

The Future is a Metaphor: Dewey, Arendt, and Speculative Time in Education

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The matter of *time* in education—the past, present, and future—has been theorized prominently in the works of John Dewey and Hannah Arendt. This essay will look at the theme of time in Dewey and Arendt, then posit a *different* orientation toward time deriving from the speculative fiction of Ursula Le Guin. The essay will proceed in three parts. The first part will introduce a short story by Le Guin called “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.”¹ Second, we unpack an orientation toward educational time in the work of John Dewey.² Next, we contrast Arendt’s notion of educational “natality” to the progressive work of Dewey on temporality. Finally, we propose the educational significance of both teachers and students cultivating a speculative attitude to better navigate spaces of antagonistic temporalities.

OMELAS

Ursula Le Guin’s short story, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” describes a society of people living in Omelas—a beautiful, peaceful society, a people living in a place of paradise. Yet, Omelas is plagued by one dark secret:

The beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on [one] child’s abominable misery.³

In this paradise, a child is suffering. The child is being held captive in a basement. “It lives,” writes Le Guin, using the pronoun “it,” rather than a pronoun

of personhood, “on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day.” “It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually.”⁴ Each citizen who lives in Omelas knows about this suffering child by the age of ten or so. Each is faced with an unbearable dilemma. They are aware that living in paradise depends upon the suffering of this one child. Each person knows that if the child were to be helped, their beautiful paradise would be lost.

Faced with this situation, with this unbearable knowledge, most of those in Omelas choose paradise. They go on living in spite of the suffering child. But a few walk away. Those who walk away do so alone. They leave the community by night. “The place they go towards,” writes Le Guin, “is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.”⁵

Le Guin’s story has much to do with the world as it is today, and it has much to do with the world as it might be in the future. A world of today where there is acute pain. A world of the future that is anything but certain. Like the society of Omelas, our world presents us with unbearable pain that we must, of necessity, disregard if we are to go on living. And like Omelas, it seems as if the future of our world presents no clear recipe for alleviating the pain that we already see. Thus, we choose this story first for its timely content. And more specifically, we choose “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” for its genre. We will argue in this essay that the aesthetic quality of this speculative short story offers an important paradigm for education. While it is true that on one level, the story’s content poses a moral dilemma that parallels the sorts of dilemmas we encounter in the world today, it is also true that the fictional world of Omelas informs a certain temporal orientation toward the classroom encounter. The content is both dark and light, both tragic and hopeful. Its speculative form compliments this tragic hopefulness by redescribing the place of education on the continuum between past, present, and future.

DEWEY’S “EXPERIENCE” AND EDUCATIONAL FUTURE

John Dewey is well known for his insistence that educational endeavors must not ignore the here and now. In *Experience in Education*, Dewey argues against traditional forms of education that hollow out the *present* of educational experience in favor of a preparation for experiences in the *future*.⁶ As he notes:

When preparation is made the controlling end, then the potentialities of the present are sacrificed to a suppositious future only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything.⁷

Dewey's skepticism toward educational future, and his championing of educational present, aligns with his pragmatist orientation toward human experience. For Dewey, there is no human experience—whenever that experience occurs—that deserves to be sacrificed to educational aims. This is a quintessentially pragmatist position insofar Dewey insists that *things must get done* in order for there to be value. Just as the pragmatist orientation toward truth is that it must be “an idea upon which we can ride,” so also for present experience; it must be of value and usefulness in the here and now. When comparing progressive education to the “old,” or “traditional,” Dewey concedes that there may be present experience to be had in traditional education. Yet, “it is not enough,” he argues, “to insist upon the necessity of experience, nor even of activity in experience ... everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had.”⁸ For Dewey, the educational experience, just because it happens in the now, does not suffice. The quality of educational experience in the now is paramount.

It is important to point out that Dewey is not without ambivalence when it comes to educational future. On the one hand, Dewey is clearly a champion of educational experience in the present. On the other, he cannot seem to shake off the tendency to treat education as a future-oriented activity. At the same time that Dewey argues emphatically against the tendency of traditional education to focus on future preparation, he seems to retain the future as the *sine qua non* of endeavors that deserve to be called educational. *Experience and Education* witnesses this ambivalence:

The educator more than the member of any other profession is concerned to have a long look ahead The lawyer is occupied with winning a suit for his client or getting the latter out of some complication into which he has got himself. If it goes beyond the case presented to him he too becomes an educator. The educator by the very nature of his work is obliged to see his present work in terms of what it accomplishes, or fails to accomplish, for a future whose objects are linked with those of the present.⁹

There are thus conflicting elements in Dewey's relation to educational future. One might say that he resolves this conflict by noting, as quoted above, that preparation for the future can be accomplished precisely “by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience,” and by making the present and future “linked.” We find this attempt to make the present more future-*ish*, and the future more present-*ish*, quite unsatisfying. Either the future and the present are distinct, or they are not. Dewey's own critique of future oriented education depends on the distinction. To say that they are “linked” begs the question of their difference.

ARENDT'S “NATALITY” AND EDUCATIONAL FUTURE

Hannah Arendt presents an orientation toward educational future quite different from Dewey's. In many ways, Arendt's educational work in *Between Past and Future* is a direct critique of American pragmatism and the progressive legacy of

Deweyian-inspired pedagogy. Arendt boldly claims, for example, “the crisis in American education ... announces the bankruptcy of progressive education.”¹⁰ Yet in spite of her more overt criticisms, her essay on the “Crisis of Education” ends with a less polemic, and more compelling description of an education where:

We decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.¹¹

In this paper, we read Arendt not for her critique of progressive education, but rather for the way she offers a different understanding of time in education, a different understanding of education’s relation to the future.

For Arendt, the modern human condition puts us in a precarious relation with the past and future. As she argues throughout *Between Past and Future*, human cultural development can no longer depend upon ancient forms of authority. Whereas societies of old used to place value on the transmission of knowledge and cultural ways from the aged to the young, we now live in an age where the very *stuff* to be transmitted is too amorphous, too disjoint to warrant authorization. Ours is no longer a time when the young look to the old for direction and purpose. As Arendt puts it, we are “without tradition—which selects names, which hands down and preserves, which indicates where the treasures are and what their worth is.”¹² We are, so to speak, caught in the rush of waters whose depths we can no longer fathom. Nevertheless, human beings are “inserted into time,” and only to the extent that humans stand their ground in time “does the flow of indifferent time break up into tenses.”¹³

As an answer to this existential dilemma, Arendt posits the existential condition of “natality.”¹⁴ “Natality” is the human condition of having been born, it is “the new beginning inherent in birth.”¹⁵ Arendt’s thinking on natality has been beautifully introduced to educational theory by Natasha Levinson, among others. Levinson reminds us that, for Arendt, “natality is both the basis and the aim of education, which is why Arendt refers to it as ‘the essence of education.’”¹⁶ “One of the primary functions of education [for Arendt] is to introduce the continuous stream of newcomers to the world,” those newcomers who embody “the promise of natality.”¹⁷ For Arendt, a lack of tradition does not change the fact that humans are nevertheless born under the condition of natality. Even without tradition serving as a reliable basis upon which the future of the young are to proceed, it is nevertheless the case that the fact of being born means that the world will renew in some way, in some form. For Arendt, it is a relational necessity that educators stand their ground amidst the onslaught of time. It is not *what* the educator must teach in order to make room for the enactment of natality; it is rather *that* the educator must intervene sufficiently such that the future generation not be lost to the vicissitudes of time’s onslaught.

THE METAPHOR OF TIME IN ARENDT

At this point, let us notice Arendt's presentation of educational time and contrast it with Dewey's. In the work of Arendt, great effort is taken to posit a facet of human existence that is not exactly coincidental with the everyday march of time. Natality, for Arendt, is not the same as pure temporality. While natality has its roots in the temporal fact of having been born, its manifestation is not precisely in "historical or biographical time," but is rather a "small non-time-space in the very heart of time."¹⁸ This condition, Arendt argues, "is not a modern phenomenon, it is perhaps not even a historical datum but is coeval with the existence of man on earth."¹⁹ Natality exists in a space "unlike the world and the culture into which we are born ... each new generation, indeed every new human being as he inserts himself between an infinite past and an infinite future, must discover and ploddingly pave it anew."²⁰ While notions of past, present, and future are ever-present in the educational work of Dewey, one is hard-pressed to find Dewey positing various temporal planes in the way Arendt spends effort doing.

In the preface to *Between Past and Future*, Arendt draws on a parable by Franz Kafka to advance her presentation of time and the place of natality. In it, a man, simply called "he," struggles with the two forces of time, past and future. These forces have the man trapped—the past pushing him forward and the future pushing him back. The man is stuck. Stuck in time. He dreams of one day being liberated from these forces. While appreciative of Kafka's parable because it recalls the essential struggle that humans face when "inserted between and infinite past and an infinite future" as mentioned above, Arendt is nevertheless critical of Kafka for lacking the imagination to change what she calls "the traditional metaphor of a rectilinear temporal movement."²¹ Arendt argues that Kafka's parable would have been more successful if there were a third, "diagonal force," emanating from the man, a force "whose origin is known, whose direction is determined by past and future, but whose eventual end lies in infinity, is the perfect metaphor for the activity of thought."²² Human action, human thought, human natality—these call for a non-traditional metaphor of time.

THE FUTURE IS A METAPHOR: THREE EXAMPLES

What we find useful in Arendt's work is that she opens up space for thinking more broadly about the future by insisting that time is not a given, not a particular thing, and not limited to the chronology of the analog or digital. Instead, it acts metaphorically. One can say that the future is an educational metaphor in at least three distinct senses. First, it is a metaphor in the way Arendt describes above, insofar as it can be understood in various forms. If, for Dewey, the future is the future; for Arendt, the future has at least two forms. One is "the traditional metaphor" of rectilinear temporal movement where the future is that which

follows the present as its logical successor. One might assume Dewey's use of "future" matches this first description. The other is more akin to the "diagonal force" she wishes Kafka had written about. Such a diagonal force, we can assume, is, like the manifestation of natality, not precisely in "historical or biographical" time. Educational future may take other forms. Arendt's two forms are just a start.

Secondly, the future is a metaphor in the sense that the quality of future life is often regarded as a metaphor for the success or failure of educational projects. Future flourishing, and future degradation, tend to get linked to how we conduct education in the present. An example of this particular metaphor is inherent in such projects like "Education for the 22nd Century," or "The Future of AI in Education." Indeed, this particular sense of the future metaphor is emphatic enough that it is often difficult to delink education from a presumed, inherent link to future endeavors. It is not necessarily the case that a student's future success—or failure—must, of needs, *stand for* the teacher's work. But it is difficult to get away from this particular metaphor.

Returning for a moment to Dewey, we suspect that this second metaphor is implicated in his ambivalent stance toward future-oriented education. As noted above, Dewey is conflicted about the matter of the future in his educational writings. On the one hand, Dewey is a staunch supporter of education *in the now*, that education *is life itself*. Yet at times, Dewey falls prey to the very future orientation that he ostensibly stands against. If one keeps this second metaphorical role of the future in mind, it is easier to see why Dewey gets stuck in ambivalence. For, it is one thing to champion education *in the now*. It is more difficult to stick with the consequences of an education *in the now* when confronted with the trope of an education that is presumed to be *responsible* for the future. While one might wish to enact the strong claim that education *is life itself*, such a claim appears a bit irresponsible when the future serves as the metaphorical arbiter for educational success or failure.

Thirdly, the future is a metaphor in the sense that the future serves as a vessel for the way various problematics in educational thought are worked out. The future has often been "an idea that animates education," to quote from the 2025 Philosophy of Education (PES) conference call. For example, we often accept that how one thinks about the preparation for the future stands in for whether one is traditional or progressive in one's educational approach. Here, we are reminded of the words of Bryan Warnick's quick summary of progressive education in his 2024 paper, "Educational Temptations at the End of the World."²³ He writes that, "in progressive education circles, at least since Rousseau, there has been a reluctance in philosophy of education to think that education should be a preparation for the future."²⁴ This last example of the future metaphor is of course linked to the previous example insofar as both examples implicate progressive and traditional education in relation to the future. However, the distinction between these two examples is that

the previous is descriptive and this one is normative. In the previous metaphor, the future serves as a description of educational success or failure. In this last metaphor, the future serves as a guide for how one should, or should not, educate.

All three of the above metaphorical functions of future point to one important fact. The very concept of the future is malleable. Notions of future change. They change according to their use, and they change over time. When considering Dewey and Arendt and their positions on educational future, it is helpful to wonder: Did these thinkers consider future in the same way that we consider future in 2025? Please note we did not ask if they considered “the” future in the same way that we consider future. What we are asking is not what we, or they, consider(ed) to be the prospects of what the future will hold. We are asking rather, what metaphor of future might be prevalent now, as distinct from when Dewey and Arendt were writing in the early twentieth century. Certainly, it is not possible to offer a definitive answer to this question. We cannot know for sure how Dewey or Arendt’s future differed from ours. Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to suspect that there are differences.

SPECULATIVE FICTION AND THE METAPHOR OF FUTURE

We now return to Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” which is typically categorized as “speculative” fiction. Interestingly, Le Guin intended Omelas to be a fictional sequel to a thought experiment by William James.²⁵ James, pragmatist contemporary of John Dewey, opined in his thought experiment, on the predicament of “millions kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture ... how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain?”²⁶ Le Guin herself has attributed to her fiction the quality of thought experiment. “If you like you can read it,” she notes, “and a lot of other science fiction, as a thought-experiment.”²⁷

Commenting on the James-inspired origin of Omelas, Isabelle Stengers notes how Le Guin accomplishes that which a philosophical thought experiment can never manage.²⁸ The philosophical thought experiment generally poses a dilemma whose binary alternatives make moral deliberation interesting and compelling. For example, the famous thought experiment where a person is given the choice whether or not to break the law in order to steal drugs that would result in saving the life of a spouse. In such a thought experiment, the aim of the anecdote is deliberation and utilitarian calculus. The idea of the thought experiment is that one should take a side. One should, based upon propositional logic, make a decision about the future. In contrast, Le Guin’s speculative fiction does not lend itself to propositional judgement. It lends itself rather to imagination “weav[ing] together implications and consequences, when it intertwines the whys and wherefores of a

situation ... [it] brings into play propositional and transformative forces compelling the author to inhabit, or at least visit” the worlds that are made.²⁹ Whereas the philosophical thought experiment demands a future-oriented resolution, speculative fiction requires one to inhabit a world at this moment, accepting all the while that the future’s actuality is a different matter altogether.

Describing her own speculative thought experiments, Le Guin observes that the writer of science fiction:

Is supposed to take a trend or phenomenon of the here-and-now, purify and intensify it for dramatic effect, and extend it into the future ... Method and results much resemble those of a scientist who feeds large doses of a purified and concentrated food additive to mice, in order to predict what may happen to people who eat it in small quantities for a long time.³⁰

And the thought experiments of speculative fiction are uniquely free of any present-gives-rise-to- future consequences. Adding to the three metaphors of future already introduced in this paper, it is helpful to listen to Le Guin’s own description of the future as metaphor: “Science fiction is metaphor,” writes Le Guin, “it contains various other metaphors ... space travel is one of these metaphors; so is an alternative society, an alternative biology; the future is another. The future, in fiction, is a metaphor.”³¹ The future in speculative time is a metaphor in sense that it is not what *will* happen; it is rather a *placeholder* for various possibilities.

EDUCATIONAL TIME IN THE LAST HALF CENTURY

John Dewey published *Experience and Education* in 1938. George Orwell published *1984* in 1949. Hannah Arendt published *Between Past and Future* in 1954. Ursula Le Guin published “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” in 1973. As we write this, it is 2025. As Frederic Jameson argues in “Progress versus Utopia, or, Can We Imagine the Future?,” there has been, for at least a half century, an existential crisis about what the future means and whether it can be accurately represented.³² This representational crisis regarding the future has landed squarely in the laps of science fiction writers. To put it simply, when George Orwell wrote *1984* in 1949, a writer of science fiction could still write a novel whose readers would say “Well, that will never happen to us! That’s just a depressing version of the future.” Today, it is no longer possible to write a piece of “futuristic” science fiction. It is no longer possible to write Science Fiction—or “SF” the acronym used by literary critics—about things that seem like they will never come to pass. One can no longer write about things that people *cannot* imagine happening, because the post-modern imagination (or the post-post-modern imagination) can no longer think of the future as that which is completely un-anticipatable. Jameson notes the following about science fiction:

SF has concealed another, far more complex temporal structure: not to give us “images” of the future—whatever such images might mean for a

reader who will necessarily predecease their “materialization” —but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*, and to do so in specific ways distinct from all other forms of defamiliarization.³³

What Jameson notes about SF, we would like to restate in terms of education. At least since Dewey and Arendt, the question of what we are to do about the future has been prominent in debates about education. Educators, like SF authors, have been tasked to negotiate the future. Times have changed for both teachers and writers. We would argue that as educators we, too, are teaching in a time that has generally become *credulous* about the future. A time when anything may come to pass. It is thus time for educators, like SF authors, to become speculative. Speculative in what we do, speculative in how we engage our students.

Situated within a complex arrangement of social, cultural, political, and economic factors, navigating educational spaces of antagonistic temporalities gives us opportunities to attend to the present. Only then, can we begin to cultivate a capacity that fiercely embraces both suffering and beauty; bitter and sweet. It lies in learning to live with the immediate tensions of cruelty and hardship, and all that lies in between. It is a departure from dualistic forms of thinking, requiring the educator to embody a speculative attitude through how they show up in their teaching and relationships. Our narratives of the future stem from these starting points of reality within ourselves and how we then encounter the world, constantly recalculating themselves with reference to one’s formation of being. It is precisely within this dynamic space that we can exercise our agency and imagination, defamiliarizing ourselves to reframe our understanding of the present, putting in the *placeholder* for a landscape of possibilities.

CONCLUSION: SUFFERING AND PROMISE IN SPECULATIVE TIME

Our thesis in this paper has been that the future is a metaphor. Whatever we are “preparing” our students for is a moving target. Metaphors change. One thing is clear, however, and not debatable. There is suffering in this world right now, and there may be much suffering in the future. As illustrated in “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” we are all witnesses to this suffering. We are witnesses at an early age. We also each have the choice to do something about this suffering. Both educators and students have the choice. Whatever ensues from this choice is indeed speculative. It may very well be that, as Le Guin writes, the future “is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness.”³⁴

Le Guin’s short story entails a speculative mode that adds thick description to what would otherwise be an exercise in propositional logic. It takes a thought experiment and brings it to life. We would venture to say that the *only* way to make propositional logic true to life is through speculative thought. Exercises in thought tend to stay exercises in thought. Speculative thought, on the other

hand, creates indelible impressions. To read the story of what unfolds in Omelas is to imagine, directly, the suffering child, “the mass of festered sores.” It is easy to imagine, directly, the child whom Le Guin calls only “it”: “It sits in its own excrement continually.” It is also easy to imagine, directly, the opposite of this child, the beauty of Omelas:

The horses rear on their slender legs, and some of them neigh in answer. Sober-faced, the young riders stroke the horses’ necks and soothe them, whispering, “Quiet, quiet, there my beauty, my hope...” They begin to form in rank along the starting line. The crowds along the racecourse are like a field of grass and flowers in the wind. The Festival of Summer has begun.³⁵

We have argued in this paper that the question of time in education is no longer about whether the present takes precedent over the past. It is no longer about getting past the metaphor of “rectilinear temporal movement.” The rectilinear march of time is, perhaps ironically, a thing of the past. Education should not be about whether we educate for the painful future of inevitable suffering, or for the better future, the future of “quiet, there my beauty, my hope.” Rather, it should be about *how* we encourage a speculative mode on the part of our students, beginning with us as educators. It starts with our own way of standing in a present that both accentuates fictions of pain, and well as setting up the circumstances for fictions of walking away.

1. Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” in *Wind’s Twelve Quarters* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1975), 275-284.
2. This essay is co-authored and so it uses “we” in many instances to represent two authors.
3. Le Guin, “The Ones,” 282.
4. Le Guin, “The Ones,” 282.
5. Le Guin, “The Ones,” 284.
6. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York, NY: Kappa Delta Pi, 1938).
7. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 49.
8. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 27.
9. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 76.
10. Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” in *Between Past and Future* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1961), 179.
11. Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 196.
12. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1961), 5.

13. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 11.
14. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 9.
15. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9.
16. Natasha Levinson, "Teaching in the Midst of Belatedness: The Paradox of Natality in Hannah Arendt's Educational Thought." *Educational Theory* 48:1 (1998): 449.
17. Levinson, "Teaching in the Midst," 442.
18. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 13.
19. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 13.
20. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 13.
21. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 11, 13.
22. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 12.
23. Bryan Warnick, "Educational Temptations at the End of the World," *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 2 (2023): 1-13.
24. Warnick, "Educational Temptations," 3.
25. Isabelle Stengers, "Ursula K. Le Guin, Thinking in SF Mode." in *The Legacies of Ursula K. Le Guin: Science, Fiction, Ethics*, ed. Christopher L. Robinson, Sarah Bouttier, and Pierre-Louis Patoine (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2021): 121-136.
26. William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," *International Journal of Ethics* 1, no. 3 (1891), 333.
27. Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (New York, NY: Ace Books, 1969), 3.
28. Stengers, "Ursula K. Le Guin," 123.
29. Stengers, "Ursula K. Le Guin," 125.
30. Le Guin, *The Left Hand*, 1.
31. Le Guin, *The Left Hand*, 5.
32. Fredric Jameson. "Progress versus Utopia; Or, Can We Imagine the Future? (Progrès Contre Utopie, Ou: Pouvons-Nous Imaginer l'avenir)." *Science Fiction Studies* 9, no. 2 (1982): 147-158.
33. Jameson, "Progress versus Utopia," 151.
34. Le Guin, "The Ones," 284.
35. Le Guin, "The Ones," 280.