

Thinking or Feeling What We Do: A Response to Burton's Social Justice Education

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Adi Burton's thesis is one with which I strongly agree: that students should be prepared as well as possible for the complexity and potential costs of political engagement, and that such preparation would be a welcome relief from the more typical encouragement that students "make a difference," as if doing so is straightforward or without risk. Burton insists that educators must respond when, at the end of courses on social justice, students ask, "now what?" I have two concerns, though, related to how Burton suggests educators respond.

First, I worry about a potential mismatch between students' question and Burton's answer. Students ask, "now what?" yet Burton provides them with a *how*. Drawing on Arendt, she outlines *how* students might navigate political complexity; namely by understanding themselves as free but not sovereign in relation to the consequences of their actions and to other people, and orienting themselves to others as fellow world-builders who deserve promises that are kept and forgiveness granted. Guidance on *how* to live may be more possible and more useful than instructions on what to do.

Yet the trouble remains. When students ask, "now what?" I see them as asking for the very thing that few educators can provide: concrete steps they can take to make things better. They want this not only because it is "practical." It is also, I suggest, because the idea that such steps exist gives them the sense that evil is reversible, that they can be agents of light in what can seem at times a dark world, that meaningful action is possible. That so often educators also do not know how they, personally, can prevent genocide, to use Burton's example, is also a large part of the issues that Burton takes up: complexity and our lack of control. It seems then that a prior lesson is necessary. When students ask, "now what?" they also need to understand that the grownups also do not

know what to do, that they are entering a field of unknowability. They need to understand *why* they are being offered a how rather than a what.

My second concern is that the content of this “how” may exist in a paradoxical relationship to the logic of political movements. The *priority* of the political for Arendt and for Burton, I suggest, may cause problems for Arendt’s *conception* of the political, which in turn makes more difficult Burton’s application of Arendt to civic education.

Many calls for civic education – and many political philosophers – begin from the assumption that the political should have priority in our conception of a full life. As Burton quotes Arendt, “To engage in speech and action in a political way is ... the highest possibility of human existence.” The idea that we are most human when we are political runs throughout the history of Western political philosophy, with Aristotle telling us that we speak so that we can engage in politics, and this is what makes us human.¹

As Burton relays, Arendt also argues that the political should be navigated with a concern for freedom rather than sovereignty, which entails mastery over one’s life and environment. The political actor should not aim at mastery, Arendt and Burton argue, because in democratic politics we are forever negotiating the terms of our common life with others. Moreover, we cannot control the outcomes of even our own political acts. Given this vulnerability to others’ actions and the unpredictability of our own, we are free but not sovereign. Burton then draws on Arendt’s guideposts for political action – the importance of keeping our promises to others as well as forgiving their mistakes – as a way to help students navigate the complexity of political engagement.

Like the priority of the political, the assertion that the political in a democracy is defined by how citizens live with each other has a long tradition behind it – Dewey for example famously insisted that democracy is not only a form of government but a way of life, and one that is centrally concerned with relationships between people.² There may be a reason, however, that we seem to be always failing at relating well to our fellow citizens while we pursue our political aims, and one that is not due to human weakness alone.

The issue as I see it is that political movements are often at odds with an orientation to *how* we treat the people in our midst. Political agendas are typically premised either on ideals to achieve, such as the eradication of racist systems, or on the proximate interests of political actors, such as mobilizing public outcry over racist incidents. Neither the change political movements wish to usher in, nor their proximate aims in service of that change, necessarily prioritize relationships with the people they encounter, and often may conflict with treating those people well. This is especially clear when a person acts in a way that a political movement deems unacceptable, for example when a university administrator releases a statement that is interpreted as racist or, even more harmfully, when a police officer uses excessive force against a person of color. Forgiving the administrator or officer *may or may not* secure the political aims of anti-racist social movements as well as mobilizing public outcry, shaming, and holding him or her accountable.

This ends-based-orientation of political movements can be contrasted with the social sphere. While Arendt insists that social life demands conformity, in practice social groups may value other goods above conformity, any of which could focus on ethical relationships between people. More importantly, though, conformity does not exclude attention to ethical relationships, such as those that prioritize promises and forgiveness. Indeed, the expected conformity may be to ethical principles. For the field of the social, which can be grounded in ethics, need not employ the ends-based-orientation of politics.

In order to cultivate the goods that Arendt and Burton claim should guide the political, I suggest that students first be grounded in an ethics of the social, by which I mean attention to our relations with others. It is this foundation that makes possible the view of others as equal players in a plurality worthy of our promises and forgiveness. In other words, I see Arendt's insistence on freedom over sovereignty as a means of introducing the ethics of the social into the political.

This suggests a different answer to the "now what" question. While Arendt prioritizes *thinking* to avoid evil and affirm good, this proposal asks students to instead first feel themselves to be in relationship to others. This

does not deny the political, but rather takes ethical relationships as its base. This is Rousseau's sentimental education rather than Arendt's emphasis on thinking what we are doing. Rousseau is helpful here in remembering that "by the reason alone ... we cannot establish any natural law; and that the whole of Nature is but a delusion if it is not founded on a need natural to the human heart."³ Indeed, Rousseau avers, "Justice and goodness are not merely abstract words" but rather must be based in our felt relationship to other people, for: "It is man's weakness which makes him sociable; it is our common miseries which turn our hearts to humanity ... Thus from our very infirmity is born our frail happiness."⁴ This suggests then that the political, to be just, must be grounded in the ethics of the social, by which I mean the realm of human relationships that take human relationships (rather than a political ideal or aim) as primary.

This suggestion remains, like Burton's approach, a guidepost rather than an answer. A foundation of ethical relationship does not erase the tensions students will encounter. An orientation to compassion will be challenged by the demands of political justice, where aims larger than individual human lives have always been at play. This is one danger of the political that students must understand, one that will make the quest for sovereignty always a more natural desire than freedom. It is not just that we cannot control the consequences of our actions – that is true in every realm, including the ethical. It is distinctly that the political, by understanding itself as operating within the public rather than between particular people, always has a reason to disregard particular people.

This in itself might not present such a challenge to social justice educators, if it were merely a matter of asserting the priority of one over the other. The difficulty is that there may at times be good reasons – good political reasons – to prioritize long-term goals over immediate relationships. When we educate, we tend to err in some direction, though, so I suggest that we err in the direction of a grounding in relationship.

1 Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. T.A. Sinclair (London: Penguin, 1962), 28-9.

2 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: MacMillan, 1922), 95.

3 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Alan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 235.

4 Rousseau, *Emile*, 221.