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Can a Classroom Recuperate the Friction Necessary for Democracy?

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Ms. Atkins: *"I once had a student say, 'you learn on Instagram, but then if you want to make sure it's true you go on Twitter.' … [It's] not the way it was when I was growing up. We weren't that different from adults. We consumed much of the same things. We watched television together, you know, there was, there's always this [shared] thing."*[1]

Ms. Atkins, a high school English teacher I recently interviewed about the implications of youth online life for the classroom, is concerned. She worries that there is an increasing gap between the tools she employs (and teaches) to make meaning in the world, and those her students use. As we talk further, we both start to wonder about the potential for the classroom to serve as an in-real-life (IRL) space to engage student online identities and their real-world selves. In this essay, I think further about Ms. Atkins' concerns and explore the potential for the K-12 classroom by examining both challenges and opportunities of increased youth online engagement. I describe how some of the conditions of the virtual world, including *prevalence*, *facelessness*, *commodification*, and *boundarylessness*, produce harms for encounters IRL. As an educator, I often turn to philosophers to help me work out potential responses to thorny pedagogical problems. In this case, to consider the ethical and political implications of youth online life for our shared meaning-making, and our person-to-person intersubjective relations, I draw from the work of two philosophers, Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt. The former offers us a way of thinking about intersubjectivity rooted in our responsibilities for one another. The latter gives us a model for political engagement rooted in common publics. Both, I argue, are especially relevant in this time of growing entrenchment of opinion, political polarization, and intolerance of other perspectives.

The New Information Environment

It may be difficult to argue that we are experiencing anything uniquely new in our current information landscape. After all, propaganda and disinformation are age-old tools of persuasion and manipulation. There are, however, some aspects of the virtual world which complicate and expand the challenges of shared meaning-making. One of these is *prevalence*. Over the last decade, smart phones have rendered online engagement not only relentlessly accessible, but also increasingly addictive.[2] A recent Pew survey reported that 45 percent of teenagers report being online on a "near-constant" basis.[3] The activities they engage with center on social media, and

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[1] Name changed to assure anonymity.

[2] Christian Montag, Bernd Lachmann, Marc Herrlich, and Katharina Zweig, "Addictive Features of Social Media/Messenger Platforms and Freemium Games Against the Background of Psychological and Economic Theories," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 14 (2019): 1-16.

[3] Monica Anderson and Jingjing Jiang, "Teens, Social Media and Technology 2018," Pew Research Center, May 31, 2018,

comprise new and emerging technologies, such as Instagram and TikTok.[4] Another issue is scope, which I am here calling *boundarylessness*. This occurs as digital life confronts us with the concerns of not only our community or nation, but with those from across the globe in real time. Yet another concern is the possibility for anyone to be a consumer or producer of information without disclosing their identity, which permits us both anonymity and *facelessness*. This encourages a kind of thoughtlessness or fearlessness when engaging online; in other words, we regularly behave online in ways we would not IRL. Finally, the information environment is nearly completely *commodified*, as they are commercialized and monetized, often in ways that are invisible for users. For example, apps often feature advertising, sell user data, and employ algorithms to predict consumer behavior and target advertising.

The change in how we spend our time has implications for how we form our identities, interests, and values. The virtual world, wielding an increasing influence in our lives, changes our perceptions of what counts as meaningful or true. The blending of IRL and artificial environments provokes not simply the most apparent question (What is real?) but also more complex questions for how we make meaning together, our intersubjective relations including: What is encounter? What is present? What is presence? I explore these questions further below, first using a Levinasian framework to think through our responsibilities to one another and second, using Arendt's ideas of the public, to examine implications for our social contracts and democracy.

The Virtual Face

Can a virtual face replace an IRL face? For Levinas, the answer would be a resounding "no." Let's start by understanding the significance of the "face" for Levinas by looking more closely at how it functions in our daily self / Other, or intersubjective relations. Levinas begins his argument by suggesting that as humans we each share an innate call to be responsible for one another.[5] That is, before we become knowing creatures with thought and language, responsibility already exists in us by virtue of us taking our place in a shared world. He writes, "To give, to-be-for-another, despite oneself, but in interrupting the for-oneself, is to take the bread out of one's own mouth, to nourish the hunger of another with one's own fasting."[6] Put more plainly, Levinas is asserting that I am "my brother's keeper."[7] This sense of responsibility is of fundamental importance to Levinas' philosophy as it imbues the entire intersubjective relation with a quality of care, humility, and vulnerability that cannot be overcome.[8] The face of the Other is singular and ungeneralizable: it stands for only the person in front of me. The face also presents the limits of my knowledge, as I can never fully know the Other, I can only seek to learn about them, fail, and try again. In this way, the face of the Other must be a face of a person whom I can not only see, but also to whom I can listen. Listening, for Levinas, is the action I undertake to demonstrate my primordial responsibility for the Other. It is an opportunity to learn.

Let's look more closely at this distinctive opportunity to learn, since it grounds the argument for the face as a pedagogical necessity. Levinas is arguing that responsibility precedes knowledge. He suggests that ethical action engenders, not knowing or understanding the world through thought, but an open-ended wisdom that comes about by listening to one another. More simply, Levinas contends that no amount of individual study nor any solitary pursuit can disclose all the truths and facts of the world. Rather, he suggests that the unknowable and unpredictable outcomes of intersubjectivity,

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https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/.

[4] Anderson and Jiang, "Teens, Social Media and Technology."

[5] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991); Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991); Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997).

[6] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 56.

[7] Levinas, *Levinas Reader,* 107.

[8] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*.

of being together and listening to one another, of being faced by the Other, breaks the totality of traditional Western knowledge apart and proffers an infinite horizon. Levinas argues for us to move away from traditional conceptions of knowledge, which can be mastered, to wisdom, which serves to remind us that even as we learn, there is much more we don't know or understand.

This unique rendering of responsibility as listening and learning as a function of intersubjectivity is possible because Levinas suggests that without the Other, we exist in a kind of non-being. This non-being constitutes a timelessness and spacelessness where neither responsibility nor wisdom can be expressed because we lack the context of an Other. In other words, we are, as egoistic individuals, not enough. The appearance of the face, of the Other, gives us the gift of time, the occasion to be, if only fleetingly, present. The Other draws me out of my navel-gazing self-sufficiency and through the intersubjective friction of encounter, they present the conditions for responsibility and wisdom. They give me an opportunity to be present through the act of listening. And here we have the slippery lip of the soap bubble: I am called into presence, into being, by being present. Levinas is making a difficult argument here because he suggests that this is our only opportunity to express responsibility—to listen intently and with vulnerability before the present becomes the past and the saying becomes the said. Put another way, Levinas is saying that we can only be present when faced by the Other, but only imperfectly. And so it is that responsibility and learning are lifelong obligations as the Other calls us into presence, again and again, making demands and offering gifts.

This brings us to the differences of relations in the digital world and the question of whether we can be virtually "faced." While Levinas predates our technological era, he inadvertently helps us answer questions about the virtual face through his critiques of art. As I will elaborate in more depth later, I think that there is a pedagogical opportunity for the representation of the face to confront us with our responsibilities—but only as engaged as an object of common encounter among IRL faces. That is, I think that art has pedagogical value as a face, but only when meaningfully and purposefully engaged in the classroom.[9] In most of his work, Levinas determines that art as a representation of the face cannot stand in perfect stead for the in-person Other.[10] He argues that representations of the face—whether as art or, in this paper the "virtual face"—fail to compel us to enact our innate responsibility. This face remains too abstract and too much a mirror of our own projections. I think here, again, of Ms. Atkins' students, reading about the world and current events on their Instagram feed and then seeking clarity through Twitter. These students may believe that they are encountering others online, but by virtue of the algorithms that seek to build networks of echo chambers (for example, following accounts that are suggested to you based on the accounts you already follow), virtual encounters are largely emptied of their potential friction.

When considering how most users participate in digital life and interact on social media, the presence of virtual Other, the virtual face, takes on a very different nature from the in-person Other. First, it does not confront us and speak to us in real time, with the full dimensions of our senses and the full precarity of our exposure. This limits our ability to be truly vulnerable, and therefore limited in our ability to express our responsibility. The virtual environment cannot be fully replicated to exist as an object IRL; instead, the "encounter" is private and insular. That is, it is lifted out of the real world and inhabits a spaceless and timeless non-place that exists directly between the viewer/listener (me) and the screen. Understood this way, scrolling through Twitter feeds, Instagram photos, or TikTok videos is akin to me indulging in a conversation with myself. I subscribe to accounts or, worse, the algorithm recommends accounts based on my history of

[9] Lana Parker, "An Argument for Levinasian Ethics and the Arts with Considerations for Pedagogy," *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 26, no. 1 (2019): 33-48.

[10] Levinas, *Levinas Reader*.

"likes." In addition, when we conjure the "spaces" of social media, what we find are fields of odd vacuousness and timelessness. We are not lifted into being through an encounter with the Other. Rather, we are subsumed with mirrors of ourselves. We are not learning because this shadowland cannot break through our self-encountering tendencies. For young people, especially, the practice of self-encounter or sameness online, the echo chambers, encourage a kind of insularity that isolates their encounters from public, IRL spaces and exacerbates the divide between their "real lives" and the classroom. It also, perhaps, lessens their exposure to managing the friction of different perspectives.

The Vanishing Table

Can the virtual world be a public? Well, it's complicated. On one hand, the internet—and social media specifically—was once hailed as a wonderful tool to galvanize democratic action. On the other hand, as the internet has become increasingly enfolded into capitalism, there are fewer opportunities to generate the kind of deliberative and participatory spaces that are needed for sustained engagement.[11] Arendt conceptualizes a public as a place for individuals to come together and act. She finds that a public presupposes relationality and presence, writing, "All human activities are conditioned by the fact that men live together, but it is only action that cannot even be imagined outside the society of men. The activity of labor does not need the presence of others."[12] Though Arendt is using the term "men," her point here is that all humans are implicated in—and need one another for—a democracy. We may, she notes, be able to labor individually, but to act we need to have some sense of togetherness. Further characterizing the importance of the public to human life, she states that "our feeling for reality depends utterly upon appearance and therefore upon the existence of a public realm into which things can appear out of the darkness of sheltered existence."[13] The public is a positive space for the consideration of issues facing the local community and common society. It gives participants occasion for dissent, debate, and deliberation—for intersubjective friction—with all the unpredictability and novelty that such discussions entail. Though the public is expressed through actions in the present, it is oriented to the future, and it is open to the unpredictable nature of future solutions to contemporary problems. It is equally open to the creation of future problems emerging from contemporary solutions.

A public is comprised of individuals acting collectively to develop a common world. This public stands in contrast to mass society, which Arendt describes as a product of the fixation on behavior that conforms to the dominant ideas of the time. She juxtaposes action with behavior, noting that the latter erases a person's agency and undermines "personal rulership" in favour of bureaucracy.[14] Arendt condemns the growing tendency for us to conceive of ourselves not as social or political actors, but rather as economic ones. This development, she notes, traps us in a cycle of unrelenting production and consumption such that we "no longer live in a world at all but simply [are] driven by a process in whose ever-recurring cycles things appear and disappear, manifest themselves and vanish, never to last long enough to surround the life process in their midst."[15] The threats here are twofold, totalitarianism and worldlessness, and they are both a consequence of a squandered public and an impoverished understanding of action.

To counteract the lack of a common world and mass society, Arendt furnishes a metaphor that is exceptionally relevant to the critique of digital life. It is also a metaphor that echoes Ms. Atkin's desire for a time and place to come together to make meaning over something shared. Arendt suggests that "what makes mass society so difficult to bear is . . . the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather

[11] Janette Hartz-Karp and Brian Sullivan, "The Unfulfilled Promise of Online Deliberation," *Journal of Public Deliberation* 10, no. 1 (2014): 1-5.

[12] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 22.

[13] Arendt, *Human Condition,* 51.

[14] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 45.

[15] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 134.

them together, to relate and to separate them."[16] She offers a way of conceptualizing the common world and the space for appearance as "a world of things . . . between those who have it in common" or as "a table . . . located between those who sit around it."[17] This table is important because it allows for Arendt to re-establish the value of appearance and presence. That is, when we sit at the table, we come together and are present together. It also permits her to render the value of individuals as political actors, as she makes a point of seeking both relation and separation. Lastly, the table provides an anchor for our mutual concerns: it roots us in a particular place and gives our concerns both a context and a foundation for action. The table, as a locale, localizes the scope of our ambition and our plans for action.

The virtual world fails in its capacity as a public because the table vanishes. First, presence—the simultaneity of appearance—is compromised. In online exchanges, threads of conversations fracture and are left unanswered. Action is also undermined; instead of the full range of possibilities afforded in the public, online action is often thinly conceived as "liking," "sharing," or commenting. Unfortunately, what has transpired is that the virtual world has been subsumed into the larger apparatus of capitalism.[18] Virtual spaces are, for the most part, monetized and commercialized, selling both data and advertising to profit-driven companies. That is one of the key reasons why action in the virtual world is so thin and doesn't often translate to actions IRL: the technology itself encourages us to continue to "engage" by clicking links rather than by undertaking more substantive IRL action. In addition to the superficiality of online actions, the loss of the table cultivates a boundarylessness to the scope of our concerns. All problems, everywhere, become our immediate purview. We are overwhelmed into indifference and are primed for the non-action of behavior.

Recuperating Friction in the Classroom

Let's revisit Ms. Atkins' concern that the opportunity for shared meaning-making is lost in the cleavages between education IRL and the online life of students. In this final section, I want to argue that the classroom has a unique responsibility and affordance in responding to the challenges of the virtual face and the vanishing table of the frictionless digital world. A particular obstacle is how to engage with student online life in a manner that incorporates criticality without pathologizing online experiences as negative. Another obstacle is to conceptualize pedagogical responsiveness without relying on pat or instrumentalist "best practices." For all its problems, it must be noted that there are benefits to online life and these have been noted across scholarly literature studying student identity, community, and literacies.[19] As such, the following suggestions seek to provide redress to the harms of online life—including prevalence, facelessness, boundarylessness, and commodification. They can be applied in various iterations across curricula and K-12 classrooms, but should be engaged with particular focus through middle and high school years, as youth online life begins to flourish.

One of the first possibilities, in response to the alienation students feel as school is increasingly peripheral to their interests, learning, and community, is to recast the classroom as a forum for encounter and (re)encounter. If we note that the virtual world reduces opportunities for encounter and agree

[16] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 52-53.
[17] Arendt, *Human Condition*, 52.
[18] Dan Schiller, *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System* (Cambridge, MA: MIT press, 1999).
[19] Cecilia Aragon and Katie Davis, *Writers in the Secret Garden: Fanfiction, Youth, and New Forms of Mentoring*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019); Martha Bigelow, Jenifer Vanek, Kendall King, and Nimo Abdi, "Literacy as Social (Media) Practice: Refugee Youth and Native Language Literacy at School," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 60 (2017): 183-197; Shelley Boulianne, Mireille Lalancette, and David Ilkiw, "'School Strike 4 Climate': Social Media and the International Youth Protest on Climate Change," *Media and Communication* 8, no. 2 (2020): 208-218.

that the virtual face does not replicate the ethical potential of the face IRL, then we can reassert the value of the classroom as the space and time for engaging with different perspectives while recognizing one another as individuals with unique frames of reference. That is, we can practice sitting around a table and listening, with humility and some sense of vulnerability, to what the Other has to say. Here, I return to my earlier suggestion that while a representation of the face of the Other cannot perfectly stand in for the Other, there is value in bringing texts into the classroom that aim for that diverse representation. Being together IRL, in the classroom, being confronted together by a representation of the Other is a pedagogical exercise in both meaning-making and a rehearsal, if not full demonstration, of responsibility. In this vein, here are some simple, concrete suggestions that create openings in the classroom to cultivate encounters with the Other:

- Expanding the conventional definitions of a text to include culturally diverse texts, multimodal texts, online texts, and art;
- Encouraging students to bring texts into the classroom from their online life for enjoyment and analysis;
- Developing teaching strategies that give students the tools to analyze information presented through complex media (for example, how does one analyze an image or video differently than a written text?);
- Exploring online consumption and production as an ongoing ethical practice without easy solutions.

A second possibility, which addresses the desire to seek homogenous or affinitive echo chambers, is to purposefully break with pedagogies that over-emphasize mastery and a single best way of knowing. This requires a multifaceted approach that leans into inquiry-based and open-ended learning, rather than teaching for rote memorization or performance on tests. It suggests that teachers might, through their own pedagogical approach, model the distinctions between knowledge and wisdom, and might remind students that the resolutions to future problems may yet be unimagined.

Strategies include:

- Alerting students to hidden technologies, including discussions of algorithms, filter bubbles, echo chambers, and data monetization;
- Fostering critique of discursive manipulations, including online and multimodal texts (for example, what is the author/artist aiming to do here? How do you know?);
- Avoiding discourses of mastery by minimizing drill and skill learning and by assessing for meaning, analysis, and criticality rather than demonstration of skills;
- Weaving criticality across subject areas and eschewing the tendency to compartmentalize online meaning-making to lessons on digital literacy or technological proficiency.

A third possibility is to distinguish online participation—consumption and production—as distinct from political action. Bringing together Levinas and Arendt, Anya Topolski offers a "political ethics" or, more specifically, a "politics of relationality," which associates intersubjectivity and politics in a pedagogically productive way. She writes,

> Relationality seeks to (1) strengthen the political by prioritizing alterity—the cornerstone of plurality—and in doing so acts as an extra precaution against undemocratic political alternatives; (2) creates an ethos of openness and 'equality' (without denying that power dynamics are inherent to all human interactions) necessary for a basic trust to develop between people; and (3) redefines politics such that each person—in her individuality and distinction—has something vital to

> contribute to the collective, making each voice significant.[20]

The pedagogical aim in response to Topolski's "political ethics" is to explore the full range of possibilities for democratic participation in a way that does not foreclose difference or become overly prescriptive. Applying this framework offers three benefits. First, it prioritizes *alterity.* Alterity can be thought of as giving time to listen to the voice of the Other without pretending to fully stand in their shoes or know them. Alterity, as Topolski says, introduces the concept of plurality, or variety. These pluralities are the necessary and inevitable differences between people that comprise democratic action. Second, this framework explicitly recognizes power imbalances and permits students to grapple with their own positionality in context of community issues. Third, Topolski's concept suggests individual political potency, energizing students with their own potential for participation, deliberation, and action. Taken together, this framework furnishes students with a reason for democratic participation both online and IRL: Hope for change. Approaches may include:

- Drawing contemporary texts about topical issues into the classroom;
- Teaching explicit strategies for debate and disagreement IRL and online;
- Analyzing the benefits and challenges associated with online vs IRL activism, including discussions of how online spaces may become polluted through bot accounts, corporate ownership of platforms, hidden technologies, and so on;
- Examining the varied perspectives of what constituted democratic participation historically, to gain a better understanding of what came before and what has changed since the advent of social media (for example, movements, organizing, activism, campaigning, revolutions).

The new information environment features prominently in youth life. The harms associated with it, including facelessness, boundarylessness, and commodification, undermine the public realm and, by consequence, herald a new pedagogic responsibility. If schools are able to recuperate some sense of encounter, of the relational productive friction that ensues from coming together at a table or in a classroom, then there is hope that education can connect with students where they are in their real, digital lives.

[20] Anya Topolski, *Arendt, Levinas and a Politics of Relationality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), xv.