

Philosophy for Ethics and Politics in Today's Schooling: A Response to Parker from a US Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Lana Parker has offered a compelling, present-time analysis of the complex relationships of internet and classroom life that many concur are detrimental to society and especially to youth. Her aim is encapsulated in the paper's title, "Classrooms as Places of Productive Friction," and in the philosophical contributions of Emanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt. Agreeing with and as complement to much of her position, this response posits an even more serious state of US schools and classrooms that are related to the "on-line-to-real-life pipeline of violence . . . [that culminated] on January 6, 2021, when an angry mob stormed the US Capitol," referenced by Parker.¹

To follow, this response to Canadian Parker is written from a US context. Her "productive friction" in schools and classrooms seems impossible at the present time, even wishing it were so. There are two interrelated considerations: First is attention to Parker's philosophical stance and its implications. Second is a context of polarized, significantly racialized conflict, characterizing contemporary social and political life in the United States. Finally, a conclusion from the different context agrees with Parker in a brief assertion and response to joint danger to a democratic ideal.

PHILOSOPHY

Parker combines Levinas and Arendt, their ethics and politics, in a minimalist philosophical stance. She begins with the ethics of encounter from Levinas, set for her in the dualistic anxieties of "the new

information environment . . . [of persons being alone before a screen] . . . [yet] pulled toward the promise of knowledge and community.”²² Parker then turns to Arendt for a politics anchored in a re-envisioned “social” sense of the *polis*, both its private and public realms. The implication is that adding politics serves as a “corrective” to “the digital sphere as a failed public sphere,” but not necessarily as Arendt correcting Levinas.³ Lastly, this straightforward position, in a short paper, adequately serves Parker’s educational purposes and through its own conclusion supports classrooms engaged in democratic participation.

Parker’s base is in phenomenology that includes the significance for philosophy of ethics and politics as well as the tradition’s modern universalism. A basic consideration of the response focuses on intersubjectivity, one to one for individuals that through analogy is claimed for collectives. The latter is the difficulty that Parker assumes but does not detail in her turn to Arendt. As philosopher Simon Critchley asserts, the issue is “that the abstraction of the ethical relation must be incarnated in the life of the political realm . . . [in a necessity as] the passage from ethics to politics.”²⁴

Were Parker to continue her project, she may be committed to further her exploration of the relationship of Levinas and Arendt. A direction is signaled in her text reference to a “politics of relationality” from Belgian philosopher Anya Topolski. Topolski’s extended treatment is based, in part, on shared biographies but divergent directions for phenomenology. She writes in general that “both remained true to the spirit of the . . . tradition . . . to appreciate the link between thinking and experience and the importance of events and perspective.”²⁵ As is well known, Levinas and Arendt were students of Martin Heidegger, and both expressed their “disappointment” with his Nazi-turn as they experienced the horrors of the Shoah. Topolski writes,

Had history and Heidegger been other than they were, Levinas might not have sought to establish that ethics precedes ontology, and Arendt might not have tried to assert plurality's priority over singularity for the sake of the political.⁶

Other directions are available to Parker that include concentrating solely on Arendt or Levinas. For example, Critchley's critique of Levinas builds from his interest in Jacques Derrida's own treatment of Levinas's position. Critchley questions the passage of ethics to politics in Levinas through the question: "Might there not be a *hiatus* between ethics and politics . . . [that] perhaps opens onto a new experience of the political decision?"⁷ Critchley's argument, in part, is that while Levinas wants to deduce politics from ethics, he "leaves us perplexed as to how it might be achieved."⁸ From Derrida, the hiatus opens the political that calls for a decision; something must be done. This decision, significantly "must be a response to the utter singularity of a particular and inexhaustible context."⁹ As Critchley summarizes, "the singularity of the context in which the demand arises provokes an act of invention whose criterion is *universal*." The difficulty of politics consists precisely in this passage from the universal to the particular.¹⁰ It is non-foundational yet not arbitrary—and allows for shared political values and actions, for as it might be put, an ethics within politics. The contemporary question arises, however, what if there is no sharing, no commonality in a polarized society?

POLARIZATION AND RACIALIZED CONFLICT

Polarization is a term typically applied in recent years to US politics with its origin in the 1960s. Divisions came to particular fruition beginning with the 2016 Presidential election, continued over four years following the 2020 election, and culminated in the Big Lie and the 2021 insurrection. Reflected in politics, US divisions extend beyond labels into geographic locations and cultural wars, arising in fears of societal change, especially

in national demographics. Particulars are in response to “realization” of an emerged multicultural, multiracial, and multi-gendered nation. In a recent book, journalist Ezra Klein writes, “[These] fundamental identities that tend to generate intolerance and hostility and the issue conflicts are . . . [expressions of these divisions].”¹¹

Polarization has devolved from communities into schools and classrooms and has taken on a significant racialized character long part of an exceptionalist belief in “white supremacy.” Emblematic of this belief was the response of the Black Lives Matter movement beginning in 2013 and reemerging in the national conscience with the killing of George Floyd in 2020, one of many young unarmed Black youth killed by police.¹² This movement then resulted in a negative counter-response. Coming together within COVID-19 restrictions, more recent events have coalesced around issues of curriculum and pedagogy in classrooms. Current political strategies include radically conservative media dominance, implementation of state and district laws and regulations, and activism of “parents’ rights” at school board meetings and other protests. The two targets are the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the banning of numerous books in school and public libraries.¹³ Both are tropes for non-existent problems largely perpetuated by adults who worry that their white children will be “uncomfortable.” The facts are that CRT is a graduate level legal theory not taught in schools and that for decades many of the books have been sought out by youth from their interests. Recent events in the US demonstrate, in student movements for example, that although at times tied to solitary screens, children and especially youth are certainly cognizant of polarized and conflictual differences.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

In this response, it is argued that the state of US schools and classrooms today is embedded in a politicized, divided, and conflicted

nation. In this condition, one pedagogical, but needed extended strategy is to involve students in projects outside of the classroom, to leave—for a time—their personal conflicts aside. In conclusion, it may be that the particulars of this context differ from a Canadian situation in which a pedagogy of productive friction can result in the furthering of democracy. To repeat: I wish that this were so! On the future of democracy, perhaps the most significant philosophical and educational project of these times, and especially for philosophers of education, Parker and I surely agree. In her turn to the ethics and politics of this aim from Levinas and Arendt, she has offered an important provocation for consideration and action.

1 Lana Parker, "Classrooms as Places of Productive Friction," *Philosophy of Education* 78, (same issue).

2 Parker, "Classrooms as Places of Productive Fiction," (same issue).

3 Parker, (same issue).

4 Simon Critchley, "Five Problems in Levinas's View of Politics and a Sketch of a Solution to Them," *Political Theory* 32, no. 2, (2004): 172-185, downloaded DOI: 10.1177/00959170326177, 177.

5 Anna Topolski, *Arendt, Levinas and a Politics of Relationality* (London and New York: Rowan and Littlefield International, 2015), 218.

6 Topolski, *Arendt, Levinas and a Politics of Relationality*, 16.

7 Critchley, "Five Problems in Levinas's View of Politics and a Sketch of a Solution to Them," 177.

8 Critchley, 177.

9 Critchley, 178.

10 Critchley, 180.

11 Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized: With a New Afterward* (New York and London: Avid Reader Press, 2020), 38.

12 See Tehama Lopez Bunyasi and Candis Watt Smith, *Stay Woke: A People's Guide to Making All Black Lives Matter* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

13 A particular target is the volume, *The 1619 Project*, eds. Nicole Hannah-Jones, Caitlin Roper, Ilene Silverman, and Jake Silverstein (New York: One World and the New York Times Company, 2021); See also Constance Grady, "How the New Banned Books Panic Fits into America's History of School Censorship," *Vox Media*,

February 17, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/culture/22918344/banned-books-history-maus-school-censorship-texas-harold-rugg-beloved-huck-finn-dr-seuss>.

14 See Lynda Stone, “Youth Power—Youth Movements: Myth, Activism, and Democracy,” *Ethics and Education*, 16 (2021): 249-261.