

The Equality of Difference: A Phenomenological Ontology for Disability and Education

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What might education mean for someone with severe cognitive deficits? What might philosophy of education contribute to special education as it is framed in the United States? I am a philosopher of education and work in the field of intellectual disabilities. In fact, my professional role is to serve as a gatekeeper for the implementation of practices that may violate an individual's rights in a large, bureaucratically structured service system. To make the questions raised in this essay concrete, I have constructed a composite person-exemplar in a typical situation of the kind I encounter daily.

I receive a telephone call from a case manager with a state agency, who explains to me that a young female teenager named Sarah (with a significant cognitive deficit) is engaging in aggressive behavior (hitting the care "providers") when she is "redirected" by caregivers from the kitchen and the pantry at night. I am told there are other problems as well, such as screaming at staff when she returns from school. The solutions proposed by her treatment team for my consideration include alarms on her bedroom door to alert caregivers as to when she "needs" to be escorted out of the kitchen, locks on the refrigerator door, and locks on the cabinet doors as well. I am further told that to address the "agitation," the caregiver staff has obtained a doctor's order for an additional psychotropic medication. Sarah lives in a group home with five other individuals and the caregivers are permitted to sleep at night.¹

Why is this case scenario a question for philosophy of education? The foregoing situation *is* an educational context, even if it did not occur in a formal educational setting such as a special education classroom, because embedded in the situation there at the group home are questions of knowledge, authority, teaching, and learning, not only for Sarah but for the others involved in Sarah's life. This situation raises questions for the larger context of culture and its influence over attitudes about disability. Practically speaking, Sarah has no voice, even as many social institutions have arisen to protect her rights and confer entitlements on her because of her disability. In the eyes of many, she is taken care of, and that is the end of issue.

In any case, for philosophy of education, Sarah's disability brings into focus the very foundational questions of philosophy of education, educating what, for whom, and why. Before I address a response to the scenario above, I want you to know that, throughout this essay, I draw on two theoretical sources to theorize a phenomenological ontology for disability and education: 1) John Dewey's metaphor of the "live creature," as a "place marker" for a human being, and 2) Hannah Arendt's concept of "plurality," that premises ethics on humans' similarity based on the very fact of their difference, that is, all human beings are equal in that they are different.² From Dewey, I claim that all live creatures share a similar educational "task" and "purpose," in *asserting* themselves in the context of their environment, weaving more complex relations and richer forms of experience. From Arendt, I claim that all children, no matter their putative abilities or disabilities, are newcomers into the world, with unforeseen possibilities for the relationships they enter into and sustain.

Taken together these concepts drawn from Dewey and Arendt complement each other by establishing a context for the establishment of educational meaning that casts a net wide enough to capture all students no matter their degree of ability or disability.

Returning to my case scenario, from the perspective of care-giving staff, Sarah presents a dual problem of control and responsibility. Sarah appears to exhibit no control over her behavior, *no restraint*, that the staff imagine she needs to function. Thus, Sarah presents a (behavior) management problem for which these caregivers can only see a solution of further restriction of her activities. In response to Sarah's situation, presuming the best possible response, I would ask many questions of the case manager and the treatment team, to identify as many circumstances as possible to establish what Sarah's behavior might mean. Hence, my first task is to establish that Sarah is an agent with legitimate standing to behave the way she does. In much the same way, a good special education teacher might attune herself to recognizing what stands in the way of a child's learning and, more importantly, how a child learns best. Sometimes a tectonic shift in understanding occurs when the team discovers, for example, that among the layers of psychotropic medications an individual receives (frequently used with individuals with significant cognitive deficits), one medication, or a combination of medications, simply enhance an individual's hunger. In fact, this turned out to be the case with Sarah. Were the caregivers therefore just to make the kitchen and all food inaccessible, they might simply increase Sarah's agitation that, in my experience, usually brings another round of psychotropic medication to "help" Sarah control her impulses and behave as an appropriate, "autonomous" person. Caregiving staff are perfectly able and allowed to get up in the night and get something to eat whenever they want, but Sarah is not. Caregivers need to ask why Sarah is hungry? While all this makes the caregiver staff in Sarah's situation seem perfectly awful, they are not; they are only operating within the context of what Michel Foucault named a "discursive formation" — an operational paradigm that contains within itself two contrary narratives, that arbitrate and interpret experiences, such as autonomy and control.³

HOW IS SARAH A DEWEYAN "LIVE CREATURE"?

No creature lives merely under its skin; its subcutaneous organs are a means of connection with what lies beyond its bodily frame, and to which, in order to live, it must adjust itself, by accommodation or defense, but also by conquest. At every moment, it is exposed to dangers in its surroundings to satisfy its needs. The career and destiny of a living being is bound up with its interchanges with its environment, not externally but in the most intimate way.⁴

The foregoing quote, famous and often quoted, appears in Dewey's treatise on art, *Art As Experience*. In this book, Dewey announces his intention to explain art as an "intensification" of ordinary experience by showing how artistic expression arises out of embodied relations that surround live creatures. In his use of the label "creature," Dewey highlights the continuity existing among all forms of sentient life, all of which are driven into "commerce" with their surroundings. While Dewey likely had no conscious intent to apply his placeholder category to disability, the metaphor still works.

Sarah is a live creature. Dewey writes that live creatures are driven to establish a sense of “inner harmony,” and in order to do so the live creature must make “terms ... with the environment.”⁵ The “terms” of which Dewey writes, are premised on a full integration of affect and cognitive function, instantiating a qualitative state, that one *feels* before one *knows*. “Knowledge,” understood as a grasp of relations in an environing context, then energizes activities and actions aimed at restoring the affective wholeness, the inner harmony, that the feeling brings. In learning spoken language, the typical child begins with raw expression to which its caregivers impute meaning, laying a foundation for the child’s self-imputation of intention, based on reading the intentions of others. While my case-exemplar Sarah has no verbal language, she has intention, and her intention is expressed with a clarity that she understands. Hence, the problem is not really with her intention, her *expression of autonomy*, but with our understanding. Everyone can relate to a situation where we believe we have expressed our intention with as much clarity as we are capable of, yet, others do not understand us. As a result, we might engage in other forms of expression that include art, sounds, movement, gesture, or silence to express what we mean. In extreme situations, we may even react in anger that gives way to either despair or even violence. In Sarah’s case, the problem of understanding lies with a failure of the staff to recognize their similarity to Sarah under conditions of perceived need. Often we respond with empathy to individuals whom we perceive to be like ourselves; with those we perceive unlike ourselves we do not. In other words, we lack imagination, a profound learning deficit for an educator. When children or students cannot do something for themselves, is not the educators’ place to ask what they can do to help them? For Sarah the question to ask is: Why is Sarah hungry? This is a key piece to the story of Sarah as a live creature.

Sarah is a live creature. This is evident in her needs as a sentient creature for nourishment and in her communications even as they do not occur in verbal speech. In the case scenario, I mentioned that Sarah is said to scream (couched in terms of “verbal aggression”) when she comes home from school. Why? It turns out there is more to the story. Sarah is in school six hours a day in a small metropolitan school. When Sarah comes home, she likes to go to a rocking chair in her room and rock. However, as part of her residential program, Sarah has what is called an “Individual Plan” that summarizes her service needs and gives outcomes for the caregiver to work on with Sarah daily. One outcome is: Sarah “participates” in household chores with prompting by caregivers. Turns out, the group home schedule requires that Sarah begin working on household chores as soon as she gets home from school. Analyzing the situation further, I find that the caregivers end up in a fight with Sarah every day, to pull her out of her bedroom to work on this goal. Why? Because her plan states that Sarah *must* work on her goal, and caregivers must document *her progress*. The objective of the goal is that Sarah become more independent. The result of the objective bears little resemblance to the goal when we consider that most people chose when or even if, they will do household chores. Moreover, Sarah’s resistance arises from her attempt to take care of herself. In Sarah’s case, her limited coping skills make transitions from one environment to another problematic for her;

hence, rocking in her chair seems to help her calm herself and “decompress” from her day. Such an intention is not at all unusual for people stressed by their day or schedule. The solution that the staff asked for (a frequent occurrence) is that Sarah’s agitation and screaming be addressed through psychotropic medication. While it is true that a psychotropic medication might sedate Sarah and make her appear calmer, it would rob her of her distinct agency to advocate for her needs or express how she feels about anyone or anything, which is certainly something that ought to be considered if “independence” is a goal of Sarah’s education. Ironically, as I mentioned earlier, medications intended to help Sarah, in reality hinder her. From a critical perspective, this example illustrates the need for special educators to ask whose interests are really served by the techniques they use and resources they bring to bear on solving a problem.

What should be the goal of Sarah’s education? Taking a cue from Dewey’s embodied view of aesthetic experience, I would claim the original roots of a live creature’s experience provide the answer. Dewey framed his discussion of the aesthetic experience in general as a movement from what happens when one “has an experience,” a discernable event of note, separated from the general flow of events, to an emergent mode of expression, that produces an object, a tangible “something” recognized by others that give a general symbolic form to the original experience. While Dewey is speaking of artistic objects as such, an analogy exists when we consider what the “tasks” and “ends” of education might mean to someone like Sarah. While Sarah may seem very different from the readers of this essay, the tasks and ends of her education, from a Deweyan perspective, have much the same roots. Education for Sarah, like every other child, must therefore begin with a harnessing of her original need to orient and understand her environment through conscious appropriation. In the situation described, the staff invalidate this process of learning that Sarah self-initiated to meet her needs. Instead, caregivers are teaching themselves and Sarah that the environment only works through domination and control by one party or the other. The original curiosity on how Sarah might meet her own needs is the foundation of a child-centered approach one finds enunciated by Dewey and practiced in the pedagogical methods of Maria Montessori, who also believed the child herself is the fulcrum on which the course of learning turns. This reaching out into the environment that “environs” the child is something Dewey describes closely in his explication of aesthetic experience. Dewey describes this reaching out into the environment through use of an infelicitous term he names, “impulsion,” (in contrast to an “impulse”) defined thus,

Impulsion designates a movement outward and forward of the whole organism to which special impulses are auxiliary. It is the craving of a living creature for food as distinct from the reactions of the tongue and lips involved in swallowing; the turning to light of the body as a whole, like heliotropism of plants, as distinct from the following of a particular light by the eyes.⁶

All human live creatures (and perhaps other nonhuman live creatures) have a need to appropriate their experience through a conscious appreciation of the relations and interrelations of their environments, manifest and observable in their activities

vis-à-vis problems presented by such environments. The problems presented by an environment are simultaneously necessary for the child's growth, but also a source of dangers that the teacher or caregiver must manage to protect the child or student from being overwhelmed by or stunted in further growth and exploration. The first problem of learning begins with communication. The development of a child's communication capabilities, that for typical children eventuate in spoken language, rests on two fundamental skills that require furtherance, "intention-reading" and "pattern-finding."⁷ While infants are genetically predisposed to seek and prefer complexity in their environment, evidenced in original preference for a mobile human face, it is only through the provocations and opportunities of an environment that these skills generalize and flourish.

Sarah is no exception to this process, nor is any child, even children with autism whose particular deficits include difficulties in regarding others as intentional agents like themselves.⁸ In any case, learning that includes a working understanding of causality, shared attention with another individual, or moral development that others share feelings like one's own, is the original foundation for all further learning of academic content of the sciences and the humanities. While Sarah's disability limits her abilities to grasp academic content, or even learn and use spoken language, the foundations of intention-reading, pattern-finding, and a rudimentary moral sense are intact. Drawing on my composite experience with individuals with even the most severe cognitive deficits, I can say my exemplar-person Sarah is aware of others' feelings and preferences, her own feelings and preferences, and moreover, that she (Sarah) shares and participates in the world somatically and aesthetically with others. The world constitutes both sources of up-welling bodily pleasure and a sense of well-being, and sources of bodily danger, negativity, and ugliness. Dewey understands this — as does Arendt, as I subsequently show. The goal of education for Sarah ought therefore to encourage her commerce with the world that envelops her, developing her understanding of her own causal impact on it and in it, and her capacities to bring meaning and pleasure into the lives of others, as well as into her own life. Such objectives of education bear limits of expression in words. Were this not so, there would be no need for artistic expression to capture the music of life. Education is about overcoming, not in the sense that one must compete with others, as the neoliberal metanarrative of the market suggests, but that one come into one's own, not once and for all, but perpetually with the rhythm of experience that Dewey so aptly captures in his description of tension and release immanent in aesthetic experience. Life is an adventure, no less for Sarah, than any other live creature.

It is the fate of a living creature, however, that it cannot secure what belongs to it without an adventure in the world that as a whole it does not own and to which it has no native title. Whenever the organic impulse exceeds the limits of the body, it finds itself in a strange world and commits in some measure to the fortune of the self to external circumstance. It cannot pick just what it wants and automatically leave indifferent and adverse out of account. If, and as far as, the organism continues to develop, it is helped on as a favoring wind helps the runner. But the impulsion also meets many things on its outbound course that deflect and oppose it. In the process of converting these obstacles and neutral conditions into favoring agencies, the live creature becomes aware of the intent implicit in its impulsion. The self, whether it succeed or fail, does not merely restore itself to its former state.⁹

Regardless of the educational context — a formal school setting, habilitative residential setting, or natural home — the role of the educator is metaphorically that of the “favoring wind,” who foresees the possible interactions of the child or student’s abilities and needs in the press of an environment in which the child must function. Tragically, educators, as well as those who educate and are rarely identified as educators, may answer to perceived educational tasks and purposes far removed from the actualities and needs of children as individuals. Even the legislation intended to support the rights of children with disabilities to a “free and appropriate public education,” *The Education of Individuals with Disabilities Act* is imbued with heavy, neoliberal sentiments suggesting that citizen–persons must be shaped, first and foremost, into discrete atoms of self-owned effort, thus, belittling the true realities of citizen interdependence. Although these issues that inform and plague legislation on education and disability might seem far removed from the case scenario that opened this essay, they are not. In truth, the practices applied to Sarah are the “effects” of a complex grid of power relations so prominently a part of Foucault’s project to understand how individuals come to be “subjects of knowledge,” both to themselves and others.¹⁰ How is Sarah a subject of knowledge to herself, and how is she an object of knowledge to others? On what basis are Sarah’s education and residential supports premised? As it is clear that she can never be independent in the way independence is constructed, does this mean she is a less a person?

In the final portion of this essay, I combine my application of Dewey’s live creature to Sarah’s situation with a reading of Arendt’s phenomenological account of existence premised on a plural ontology.

SARAH’S ONTOLOGY OF PLURALITY

A child born with a disability, that is, a cognitive or physical impairment, is never born knowing she has a disability. A child is simply born. In the same sense intended by Simone de Beauvoir, when she wrote her iconic phrase that “one is not born a woman, but becomes one,” children with certain markers of appearance often become what culture says they are.¹¹ Arendt understood the hegemonic power welded by culture over the construction of identity in her careful study of identity, totalitarianism, and Anti-Semitism. In *The Human Condition*, she describes the difficulties of knowing others, in terms of “what” they are, as opposed to “who” they are.¹² Even though Arendt’s concern in this book was to theorize the conditions of political action based on its *raison d’être* freedom, her observations about factors that condition human existence are extremely relevant in many other contexts. For example, Arendt premises ethics not on the Enlightenment natural rights discourses nor on theology, that is, *the imago dei*, but rather on the fact of plurality, that everyone comes into the world as an individual, a new beginning. Each person begins and develops a distinct autobiography woven into the lives of everyone with whom he or she comes into contact, in ways that cannot be predicted at the entrance of this new life into the world. These Arendtian observations apply no less to my case-exemplar, Sarah, than any other person regardless of capabilities or putative disabilities. Sarah’s life is an event fit for a story, with a unique beginning,

characterized with certain given circumstances that apply to how Sarah's life will unfold. Sarah's equality with others, as Arendt claims, rests on the fact that she is different from everyone else; and everyone else is different from Sarah. While Sarah cannot speak with verbal language, she remains an event of potential agency to influence events in a common world she shares with many other people. Her life is a source of stories, some celebrating her successes, perhaps others filled with pity or derision. In any event, Sarah is part of the panoply of an appearing world. By placing an emphasis on Sarah's uniqueness as a distinct individual, I wish to highlight not her distinctness based on her disability, that is, her difference, but rather on the possibilities of Sarah's active agency, to appropriate her experience for herself in a meaningful way and celebrate her indirect agency in potentially influencing the lives of others in positive ways.

Returning once again to my case scenario, more facts demonstrate latent meaning in what Sarah does. It seems that the rocking chair in her bedroom belonged to Sarah's grandmother, the only natural caregiver Sarah ever had, caring for Sarah until she was too ill to continue. Sarah's grandmother also allowed Sarah to eat while rocking in the rocking chair, and often this occurred at night, as Sarah would get up on hearing her grandmother stirring about in the middle of night unable to sleep. One of Sarah's current caregivers, an individual much more sympathetic to Sarah's well-being volunteers this information in a treatment team discussion of Sarah's "challenging behavior." This particular caregiver reports that she knows this information from a story told her by Sarah's grandmother before the grandmother died. My point in adding these details is to emphasize that Sarah's life is not summarily described as a story of unfortunate disability involving a child who disobediently gets up at night and steals food, or screams after school when redirected from a rocking chair. Instead, Sarah's story is, in fact, a story of a child loved by her grandmother, seeking to restore a feeling of well-being by calming herself in a manner she remembers.

Sarah is a live creature. Again, from a Deweyan perspective Sarah is a conscious "union of impulse, sense, need and action." Inherent in the unfolding of Sarah's impulses, senses, needs, and actions is a phenomenological ontology that depends on others for recognition, affirmation, affection, and even love. This is the condition of equality that bridges all possible differences among all people. In her final work, *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt beautifully describes the phenomenological nature of experience in the following quote where she uses theatrical metaphors of actor, stage, and spectator:

To be alive means to be possessed by an urge toward self-display which answers the fact of one's own appearingness. Living things make their *appearance* like actors on a stage set for them.... The urge toward self-display — to respond by showing to the overwhelming effect of being shown — seems common to be to men and animals. And just as the actor depends upon stage, fellow-actors, and spectators, to make his entrance, every living thing depends upon a world that solidly appears as the location for its own appearance, on fellow-creatures to play with, or spectators to acknowledge and recognize its existence.¹³

The kindred affinities of Arendt's phenomenological–ontological claims with Dewey's metaphor of the live creature are striking indeed. When I apply these kindred observations to my exemplar-person, Sarah, the meaning of her behavior

widens immeasurably, giving her life a depth and purpose rarely recognized or considered with individuals with severe intellectual disabilities. The context of Sarah's life for Sarah is the manner in which the world unfolds experientially, that from an educational perspective, confers on her life an equality of task and purpose to grow, interact with other live creatures, and, if circumstances are favorable, flourish. While Sarah cannot articulate verbally her experience, those who know her will understand what she thinks and communicates in ways that Sarah does think and communicate. Caregivers and perhaps many others benefit from attempts to see the world in the way Sarah sees it, manifest in her reactions and bodily comportments. If individuals understood immediately what everything else thinks or feels, or how the world to appears to others, there would be no need for communication at all. Hence, from Arendt's perspective, the *plurality of the earth* guarantees the need for everyone to both act and give account of their experiences in order that reality might be appreciated in the round. A phenomenological ontology of plurality for Sarah requires that others attempt, no matter how difficult, to imagine how the world appears to Sarah, acknowledging her, and seeking her acknowledgement as well. How would the caregivers' behaviors change were they to regard themselves as educators whose autobiographies were closely interwoven with Sarah's story, as well as with the stories of others that might be told long after they had left the scene?

1. I wish to stress that that the person-exemplar constructed for this essay is a fictitious composite that in no way provides facts or circumstances that taken together might identify a specific real person.

2. John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (1934) (New York: Perigee Books, 1980). See chapters 1–3 for an introduction to Dewey's metaphor of "the live creature" as a placeholder for the human being. Arendt's concept of "plurality" is a recurring concept throughout her oeuvre. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2d ed. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago, 1998); and *The Life of The Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1981), which are the primary sources of the deployment of plurality in this essay.

3. Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Routledge, 1972).

4. Dewey, *Art As Experience*, 12.

5. *Ibid.*, 16.

6. *Ibid.*, 60.

7. Michael Tomasello, *Constructing A Language: A Usage-Based Theory of Language Acquisition* (Cambridge, Mass.: University of Harvard Press, 2003), 22–31.

8. Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Social Cognition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

9. Dewey, *Art As Experience*, 61.

10. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2d ed., trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

11. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vantage Books, 1989).

12. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 181.

13. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 21–22.