

## Privacy and the Renewal of the Common World

Kyle A. Greenwalt

*Michigan State University*

It is a commonplace of political theory, if not a sacred truth, that a democracy requires educated citizens who can act for the common good.

This statement is, of course, true. But at this point in our planetary history, it is neither an interesting nor an illuminating statement. The linkage between democracy and education—much less the more specific conjoining of democracy and civic education in school settings—misleads us into thinking that something is wrong with the teachers, with the curriculum, or with the instructional strategies being employed in our national school systems. The trite old ideology of efficiency rears its ugly head.

If we could only optimize our means, the ends are surely within reach.

But are they?

In the United States and across the globe, we see schools beset with problems that no educator, no curriculum, and no instructional strategy can solve. Exhibit number one: the massive waves of human migration as people flee violence and climate instability. Exhibit number two: massive income inequality, between and within nations. Exhibit number three: racial violence against my Black brothers and sisters, with carry-over effects against any visibly minoritized group in a society. Like a snake eating its tail, the effects of the climate emergency, refugee crises, anti-Blackness, and income equality form an interwoven set of conditions that make it nearly impossible to sustain the sorts of political activities that will result in communities that respect the dignity of all human and more-than-human persons.

While efforts to improve civic education are worthwhile, they are not sufficient. It is therefore necessary that we look beyond current practices to consider what is yet relatively unexplored in our common lives. This essay seeks to explore a few of these possibilities for renewal by examining the thought of Hannah Arendt and John Dewey. It builds on Arendt's well-known defense of the public/private distinction to suggest, perhaps paradoxically, that the best civic education in our day and age is one that cultivates a sense of privacy. It continues by endorsing Dewey's defense of the importance of individualism,

linking it back to Arendt's notions of natality, education, and action. The paper concludes by asking educators creatively to explore new possibilities for a civic education that rejects "socialization" and instead turns toward the cultivation of new spaces that respect privacy. In short, I argue that civic education is not (just) a public function but instead requires a conceptualization that simultaneously respects and reshapes the public/private dichotomy.<sup>1</sup>

#### HANNAH ARENDT AND PRIVACY

Protection of the first natality in order to make possible the second—in the form of authentic thought and action—is a private, hidden activity: it takes place in a world not open to public scrutiny and control. The distinction between private and public is one between the things that should be hidden and those that should be shown. . . . A private, hidden sphere is necessary in order that children and the labor that brings children into being and nourishes them be exempt from publicity. . . . This is not to embrace duplicity and disguise; rather, it means holding on to the concealment necessary to a rich personal life and to primary human dignity in order that one might come to know and thus work to attain that which is self-revelatory and public.<sup>2</sup>

What sort of civic education fits with Arendt's famous defense of the public/private distinction—a distinction that is mitigated by the fact the social realm has eroded both publicity and privacy?<sup>3</sup> By extension, what sort of civic education is appropriate in light of the need for action—defined as natality, the birth of something new in the world whose consequences are unpredictable and unable to be completed, managed, or predicted—action that is necessary not only to solve collective problems but also to live out a life that is meaningful.<sup>4</sup>

"Public" and "private" are adjectives, though often the public/private distinction is localized and nominalized—and, in its worst and most unhelpful form, singularized, becoming *the* public sphere, or, perhaps even worse, *the public*.<sup>5</sup> But the public/private distinction is perhaps better approached phenomenologically; that is, not as a location (in other words, *the* public sphere) but as a quality of experience—as publicity and privacy.<sup>6</sup>

For Arendt, privacy is not the opposite of publicity but its necessary condition:

A life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow. While it retains its visibility, it loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real, non-subjective sense. The only efficient way to guarantee the darkness of what needs to be hidden against the light of publicity is private property, a privately owned place to hide in.<sup>7</sup>

Without privacy, life is flat, shallow, and lacking the interior depth that make going out into public—showing one’s self—interesting and meaningful. Why is that? For one, the private sphere is where life is sustained. Without the protection and shelter offered in the private sphere, our species would perish, and there would be no public life—no common world—at all. The private sphere is, therefore, reproductive. And, as reproductive, the private sphere is also about intimacy and love (emotions and relations that are inappropriate, Arendt says, for our public dealings).

Additionally, whereas the private sphere is about dealing with the necessities of one’s life, one’s body, and one’s emotions, the public sphere is about the things we share in common and, just as importantly, *how* we share those things in common—that is, the type of relationship that we have with others through the mediation the built environment (the city), shared habits (civility), and shared speech (civil discourse) provides. For the ancient Greeks, the private sphere was about living, whereas the public sphere was about living well. Arendt recognizes that the private sphere has lost much of its “privative” character in the modern age and rejects the notion that the *oikos* is about “bare life,” instead linking it more and more to intimacy, love, and the emergence of natality.

Therefore, the contrast is not so much between living and living well but between a profound and unique interiority and a playful and adept exteriority that takes pleasure in the objects and situations of our shared common world.

#### PRIVACY, SOCIALIZATION, AND EDUCATION

The emergence of the social realm, which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon

whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation-state . . . [it] expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to “normalize” its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement.<sup>8</sup>

Education, in Arendt’s view, grows out of the fact of natality: “the essence of education is natality, the fact that human beings are *born* into the world.”<sup>9</sup> Parents and other caregivers, recognizing the uniqueness and specialness of the child, protect her from exposure, from hyper-competition, and from invidious comparison.

In particular, it is a mark of a genuine education that the educator does not attempt to “socialize” children—that is, to deny the natality that produces unique persons in a pluralistic world—by attempting to manage or control their behavior by making it conform with artificial or arbitrary norms. Nor can educators attempt to speed up the process of political maturation, understood as the ability to act, to bring something new into the world. An education that respects and cultivates natality recognizes that much might grow in the relative “darkness” of the private realm. In short, for education to be educative, it must avoid the flattening and normalizing effects of the social realm and the “assumption of equality” that is the mark of the public realm.<sup>10</sup>

Arendt’s educational writing is complex. At times, she can sound like a conservative educational critic, resonating with thinkers such as Arthur Bestor or Allan Bloom.<sup>11</sup> That said, the risks that Arendt identifies in mass compulsory schooling must be taken seriously. The obsession with ensuring basic minimum competencies through standardized curriculum and standardized tests is only the most obvious sign that the true essence of education—natality—is under threat. The insecurity and sense of exposure that many teachers feel as they contemplate a curriculum that in any way speaks to our planetary crises (climate change, anti-Blackness, migration) is telling.

In review, American schooling “has arisen under the conditions and in response to the demands of a mass society.”<sup>12</sup> Schooling has been socialized, and socialization, for Arendt, means abandoning the concern with natality—of

welcoming newcomers and helping them to take responsibility for re-shaping our common world—and has instead become a tool for preservation of the status quo. In this way, schooling has very little to do with preparing unique persons to act as equals in a pluralistic public sphere.

The concerns about mass society, conformity, and normalization of behavior are concerns that any civic education must take seriously. Yet schools are, sadly, the last place that one would look if the preservation of natality were the imperative of educators.

### PRIVACY, SUFFERING, AND CIVIC ACTIVISM

“The power of society in our time is greater than it ever was before, and not many people are left who know the rules of and live a private life.”<sup>13</sup>

If schooling is not a place where we can find civic education today, where then should we look? Unfortunately, one answer is the suffering of individuals. There has been a remarkable amount of political work carried out by young people in the past five years—work that may even approach that of young Civil Rights activists in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>14</sup> School-based civic education has played little role in this recent work.

For example, students from Parkland, Florida, launched a political movement after the 2018 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Five weeks after a gunman killed seventeen of their friends and teachers, students led a march for gun control, which they called “March for Our Lives.” These students wanted concrete legislative solutions to the epidemic of mass shootings and an end to the influence of organizations such as the National Rifle Association. An even more famous example, that of climate activist Greta Thunberg, took its inspiration from March for Our Lives. In August 2018, about six months after the Parkland shooting, Thunberg began her famous school strikes outside the Swedish Parliament (*Skolstrejk för klimatet*). From this rather modest start, Thunberg and other youth activists organized a school strike movement that came to be known as “Fridays for Future.”

Rarely are children ready to bring something new into the world. The obvious exceptions of March for Our Lives and Fridays for Future need to be reckoned with. What sort of civic education produces such obvious success? How was natality—the birth of something new—preserved and brought for-

ward into the world?

Part of the appeal of Greta Thunberg resides in the fact that she was a child when she began her activism—and that a child was having to state something so obvious. Another part of the appeal of Thunberg, at least for me, was her willingness to speak openly about her experience with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), which she famously called her superpower—a superpower that let her speak in black-and-white terms when that was exactly what was called for. But I would also point to the “unschooling” that Thunberg’s family undertook for a portion of Greta’s life and that she creatively extended in her school strike. The family reflection written by Thunberg, her parents, and her sister, *Our House Is on Fire: Scenes of a Planet and Family in Crisis*, is aptly titled. The stories shared there are heart-breaking and reveal the profound challenges and immense suffering the family underwent prior to the day that Thunberg decided to protest outside the Swedish Parliament. These challenges include both depression and eating disorders. Both the Swedish health care and educational systems were unresponsive to the family’s needs, resulting in a situation where Thunberg’s parents were left to figure out her health and wellbeing largely on their own.<sup>15</sup>

No one would wish upon their own children the experiences that Thunberg and her family underwent. But there can be no doubt that her activism is tied to her suffering. I would further assert that we must tie Thunberg’s ability to bring something new into the world to the fact that she existed, unnoticed and uncared for, on the margins of two powerful institutional forces in people’s lives. She was an extreme case of “not fitting in”—the sort of case that modern institutions do not know what to do with. Natality was fostered in the shadows of a genuinely private life.

It is a sad conclusion that natality, as the ability to bring something new into the world, can only come about at the cause of great personal pain and social exclusion. Of course, most of the world’s major religions have spoken to the meaning of human suffering and recommended practices that would result in personal healing through the transformation of pain into creative works. That said, I am not suggesting that natality is only preserved through a suffering that results in social exclusion. Rather, I am saying that some form of withdrawal from our mass institutions is absolutely necessary for us to realize the essence

of education—and that the cultivation of Arendtian privacy is the best way for us to think about this withdrawal.

### NATALITY AND INDIVIDUALISM

Individuality is at first spontaneous and unshaped; it is a potentiality, a capacity of development. Even so, it is a unique manner of acting in and with a world of objects and persons. . . . Since individuality is a distinctive way of feeling the impacts of the world and of showing a preferential bias in response to these impacts, it develops into shape and form only through interaction with actual conditions.<sup>16</sup>

By way of contrast to Arendt's public/private distinction, for pragmatists such as John Dewey and Jane Addams, publicity and privacy lie on a continuum where each can bleed into the other. Action is intelligent behavior guided within the means-ends continuum, and its meaning and moral quality are judged through its consequences. If the consequences impact those whom we do not know, they are public consequences.<sup>17</sup> If they impact only friends and family, then they are private, or perhaps personal.

Individualism, of course, has a bad name. Its connotations include selfishness and egoism. Philosophically, as Dewey well notes, a pernicious dualism between the individual and the social is often set up, as if we are first individuals who then enter into social relations with others. None of these ways of thinking are especially fruitful. So, it is particularly interesting that Dewey would want to rehabilitate the term "individualism."

Part of the reason Dewey seems to want to hold onto this term is that he wants to stress, again and again, that society and social pressure are no danger to the development of the unique gifts of the individual. (In this way, his work is a helpful corrective to Arendt's tendency to speak of "the social" in overly broad ways.<sup>18</sup>) Dewey writes that, "we are given to thinking of society in large and vague ways. We should forget 'society' and think of law, industry, religion, medicine, politics, art, education, philosophy—and think of them in the plural."<sup>19</sup> Just as *the public realm* is of no help for Dewey, neither is *the social realm* or *society*. We need to think about the concrete situations and social relations, near and far, of our daily lives. "There is no society at large, no business in general.

Harmony with conditions is not a single and monotonous uniformity, but a diversified affair requiring individual attack.”<sup>20</sup>

So, while Dewey’s insistent pointing to the concrete particularities that shape lived experience can be contrasted with Arendt’s views on socialization, Dewey’s view of education nonetheless comes quite close to hers: the preservation of natality, of the ability of individuals to cultivate their distinctive modes of response to the concrete conditions of life. For both Dewey and Arendt, no “standardized curriculum” will do:

Individuality is inexpugnable because it is a manner of distinctive sensitivity, selection, choice, response and utilization of conditions. For this reason, if for no other, it is impossible to develop integrated individuality by any all-embracing system or program. No individual can make the determination for anyone else; nor can he make it for himself all at once and forever.<sup>21</sup>

The goal of education is idiosyncratic in the truest sense of that term.

Action and natality are closely linked concepts for Arendt, demonstrating that education that preserves the conditions of newness and possibility are key concerns for her. 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 resolutions to inherent tensions. Natality is the condition of education; action is the outcome of education; and individualism is the fruit of action that is intelligent and in harmony with the demands of the situations in which we find ourselves.

#### GROUNDING CIVIC EDUCATION IN PRIVACY AND INDIVIDUALISM

Totalitarianism is distinguished from mere tyranny by the fact that it works directly on private life as well as limiting public life. This is not just a matter of contrasting intentions, but of distinctively modern capacity. Modern sociological conditions offer rulers the possibility to reach deeply into the family in particular and personal life in general, to engineer human life in ways never before imagined.<sup>22</sup>



As a long-time social studies educator, I admit to being somewhat exhausted with the repeated calls for renewing civic education in the schools. The classroom is a wonderful space in which to learn about public issues and to hear about how others think about them. But this sort of classroom practice was not the sum total of education for Arendt (nor, of course, for Dewey).

More than ever, our common lives are threatened by forces that are determined to enforce conformity and manage behavior. Social media is only the most obvious example of the ways in which machine algorithms are being used to make humans more docile and more predictable in the name of corporate profit. Young people are at special risk. Social media encourages young people to compare themselves to one another and contributes to the rising rates of teenage depression and anxiety. It reifies particularly unhealthy aspects of the status quo, such as the obsession with material possession, body image, and popularity. In addition, schools continue to value predictable behavior on the part of young people. Given all of this, I would argue that new spaces are needed, unschooled and unplugged, for civic education to flourish.

In this paper, I have argued that privacy is what our common life most needs. Having a place of one's own, a place to hide, and a place of intimacy, which in turn leads to feelings of safety and at-homeness, is the foundation for the development of a rich interior life. And it is in the interior life, as we confront our deepest pains, our greatest fears, and our most fragile hopes, where we develop the capacity to bring forth the novelty that our world demands if it is to be continually renewed.

What does this demand of parents and teachers? As should be clear, I am calling for neither a new curriculum nor a new way to approach teaching and learning in the schools. Far from it. Instead, 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.

As is probably clear, I am deeply skeptical of public schools' ability to create this sort of "empty" space wherein a genuine sense of privacy can be developed. There is simply too much put on schools, and I have no desire to add to those pressures. My own thinking has therefore turned toward "unschooling"

the remaining spaces in a child's life—spaces that are free from surveillance, unhealthy levels of competition, and normative assumptions around race, gender, and sexuality.

In her beautiful essay on Arendtian pedagogy, Natasha Levinson makes clear that a pedagogy that welcomes newness is one that must also embrace belatedness. For the cynical and tired adult, nothing is new under the sun. Every thought has already been thought, every experience already experienced. The Arendtian educator, however, cannot afford that sort of cynicism. Neither, however, can the newcomer be allowed to abjure responsibility for the world into which they were born (but had no hand in making). We are born both “too late” and “too soon.” An incredible amount of patience is required as we watch young people make mistakes that we would have rather prevented them from making—for, as parents and teachers, it is the young person's job to act, not ours. “This means that teaching for social transformation itself requires a constantly renewed effort on the part of teachers. We need to be aware that, since newcomers are constantly born and in need of introduction to the world, our work as teachers reflects . . . the time-lag.”<sup>23</sup>

In school, as at home, young people should be treated as unique and special. And, as adults, if our natality has been nurtured and preserved, it is also possible that we might bring something uniquely new into the world. In this way, the distinctiveness of the individual comes both early and late, in natality and, perhaps, in the shadows of mortality.<sup>24</sup> As teachers, we must be open to both forms of uniqueness, respecting children both for who they could be and for what they actually have achieved. We must be alert to the difference—for belatedness and newness.

#### Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the reviewers of this manuscript for their helpful and encouraging feedback.

---

#### REFERENCES

1 I wish to thank the reviewer who offered this formulation of my own thesis.

2 Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Political Children,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Han-*

*nah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 266-267.

3 “It seems even more important that modern privacy is at least as sharply opposed to the social realm . . . as it is to the political, properly speaking.” Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 38.

4 “The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable.” Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178.

5 This is something that John Dewey might be accused of fostering, for despite the careful way in which he charts the rise of (plural) publics, the title of his most famous work on the topic, *The [sic] Public and Its Problems*, belies him.

6 Arendt equivocates on her own use of the public/private distinction. At times, she seems to have a topographical conception in mind, one that draws upon the Greeks’ distinction between the *oikos* and the *polis*. At other times, she clearly employs a more phenomenological approach, speaking to the meaning of privacy and publicity as it is revealed in lived experience. See Craig Calhoun, “Facets of the Public Sphere: Dewey, Arendt, Habermas,” in *Institutional Change in the Public Sphere: Views on the Nordic Model*, ed. Fredrik Engelstad, Håkon Larsen, Jon Rogstad, Kari Steen-Johnsen, Dominika Polkowska, Andrea S. Dauber-Griffin, and Adam Leverton (Warsaw, Poland: De Gruyter, 2017), 26.

7 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 71.

8 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 28, 40.

9 Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1961), 174.

10 The assumption of equality among children might, in many instructional circumstances, be appropriate, for example, the sharing of ethical reasoning around a controversial public issue. Still, most education better operates on

the assumption that children are diverse in their needs and talents, and that equity demands that we give to each child the supports they need to flourish and grow into adults capable of political action. This view is strenuously objected to by many. For example, Biesta, an otherwise sympathetic interpreter of Arendt, nonetheless objects by stating that “political existence, bearing with strangers, is not something we can simply postpone when it is not convenient for us.” Gert J.J. Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2013), 117. To this, I would reply that children best learn to deal with others—“strangers”—through cooperative activities, such as organized sports and the arts, that are not political, that do not require any assumptions of equality, and that allow widening spheres of intimacy.

11 For more on Arendt’s conservatism, see Mordechai Gordon, “Hannah Arendt on Authority: Conservatism in Education Reconsidered,” in *Hannah Arendt and Education: Renewing our Common World*, ed. Mordechai Gordon (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001).

12 Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 179.

13 Hannah Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” *Dissent* 6, no. 1 (1959): 53.

14 For more on political children, see Elshtain, “Political Children,” and Kenneth W. Warren, “Ralph Ellison and the Problem of Cultural Authority,” *boundary 2* 30, no. 2 (2003): 157-174. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-30-2-157>

15 Greta Thunberg, Svante Thunberg, Malena Ernman, and Beata Ernman, *Our House Is on Fire: Scenes of a Family and a Planet in Crisis* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2020). Part of what made Greta’s situation difficult was the unwillingness of researchers to investigate how ASD manifests differently in girls.

16 John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New* (New York, NY: Capricorn Books, 1962), 168.

17 See *The Public and Its Problems* and *Liberalism and Social Action*.

18 See Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, “Conformism, Housekeeping, and the Attack of the Blob: The Origins of Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 51-82.

19 Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, 166.

20 Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, 167.

21 Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, 167.

22 Calhoun, "Facets of the Public Sphere," 33.

23 Natasha Levinson, "The Paradox of Natality: Teaching in the Midst of Belatedness," in *Hannah Arendt and Education: Renewing our Common World*, ed. Mordechai Gordon (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 33.

24 This is what Elshtain called, in a passage quoted earlier in this paper, the first and second natality. Elshtain, "Political Children," 266.