

On the Commerce of Disability and the Advocacy of Philosophy for Educators

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In his essay on the equality of difference, Michael Surbaugh asks us to consider what philosophy of education can offer special education, particularly an education revolving around “someone with severe cognitive deficits.” In an effort to accomplish this task and make his discussion more concrete, he constructs a “composite case study:” “Sarah.” Sarah is a “disabled” young female living in a group home. The rub: “Sarah has no voice, even as many social institutions have arisen to protect her rights and confer entitlements on her because of her disability. In the eyes of many, she is taken care of, and that is the end of the issue.”

For Surbaugh, this is not the end of the issue. Drawing from John Dewey, Surbaugh claims, “all live creatures share a similar educational ‘task’ and ‘purpose,’ in *asserting* themselves in the context of their environment, weaving complex relations and richer forms of experience” (original emphasis). From Hannah Arendt he claims that, regardless of one’s abilities or disabilities, all children are “newcomers to the world, with unforeseen possibilities for the relationships they enter into and sustain.” Taken together, he wants us to grasp the “phenomenological” moment: “Sarah is a live creature.” As a live creature, she is endowed with task and purpose in the world; her relationships to the world are open rather than closed and, like a “newborn” — open to new unforeseen possibilities. The foreclosures to possible actions for Sarah, then, are not ontological in nature; rather, they are the result of societal prejudices and misunderstandings that close off Sarah’s possibilities, limiting her potential, curtailing who she is.

While Surbaugh rightly advocates for Sarah — advocates that caregivers realize her humanity and respond accordingly — if we are to grasp the societal prejudices that foreclose Sarah’s possible actions then, the educative experience of the caregiver needs to be included and developed. Why? Because if we take the pragmatist perspective that Sarah’s actions and intentions can never be fully understood in isolation — as Sarah is never out of contact with her world, nor out of relation with the caregivers — then, as Surbaugh argues, Sarah’s education “should encourage her commerce with the world that envelops her, developing her understanding of her own causal impact on it and in it.” That is, Sarah’s education requires that she come to some “understanding of her causal impact” on others, and perhaps by extension the role she plays in determining the outcome of the situation at hand. Further, if there is to be an educative experience for Sarah, then, “for Dewey,” as Alison Kadlec points out, “experience is not a matter of *knowing*, rather it is a matter of *doing* in which we undergo, endure, and suffer the *consequences* of our actions.”¹ Sarah’s experience is not a private matter; rather it is constituted within her interactions with the world. At minimum, if Sarah’s experiences are to be educative, Sarah will need to work through the consequences of her actions with the

hope that through this process she will develop skills and habits to adapt, cope, and thereby restructure her relationship to the caregivers.

Conversely, while Sarah's education involves her learning skills to adapt and adjust to her world through her commerce with others, given her impairments, the *onus of responsibility* for her education falls clearly on the educators, the caregivers. For Surbaugh's point is that Sarah is more than an object of care: she is a person. As such, it becomes imperative for the educators to understand their social commerce, as they too need to be aware of their "causal impact" — the consequences of their actions — on Sarah. And while "commerce" implies negotiation and exchange between the caregivers and Sarah, we must keep in mind that *this relationship is asymmetrical; this is not an equal partnership!*

Drawing from Arendt, Natasha Levinson helps us by explaining that natality entails both social positioning and uniqueness; that is, while we are born into the world as newcomers — as unique — there is also "the disconcerting fact is that the world does not simply precede us, but effectively constitutes us as particular kinds of people."² This aspect of natality — our belatedness — represents our whatness: "what" we are, and what we share with others in our society, for example one's identity as a "disabled." On the other hand, "who" we are is a function of our newness, our uniqueness, as it differentiates us from others. In Surbaugh's discussion, Sarah is overdetermined by her social position, her whatness, at the expense of who she is: a "living creature." In an unequal society such as ours — with its disproportionate distribution of power and privilege — Sarah is subsumed under the category of a "type" rather than embraced for her unique humanity, who she is. And this is tragic.

To be fair to the caregivers, they too are overdetermined by their social position, their whatness, and left out is their who-ness. Given the realities of working in a group home, it is easy to understand why they may be weary after a full day's work, and be too tired, for instance, to get up in the middle of the night to supervise Sarah when she gets hungry. Indeed, we can plausibly suggest (ironically) that given the burdens of the workplace, perhaps they are feeling the *weariness of being responsible*. This does not take the caregivers "off-the-hook" so to speak, ethically. Rather this provides us with some of the motivation behind the conflicts at the home. For instance, the job requirement that caregivers pay strict adherence to following Sarah's individual plan only creates tensions between the caregivers and Sarah. The result: caregivers find themselves running into "road blocks," impasses in their engagements with Sarah, and where out of frustration, they may "give up" on trying to interact in a way that enables Sarah to engage in her commerce with the world. As such, it is equally imperative to talk about the educative moment for the caregivers. That moment, I claim, begins when the caregivers run into "road blocks" in their engagements with Sarah.

How can philosophy of education be of service here? I am sympathetic to Surbaugh's efforts as his work compliments my own efforts, for I too have struggled with these questions. Surbaugh argues, "Caregivers and perhaps many others benefit

from attempts to see the world in the way Sarah sees it.” While Arendt’s notion of representational thinking and Dewey’s insistence on imagination are necessary to our understanding, they are not sufficient for growth to occur, for social intelligence. That is, I believe that philosophy of education works best when it points out the obvious, the proverbial “hand-in-front-of-the-face:” here, the need to advocate on Sarah’s behalf, for those labeled “disabled.” Philosophical advocacy is not about speaking for Sarah, but standing with her in solidarity. This may entail speaking on her behalf, but it is not speaking from a position that claims to see the world from Sarah’s perspective. For as I have argued elsewhere, if we take Douglas Biklen’s work on autism seriously, “the task for the outsider is not to interpret the world for those labeled autistic, but rather to own up to the fact they can’t fully know the experience of those labeled autistic.”³ Hence, instead of trying to imagine what Sarah is experiencing, it would be better for the “outsider” to take a stance that presumes that the person labeled autistic is a “competent,” thinking, feeling person.

Why is this better? Because the point is to resolve conflicts by working-through “road blocks” rather than reinforcing hierarchy and assuming a privileged position of omnipotence: Plato’s philosopher. Furthermore, presuming competence on the philosophical level “advocates” by motivating the educator to adopt an attitude of experimentation: a commitment to working-through the consequences of their actions: its pain and frustrations, in such a way that explores and fosters the development of new avenues of communication, of interaction. For the educative moment for staff lies precisely in the “road blocks,” in those places where things don’t go according to plan, for it is here that the individual aim of the caregiver can be transformed into shared interests with Sarah. And this is the point: to locate and develop some confluence in their respective activities, a coordination of efforts such that Sarah’s and the caregivers’ humanity can emerge, aesthetically. An equality of difference!

1. Alison Kadlec, *Dewey’s Critical Pragmatism* (New York: Lexington Books, 2007), 21.

2. Natasha Levinson, “The Paradox of Natality: Teaching in the Midst of Belatedness,” in *Hannah Arendt and Education*, ed. Mordechai Gordon (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2001), 13.

3. Glenn M. Hudak, “Alone in the Presence of Others: Autistic Sexuality and Intimacy Reconsidered,” in *The Sexuality Curriculum and Youth Culture*, eds. Dennis Carlson and Donyell L. Roseboro (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 61.