

“Now What?”: The Risk of Action and the
Responsibility of the Teacher

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This essay begins in the moment of social justice education (or indeed any education oriented toward political action) where students learn enough about injustice to ask: “now what?” I argue that this question poses a challenge for the teacher, who must decide if and how they will guide the student through the incredible difficulty, complexity, and risk of political action. By drawing on Hannah Arendt’s work, in particular *The Human Condition*, I will show how Arendt’s account of action can help teachers respond authentically to the “now what?” question and prepare the student for “the task of renewing the common world.”¹

I first encountered the “now what?” question as an activist working with STAND Canada, a national, youth-led anti-genocide advocacy organization. With STAND, I co-designed and ran a workshop on ethics and activism for high school students.² The goal of the workshop was to introduce younger students (since we ourselves were undergraduates) to the ethical complexities of activist work in the hopes that an earlier introduction would help these young people in their ability to face and address difficult challenges to activism that inevitably arise in the course of the work. Many young people, especially in high schools in Canada and the United States, are exposed to a dangerously simplistic “make a difference” narrative that often unravels in the face of very real and complex crises. We identified this moment – the rupture of the direct link between the individual and massive social, political, or economic change, the disruption of the clarity of what should be done – to be one of the reasons that the starry-eyed optimism of youth falls away so

quickly upon entering into the world, which on a pragmatic level was a barrier to recruitment for STAND's political campaigns. Through this workshop, we hoped we would encourage these youths to stay engaged in political activism, to continue asking difficult questions, and to actively reject the view that young people should be protected from these complexities of ethics and politics – and even deceived into believing that they are resolvable.

In the students' feedback, however, one question always loomed. The question was simple: "now what?" Students were interested and engaged in the program we had developed. Their participation continually exploded our expectations, their thoughtfulness and capacity for reflection reaffirmed our initial belief that young people are capable and willing to ask the difficult questions that are so necessary to political action in public life. Over and over again, however, they reported being left with the feeling that they didn't know what was next.

I want to dwell in this question for a moment. What is being asked by "now what?" In my view, the question contains two main parts: time and action. The "now" signifies a sense of presence in the moment but also a relationship to past and future. "What" refers to some form of action or change, an unknown quantity. In the passage of time, a choice is laid before us. In asking "now what?" the asker is seeking the next step, the next action. The words also express for me a sense of craving and impatience (perhaps sometimes a sarcastic impatience), with the past and for the future.

The context of the question itself is both educational and ethical, which adds two additional dimensions to think through. In a classroom, "now what?" is uttered most often in the wake of something learned and when the student is aware that there is still *more*. In the context of ethics and ethical discussion, where the question is also directed toward

deep-seated political and social issues, and where the stakes are high, this question also expresses an anxiety about the uncertainty of both time and action. All of this makes up a rather complex and pressing question, particularly urgent for the teacher. This is not because the action of the “what” belongs in the classroom per se, but because this question in particular can be asked – and was asked – there.

THE OVERWHELMING RISK OF ACTION

In order to better understand the question and the stakes under which it is asked, I turn to political theorist Hannah Arendt, who lays out the problem of action in her 1958 work, *The Human Condition*. In this text, Arendt puts forth the claim that the crucial task before the world is “to think what we are doing,” which she identifies as the central purpose of the book.³ “To think what we are doing” means to reconsider ourselves in the current moment, to critically evaluate our experiences and fears, and to turn away from thoughtlessness, or what she calls “the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of ‘truths’ which have come trivial and empty.”⁴ Her method of approaching this task is to rethink three essential modes of human activity (namely labour, work, and action) and trace back important concepts to their origins in Ancient Greece so that the reader can reconsider the present and future in the context of the past.

In some ways, *The Human Condition* is itself the “now what?” question; it is the pause required to think what we are doing – and what we will do. Arendt’s understanding of action reveals the stakes at hand. She turns to the Greek word *archein*, meaning “to begin,” for insight into the meaning of action and its history.⁵ Human beings have a unique ability to act in the world. That is, they have a unique ability *to begin* something absolutely new *in the world*, i.e. in the presence of other human beings.⁶

The combination of action and speech, Arendt writes, “together constitute the fabric of human relationships and affairs,” that is, the human world.⁷ Whereas labour and work also depend on this condition of natality, it is action (and also its twin, speech) that give natality its distinctly human meaning because it does not produce anything tangible or useful in the world (unlike work, which results in tangible outcomes) and yet breaks free from the necessity of sustaining life (unlike labour). There is no object created to sustain life nor is there a record outside the memories of others until that action is transformed into a work (like a book). The only reason that action and speech continue to affect the world is because they are witnessed by others in public.⁸

This world shared between us through action and speech is what Arendt identifies, following a long line of distinguished citations, as the public realm.⁹ We come to the world as if we take a seat at a table; the table does not unify, but simultaneously separates and relates us to one another.¹⁰ It is the space of “inter-est,” of inter-being.¹¹ When we sit at the table – that is, when we speak and act *together* – the political realm emerges. In other words, it is not that speech and action are a part of political life that takes place in an objective, physical realm, but rather that speech and action constitute the political space that exists between us.¹² It is for this reason that Arendt identifies speech as “what makes man a political being”¹³ and defines action as the political activity *par excellence*.¹⁴

To engage in speech and action in a political way is, for Arendt, “the highest possibility of human existence,”¹⁵ and “the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but qua men.”¹⁶ They are owed to what has thus far been only hinted at here: the fundamental human condition of plurality, which Arendt places in the highest regard:

Human plurality, the basic condition of both action

and speech, has the twofold character of equality¹⁷ and distinction. If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood.¹⁸

Without others to hear me, what would be the meaning of speech? Without others to act with me or react to me, what is the meaning of action?¹⁹ It is through this plurality of absolutely unique perspectives that the public realm emerges, and so Arendt names plurality “the condition of human action.”²⁰

Arendt situates action in a place of seminal importance for human affairs (and especially political affairs), but it is not only a rosy picture that she paints. She also recognizes that action is deeply troubling, a source of uncertainty that can be intolerable. The possibilities of action are innumerable, but this strength is also weakness, or what Arendt calls “the frailty of human affairs.”²¹ The first vulnerability we encounter is that action is irreversible: “men never have been and never will be able to undo or even to control reliably any of the processes they start through action.”²² Once something is set in motion, it grows and multiplies in consequences that can never be stopped and have no end. The second vulnerability, by the same logic, is that action is also unpredictable: “and this incapacity to undo what has been done is matched by an almost equally complete incapacity to foretell the consequences of any deed or even to have reliable knowledge of its motives.”²³

The anxiety of the “now what?” question is on full display here. The risk of action is frightening, with no certainty and no reversal. Action propels us forward and does not take direction well. In the face of the

possibility of action – to really impact the world, to initiate something new – it is easy to become paralyzed by the enormity of this capacity and its unpredictable, irreversible consequences. To consider the ethical implications of action, as we had done in the high school workshop, is to dwell specifically on that which causes one, as Arendt puts it, “to turn away with despair from the realm of human affairs.”²⁴ But there is no way around this paradox.

THE TEMPTATION OF BEHAVIOUR

It is precisely the burden and risk of action that presents such a temptation for what Arendt identifies as the wrong path. This path is wrong not because she assigns any particular moral value to it, but rather because its very existence negates the possibility of action itself. This temptation is named by Arendt as behaviour, and it belongs to the new realm of the social. Arendt continually highlights the importance of the distinction between private and public in the history of Western thought, but she also reaffirms the reasons why this distinction must be maintained. It is worrying for her, then, that a new realm emerged at the same time as the modern age that is neither private nor public.²⁵

Arendt views the social realm with trepidation and sometimes outright derision. Again, her stance does not result from a moral evaluation of the social realm. Her argument against the rise of the social is that it threatens the existence of the public realm, which is necessary for politics and for the expression of utter uniqueness that can only be seen in public. The social, she argues, battles against plurality (i.e. the condition for human action) with its own logic: conformity. Society, as opposed to the private and public realms, only allows for monoliths; it cannot tolerate plurality and therefore relies upon “the one-ness of man-kind” to bring people together.²⁶ The result is not the possibility of speech and

action, but a singular experience multiplied numerous times, a hegemony of perspectives, ideas, and worldviews. This is the end of the common world that recognizes and depends upon our equality and distinctness.²⁷

The political risk cannot be understated. Arendt argues that within this monolithic society, "Large numbers of people, crowded together, develop an almost irresistible inclination towards despotism, be this the despotism of a person or of the majority rule."²⁸ Without plurality to unite us as distinct beings capable of introducing something new into the world that only we can birth, the risk of tyranny is too great.²⁹ Conformity is ultimately isolation: "the unitedness of many into one is basically anti-political; it is the very opposite of the togetherness prevailing in political or commercial communities."³⁰

This is not to say that under the social realm nothing takes place. Action, however, cannot exist without plurality. Therefore, instead of allowing for action to emerge (which cannot be controlled), society replaces it with behaviours, which can be managed in a way that action could never be. Arendt explains: "instead [of action], society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behaviour, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to 'normalize' its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement."³¹

The obvious way to think through this problem of behaviour is through the totalitarian lens that Arendt employs so well. Totalitarian regimes – both on the left and right of the political spectrum – erase the boundaries between public and private, destroy freedom and plurality and thus the potential for speech and action. Arendt sees the same danger in less extreme situations where the distinction between persons is at risk of erasure in favor of unity. She thinks through the problem of behaviour in labour unions³² and in the nation-state, the political form of society.³³ If we were to think through this problem today, I see the

same risks inherent across the political spectrum again. The dramatic resurgence of extreme nationalism and xenophobia is predicated on a sense of oneness that goes so far as to erect a wall to contain itself in its homogeneity and protect itself against the intrusion of plurality. White supremacy follows a similar logic.

When we take the risk of action seriously – that is, when we take the temptation of behaviour seriously – we can see that it extends yet further. Movements on the left that try to bring awareness to important issues like cultural appropriation or racist histories, epistemologies, and ontologies often fall prey to this temptation of behaviour. When hackles rise in response to the seemingly arbitrary restrictions on speech imposed by “political correctness,” the mistrust is not necessarily directed at the ideas behind the words themselves, but out of a lack of willingness to take the perspective of the other under possibly coercive circumstances. We must ask ourselves: at what point does social justice, itself a problematic and complex term within this Arendtian context, abandon the goal of authentic political change in favour of regulating behaviours? At what point does the possibility of speaking – and thus being heard – become excluded from public life in favour of behaviours that may attempt to guarantee “correct” speech, but collapse into tyranny? The alternative has its problems as well. Arendt advocates for dialogue in the public space and demands the slow but more meaningful process of persuasion for change to occur. What happens if, to quote Nina Simone, doing things gradually brings more tragedy?³⁴

THE STAKES: FREEDOM ITSELF

Arendt does indeed show us an entangled web of human relationships, so much so that it seems easy and even likely to get caught up in its strands, to be rendered utterly immobile in its grasp. The seemingly

infinite mass of contradictions and paradoxes that makes up humanity becomes not just a consequence of politics, but its point. The struggle for speech and action, therefore, is as unending and unyielding as the things themselves. At the core, however, lie the human conditions of plurality and freedom.

The importance of plurality for politics has been discussed, but freedom has been left unexamined thus far. It is imperative now to turn back to freedom, especially since Arendt draws a key distinction in her discussion of the frailty of human affairs that can be easily missed or misunderstood. This is the distinction between freedom and sovereignty. First, however, let us return to a passage that has been referenced throughout this essay but which I will now cite in full:

All this is reason to turn away with despair from the realm of human affairs and hold in contempt the human capacity for freedom, which, by producing the web of human relationships, seems to entangle its producers to such an extent that he appears much more the victim and the sufferer than the author and doer of what he has done. Nowhere, in other words, neither in labor, subject to the necessity of life, nor in fabrication, dependent upon given material, does man appear to be less free than in those capacities whose very essence is freedom and in that realm which owes its existence to nobody and nothing but man.³⁵

Arendt understands that this complex web is restrictive and potentially disempowering – victimizing – and contrary to popular conceptions of freedom, even or especially within political and philosophical thought.³⁶ She identifies this incongruence with a misunderstanding of political freedom as opposed to sovereignty. The frailty of human affairs (i.e.

the unpredictability and irreversibility of action) is threatening to one's ability to "safeguard one's sovereignty and integrity as a person."³⁷ One chafes and balks at this restriction, this demand to enter into the tangled web and sacrifice certainty, security, and comfort. It is easier, as we have seen, to turn away from action altogether and find a sort of refuge in its alternatives, where responsibility can be transformed into security or even victimhood. This sense of freedom is what Arendt identifies as sovereignty, "the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership" that abstains from human relationships and the responsibilities they entail.³⁸

While sovereignty may seem a tempting solution to make up for the frailty of human affairs – the inherent weakness of a politics rooted in plurality and political freedom that is really responsibility – it is ultimately insufficient and even actively harmful. To participate in the world is to realize that "No man can be sovereign because not one man, but men, inhabit the earth ..."³⁹ "Man's inability to rely upon himself or to have complete faith in himself," Arendt writes, "is the price human beings pay for freedom ..."⁴⁰ To return to an earlier point, we cannot engage in action in the world without others in the world, and we cannot know how others will act or react to our actions. This type of freedom demands that the citizens of the *polis* engage in complex negotiations that must be conducted in the public sphere, in the presence of others. This freedom is what gives meaning to political life and enables the action that can only take place in the public realm.⁴¹

NOW WHAT? AN UNCERTAIN PATH FORWARD

Arendt urges us to confront the challenge of action head on, but she does not think that the "ocean of uncertainty" is without "islands of certainty" in its depths.⁴² We are not tossed into this ocean without anything to hold on to. We have, after all, each other.

There are two "islands" that Arendt identifies and they correspond directly to the unpredictability and irreversibility of action. The first "guidepost of reliability," to use another term that Arendt employs, is promises, which come into the world as things like treaties and contracts. Promises respond to the inherent unreliability of humans who are bound to the present, unable to see the future through the inherent darkness of human affairs. Mutual promises are the forces that keeps the public space in existence.⁴³

Still, a promise is no guarantee and cannot be limitless or it becomes meaningless. Since we cannot know the future, we cannot be irrevocably bound to promises made. As such, the second "guidepost" is forgiveness. Forgiveness responds to the irreversibility of action and its intended and unintended consequences.⁴⁴ We cannot turn back the clock, but without the ability to be granted forgiveness by others, we are stuck in the course of action bereft of the freedom necessary to begin something new again. Without forgiveness, freedom is negated and natality becomes impossible. We are entrapped by action. Forgiveness allows us to begin anew and be willing to change our minds, and our course of action, in order to try and take responsibility for the power that action gathers between us.⁴⁵

Arendt's emphasis on promises and forgiveness as the element of reliability that maintains the public sphere and enables action to begin again is yet another example of her prophetic commentary on the human condition. It seems impossible not to apply her analysis to the pressing issues of today. We grapple together with the responsibilities of settlers and the settler-colonial state, struggling to look for a path to reparation and reconciliation (or one or neither or something else altogether). We anguish over the public unearthing of the legacies of slavery and genocide and the scars and gaping wounds on bodies that are often hidden and

silenced. We twist into knots in the attempt to understand how to show support and solidarity with victims of sexual assault and abuse, even as we ourselves work through our own histories. In the wake of the #MeToo movement and so many others, we are wrecked by the obscured path to forgiveness and the anger yet coiling.

The “answers” that Arendt provides to the “now what?” question may seem plain but they are not simple and they do not diminish the enormity of the task before us. Instead, promises and forgiveness allow us to continue to take up action in the world, to try new things, to make mistakes. They are not guarantees in and of themselves; the power gathers when each of us is guarantor to each other, to enable action and act together in community. It must be the special responsibility of the teacher to help their students understand that this question is ever-recurring. To pretend otherwise would be to teach a misleading and harmful version of the world that will only melt away with childhood. As Arendt says in her essay “The Crisis of Education”:

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.⁴⁶

1 Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis of Education," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1961), 193.

2 The workshop was co-written by myself, Courtney Loftus, and Krista Knechtle and ran from 2012-2014.

3 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5. It is important to note that she makes this claim in the political, social, and scientific aftermath of WWII and at the outset of the Cold War. These are the pressing issues of "our time" that she addresses.

4 *Ibid.*, 5.

5 *Ibid.*, 177. Arendt notes that action has two Greek roots, *archein* and *prattein*, which imply two steps to action. The first is that action begins something new, while the second signifies something that is seen through to its conclusion. Thus, Arendt claims, the Ancient Greeks' understanding of action encompassed both the leader, who begins or commands, and the followers, who execute those commands. In other words, action relies upon interdependence and cannot be carried out alone (see Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 189).

6 Arendt uses the word "world" (or "worldliness") to refer exclusively to the world of human affairs. This is distinct from the natural world or from "life," which is shared with all living things. (See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 19 and 22.)

7 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 94.

8 *Ibid.*, 94-95. The opposition of speech and action in public is found in the human activity of thought, among other things, which occurs in private.

9 Arendt explains further: "[T]he term 'public' signifies the world itself in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it" (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52).

10 *Ibid.*, 52.

11 *Ibid.*, 182.

12 *Ibid.*, 26, 198.

13 *Ibid.*, 3.

14 *Ibid.*, 8-9. "Action is thus also how history is made because it "creates the conditions for remembrance" (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 8-9).

15 *Ibid.*, 64. This is in opposition to the lowest possibility, slavery, which robs the subject of their humanity.

16 *Ibid.*, 57, 176.

17 It is important to note that Arendt draws from the history of ideas a specific meaning for equality. Here equality is not equality before death (in that we share the fate of our inevitable demise) or equality before God (an equality of sinfulness in the Christian context), both of which do not belong to the world but to an otherworldly, transcendent realm. Nor is it "modern equality," which is based in sameness and which shall be elaborated upon further in the next section. Equality as it is a charac-

ter of plurality – political equality – is the equalizing of unequals *for a specific purpose*, that is, to be able to speak and be heard in public. (See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 215.)

18 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176.

19 Ibid., 4.

20 Ibid., 8.

21 Ibid., 188.

22 Ibid., 232-233.

23 Ibid., 233.

24 Ibid., 234.

25 Ibid., 28.

26 Ibid., 46.

27 Ibid., 58.

28 Ibid., 43.

29 Ibid., 202.

30 Ibid., 214.

31 Ibid., 40.

32 Ibid., 220.

33 Ibid., 28.

34 I refer here to singer, songwriter, and civil rights activist Nina Simone's composition, "Mississippi Goddam," which was released in 1964.

35 Ibid., 234.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 244. The reader may benefit from the entire quotation: "Man's inability to rely upon himself or to have complete faith in himself (which is the same thing) is the price human beings pay for freedom; and the impossibility of remaining unique masters of what they do, of knowing its consequences and relying upon the future, is the price they pay for plurality and reality, for the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all."

41 Courage is recognized by Arendt as an important element to political freedom: "The connotation of courage, which we now feel to be an indispensable quality of the hero, is in fact already present in a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one's self into the world and begin a story of one's own. And this courage is not necessarily or even primarily related to a willingness to suffer the consequences; courage and even boldness are already present in leaving one's private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one's self." (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 187).

42 Ibid., 244.

43 Ibid., 244-245.

44 Ibid., 244.

45 Ibid., 240.

46 Arendt, "The Crisis of Education," 193.