

The Janus Face of Autism: As the “Between” in Arendt’s Conception of Thinking

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INTRODUCTION

Interestingly, given the compatibility of their ideas regarding the nature of thinking, neither Hannah Arendt nor Hans Asperger ever met, as far as I can tell; nor do I have any evidence that either even considered the other’s scholarly writings. Yet the events of World War II shaped both Arendt’s and Asperger’s thinking, as both came under threat by the Nazis. Arendt was forced to flee Europe; Asperger remained to work under the auspices of the Nazi regime at the Heilpädagogik Station, where he published his path-breaking dissertation on autism in 1944 at the University of Vienna. I wish they had met; perhaps the discourse on autism today would be a radically different one. Indeed, I have been deeply concerned about autism for nearly three decades, ever since my son was diagnosed as having “Asperger’s Syndrome;” because of this I have both a personal and professional interest in Asperger and his “discovery:” autism. But Arendt and Asperger didn’t meet or collaborate, and I find it odd that there have been no attempts to bring these two thinkers together or, at the very least, to explore both how Arendt’s framework could readdress autism today and how Asperger’s autism would speak back to Arendt’s notion of thinking.

To inaugurate this conversation, the focus of this article is to trace the phenomenological development of what I refer to as the “Janus face” of autism as the “between” in Arendt’s conception of thinking. Indeed, as I will argue, in 1944 Hans Asperger “sat” in the between of the Janus face of autism - that place where the past and the future of autism converged - to evoke the term of “autism.” In his evocation of autism, Steve Silberman writes:

Asperger was speaking out with the “force of his whole personality” for the sake of children all over Europe who had not yet been murdered by a monstrous idea of human perfectibility - an idea that his supervisors, who were fervent Nazis, had imported from America.¹

Thus, Asperger’s framing of autism was conceived, in part, to protect those who were unable to protect themselves - the children of Europe - from Nazi eugenics. Within this historical context, I want to explore that place where Asperger “sat” - the between, the Janus face - and how Arendt’s framing of thinking qua thinking helped me to uncover conceptually what lay beneath Asperger’s “discovery” of autism.

For me, Arendt and Asperger can tell us something about the ontological necessity of withdrawal and what is at stake when a society views withdrawal to think as pathological. That is, at the heart of both Arendt’s conception of “thinking” and Asperger’s study of autism lies a very specific existential site: *autos*, the classical Greek term in which autism is rooted. By following the trail of *autos*, I believe it is possible to affirm Arendt’s claim that education needs to be “decisively divorced” from the political, as education becomes a site of “witness protection.” It is here that the controversies over the nature of autism enter into conversation with education.

For what is at stake is the ontological condition of withdrawal-in-solitude; not as pathology, but as a necessary condition for thinking and, with this condition, the necessity to protect the witness, the thinker, from the world.

In *The Life of the Mind, Thinking*,² Arendt asserts that the thinking of the thinker takes place in the “Now.” The Now is that place where the past and the future come together and converge in the “gap” of the present to create a “thought-line.” It is here, “in this gap between the past and future, [where] we find our place in time when we think, that is, when we are sufficiently removed from past and future ... [and where in the Now] springs, as it were, from the clash of past and future ... thinking.”³ It is in the Now that the thinker thinks and, for my argument here, Arendt’s framing of the Now, as the site of thinking, serves as a structure. As such, there will be three parts: **a past** that pressures the present; **a future** that pressures the present; and **the Now** itself, which is constituted where the pressures of the past and future clash, in our case within the Janus face of autism.

Finally, throughout this article, my aim is to avoid being simplistic by reducing the complexity of autism solely to the realm of thinking. Instead, my point here is that there is something of a crisis in education today, as the very nature of thinking itself is threatened, and with it the privilege to withdraw from the social without stigma or being labeled pathological. It is this crisis in thinking on which my article is focused.

PRESSURE FROM THE PAST: *AUTOS* & THE CRISIS IN THINKING IN SCHOOLING

Eduardo Duarte speaks from an Arendtian perspective regarding the “eclipse of thinking”⁴ within the school context when he highlights the tension between cooperative learning and the need for solitude to think. At stake here for Duarte, then, is that while advocates of cooperative learning want to reverse the traditional hierarchy of knowing - contemplation being at the top - and while there is some truth to this claim, they miss the point: the very nature of thinking requires solitude. Citing Cato’s aphorism, “never is one more active than when one does nothing; never is one less alone when one is by oneself,”⁵ Duarte is faithful to Arendt, for thinking is always invisible to those looking on from the world of appearances, and hence appears as doing nothing. As such, Duarte argues that *withdrawal*, as it pertains to thinking, is a form of “positive independence.”⁶ For educators to ignore this space of positive independence is dangerous, as it can lead to nonthinking. To provide a counter-narrative to that of cooperative learning, Duarte posits the site for the spectator-as-student as a conservatory, *schole*, where “*schole* designates education as the time of detachment, I’m holding back from everyday life and from politics, that is, the deliberate abstention from the social and political spheres...”⁷

It is clear from Duarte’s discussion of the conservatory that solitude is fundamental to any Arendtian conceptualization of schooling, that is, if - and only if - one’s conception of schooling views thinking as pertinent to its mission. The conceptual status of withdrawal itself, however, is not clear. If withdrawal-to-think is something other than personal psychology, then perhaps this exploration into *autos* might shed light on an important dimension of living: the very moment of withdrawal-to-think as ontological.

Arendt clarifies that this solitude of thinking is a special place; indeed it is a special relation that exemplifies the only Socratic requirement for thinking: “to be consistent with oneself, *homologeîn autos heauto*,” (T186) where this internal, “soundless dialogue - *eme emauto* - [is] between me and myself” (T185).⁸ In both Greek quotations cited by Arendt, we notice this relationship between me and myself identified by the Greek root, *auto*. Taken together, this set of defining traits places thinking-in-*scholē* under the umbrella of *autos*, where *autos* exhibits two interwoven moments of friendship that are lodged within the very condition of thinking itself. The first moment of *autos*, when one is thinking alone in the presence of oneself, is **not** a site of self-love (it is not narcissistic). Rather, it is the site of friendship between oneself and oneself. In the second moment, when one is thinking-in-*autos*, the person is both with oneself and also in the presence of another in positive independence at that very moment of withdrawal. Taken together, these two moments of *autos* serve as *the* crowning moment of friendship. For, as Socrates argued, “if you want to think, you must see to it that the two [two-in-one] who carry out the dialogue be in good shape, that the partners be friends,”⁹ and that, in friendship, one is able relax in the presence of oneself or another, without masks of deception or moments of deceit. Now, if thinking-in-*scholē* and *autos* “belong together,” then it is plausible to claim that thinking-in-*scholē*, *the site of positive independence, is also the potential site where students can think in an environment of friendship; they can withdraw in an environment of safety*. While *autos* embodies relations of friendship, it is still not apparent, to me at least, why we withdraw from the world in the first place!

PRESSURE FROM THE PAST CONTINUED: AUTOS & THE ONTOLOGY OF WITHDRAWAL

In *Life of the Mind, Willing*,¹⁰ Arendt stresses that, for Heidegger, Dasein, the human being, is always a being-in-the-world; one is always situated within the world of existence, i.e. Being. As such, for Heidegger our destiny as humans is to serve as witnesses to Being, i.e. existence. How? As Arendt explains: “For Heidegger, speech is the original dimension in which the human being is able to respond to Being’s claim, and responding, belong to it. Thinking is the actualization of that original correspondence.”¹¹ To think, then, is a response to the original “correspondence:” the call of Being, i.e. the claim that existence makes on humans to serve as witnesses to existence. It is here, located in the depths of Being, that we also glimpse the site of *withdrawal* as ontological.

Heidegger’s notion of “ontological difference” is central to uncovering the ontology of withdrawal. For later Heidegger, becoming is no longer merely appearance, in the Platonic sense. Instead, becoming itself takes on an ontological status: it is equivalent to, but not the same as, Being, hence the “ontological difference” between Being and becoming. And as Arendt observes:

Becoming ... is now the opposite of Being; [and] when, in passing-away, becoming ceases, it changes again into Being from whose sheltering, concealing darkness it originally emerged ... It is through [this] *withdrawal* that “Being holds to its truth;” ... [in its] concealment of Being ... [That is,] “Being withdraws into itself and [where] beings are ‘set adrift’ to constitute ... the sphere of common human history ...”¹²

Being brings forth beings into becoming. And once Being has been brought forth by language into the world of becoming, Being itself sinks back, *withdraws*,

into its own concealment. Why? Because once becoming is brought into existence it is “set adrift,” and in doing so, the entities of the world overshadow Being and hence hide it from the light of the everyday by constituting the very background, the ready-at-hand, of existence; what becomes become available as potential present-at-hand entities for use, availing them for circulation within the sphere of common human history. Existence, then, always seeks to remain hidden in the background, hence Being needs a living human being, Dasein, to correspond with: the thinker!

It is here that we locate the necessity of the thinker, who withdraws to dive into existence itself. Arendt continues that, while in thinking, “... [the] Thinker ... does not return to the world of appearances [in thinking]. He remains in ‘*solus ipse*’ in “existential solipsism,” except that now the fate of the world, the History of Being, has come to depend on him [or her].¹³ This leads us to consider the following: if thinking “belongs together” with the thinker, and if, as Arendt explains, the thinker remains in “existential solipsism,” then *autos* - the requirement to withdraw - must be the form of existential solipsism required of the thinker to think.

Here, *autos*-as-existential solipsism is not about a thinker thinking of anything *per se*, rather it is a specific ontological position. Because, as Arendt explains, “the thinker who has weaned himself from willing to ‘letting-be’ ... listens to the call of Being ... This thinking is ‘beyond the distinction between activity and passivity’ because it is beyond the ‘domain of the Will ...’¹⁴ So, if the thinker is beyond the will, then the withdrawal into *autos* is also beyond our willing. Indeed, thinking-in-*autos* is a sublime moment of friendship, as the thinker is alone in the presence of the world itself - to witness and give testimony - in a non-willing, non-defensive way.

Hence, to be human is to think, and to think one must *withdraw* from the world, not only as spectator or umpire - as Arendt and Duarte contend - but also, as I have suggested, as a witness to the world whose motivation is grounded in “radical” friendship. As such, this thinker, who in witnessing gives testimony to there being a world, becomes a steward of the world itself.

Who are these thinkers-in-*autos*? Does this list include, I wonder, Asperger and his awkward “little professors”? Is it possible that Asperger did indeed view these children as thinkers, whose very futures were imperiled by the Nazis?

PRESSURE FROM THE PAST INTO THE FUTURE

In the previous section I took heed of Arendt’s conservatism and dived beneath the surface of our confessional society to retrieve *autos*, where the point of Arendt’s conservatism is:

not to revitalize our ties with tradition and the past, as one would mend a worn-out seam. It is rather to discover those crystallized forms and shapes that have survived the forces of destruction so that we can use them to interrupt and critique the present.¹⁵

The task of this section will be to build upon our understanding of *autos* to uncover the pressure from the future on the Now of autism. To accomplish this task, we need to go “back into the future” and follow the history of *autos* into autism, for *autos* not only exerts a pressure from the past on all humans, it also frames the future of autism.

Interestingly, the history of *autos* within autism is very short and is most famously found in Hans Asperger's breakthrough dissertation published in 1944 as a short one-liner, in which he observed: "The autist is only himself (cf. the Greek word *autos*) and is not an active member of a greater organism which he is influenced by or which he influences constantly."¹⁶ In Vienna, Asperger worked with over 200 children at the Heilpädagogik Station. Here, these children "displayed a similarly striking cluster of social awkwardness, precociously smart, but could see right through the polite facades and social games unfolding around them."¹⁷ Hence, contrary to our thinking today, Asperger viewed the quiriness of his students in a positive light and as something that should be treasured, not destroyed. He is quite clear in his study that these children exhibited "special achievements" and originality in thinking, as he observes that "their thoughts can be unusually rich. They are good at logical thinking, and the ability to abstract is particularly good. It does often seem that even in *perfectly normal people* an increased distance to the outside world is a prerequisite for excellence in abstract thinking."¹⁸

Asperger called this "autistic intelligence," and felt that such intelligence was undervalued in society. Indeed, he declared: "It seems that for success in science and art a dash of autism is essential. For success, *the necessary ingredient may be an ability to turn away from the everyday world*, from the simply practical, an ability to rethink a subject with originality so as to create new untrodden ways."¹⁹ (Wow! Given how Arendt writes of the figure of the thinker, she could have written this quote!) In this quote we can clearly identify the presence of *autos* - "the ability to turn away from the everyday world" - within the very framing of autistic intelligence. Hence, while Asperger doesn't mention *autos* explicitly, beyond the one reference cited above, we nonetheless find the spirit of *autos* throughout his study.

The question, then, is how does *autos* as a pressure from the past fling itself into the future as autism? While Asperger did indeed view the quiriness of these children in a positive light, the primary reason that he focused on the high functioning capacity of these children has a lot to do with the Nazi presence in Vienna, who, in their "mad campaign to purge the land of the 'feble-minded,' were euthanizing institutionalized children with abandon ... [And where as a result of his 1944 dissertation] Asperger accidentally gave the impression that autism was a rarefied condition amongst young geniuses, not the common syndrome he knew it to be."²⁰ All in all then, Asperger's actions were tacitly aimed at saving these children from the Nazis, and hence saving their future.

Asperger worked at the Heilpädagogik Station for over a decade. During this time, the Station devolved from being one of the most progressive educational environments, which offered "therapeutic education" to children within an environment of maximum "freedom of expression," to a ward for killing children. Steve Silberman states:

Am Spielgrund [in Vienna] became the primary children's killing ward for all of Austria. The institution had 640 beds ... and added 240 more in a section of the hospital that [was] referred to as the Heilpädagogik Clinic, though therapeutic education was not on the agenda ... Over [a five year period] 789 children [were murdered] at the facility, including 336 from the infants' ward. Most of them with diagnosed of feble-mindedness, epilepsy, or schizophre-

nia - the three diagnoses that autistic children were most likely to receive in the days before autism was an accepted diagnostic category.²¹

And what of Asperger? Silberman continues: “Asperger refused to report his young patients to the Reich committee ... Twice, the Gestapo showed up at his clinic to arrest him.”²² Twice his superiors intervened to protect him.

It is quite clear to me that Asperger saw his “young professors” in a much more complex manner than I am presenting here. And while this is certainly the case, for my purposes here, it suffices to say that the above does indicate that Asperger was concerned about the *future* of these children to such an extent that he risked his life to protect them. In a 1974 interview he described his time in Vienna as “a truly dangerous situation.”²³ What is crucial here is that “autism” was invoked by Asperger to save the children from Nazi eugenics. From this we can extrapolate that, in order to save these “thinkers,” he instantiates a type of “witness protection:” autism. Here we can think one step further to suggest that the pressure from the past is tacitly present in Asperger’s actions, in the form of radical friendship. For, as Silberman points out, Asperger “saw [the children] as indispensable allies in developing methods of pedagogy that would be most appropriate and effective for them.”²⁴ Asperger viewed his autists as both friends and colleagues; in short, a community of thinkers who shared in common: *autos*. Asperger’s motivation for saving the children, therefore, can be seen as a moment of radical friendship. Indeed, Jennifer Senior in the *New York Review of Books* declares: “The implications [here] are staggering: Had the definition [of autism today] included the original, expansive vision [of Asperger], it’s quite possible we wouldn’t be hunting for environmental causes or pointing fingers at anxious parents.”²⁵

THE NOW: THE JANUS FACE OF AUTISM

In the first part of the article, we uncovered the pressure from the past on autism in the crystallization of *autos* as the site of the thinker-as-witness. In the second part, on the other hand, we uncovered Asperger’s evocation of autism, in part as a moment of witness protection aimed at saving the lives of children from the Nazis. In this part, we find ourselves in that place where the past and future of autism meet in the Now, Arendt’s between.

To situate us in the Now of autism, let us consider the very positionality of Asperger. For, if we take Silberman’s account of Asperger to be plausible, then we note, in retrospect, that Asperger’s actions signify a high degree of risk taken in the face of Nazi retribution for sheltering the children. If this is the case, then, as Maxine Greene writes: “When risks are taken, when people do indeed act in their freedom, a kind of miracle has taken place. Arendt reminds us that we ourselves are the authors of such miracles, because it is we who perform them - and we who take the capacity to establish a reality of our own.”²⁶ Clearly, as the evidence presented suggests a miracle did happen, as Asperger’s authorship was an act of freedom in the face of danger itself, an act that “established a reality” of its own: autism.

The question now is how can we unpack this Now-as-site-of-miracles? Asperger provides us with a clue. In 1953, he wrote: “In short, the teacher has to become somewhat autistic,” to teach autistic children.²⁷ Notice that there are three important

ways we could interpret “become somewhat autistic.” The first interpretation emphasizes that Asperger was himself somewhat autistic. But this interpretation would be mere speculation, as I have no evidence for this claim either way. However, there is a second plausible interpretation, noted in the second part of this article, namely, that Asperger and his students did share a common property, common to both the neurotypical and his autistic children, that is, *autos*: the ontological capacity to withdraw to think in solitude as friends! The third interpretation of “to become somewhat autistic” might be rendered as calling for an assimilation to a place, as in “when in Rome, do as the Romans do.” This interpretation provides a location for the Now: the Janus face of autism.

Why Janus? This insight comes from Arendt, who tells the story “of the man who stands in the gateway ... [and for this man in the gateway a] clash is produced only for the one who *himself is* the Now ... Whoever stands in the Now is turning in both directions: for him the past and future run against *each other*.”²⁸ Where is such a place where the past and future of autism clash? In the face of Janus, the Roman god of “transitions and *thereby of gates* ... He is usually depicted as having two faces, since he looks to the future and to the past.”²⁹ Here, within the Janus face of autism, where Asperger “sat,” we begin to uncover the very structure of the “between,” itself lodged in Arendt’s conception of thinking. But how shall we understand this strange location?

Interestingly, Arendt again gives us a clue when she asks: “Where are we when we think? ... Nowhere.”³⁰ How do we logically locate “nowhere?” By following Arendt’s own logic on the subject. By doing so, we can identify that the structure of the very discourse she employs to describe thinking is a series of binaries: withdrawal/appearance; thinking/doing; solitude/loneliness. In each of these binaries, we notice a particular logic at work that takes the form of “either-or” propositions. This disjunctive, either-or logic is evident, for example, when she differentiates between *schole* and *a-schole*. She argues: “*Schole* is ... the deliberate act of abstaining, of holding oneself back from the ordinary activities determined by our daily wants ...” This is then set in opposition to *a-schole*: “... those who take part in the spectacle and actualize it ... [in the world] of human affairs ...”³¹ Either one is withdrawn into thinking-in-solitude, or one is in the world of appearance.

Further, these binaries exhibit a sort of Gestalt logic operational in Arendt’s conception of thinking itself, a sort of flip-flopping, where one is situated either on one face of the coin or another, so to speak. Arendt’s Gestalt logic can be seen to exemplify Aristotle’s law of the excluded middle. Here, curious things appear: first, note that the form of the law of the excluded middle excludes all possibilities logically available in the situation, except either withdrawal or appearance. There is no middle ground, hence the excluded middle. If this is the case, then the law of the excluded middle tells us logically that the middle, the “between,” the Now, *is* the excluded. If anything does emanate from the Now, it is surely a miracle, as the excluded middle is not a logical possibility. Yet what is logically neat might be existentially implausible. For how do we reconcile the existence of a logically excluded space with the place of the thinker, Asperger himself?

To account for this, let me suggest that, within the Janus face, the convergence of the past and future clash and stop the world, hence the constitution of existential solipsism. Indeed, thinking-in-autos involves stopping-the-world, “where the reality of everyday life is altered because the flow of the interpretation, which ordinarily runs uninterrupted, has been stopped by a set of circumstances alien to that flow.”³² Asperger “sat” in the excluded middle of the Janus face of autism and, for a moment, stopped-the-world; and from that moment, *autos* **belonged-with** autism. This clash produced such a force that it actually stopped, brought to a halt, the world itself, and brought with it a “decisive divorce” from the private, social, and political realms of the everyday.

Paradoxically, it is the very ontological structure of thinking qua thinking that “decisively divorces” one from a world saturated in politics. Here, being “decisively divorced” is posited **not** as a political proposition, but rather an ontological claim. Why? Because being “decisively divorced” is not an act of will, as thinking-in-autos is neither active nor passive; hence, one doesn’t will-away politics. Further, when thinking-in-autos, one is vulnerable to attack; hence, Asperger’s mission to protect his “little professors.” As such, if educators are to learn anything from Asperger it is this: if thinking is central to one’s conception of schooling, then educators need to realize that the student-as-thinker will be decisively-divorced from the political realm while thinking, yet still vulnerable to it. Hence, if schools are to engage the community, then, paradoxically the school will engage the community by withdrawing from it. In such a situation, schooling would afford students (and teachers) “witness protection” by providing a location that is both a suspension *of* and asylum *from* the world: a site for autonomous thinking. In doing so, they will be keeping in step with Arendt’s call to “... decisively divorce the realm of education from the others, most of all from the realm of public, political life ...”³³

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1. Steve Silberman, *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 109.
 2. Hannah Arendt, *Life of the Mind: One/Thinking* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 71.
 3. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 209, 211.
 4. Eduardo Duarte, “The Eclipse of Thinking: An Arendtian Critique of Cooperative Learning,” in *Hannah Arendt and Education*, ed. M. Gordon (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001).
 5. Duarte, “The Eclipse of Thinking,” 212.
 6. *Ibid.*, 215.
 7. Eduardo Duarte, “Educational Thinking and the Conservation of the Revolutionary,” *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 2 (2010): 488-508, 501.
 8. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 185, 186.
 9. *Ibid.*, 187, 188.
 10. Hannah Arendt, *Life of the Mind/Willing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978).
 11. *Ibid.*, 181.
 12. *Ibid.*, 191, 192 (my emphasis).
 13. *Ibid.*, 187.
 14. *Ibid.*, 187, 178-179.

15. Mordechai Gordon, "Hannah Arendt on Authority: Conservatism in Education Reconsidered," in *Hannah Arendt and Education*, ed. M. Gordon (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 50-51.
16. Hans Asperger, "'Autistic Psychopathy' in Childhood," in *Autism and Asperger Syndrome*, ed. Uta Frith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991/1944), 38.
17. Silberman, *NeuroTribes*, 93.
18. Asperger, "'Autistic Psychopathy' in Childhood," 39, 49 (my emphasis).
19. Silberman, *NeuroTribes*, 103.
20. Jennifer Senior, "Skewed Diagnosis," *New York Times Book Review*, August 23, 2015, 11.
21. Silberman, *NeuroTribes*, 133.
22. *Ibid.*, 138-139
23. *Ibid.*, 138.
24. *Ibid.*, 105.
25. Senior, "Skewed Diagnosis," 11.
26. Maxine Greene, *The Dialect of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), 56.
27. Silberman, *NeuroTribes*, 106.
28. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 204.
29. "Janus," <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janus> (accessed October 30, 2015; my emphasis).
30. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 197, 200.
31. *Ibid.*, 92-93, 71.
32. Carlos Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 14.
33. Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 192.