and sustained by “the act of thinking itself,” and in this vein, the Call for Papers seeks to make “this thinking public in the hopes of redirecting educational thinking, policy and practice.”³

Let’s take a closer look at Arendt’s argument. Her main inspirations are the poet René Char and the writer Franz Kafka. Arendt begins the Preface with a line from the former: “Notre héritage n’est pas précédé d’aucun testament.”⁴ This testifies to a resistance and an unnamed and disappeared treasure, lost by the absence of Testament, due to “historical events.” One of Kafka’s Parables is the “single description of that crisis,” and tells the story of a man (“he”) who must fight against the past that presses him from his back and the future that presses him from his front. If there is fight, it is because there is a human being there. Without him, the forces of time would have been neutralized or destroyed.

Arendt’s interpretation of the Parable emphasizes that for human beings time is not continuous, but rather is a cut in the middle of the line at the point where Kafka’s man is. His position in this line demands that we consider the present not as we commonly do, as simply a non-graspable or escaping instant (*nyn*), but rather as a gap that exists due to his constant fight, his taking of a position against the past and future.⁵ Kafka’s man has such a difficult time dealing with the opposing forces of past and future that he dreams, as Kafka points out, of stepping outside the fighting line and becoming a judge of the fight.⁶

As Arendt reveals, Kafka presupposes what she calls a “traditional image of time,” according to which time is a rectilinear movement. Additionally, she claims that when humans carry the dream of escaping from this line they fall into the metaphysic dream of a non-temporal sphere. Throughout her analysis, Arendt distinguishes between two forms of time: a) historic or biographic time, and b) mental time. The gap can only exist in the latter, as the former is just the continuous, consecutive, and successive line of time. Only while living the non-temporal life of thinking, could “he” live in the gap between past and future. This non-temporal space is not passed down from one generation to another, it is not inherited, but rather “each new generation, indeed every new human being as he inserts himself between an infinite past and an infinite future, must discover and ploddingly pave it anew.”⁷

Arendt shows that this lived experience of thinking in the gap can only be acquired by thinking itself, through “practice” and “exercises.”⁸ She further clarifies that these exercises consist of more than just applying mental processes as if they

were techniques or skills, i.e. thinking is not just a matter of logic. In fact, the book she is prefacing performs the thinking she describes. It is composed of six exercises of thought that do not prescribe what to think, but instead seek to “move in this gap.”⁹ Notably, at the end of the Preface, Arendt stresses that the essay is the literary form more akin to the exercises of thought she is practicing.

This article is also an attempt to be an exercise of thinking, focusing on the problematization of what we do in school under the name of philosophy. In the gap opened by Arendt, this exercise hopes to open other gaps concerning the way the teaching of philosophy is usually understood in “educational thinking, policy, and practice,” in Arendt’s terms.

Given the complexity of the issues involved, and the rather short length of this contribution, it will only be possible to point out issues that will certainly need to be further unfolded and justified elsewhere. The aim of this essay is to provide some stimuli to (re)consider two notions addressed by Arendt: time and thinking, and especially the relationship between them; and the more general issue of what kind of time can be nurtured through thinking. More specifically, this essay inquires into what kind of experience of time the dispositive of thinking called philosophy can foster in educational institutions, here referred to by the generic name of school. To accomplish this aim, the themes of time and thinking will be addressed in the first two sections.¹⁰ In the third section, the question of teaching philosophy in school will be examined in light of the characterizations of time and thinking previously developed.¹¹

TIME

The idea of time as a continuous line is derived in the so-called Western tradition from the association of time and movement, as found in Plato’s *Timaeus*. In effect, time as *chronos* is “a moving image of eternity (*aion*) moving according to number.”¹² While defining *chronos* as a moving image of *aion*, Plato might have had in mind Parmenides’s sphere. He stresses this other gap, pointed to by Arendt, between the physics (natural movement) and the metaphysics (an artificial immobile space): the timeless, aionic, eternal, spherical being, and the imperfect, moving, chronological line. In the *Physics*, Aristotle defines *chronos* in a more analytic way as “the number of movement according to before and after.”¹³ According to Aristotle, the two parts of time are past (the movements already experienced) and future (the movements still to be experienced). If time is movement, the present cannot exist but as a limit or boundary: there is no way to stop natural movement other than in a metaphysical artificial realm. The movement of *chronos* is continuous, consecutive, successive, and irreversible: one movement after another, of seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, decades, centuries, etc. There is no way to be in March without passing the whole of February, to begin April right after February before March itself has passed and ended, or living again in 2015 once 2016 has begun.

Chronos is familiar to us because it resembles the arbitrary cultural inventions that give structure to the way we think and experience time. This notion of time seems also to be presupposed in Kafka’s Parable and explains the difficulty of the man who stands between the past and future: the crash of time is inevitable and his

position unsustainable. Only his presence breaks the continuity of time and introduces the gap in which “he” stands.¹⁴

But *chronos* is not the only word the Greeks had for time. Another is *kairos*, which means “measure,” and, in relation to time, “critical moment,” “seasonal,” “opportunity.”¹⁵ If movements in *chronos* are qualitatively all the same (that is, every element of time is the same as any other in terms of quality), then *kairos* establishes a qualitative difference as a result of the human presence in the natural movement of *chronos*. If *chronos* follows a regular and non-differentiable pattern, in a human life it is clearly not qualitatively the same to do some things at some moments rather than at others: what was not even thinkable to occur in October 2015 might be completely expected in April 2016, for example.

But still there is a third term for time in Ancient Greek, already mentioned in the quote from Plato’s *Timaeus*: *aion*, which is usually translated in Plato and Aristotle as “eternity.” In its more ancient appearances it means the intensity of lifetime, duration, destination, something not easily divisible or countable. There is an extraordinary and enigmatic fragment of Heraclitus¹⁶ that connects *aion* and infancy, suggesting that if *chronos* is the adult time of institutions, *aion* is an infant time of play.¹⁷ If in *chronos* the present cannot be but a limit (or a “gap” as in Arendt’s interpretation of Kafka’s Parable), in *aion* the present is everywhere, and aionical time is only present, for example, when an infant plays. *Aion*, governed by infancy, is not only the time of play, but also the time of questioning and thinking as opposed to the chronological time of knowing. Moreover, it is also the time of philosophy and art, as opposed to the time of science; of aesthetic experience, as opposed to scientific experiment; and also the time of love.

As already observed, Arendt points out that the present she is speaking of is “due exclusively to the presence of man,”¹⁸ or as Jan Masschelein describes it, “the insertion into time of “a beginning” (man as a being of action).”¹⁹ According to Masschelein, the present that we experience, for example while we think, is not something that appears as such and before us (as an *object of knowledge*, as in a scientific experiment in modern science), but something that emerges when we are committed and affected in an attentive and caring way, when we are involved in a way in which we cannot really separate ourselves from what we are experiencing (like in philosophical questioning). If in the former we touch the present, in the latter we are touched by it. Thus, in *aion* the relationship between the object-subject of knowledge is suspended; we are exposed and transformed by experience. In other words, and inspired by Masschelein, we can argue that these experiences of thinking can only exist if we recognize ourselves as *infants*, in the sense of interrupters of a given force or movement, and writers of our lives as part of a new world, i.e., beginners.

THINKING

It is probably time to engage with the question, “what does it mean to think?,” which has a rich tradition that we can trace back as far as Plato’s “*logos* of the soul with itself.”²⁰ We have already noticed how Arendt distinguishes the experience of thinking from the mental habits that follow a logical pattern. More recently, Gilles Deleuze has critiqued instrumental conceptions of thinking, those that consider

thinking as a set of skills, abilities, or competences, and which seem to be the basis not only of different discourses in the social and human sciences, but also the history of philosophy. The dominant understanding of thinking presupposes what he calls a dogmatic, naturalized, or moralistic image of thinking.²¹ Based on recognition, thinking cannot generate more than conformity to the same. But on what can thinking be based if not on recognition? From where can it emerge? From an encounter, Deleuze suggests.²² It is an unpredictable encounter that forces us to think, puts us in doubt, takes us out of our conformity, normality, and natural attitude. As an experience of encounter, thinking is a free operation of difference: the complex repetition in the realm of the heterogeneous – uncertain, accidental, unexpected. As an ability or tool, thinking is mechanized, turned into a technique. As unexpected encounter, thinking cannot be trained, but one can prepare for it; it can be nurtured, awaited, and, when experienced, cared for.

Deleuze points out that the history of philosophical thinking is not chronologic but *stratigraphic*: for example, in one stratum or plateau we find Plato, Kant, and Hegel around the concept of justice; on another Empedocles, Montaigne, and Foucault on friendship, and so on.²³ Time in the history of philosophy is neither historical nor linear; philosophers of different chronological times might overlap or share the same philosophical time while creating concepts about the particular problems they pose.

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY IN SCHOOL

The rationale for teaching philosophy in school is usually focused on the effects it might have on students' thinking. This is the case in educational movements such as "critical thinking"²⁴ or "philosophy for children,"²⁵ where it is argued that the exposition of children, adolescents, and young people to philosophy will allow them to foster the thinking skills they need in order to develop into autonomous thinkers, or reasonable citizens, or whatever terms are used to refer to the aims of the formation process in which the teaching of philosophy is incorporated. Recently, UNESCO has published a report entitled *Philosophy: a school of freedom*, about the situation of the teaching of philosophy around the world.²⁶ In this report, which covers all levels of teaching, the pre-school and elementary school chapters focus on presenting examples of practices that have been carried out with children across the five continents. The high-school chapter presents a map of the situation of the discipline in different regions and opens up a discussion on the meaning of that presence. After pointing out how vast a subject "philosophy" is and the challenges faced in almost every educational system, UNESCO's reading committee concludes: "Philosophical teaching is defined as bringing freedom into the exercise of critical thinking – and through critical thinking exercising freedom;"²⁷ it prepares young people in order to inhabit "the political world," to put it in Arendtian terms.

Let's follow another strategy. According to its Greek etymology, the word "school" is a "time-word," *schole*, which means leisure, rest, ease, (plenty of) time.²⁸ School as *schole* configures space-time so that egalitarian and unique experiences of time unfold. Thinking of *schole* in this way, we follow authors such as the 18th/19th century Venezuelan educator and philosopher Simón Rodríguez, and contemporary philosophers Jacques Rancière and Jan Masschelein. Rodríguez explored how in the

Latin tradition *schole* was translated as *otium*, and argues that those who make school in to a transaction (*neg-otium* in Latin, *negocio* in Spanish) in fact deny the very form of school.²⁹ When school is thought of in the commercial sense of *negotiation*, *schole* is negated. Rancière has shown that the Greek *schole* was not specifically an institution to learn in, but rather a space to share an egalitarian experience of free-time, one that is completely impossible for those inserted in the labor market.³⁰ Masschelein has described *schole* as a form with a number of characteristics that constitute the experience of free, liberated time: suspension, profanation, attention, technology, equality, public love, preparation, responsibility.³¹

Contemporary schools are far from this experience of spared-time. They are mainly chronological institutions: time is organized in hours, semesters, years. Schools function according to the logic of periodization. *Kairos* also has its place in schools in the sense that some spaces, both geographically and pedagogically, can be occupied only at specific and pre-established ages. According to this logic, there is a precise time, an opportunity, when some contents can be learned, and cannot be learned either before or afterwards. As any inhabitant of contemporary schools might confirm, in different geographical contexts, with very rare exceptions,³² there is no free time in schools other than the breaks, excursions, or similar intervals that seem to be there so that the regular school time can maintain its hegemonic place. As we have already suggested, even philosophy as a subject matter seems to be submitted to this same chronological experience of time: its contents, usually taken from the hegemonic history of the discipline, are presented in a certain sequence and all students must learn them in that order and at the same time.

Thus it is not at all clear that philosophy - not as subject matter, but rather as an experience of thinking - can find a comfortable place at school. The notes on thinking in the previous section might help to clarify what kind of experience of thinking philosophy can make possible: philosophy as experience does not affirm an image of thinking based on skills or abilities, but one of an encounter with what forces one to think. Philosophical thinking does not propose a self-legitimated rationality that establishes what ought to be thought in order to be a "good thinker." Instead it grants one the possibility to experience the illogical, what seems to not be thinkable, what we do not expect can be thought.

In this sense, philosophy occupies an antinomic position in educational institutions, as shown by Jacques Derrida.³³ On the one hand, philosophy needs and calls to be institutionalized but, on the other, the experience of thinking philosophically is impossible to institutionalize. To put this differently, from one perspective, since Socrates, philosophy cannot be separated from its educational dimension but, at the same time, the very gesture of thinking for oneself that constitutes philosophy cannot be taught, and must be learned by oneself. In this way, philosophy presents an antinomy in relation to both its institutionalization and its educational dimension: it calls for an institutionalization that cannot be fulfilled; it urges an educational dimension that is impossible to fully accomplish.

This antinomy seems to be even stronger when we consider the specific role of the teacher. Let's consider, provisionally, the act of teaching as an act of giving.

What kind of “giving” is the “giving” of a teacher when she offers philosophy as an experience of philosophical thinking? It is certainly not a “giving” of content, or of a system. Could it be a “giving” of “time”? Derrida has also shown the double aporia present in the expression “giving time.”³⁴ In effect, a true giving could only exist if it does not expect anything in return and if it is without consciousness of the giving, i.e., giving could only truly exist as giving if it is not a giving, it would demand a radical forgetfulness. If giving is impossible, giving time is a double impossibility, because time, considered from the standpoint of the present, the now (*nyn*, as limit, instant) does not exist, it can only be the presents already past, or the presents still to come (future). But none of them really are, and no one can give what does not exist and what, after all, does not belong to anybody. Considered as something that a teacher actually does, “giving time” appears as a double impossibility.

We should note, however, that in his argument concerning the antinomy of “giving time,” Derrida presupposes a concept of time as *chronos*. But as we have already suggested, the time of the experience of philosophical thinking is more aionic than chronological. Let’s consider, then, a possible meaning for the teaching of philosophy in terms of a “giving of time” that is not understood literally and chronologically, but that might inspire a different meaning to thinking philosophically with others in school.

A number of considerations need to be offered: as just seen, “giving” could not mean “giving” something to somebody, but it might signify offering the conditions in which something, i.e. thinking philosophically, could be experienced. In order to offer, create, or establish these conditions, the teacher gives her own thinking in the act of teaching, not literally, in the sense of transmitting something to her students, because this is impossible, but for the sake of being a teacher. That is, what constitutes the giving of a teacher of philosophy is her giving herself in her thinking, i.e. openly and committedly she offers her thinking, without hiding any of it, to others. At the same time, if this is possible, the teacher gives by making sure that all the others in the classroom can also offer, freely and openly, as equally intellectually capable persons,³⁵ their own thinking. These two dimensions – the offering of her thinking and the preparation of the conditions so that everyone can equally share the thinking experience – are not waiting there to be discovered, but need to be created, invented by the teacher.

To conclude this essay, we might affirm then that the time that is “given” in the shared experience of thinking through philosophy is not something transmitted, objective, external, or that belongs to someone who owns it. Nor is it “the number of movement according to before and after.”³⁶ Rather it is the present aionic experience of time that virtually inhabits actual school as *schole*. Philosophy, precisely due to its commitment to thinking rather than knowledge, can help to actualize *schole*. The teaching of philosophy is the offering of a forgotten dimension of school, one that allows newcomers, through the experience of thinking philosophically together, to put the old world into question and eventually to invent a new one. Thought of in this way, philosophy is an untimely experience of thinking: a gap between the actual and the virtual, an encounter with what ought not to be thought, a school of

free-time in school so that a school can be a school. It is a space where the new put the world into question and prepare themselves for the experience of thinking (and living) together in a new world.

1. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).
2. Philosophy of Education Society, 2016 PES Conference Call for Papers, <https://www.philosophy-ofeducation.org/>
3. René Char, *Feuillets d'Hypnos* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946); René Char, *Hypnos Waking: Poems and Prose*, trans. Jackson Mathews (New York: Random House, 1956).
4. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 10.
5. *Ibid.*, 11.
6. *Ibid.*, 13.
7. *Ibid.*, 13.
8. *Ibid.*, 14.
9. In doing so, the Ancient Greeks, as well as Arendt, Kafka, and contemporary philosophers such as Simon Rodríguez, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida will be brought into the conversation. This does not mean that they share a common idea of time, or thinking. They are introduced here to strengthen this experience of thinking.
10. In her Preface, Arendt's uses both expressions, "experience of thinking" and "exercise of thought". In this exercise of writing, the former will be privileged over the latter: hopefully this move is justified in what follows. Moving from "exercise" to "experience" privileges a word whose etymological root (the Indo-European "per" from the Latin *ex-per-ientia*) means movement, displacement, and is less associated with something mechanical, technical, or instrumental; similarly, the move from "thought" to "thinking" privileges an incompleteness, and process over product. Considering both, this move aims to privilege the non-technical and open-ended movement of thinking itself.
11. Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. P. Kalkavage (Newburyport: R. Pullins Company, 2001), 37d.
12. Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye (Adelaide: The University of South Adelaide, 2015), IV, 220a.
13. Even though presented by Arendt as universal, this is far from the case. For example, the Aymaras inhabitants of the Andes in present day Bolivia and Chile represent past and future in precisely the opposite way: the past is in front, because it is what we can see and know; the future is behind us because we do not see and cannot know it; and the present is what falls up upon ourselves. Between the past and the future there is no clash but rather a cooperative relationship: the past gives light to the present and to the future. See, for example, Rafael E. Núñez and Eve Sweetser, "With the Future Behind Them: Convergent Evidence From Aymara Language and Gesture in the Crosslinguistic Comparison of Spatial Construals of Time," *Cognitive Science* 30 (2006): 401-450.
14. Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 859.
15. Miroslav Marcovich, *Heraclitus Fragments* (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 2001), DK 22 B 52.
16. I've worked in more detail on this fragment in: Walter Kohan, *Philosophy and Childhood* (New York: Palgrave, 2014).
17. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 10.
18. Jan Masschelein, "Philosophy as (self-) education: To make the voice of the pedagogue heard," unpublished manuscript; published in Portuguese as: Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, *A pedagogia, a democracia, a escola* (Belo Horizonte: Autêntica Editora, 2014), 7-24.
19. Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 2004), 189e.
20. Deleuze's critique is mainly developed in Chapter Three, "The Image of Thought," in: Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 129-166. Here he distinguishes eight postulates of the Moral Image of Thinking: 1) the principle (the presupposed thinker's good will and the good nature of thought; 2) common sense (as *concordia facultatum*, and "good sense" as what guarantees this concord); 3) the model, or recognition: inviting all the faculties to

exercise upon an object supposedly the same; 4) the element or representation that reduces difference to the dimensions of the Same and the Similar, the Analogous, and the Opposite; 5) the negative, in which error expresses anything negative in thinking as a product of external mechanisms; 6) the proposition: designation is constituted as the space of truth; 7) modality or solutions, which tends to define problems only in terms of the possibility of their being solved; 8) the end: learning and culture as subordinated to knowledge and method.

21. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 139.

22. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

23. See, for example, "The Critical Thinking Movement," <http://www.criticalthinking.org/>, accessed 29 October 2015.

24. Matthew Lipman, *Philosophy Goes to School* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

25. UNESCO, *Philosophy: A School of Freedom* (Paris: UNESCO, 2007).

26. UNESCO, *Philosophy: A School of Freedom*, 239.

27. Cf. Liddell and Scott, *A Greek English Lexicon*, 1747.

28. Simón Rodríguez, *Obras completas, Vol. II* (Caracas: Presidencia de la República, 2001), 148. See also: Walter Omar Kohan, *The Inventive Schoolmaster* (Rotterdam: Sense, 2015). Translations are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

29. Jacques Rancière, "École, production, égalité," in *L'école de la démocratie* (Édilig: Fondation Diderot, 1988), www.horlieu-editions.com/textes-en-ligne/politique/ranciere-ecole-production-egalite.pdf

30. Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, *In Defense of the School: A Public Issue*, trans. Jack McMartin (Leuven: E-ducation, Culture & Society Publishers, 2013).

31. It is an issue for future research to consider what kind of experience of time is provided, for example, in the so-called "Democratic Schools" movement and others "progressive" movements in education.

32. Jacques Derrida, "Les antinomies de la discipline philosophique," in *Du droit à la philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1980), 511-524.

33. Jacques Derrida, *Donner le temps* (Paris: Galilée, 1991), 44.

34. Jacques Rancière, *The ignorant schoolmaster*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

35. Aristotle's definition of time in *Physics* IV 220a. See note 12.

The research informing this article is funded by the CNPq (National Council of Research, Brazil) and FAPERJ (Rio de Janeiro Research Support Foundation).