

Thinking about Autism and Education

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INTRODUCTION

In this response, I take up three themes central to Glenn Hudak's paper "The Janus Face of Autism." First, I examine Hudak's worry about educational trends that tend to pathologize "withdrawal-to-think"; second, I challenge the Arendtian claim, which Hudak affirms, that education, if it is to serve its central purpose, must be "decisively divorced from politics"; and third, I offer some reflections on the role of autism, and of intellectual disability more generally, in educational thought.

WITHDRAWAL AS PATHOLOGY; THINKING AS WITHDRAWAL

Glenn Hudak initiates his discussion of withdrawal-in-solitude by asking "what is at stake when a society views withdrawal to think as pathological?" His answer: "the very nature of thinking itself." In response, Hudak invokes Arendt and Asperger who, in their different ways he argues, provide the basis for an educationally curative notion of "withdrawal-in-solitude" as "a necessary condition of thinking." One reason that the discussion of Asperger is so important in the article is that, without it, it might seem more natural to associate the pathological element here with autism as an intellectual disability or disorder that *precludes* thinking rather than necessitates it. What, if anything, does an autistic person think? How, if at all, do they think? As Hudak observes, "thinking is always invisible to those looking on from the world of appearances, and hence appears as doing nothing." When it comes to "thinking about thinking" from the perspective of people with intellectual disabilities, including autism, the notion of thinking is worse than invisible; its very possibility stands in doubt, and with it the need for an education that might attend to the conditions of thinking of thinking at all. For this reason, Hudak's employment of the story of Hans Asperger valuably illustrates one person's efforts to understand the first-person perspective of autistic persons as thinking subjects. On this basis, as Hudak shows, it is possible to envision "the ontological capacity to withdraw to think in solitude as friends" as a trait that is shared by both neurotypical and autistic students.

DIVORCING EDUCATION FROM POLITICS?

I remain unconvinced, however, by Hudak's Arendtian argument that education should be "decisively divorced from the political, as education becomes a site of 'witness protection'." On its face, the phrase "decisive divorce" suggests that the separation of education from politics should, at least in one important respect – that pertaining to its role in promoting thinking – be final, complete, non-negotiable. I have serious doubts about the wisdom of this line of thinking.

I am going to articulate my doubts indirectly, by deferring the analysis of what it might mean to "decisively divorce" education from politics in favor of a more specific question. If education (and students) require "protection" in order to think, what do they need protection *from* in present day, nominally liberal-democratic societies? If it is "politics" that poses the relevant threat, what does this mean ex-

actly? Once we answer this question, I suggest that the idea of a “decisive divorce” becomes unintelligible.

It seems right to say that, at any given time, education, schools, and students need certain kinds of strong “protection” from various, prevailing mis-educational political forces. But if it is politics that students need protection from, the political threat comes in many different forms and guises in different circumstances. By the same token, it is difficult to see how the necessary forms of protection can themselves be defined and developed apolitically. This makes the notion of “decisive divorce” between education and politics incoherent.

When it comes to the status of “thinking” as an educational aim, students may face a number of different threats. Here I will just mention three. First, consider the role of parents, some of whom relentlessly insist on a variety of different “therapies” designed to “normalize” the autistic child; or so-called “helicopter parents,” constantly hovering over their children both in and outside the home, in order to completely regulate their children’s lives; or, of course, parents who seek to indoctrinate their children – trying to forcibly “enclose” their thinking within narrow and restrictive religious or political ideologies. Such threats are “political” in educational contexts, at least to the extent that they force us to address political questions about the appropriate distribution of educational authority among parents, educators, and the state. A second threat comes from the economic sphere. Here, a powerful threat in contemporary societies comes in the form of neoliberal emphasis on the educational value of human capital, a view that seeks to harness the power of educational institutions to the needs of employers rather than to ensure that those institutions serve the interests of students. Third, Hudak himself briefly alludes to a threat to thinking and withdrawal that arises out of the pervasiveness of “our confessional culture.” These brief examples illustrate that potential threats to students’ educational interests – including their interest in having a protected space for withdrawal to think – come from many different quarters; yet it is far from clear how it is possible to determine the kind of political protection needed in particular circumstances without careful attention to the complex details of local political contexts. Indeed, those who wish to provide an educational space for students to think in solitude must address the complex ways in which education, schooling, and politics are inevitably entangled.

THINKING ABOUT AUTISM AND EDUCATION

How important is reflection on “thinking,” in its ontological dimension or otherwise, when addressing the educational needs and interests of students with autism or other intellectual disabilities? In response to this question, many contemporary disability theorists emphasize the non-cognitive dimensions of *agency*. Specifically, disability theorists have been instrumental in developing conceptions of “collaborative” or “dependent” *agency*, which downplay the educational significance of promoting cognitive capacities. Such an approach suggests the need for political recognition and support for “educational conditions” conducive to agency, but not necessarily conditions specifically focused on students’ capacities as individual thinkers. For example, an education designed to promote collaborative agency among students might attend to those conditions necessary for students to learn how to: relax, play, or

make friends with those who are cognitively different from themselves; to enjoy one's preferred leisure activities alongside others or to develop new strategies for including others in those activities; to seek avenues for "mutuality" or "connection" with others via non-linguistic avenues. Such an education would attend to the ontological and political conditions by which those capacities necessary for collaborative agency - grounded in human capacities for pleasure and communication through "physical touch, sound, gesture, and subtleties of expression" - might be nurtured in schools.¹

Autism, like intellectual disability more generally, is a space of great diversity. A truism about autism is that if you've met one person with autism you've met exactly one person with autism, one time.² The point of the truism here is that Asperger's account of autism, along with Arendt's conception of thinking between past and future - however valuable they may be in highlighting certain unrecognized cognitive capabilities of some autistic people in a particular political context - are themselves politically charged accounts when transposed to the educational concerns of 21st century liberal-democratic societies. I have suggested that the Arendtian account neglects a wide range of significant non-cognitive educational values. To go one step further, I wonder if this "intellectualist" focus might not incur significant educational harms insofar as the focus on the need for a space of "withdrawal to think" reinforces stereotypes of the autistic savant, and distracts from the diversity of ways in which autism may be expressed or enacted.

I suggest that philosophical reflection on autism and education should recognize the variety and diversity of intellectual disability, and that it should grapple with complex questions about the political conditions for enabling individual agency of students with intellectual disability. Such work could have several salutary effects. First, it could contribute to a broader educational understanding of autism in forms that diverge from and "disrupt" the entrenched dualism represented by the most well-known varieties of autism associated with Asperger and Kanner. Second, it could disclose the ways in which contemporary politics and education threaten to extinguish important non-cognitive educational values for all students, not just students with autism. Third, it could disclose pathways for overcoming or transforming political conditions so as to make education more hospitable to the goal of expanding students' agency. However, my main point in this response has been to show that the task of determining which particular educational values are deserving of political protection, and the task of determining how to preserve a space for those values within our evolving conceptions of education, are deeply political endeavors.

CONCLUSION

Like Glenn Hudak, I believe that further reflection on the nature of autism, and on the many different varieties of intellectual disability, can shed important light on educational matters whose import extends well beyond their application to students with autism. I hope my response has provided some useful momentum for continuing a conversation about which we both care deeply.

1. Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka, *Zoopolis: a political theory of animal rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 105.

2. Michael Bérubé, *The Secret Life of Stories* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 50.