

Releasing Natality and Yielding to a Philosophy of Weak Education

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Kyle Greenwalt’s “Privacy and the Renewal of the Common World” is a generous argument for *releasing* schools, teachers, and students from the many pressures they are under.¹ Greenwalt is rightly wary of the demand that schools do more to prepare young people to respond to the many profound social crises enveloping them. He doubts that schools and teachers contribute substantively to solving these problems, and he reminds us that, for many students, school is not a panacea but a source of profound social and psychological discomfort. It is ironic indeed that we expect these flawed institutions to solve the very social problems that students in these same schools cannot escape. Instead of either asking schools to tackle these structural problems by asking for more or better schooling or relinquishing schools altogether, Greenwalt makes a counterintuitive case for *less* school. I understand Greenwalt’s paper to be a contribution to a philosophy of weak education. In what follows, I will suggest how this is the case. I will also, somewhat presumptuously, suggest some ways in which the argument could be further weakened if Greenwalt wants to align his thinking with philosophers of education who, in various ways, are making a case for “the weakness of education.”²

Greenwalt finds sustenance for his view of education in Hannah Arendt’s reflections on education. Arendt famously and controversially counselled against politicizing education on the grounds that it turns children into instruments of the older generation. In so doing, the chance to experience themselves as new beings who, though belated and interpellated, must be free to shape the shared world *in* on their own terms is struck from their hands.³ Greenwalt is right to shift our attention from the political instrumentalization of young people to the more invasive tyranny of social media. These days, it is the conflicting pressure to be who they are without being too different from anybody else and the compulsive need to share the minutiae of their lives with everyone in a battle for attention,

that fuels the overexposure of young people. In this context of excessive public exposure, Greenwalt helpfully draws on Arendt's concern with privacy to make a case for loosening young people's attachment to the glare of social media by creating spaces where they can exist "unschooled and unplugged." Greenwalt is not suggesting permanent withdrawal from this voluntary self-exposure and "exteriorization" of the self but rather a temporary respite from it.⁴ Even Greta Thunberg, whose adept social media posts are the reason why her *Skolstrejk för Klimatet* took off, has alluded to the tyranny of public attention. She told a journalist that she didn't really mind that nobody in her school talked to her: "They do not talk to me that often but that is good because then I am in a free zone where I don't have to deal with all the attention."⁵

I must admit that when I came across this comment, I thought for a moment that I had landed on a pressure point in Greenwalt's argument. I started to mount a defense of our imperfect schools on the grounds that many children do not have the luxury of privacy. For all their flaws, schools are sometimes the only place where children's needs are cared for, including the need to be cared for. I also saw in schools some potential to be the kinds of sanctuaries that can offset the shallowness of "a life spent entirely in public."⁶ I wondered whether Greenwalt is right to let schools off the hook. Surely, they can be rethought and reformed? Essentially, I was reverting to the strong language that pervades educational thinking and that is the exact opposite of the philosophy of weak education that I take to be at work in Greenwalt's paper. In the remainder of this essay, I will unpack the resonances with this undercurrent within the field.⁷ I will also attend to the residues of strong formulations that will need to be loosened if Greenwalt is interested in yielding to weak philosophies of education, although it is, of course, entirely possible that he has something stronger in mind.⁸

First, as I have indicated, Greenwalt makes it clear that he is not breaking with schools entirely, just as he is not counseling students to break completely with the new technologies to which they have literally given themselves over. He is simply wanting to open spaces for young people temporarily to detach from modes of existence that ask too much of them. These are spaces for

the kind of inoperativity that Tyson Lewis writes about and that can perhaps be understood as an inversion of Arendt's conception of political spaces that are opened up through action. In this case, it is *in*action that has the capacity to open spaces for young people to be together or by themselves. To be *by* oneself is an aptly Arendtian formulation that captures the "two-in-one"—the dialogic state—of thinking.⁹ Although thinking is an activity, it is "resultless" and therefore inoperative. The point of thinking is not to produce knowledge but to unravel attachment to dogmas of all kinds.¹⁰ This idea of thinking as undoing puts Arendt in the orbit of weak philosophy of education, which Tyson Lewis, using language from Giorgio Agamben, explains as follows: "[I]nstead of activating something, a philosophy of weak education de-activates."¹¹ To de-activate is not to destroy but rather to return to a state of (im)potential and *im*ability in the midst of the compulsive optimization of the neoliberal "achievement-subject."¹²

Second, Greenwalt pulls back from the projective language of education as *preparation* for political participation and writes instead about the need to *ground* civic education in natality and privacy. Grounding is a pulling back rather than a pushing forward, which is apt in light of Arendt's idea that natality needs to be protected rather than cultivated or manipulated. Greenwalt also pulls back from making demands on teachers and schools, writing, "I am simply calling for more 'empty' and 'unschooled' space in our lives. Space for discernment. Space for being alone. Space for thinking. Space for quiet conversation. Space for mindfully attuning to and sharing our feelings." These small but significant shifts in expectations of schooling in particular and education more generally are characteristic of a philosophy of weak education's attempt to rediscover the "open potentiality of education without ever fully actualizing such potentiality in a formula or prescription that could decide what education is, how it should function or what it is for."¹³

This brings me to the remains of strong thinking in Greenwalt's paper that pose something of a challenge to my desire to construe this paper as a contribution to a philosophy of weak education. The residue is most evident when Greenwalt turns to Dewey's conception of individualism. The language

here sounds distressingly neoliberal: “Individualism, for Dewey, is the ability of individuals to leverage their own unique patterns of response in ways that bring out the most novel and creative possibilities inherent in any situation. It is the conjoining of perception and behavior in ways that maximize the possibility for creative solutions to inherent tensions.” While this conception of the self is responsive and thus clearly in relation to others, there is still a sense in which novelty and uniqueness are something of a pursuit for this Deweyan individual. As I understand it, natality is less a matter of subjectivization—the coming into being of a strong self—and is more akin to subjectification. Arendtian selves are subject of and to their initiatives, which means that they are tempered by the condition of plurality.¹⁴ Philosophers of weak education understand subjectification in a range of ways, some of which ratchet up the pressure and responsibility placed on young people, others of which try to loosen it.¹⁵ Tyson Lewis offers a wonderful counter to the pressures placed on young people to *be all they can be* by opening conceptual space for inoperative selves who are free to be *less than they are*.¹⁶ The idea here is not to diminish young people but to release them from the pressures of performativity. Inserting these kinds of “minor differences” into the non-school spaces that Greenwalt is advocating will be important if such spaces are to resist the temptation to become more like school.¹⁷

I want to thank Greenwalt for drawing our attention to an aspect of Arendt’s thinking that has been underattended to precisely because of our attachment to strong thinking about schools. His investigation of Arendt’s conception of privacy and his insistence that schools should not be expected to solve all that ails society helps us think differently about what we are asking of our schools and young people, making it possible to ask just a little less.

REFERENCES

1 Kyle A. Greenwalt, “Privacy and the Renewal of the Common World,” *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 3 (same issue). <https://doi.org/10.47925/79.3.056>

2 Gert Biesta, “On the Weakness of Education” *Philosophy of Education* 65 (2009): 354–362. <https://doi.org/10.47925/2009.354>

3 Hannah Arendt “The Crisis in Education,” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1968).

4 Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics* (London: Verso Press, 2017), 9.

5 Amelia Tate, “Greta Thunberg: How One Teenager Became the Voice of the Planet,” *Wired*, June 6, 2019, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/greta-thunberg-climate-crisis>.

6 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 71.

7 Biesta, “On the Weakness of Education.”

8 Tyson E. Lewis draws attention to the need to rethink key concepts in order to convey the distinctive gestures and postures of weak education. “Yielding” is one such idea. Lewis writes, “Yielding is indifferent to power and its constituted and constituent forms of violence over educational life and this indifference is a humble alternative to powers of resistance, transformation and constitution. Stated differently, a weak philosophy of education focuses on moments that render the operativity power relationships idle precisely by giving into them, passing through them without resigning to being or leaping toward becoming.” See Tyson E. Lewis, *Inoperative Learning: A Radical Rewriting of Educational Potentialities* (London: Routledge, 2018), 8.

9 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: One/Thinking, Two/Willing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 185.

10 Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture,” *Social Research* 36, no. 3 (1971): 425. Arendt writes, “the business of thinking is like the veil of Penelope: it undoes every morning what it had finished the night before.”

11 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 7.

12 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 3; Han, *Psychopolitics*, 2.

13 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 7.

14 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

15 Gert Biesta is an example of the latter, although he has lately drawn attention to the problems of responsabilization, which turns an ethical and educational precept into a neoliberal one. See Gert Biesta, “Risking Ourselves in Education: Qualification, Socialization, and Subjectification Revisited,” *Educational Theory* 70, no. 1 (2020): 89-104. <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12411>

16 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 38-44.

17 Lewis, *Inoperative Learning*, 40.