Against "Careless Speech": Reflections on Collective Responsibility in Education and the Condition of Post-Truth

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Since *Oxford Dictionaries* famously named "post-truth" the word of the year in 2016, the term has become widely utilized to describe the tensions and challenges in the political life of contemporary democratic societies.[1] In the field of education, particularly democratic education, post-truth politics has been seen by many as a central concern when dealing with socially relevant scientific information as well as with a broader set of social and cultural issues in classrooms.[2] While it is tempting to dismiss the term as simply an overblown and outdated buzzword, or, in Arendtian terms, a *cliché* – that is, a word that has lost its quality of speech – attention must nevertheless be paid to the novel phenomena associated with the notion.[3] As Hannah Arendt reminds us, the quest for true understanding begins with the acknowledgement of and further reflection on the emergence of a new word as a response to something unprecedented. In Arendt's view, it is by returning to "what we saw and knew in the beginning" about this phenomenon rather than by retrospective rationalizing, that we can come to terms with it in our life and, for this matter, in our educational thinking.[4]

Among her many thought-provoking distinctions, it is Arendt's reflections on the differences between such notions as *rational* and *factual* truth that bear a potential to illuminate the state of post-truth in both politics and education.[5] Historically, Arendt claims, the notion of truth has always been antagonistic to the political realm, which is the sphere of human affairs, in which the condition of plurality of opinions prevents any single view possessing an absolute truth. However, what is equally detrimental to the kind of *plurality* that Arendt associates with the political realm is the treatment of *facts* concerning present reality (or *events* of the past, for that matter) as mere opinions. Facts, and the common world that they represent, are for Arendt a condition of possibility of the realm of politics, "its main stabilizing force, [as well as its] starting point from which to change, to begin something new."[6] Moreover, precisely because

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things could have always been otherwise, facts, unlike rational truths, are more fragile, vulnerable to deception and lies. Therefore, it is crucial to be attentive to what Linda Zerilli pointedly spotted in regard to Arendt's distinction: "it is not the facts that hold up our common world, it is we who hold up the facts and so our common world – or not."[7]

Accordingly, from an Arendtian perspective, with the current reality of mis- and disinformation, conspiracy thinking, and political polarization, the essential question is what exactly constitutes the foundation of political life and what preserves its very possibility. Considering this question, the notion of *careless speech* – a concept indicating the post-truth condition, which, based on Arendt's work, was developed by a Finnish political theorist, Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen,– becomes relevant.[8] At the core of Hyvönen's notion is the idea that the true danger of the post-truth condition lies not necessarily in using lies or deceptions as political tools or to conflate acts with emotions, as many definitions state. Nor is the danger with post-truth politics necessarily the imposition of one truth – ideological or religious – over the multitude of political views, which is the danger that Arendt associates with the concept of truth. Rather, the greater risk in the post-truth climate is the *erosion of the common world*, which is manifested primarily in the loss of shared factual reality. In this sense, *careless speech*, in Hyvönen's Arendtian definition, refers to speech that lacks the proper *care for the world*, not only dismissive of truth, but also of the world as a common space. As Hyvönen further explains, *careless speech* "means an unwillingness to engage with other perspectives, a reluctance to accept that speech has repercussions and words matter. It involves creating uncertainty over whether what is said aloud is actually meant; it means believing that anything can be unsaid."[9]

In this essay, we pose the following question: In the current context of post-truth politics, what conceptualization of responsibility in education holds significance, particularly in addressing the primary challenge of the decay of a shared factual reality, manifested through the phenomenon of "careless speech"? The theme of responsibility continues to be both highly topical and widely debated in philosophy of education, especially in relation to issues of social justice and historical wrongdoings; however, with the help of Arendt's

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work, in this paper, we aim to identify a dimension of this debate which, in our view, remains to be somewhat neglected in the more activist-oriented definitions of responsibility in education. With the aim of shedding light on this neglected dimension, we suggest recovering Arendt's original understanding of *collective responsibility*, while complementing it with the educational reading of this concept.

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY: BETWEEN ACTION AND BELONGING

Aligning with Seyla Benhabib's call for "thinking with Arendt against Arendt," one can find many attempts in the philosophy of education to transport concepts from Arendt's vocabulary into the context of education, often in a way that does not necessarily correspond with her own views on education, particularly her insistence on the separation between politics and education.[10] The most promising and perhaps most commonly chosen candidate for such "conceptual travel" is the notion of *political action*. In the context of Arendt's educational writings, this notion is tied to the condition of *natality*: that is, the fact of the birth of newcomers to the world and the potentiality of them bringing something new and unexpected to it. For Arendt, natality constitutes "the essence of education."[11] However, it does not mean that education should be seen as an invitation for children to change the world here and now. On the contrary: she states that "exactly for the sake of what is new and revolutionary in every child, education must be conservative; it must preserve this newness and introduce it as a new thing into an old world."[12]

In the case of the concept of *collective responsibility*, which is our main focus in this paper, some justifications can be given for stretching this concept in an educational reading. Strictly speaking, the notion of collective responsibility is not Arendt's original concept – the term itself emerges in her thought with reference to the American philosopher Joel Feinberg whose article she commented on at the symposium held by the *American Philosophical Association* in December 1968. Feinberg, drawing from classical liberal thought, uses the term to encompass situations in which the guilt associated with a particular action can be attributed to multiple individuals simultaneously.[13] In her response, Arendt points out that such cases are just instances of personal (legal or moral)

guilt. Arendt defines the notion of collective responsibility through two main conditions: first, through being vicarious by nature and, second, through being associated with a membership in a particular community. In Arendt's words, collective responsibility therefore means being "responsible for something I have not done" and, furthermore, "the reason for my responsibility must be my membership in a group (a collective) which no voluntary act of mine can dissolve."[14]

Among the many scholars having commented on Arendt's remarks on collective responsibility, perhaps the most famous is the reading by the political theorist Iris Marion Young.[15] She specifically attempts to redefine Arendt's criteria for what constitutes responsibility, and she does so by shifting the focus from *belonging* to a political community to specific *actions* (or inactions) that indirectly contribute to the maintenance of an unjust state of the world. Arendt articulated the source for collective responsibility as follows: "every generation, by virtue of being born into a historical continuum, is burdened by the sins of the fathers as it is blessed with the deeds of the ancestors."[16] Young finds Arendt's way of describing the notion of collective responsibility solely through events of the past to be artificial. In contrast to Arendt's approach, in which responsibility is understood as backward-looking and similar for everyone, Young interprets responsibility as forward-looking and distributive. According to Young, "one has the responsibility only now, in relation to current events and in relation to their political responsibility."[17] While everyone is personally responsible for the outcomes of an unjust system, this responsibility is shared with others whose degree of responsibility may vary depending on their position within the system. Therefore, what becomes central to this model is *political action* in the face of structural injustice, which requires joining forces with others.

This type of revised understanding of collective responsibility, as introduced by Young, has already been addressed in philosophy of education, particularly in relation to classroom discussions that concern issues of social injustice and evoke feelings of collective guilt. Michalinos Zembylas argues that in such situations, we need a special pedagogy of shared responsibility that allows students to move past their feelings of guilt and transform them

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into educationally valuable "responsible" responses.[18] The desired outcome of this pedagogy, according to him, is that "students are encouraged to recognize that everyone is implicated in systems of oppression and injustice, but it is important to differentiate varying degrees of culpability."[19] As an extension of this idea, Zembylas suggests that education should, first, determine the extent of shared responsibility among students within the school community and society at large, and second, clarify what this responsibility means in terms of collective political action, which is the central focus of Young's model. Zembylas describes it as follows:

> If responsibility is shared, as Young tells us, then children also bear a portion of responsibility that needs to be critically examined based on their actions or inactions regarding the perpetuation of harm committed by others. For instance, within the school community, this involves exploring the responsibility children might have for a classmate's bullying; beyond the school community, it may involve examining the extent to which they are responsible for impoverished or homeless children in their neighborhood or town.[20]

However, urging children to take collective responsibility by encouraging them to assess their participation in ongoing injustices in a local context, as suggested by Zembylas, can lead to the dangerous confusion between the concepts of guilt and responsibility, as Arendt reminds us. For instance, in the case of bullying, we must understand that what is done, as Arendt correctly noted when describing the case of the post-bellum Southern social system, might be "something which is by no means vicarious."[21] In situations like these, it may be more prudent to return to the legal and moral considerations of guilt rather than resorting to political conceptions of responsibility.

While there is evident value in Zembylas's pedagogical project and its attempt to translate student responses to suffering and injustice into a constructive understanding of shared responsibility, this type of pedagogy departs from Arendt's thought in two major ways. As was shown above, it shifts the emphasis of education from the past to the present and future and, in terms

of cultivating students' responsibility, from *belonging* to *action*. Furthermore, it fails to engage with a broader understanding of responsibility from Arendt's account, including its distinctive educational dimension as responsibility for the world. It is obviously not the case that the contradiction with Arendt should necessarily disqualify Zembylas's approach. Nevertheless, in doing so, in our view, Zembylas's pedagogy does not properly consider the challenge posed by the post-truth condition, which is the expansion of *careless speech*. This argument will be elaborated in the concluding section; however, prior to that, we will scrutinize the concept of educational responsibility.

EDUCATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY AS RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE WORLD

In the aftermath of World War II, as early as 1945, Arendt evokes the notion of *responsibility* to respond to the frightening reality of the evident complicity of many German citizens in Nazi crimes, while cautioning against the adoption of the idea of collective guilt.[22] In addition to her well-known claim that "when all are guilty, nobody is," Arendt later observed how the abdication of responsibility also manifested in inability to find a reasonable *attitude towards the past*, which was relevant to education in post-war Germany but, in our view, continues to resonate in contemporary times.[23] The following is her own eloquent portrayal of this perplexing situation:

> There has been much discussion of the widespread tendency in Germany to act as though the years from 1933 to 1945 never existed; as though this part of German and European and thus world history could be expunged from the textbooks; as though everything depended on forgetting the "negative" aspect of the past... It was a grotesque state of affairs when German young people were not allowed to learn *the facts* that every schoolchild a few miles away could not help knowing.[24]

In more explicit terms, Arendt discusses this type of responsibility in her essay on *The Crisis in Education*, which in her own articulation, is essentially "a crisis in our attitude toward the realm of the past."[25] According to Arendt, in education

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this crisis manifests itself in adults' loss of authority over the younger generation that mirrors the loss of almost all types of authorities in political life. At the heart of Arendt's rationale for keeping politics and education separate is her reliance on the two guiding elements that she believes are unique to education: "a concept of authority and an attitude toward the past which are appropriate to it but have no general validity and must not claim a general validity in the world of grown-ups."[26]

It is these two elements that, for Arendt, also constitute a distinctive dual responsibility of adults in the context of education: "for the life and development of the child and for the continuance of the world."[27] From the perspective of teachers, the application of these two elements in education suggest the following course of action: "insofar as the child is not yet acquainted with the world, he must be gradually introduced to it; insofar as he is new, care must be taken that this new thing comes to fruition in relation to the world *as it is*."[28] Nevertheless, in both ways it resembles Arendt's twofold definition of *collective responsibility* from the previous section. First, this responsibility is *collective* or joint in a sense it is "not arbitrarily imposed" since "it is implicit in the fact that the young are introduced by adults into a continuously changing world."[29] Second, for Arendt, adults, and especially educators, must assume responsibility for the world, "although they themselves did not make it, and even though they may, secretly or openly, wish it were other than it is."[30] Therefore, this educational responsibility is also vicarious; we are responsible for the world even if we did not make it.

How then does this form of collective responsibility relate to the practice of truth-telling, specifically in terms of factual truth? Normally, "the mere telling of facts," Arendt notes, "leads to no action whatsoever."[31] By this she means that stating facts is principally *non-political* activity, yet it plays a foundational role in preserving the existence of a shared reality, being in this way a form of *caring for the world*. However, Arendt notes that in certain exceptional circumstances, "where everybody lies about everything of importance, the truthteller, whether he knows it or not, has begun to act; he, too, has engaged himself in political business, for, in the unlikely event that he survives, he has

made a start toward changing the world."[32] In her seminal work, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt provides an example of truth-telling turning into political action: in 1943 "two students at Munich University, brother and sister, under the influence of their teacher Kurt Huber, distributed famous leaflets in which Hitler was finally called what he was—a mass 'murderer.'"[33] The very same example was introduced by Young as an illustration of her account of shared responsibility that centers around political action.[34] Arendt notes that this act was a single, isolated and perhaps a desperate gesture, but, most importantly, it intolerably expanded the limits of educational activity into the political realm. While we do not deny the necessity of speech in politics and in education that disrupts the normalized ways of thinking and exposes biases and injustices in the dominant narratives, specifically in education, the production of tellers of truth is not enough. The responsibility should also include the concern for the world in which these facts are acknowledged and attended with due care.

As Natasha Levinson explicates on the challenge of teaching for the world *as it is*, it implies "a profound gratitude for what is "given," for the conditions of *plurality* and *natality* that make it possible to build a shared world."[35] As she further states, based on a thorough reading of Arendt, these two conditions do not need justifications, yet these givens, like the world itself, are rather fragile and, thus, "in need of constant care and upkeep," not least in education.[36] Notably, Arendt does not provide clear guidance on what it means to assume educational responsibility —to introduce young people to the world *as it is*. Yet, as Arendt's quote from above evidently demonstrates, it is clear for her in which situations this responsibility is abdicated. In this regard, Arendt notes that the attitude towards the past, while being asserted in education, should not be instrumentalized. As she puts it, "insofar as any 'mastering' of the past is possible, it consists in relating what has happened; but such narration, too, which shapes the history, solves no problems and assuages no suffering; it does not master anything once and for all."[37] According to Arendt, the proper attitude to the past in the context of education thus should be "to know precisely what it was and to endure this knowledge, and then to wait and see what comes of knowing and enduring."[38]

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"CARELESS SPEECH" AND RESPONSIBILITY IN EDUCATION

From the outset, Arendt's prescription might sound naïve at best or even damaging at worst given the deep structural injustices and inequalities that prevail in society, and which seem to require an educational response of some kind. In other words, in light of these injustices, it seems reasonable to conclude that the situation might demand an orientation toward political activism in education and the associated notion of responsibility, like the one introduced by Zembylas. However, while there is important work being done in terms of social justice education in this regard, in our view, this work does not sufficiently account for the challenge posed by the post-truth condition. This challenge, as we see it, is the expansion of *careless speech* that introduces heavily laden political agendas into schools, leading to what Arendt referred to as having "political battles fought out in the school yards."[39] In the current post-truth climate, these political agendas do not necessarily take the form of indoctrination through imposing particular ideologies – or *truths* in Arendtian terms – over students. Instead, today, political agendas make their way into the sphere of education though rewriting of events and through the deliberate disregard of certain facts, as we are currently witnessing in the form of right-wing reactionary policies in the context of education. This poses a significant threat to education and its capability to sustain a space of natality in an Arendtian sense, as such disregard for facts may result in the erosion or even disappearance of a common reality, which is an essential prerequisite for education and a political community alike.

When viewed through the original Arendtian definition of *collective responsibility* as vicarious by nature and as being based on one's membership in a political community, it can be argued that it is the failure to engage with this responsibility in the classroom that leads to the loss of the community bond that is essential to Arendt's understanding of politics. This bond is created, in Arendt's view, through a common reality that education should present to students by preserving facts and by portraying the world as it is, and not by indicating how it *should be* from the perspective of adults. As Arendt further states, "we can escape this political and strictly collective responsibility only by leaving the community."[40] What she means by this is that to have this respon-

sibility is not a burden but, rather, something that comes with the recognition of human togetherness. Children who have not yet become part of a political community in the fullest sense of the word may thus be considered collectively *innocent* and cannot be expected to act politically, at least not in educational settings. As stated earlier, the task of education, for Arendt, is to present the world as it is to newcomers with the understanding that the time will come for them to renew it in myriad ways that cannot be predicted beforehand. In the meantime, a proper attitude towards the past, no matter how horrible it may have been, should be cultivated, and this attitude consists of preservation of facts, and does not involve urging for political action or social change. This attitude defines students' collective responsibility not in the form of future-oriented political action, but in the form of a connection with the political community and with its traditions, i.e., the past or *what has been.*

As a possible objection to the Arendtian account just provided, it could be argued that in the current political climate, the distinction between *rational* and *factual* truth may no longer be helpful as the very existence of facts, free from various historical interpretations or ideological views, has become questionable. Moreover, the suggested Arendtian views may sound equally problematic when perceived from the viewpoint of the desire to offer to students fact-based, "neutral" curricular contents. (Not least because of the way, as Levinson demonstrated, traditional academic disciplines have contributed to our alienation from the world.)[41] However, the intention of our Arendtian reflections is to bring to focus the risks of politicized education under the condition of post-truth politics: in defining responsibility in education, it is important to avoid educational responses that, instead of preventing and interrupting *careless speech*, are set to intensify it. Hence, the denial of collective responsibility in the form of sustaining a common world together, particularly in the context of education, manifests itself as ultimate carelessness about the world. This carelessness refers not to an alternative imagined reality, but rather to the formation of a certain cynical attitude within education. Reflecting on the examples of brainwashing and the erasing of facts in history books in Soviet Russia, Arendt poignantly diagnosed the most damaging consequences of such attitude:

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> [it is] a peculiar kind of cynicism – an absolute refusal to believe in the truth of anything, no matter how well this truth may be established… The result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed.[42]

While it may seem most closely linked to totalitarian forms of propaganda and indoctrination, *careless speech* can be recognized in democratic societies and education as well. In his analysis of *careless speech*, Hyvönen holds a mirror to the reader, asking to what extent we may identify with a portrayal of Soviet citizens' rendering of truth:

> Upon hearing a purported piece of information, the reaction was not 'Is this true?' but 'Why is this person saying this? –What machinations or manipulations are going on here?' The question of truth did not, as it were, have the social space in which it could breathe.[43]

To the extent that education today plays a role in these developments, it is imperative to resist *careless speech* and cynicism at every turn by presenting students with the world and by indicating to them why we should care for it.

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