The Fragility and Necessity of Factual Truth

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When it comes to teaching difficult histories about the Holocaust, slavery, and other crimes against humanity, the focus of pedagogical attention in schools, historical sites, and museums is generally twofold: to try to understand what happened – no matter how confounding – and to derive usable lessons for the future. To make these histories more approachable, the question is often not simply "how to convey what happened and offer our best understanding of how these events were brought about," but "what usable lessons can we derive for the future?" An unintended consequence of this rush to redemption is that it fosters the illusion that we can guide students through the process of coming to grips with phenomena that historians are still trying to fathom while supporting them through the stages of guilt and recrimination, denial and disavowal, resistance, and refusal in the short amount of time allotted to a lesson, museum visit or course module. These pedagogical strategies have prompted resistance, which makes Ivan Zamotkin and Anniina Leiviskä's essay a timely redirection of these well-meaning but rather heavy-handed approaches. They enter this fraught territory by reorienting attention from these forms of strong education to a weaker but counterintuitively more difficult task: inviting students and museum visitors to dwell in historical difficulties.[1]

Instead of rushing to foster or perhaps foist a sense of collective responsibility on students, Zamotkin and Leiviskä take a different tack of focusing on the teacher's responsibility to introduce the new generation to the world *as it is*, and not how we might wish it were or want it to be.[2] They offer this attitude of care for the world as an antidote to the care-lessness that Ari Hyvonen takes to be at the heart of post-truth contexts, in which what is said to have occurred has parted company with what actually happened. "Care for the world" is a distinctive Arendtian formulation that needs a little unpacking. In keeping with Arendt's well-known bluntness, care for the world does not mean soft-pedaling uncomfortable historical truths in order to avoid offense.[3] Care for the world is both an orientation and an action. It involves what Morten

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Korsgaard calls "a retuning" of educational attention from a preoccupation with the self to concern for the status of the shared world, i.e. a shift from self-insight to self-outsight.[4] But what kind of action is care? Or, to put it another way, how is care for the world enacted? Zamotkin and Leiviskä offer an approach that is powerful precisely because of its restraint: tell the truth about what happened and let people sit with it. Citing Arendt, they explain, "The best that can be achieved is to know precisely what it was, and to endure this knowledge, and then to wait and see what comes from this enduring."[5]

I'm going to set aside the affective dimension of Arendt's counsel, which hinges on the many challenges of conveying and sitting with difficult knowledge, to focus attention on a key difficulty: what does knowing "precisely" what happened mean when the ground for establishing factual truths has seemingly given way? Arendt explores this problem at length in her essay, "Truth and Politics," which was prompted by her sense that the backlash against her report on the Eichmann trial hinged on her discomforting presentation of certain facts. From an Arendtian perspective, the problem with post-truth is not that we disagree about what things mean – disagreement is the hallmark of political life – but a more insidious refusal to accept that there are things that we must agree about in order to have political conversations. At stake are not only important evidentiary considerations that testify to the veracity of truth claims, but something more deeply existential: factual truths reassure us of the reality of the world. They establish that we are looking at the same thing, even though we might interpret it differently because of our social positioning, political commitments, and individual idiosyncrasies. Importantly, this thing is outside of ourselves; it is not a figment of our imagination, although it is not without an imaginative component. Coming to grips with factual truths requires a capacity to "train the imagination to go visiting" so that we can see how the thing that appears one way to me seems to other people.[6]

Here we encounter the first of many challenges when it comes to sitting with difficult truths, having to do with the way in which factual reality is made available to us: not objectively, but through the *dokei moi* of perspective and opinion, the "it seems to me" that is central to political debate and a particular source of tension in education. The trouble with student centered approaches

DOI: 10.47925/80.2.104

to education is that the preoccupation with what seems to me and people like me can overshadow what it is that we are examining. The trouble with traditional approaches to education can be that the balance tips too far to a monolithic conception of what it is that we need to understand – as though it presents itself in the same way to everyone. Such an approach loses sight of the lines of perception through which the world is experienced and interpreted.[7] Zamotkin and Leiviskä resist tipping too far in this direction when they explain that they are not suggesting that we limit teaching to a "fact-based" and "neutral" curriculum, although they do think that careful attention to factual truth can offset the proliferation of care-less speech that has jettisoned veracity entirely. This claim requires further elucidation because it hinges on a distinction between big "P" Politicization of the curriculum, which is concerned about exposing children to aspects of the world that different sides of this multifaceted debate deem problematic, and small "p" politics that are at once a condition of possibility and a source of factual truth's uneasy footing.

In "Truth and Politics," Arendt concedes that factual truths are saturated in small "p" politics in several ways: Factual truths are contingent, which makes them unstable. Any event could have happened differently, which means that what "in fact" occurred is always something of a question. Second, the veracity of the particulars is dependent upon the witness and testimony and remembrance of those who were present at the time or care deeply enough about what happened to keep the memories alive, not least by generating and sharing stories about what happened. Because interpretations change as events recede into the distance and become increasingly saturated in the *dokei moi*, the border between factual truth and politics blurs still further. Everything depends on who is present to retrieve and reinterpret what has been rendered "rich and strange" in the sea of remembrance.[8] Attention to temporality also alerts us to how quickly factual truths disappear, not only the bare details, but the significance of these events. These kinds of difficulties of extricating factual truths from politics indicate that they are not the bulwark against the vicissitudes of power that we need them to be. Factual truths are fragile.

As I see it, this element of weakness is precisely the point Zamotkin and Leiviskä are making in this paper. As they understand the concept, collective

responsibility consists in presenting the facts with all these attendant caveats. For all the difficulties we encounter, factual truths are what bind us to the world and one another. Precisely because there is no guarantee that factual truths can withstand the vicissitudes of power, they require care and attention. Protecting factual truth is a pivotal pedagogical dimension of collective responsibility. While this is not particularly glamorous in that it does not put teachers at the forefront of social change, it keeps us exactly where we belong – in the gap between past and future that each generation "must discover and ploddingly pave anew."[9] As Zamotkin and Leiviskä note, there are times – and we are living in one such historical moment – when these seemingly small acts of care for the world have profound political significance.

REFERENCES

1 Ivan Zamotkin and Anniina Leiviskä, "Against 'Careless Speech': Reflections on Collective Responsibility in Education and the Condition of Post-Truth," *Philosophy of Education* 80, no. 2, https://doi.org/10.47927/80.2.090. See, for example: Hannah Knowles, "As Plantations Talk More Honestly About Slavery, Some Visitors Are Pushing Back," *The Washington Post,* September 8, 2019.

2 Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (Cleveland: Meridian Press, 1963), 189.

3 Arendt wrote "Truth and Politics" as a response to critics who accused her of misrepresenting the role of the Jewish Councils in Eichmann in Jerusalem. The essay is her way of insisting that the facts be made known, no matter how controversial or inconvenient. The essay was originally published in The New Yorker, February 25, 1967, and reprinted with minor changes in *Between Past and Future* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968).

4 See Morten T. Korsgaard, *Bearing with Strangers* (London: Routledge, 2019), 167 and *Retuning Education: Bildung and Exemplarity Beyond the Logic of Progress* (London: Routledge, 2024).

5 Hannah Arendt, "On Humanity in Dark Times," in *Men in Dark Times*

doi: 10.47925/80.2.104

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6 Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 43.

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9 Arendt, "Preface," in *Between Past and Future*, 13.