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Why solving intergenerational injustice through education does not work

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Utopia or dystopia, where are we headed?

Ever since the educational shift away from the life one was born into towards conceptions of a general openness of life's trajectory, modern education has set its focus on enabling a better future. Moreover, this imagined future connects a better future for the individual child with a better future for humanity. To Kant, it is downright 'delightful' to imagine a "happier human race in the future" (Kant, 1803/1900, p. 8) through education, which is an "*art* which can only become perfect through the practice of many generations" (Kant, 1803/1900, p. 10). This way "each succeeding generation will advance one step towards the perfecting of mankind" (Kant, 1803/1900, p. 7). And in turn, following this succession of generations, a more humane future society would enable every individual to have a better life. As Dewey sums up this understanding: "[B]etter habits shall be formed, and thus the future adult society be an improvement on their own" (Dewey, 1916/1985, p. 85).

Unfortunately, circumstances have changed. As we all know too well, we are facing an unprecedented global catastrophe called 'climate change', caused by the extraction and wasteful use of fossil fuels, as well as a number of usually related (sub-)problems, e.g. air and water pollution, deforestation, and mass extinctions at an alarming speed, to only name a few. At this rate, environmental problems that are already severe today will become even more so in the near future, to a point where a dystopian future is not an unrealistic scenario. Yes, the accumulated effects of our consumerist lifestyle on the whole ecosystem are massive. And so are the social issues as well as the health issues caused by pollution. Taking the magnitude of this crisis into account, it is relatively safe to assume our children will not have a better life than we did.

The true costs of decades of overconsumption go even beyond all of the above. We haven't even mentioned environmental (in-)justice with regards to

- a) the unequal distribution of sufferings, such as the thoughtless exploitation of laborers (other humans) for our need for overconsumption (fueling a dynamic which conveniently strengthens oppression), and the general acceptance that the consequences of pollution and climate change—even though we will all pay the price—will still be especially catastrophic for already

marginalized groups but a mere inconvenience to the relatively well off, and

- b) the instrumentalization, reification, and commodification of non-human animals for food production, e.g. the killing of non-human animals even though there is no physical necessity to do so, as humans do not rely on the consumption of animal products for survival.

These aspects of justice across the globe and justice between species deserve an argument of their own, both in general as well as with regards to education. However, important as they undoubtedly are, they will not be our concern in this paper. Rather, we will focus on the intergenerational perspective and how the social crisis of exploitation and destruction of habitats poses a problem for education.

Facing the grim outlook that the generations to come will most certainly not have a better life is surely a problem for any progressivist mindset. In their recent work on how sustainability matters in education (as well as their contribution to this issue of *On Education*), Randall Curren and Ellen Metzger challenge this progressivist conception of intergenerational relations. "[G]iven how detrimental to future life prospects the excesses of present opulence are likely to be" (Curren & Metzger, 2017, p. 78)—i.e. specifying future costs of our present privileged lifestyles—it may be assumed that "those born in the future are likely to be a disadvantaged class by comparison with those presently alive" (Curren & Metzger, 2017, p. 78). In short, if there is no certainty that future generations will be better off, the whole question of intergenerational justice has to be reframed. After all, this socio-ecological crisis is "not a surface-phenomenon" (Schmidt, 2013, p. 479) requiring only a little bit of mending here and there. Rather, it is built into the core of modern culture.

In what follows, we want to address the issue of the intergenerational structure in society and education. The general educational belief "in a world of opportunity" (Curren & Metzger, 2017, p. 181) for young people is challenged by the fact "that we are collectively living in ways that are diminishing [those] opportunities" (Curren & Metzger, 2017, p. 181). This problem is further intensified by an unprecedented pressing urgency. According to recent UN

calculations, we are left with only eleven years (until 2030) to prevent the worst effects of climate change (IPCC, 2018). We simply “cannot wait for today’s children to be suitably educated and leave all the work of solving the problems to them” (Curren, 2009, p. 1).

As a consequence, education cannot be merely about preparing the next generation for their future anymore, simply presuming their future will be an improvement compared to the life of those before them. Facing ecological facts, however, it is sadly not exaggerated to say we are living in extreme times, in which preparing the children for their future means to prepare them for the possibility of not having a future. If we want to prevent this very real possibility, education needs to include the present generation *assuming responsibility* for the consequences of their collective actions by solving as much of the crisis as possible in their own lifetime.

So, we join the call to “shift the emphasis from human rights to human responsibilities, in this case the responsibility to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for living in such a way that one minimizes the harm one does to human and non-human others’ ability to live well in the world now and in the future” (Ruitenberg, 2018, p. 113). However, we do so by pointing out the need for educators to change their own behavior. This goes against the general educational intuition of changing those being educated rather than the educators changing themselves. Instead of educating to change society by changing the children, we will shift our focus to asking what kind of world we want to leave behind.

Technology will not save us

We are used to classify problems surrounding climate change as ‘environmental problems.’ As a consequence, we mainly expect natural sciences to deal with these problems by providing insights and new technologies. After all, ever since Bacon’s call for a scientific method and Descartes’ detachment of the thinking faculty from the natural world, the scientific and especially the technological mindset have been connected to the aspiration of finally mastering nature.

Indeed, climate scientists have run countless of studies, collected and analyzed data, explained causes and effects. They have made predictions and even recommendations based on that data. And this is what natural sciences *can* do. What they *cannot* do, however, is to ‘solve’ the problem of climate change—because these so-called environmental problems are not natural problems. Rather, they are cultural or *societal problems*, caused by decades of human misbehavior.

Over the course of just a couple of decades, we have built a global infrastructure that heavily relies on fossil fuel. We have come to believe a well-oiled economy (pun intended) can only work if based on growth and, hence, overconsumption. As a matter of fact, we have continuously ignored the fact that this economic system needs systemic exploitation to keep growing—and we have chosen to turn a blind eye to the simple math of the Club of Rome that there is no such thing as infinite growth on a planet with finite resources.

A problem caused by societal misbehavior can only be solved by action on a societal and not on a technological level. Technological innovations can certainly ease the symptoms but are a mere band aid. In order to solve the actual problem, we need to get to the cause of it. Climate scientists have been presenting their observations and calculations, but the solution—as the same climate scientists have emphasized—lies in societal measures such as political and economic implementations of massive carbon emission restrictions and a substantial change in everyday consumption habits. As they have urged policy makers and addressed the general public, this must happen in the next one to two decades, or else we will have gone beyond the point of no return (Aengenheyster et al., 2018).

“The main solution [...] is so simple that even a small child can understand it. We have to stop the emissions of greenhouse gases. And either we do that, or we don’t” (Thunberg, 2019). Yet our approach to these pressing matters has not been a systematic dismantling of the societal structures that got us into this mess in the first place. Even though we have already started to suffer the consequences of climate change—and in some parts of the world people have suffered *heavily*, already—, we have held onto a let’s-party-now-and-let-future-generations-worry-about-it attitude. Instead of taking responsibility for our actions now, we knowingly choose to continue our everyday practices despite their detrimental consequences. Every day, we choose to burden future generations with solving a crisis we keep on fueling.

This global economic system is designed to hide the exploitation happening along the supply chain. By default, we are outsourcing the true costs of our affluent lifestyles not only to the environment, millions of exploited farmers, workers, and their families across the globe, but also our own children. Because this unsightly side is kept away from our supermarkets, our fashion outlets, and our cars, we can simultaneously claim we’d do anything to ensure our children’s well-being. Even worse, we are robbing our children of their future not so we can *survive*, but for mere

convenience and *luxury* that we have confused with basic needs.

The Earth Overshoot Day probably illustrates this best. It is the date when humanity has exhausted nature's budget for the year (Earth Overshoot Day, 2018). Last year it fell on August 1, 2018 and it was the earliest since this planet went into ecological overshoot in the 1970s. This means the rest of the year, we live at the expense of future generations. Instead of doing all we can to ensure future generations can start out with a clean slate, to have a chance at a 'better future', we make sure they will inherit our accumulated unjustifiable environmental debt. Unjustifiable, because it is not an investment, but an expression of decades of "failure to distinguish between income and capital" (Schumacher, 1973/1989, p. 11). Instead of maintaining "the irreplaceable capital which man has not made, but simply found without which he can do nothing" (Schumacher, 1973/1989, p. 11), we simply *use nature up* like it were a perpetual, solid, and never-ending stream of income.

The Blame Game

The simple progressivist view that our children should have it better than we did is obviously not feasible anymore. Instead, we suggest a framework that takes into account that we, the adults today, are better off than our children, and that specifically asks for our "responsibility for the future" (Jonas, 1976, p. 53).

The conceptual interest here lies not with the expected question of who can be held responsible for certain deeds. After all, "all of us collaborate [in these practices] as captive beneficiaries through rising production, consumption, and sheer population growth" (Schmidt, 2013, p. 463). Asking who can be held responsible means focusing on the *past*. Rather, Jonas offers a concept of responsibility modeled after the *forward-looking* parental act of *assuming responsibility* for a certain object or task, i.e. certain *future* deeds (cf. Jonas, 1976, pp. 51-52, p. 69). The main idea of such an ethics of responsibility, which distinguishes between *being held responsible* and *assuming responsibility*, can be traced back to Jonas' contemporary Hannah Arendt who connects her moral thinking to such a concept of responsibility. And she does so in two ways, both of which can be taken to be cornerstones of an *educational ethics of sustainability*.

Firstly, it is important to distinguish between *guilt* and *responsibility*. In view of the debate of 'collective guilt' of the German people for the Holocaust, Arendt argues against the "cry 'We are all guilty'" (Arendt, 1968/2003, p. 147). When referring to a certain act, the determination of guilt not only "always singles out" (Arendt, 1968/2003, p.

147), but also works in retrospect, i.e. it is *backward-looking*. When we resume responsibility, however, it is not about finding people to be punished. Realistically, there is simply no way to trace back that one particular plastic straw caught up in the nostril of a grown sea turtle to the person that once used that straw, just as there is no way to trace back the exact emission particles that each of us has caused and where these particles have ended up in the atmosphere. The nature of this problem is even more diffuse than the question of who is guilty or should be held responsible for the Holocaust. Nonetheless and regardless of how much (or little) each of us has contributed to or gained from exploitation, we can all assume responsibility within our ambit. We are in a state of emergency and, whether we like it or not, we are running out of time to play the blame game.

Secondly, Arendt reminds us not to aim at "creat[ing] a new political order through education" (Arendt, 1958/1961, p. 177). She famously—and controversially—developed this thought in her reflection on the events in Little Rock, which followed the US supreme court ruling against segregation in the case *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. To Arendt, it is 'startling' to begin the process in public schools of all places (Arendt, 1959, p. 50), since adults were "asking of young people what they could not ask of themselves" (Allen, 2007, p. 15). The black student yelled and spat at by the white mob (without any teacher or administrator in sight), appeared to Arendt as the "caricature of progressive education which, by abolishing the authority of adults, implicitly denies their responsibility for the world into which they have borne their children" (Arendt, 1959, p. 50).

Six decades later, in 2018, Greta Thunberg, a then fifteen-year-old climate activist from Sweden, found similar words in her famous speech addressing the UN Climate Change Conference: "[S]ince our leaders are behaving like children, we will have to take the responsibility they should have taken long ago" (Thunberg, 2018a). Trying to solve problems through education and thereby making children serve political ends, first and foremost means we "burden children [...] with the working out of a problem which adults for generations have confessed themselves unable to solve" (Arendt, 1959, p. 50). Even worse, this is often used as an excuse to keep up or even increase our wasteful, over-the-top lifestyles. And the societal failure to assume responsibility does not even stop there: "You are not mature enough to tell it like it is. Even that burden you leave to us children" (Thunberg, 2018b). At the time of writing, the world leaders are gathering at the World Economic Forum 2019 in Davos. Climate talks are also on the agenda, and Thunberg is one of the invited speakers. Thunberg chose to travel from Stockholm to Davos by

train—a 26-hour journey—, whereas the world leaders have managed to set a record for private jet flights (1,500 in numbers) to and from the conference (Ratcliffe, 2019).

Our house is on fire

Let's say you have a beautiful home, and it is the only house you and your descendants will ever be able to live in. You would probably take good care of it, avoid permanent damage, clean it regularly, and repair whatever needs to be fixed. You would most likely make sure your children do not have to take over a home at the verge of collapsing due to a lifetime of neglect. Quite the opposite, you would probably want to leave them an immaculate house, a legacy for them to build their own upon.

Yet so far, we have been (mis-)using education as an excuse to not solve our own problems and crises, our 'ticket out'. We have broadly tried to make education the starting point for societal change, choosing to burden our children instead of assuming responsibility for our own actions during our own lifetime. We act as if there was still plenty of time for the next generation to figure out how to implement the societal changes required to turn everything around. Too bad that—considering the environmental state our world already is in at the moment—we do not have the luxury of time. In fact, according to the most recent IPCC report, we have only eleven years left to contain the most extreme effects of climate change by limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius (IPCC, 2018, p. 95). The least—and maybe the best—educators today can do is to adopt a lifestyle for themselves that is *not adding* to the burden on future generations.

Arendt even takes it one stage further: "Anyone who refuses to assume joint responsibility for the world should not have children and must not be allowed to take part in educating them" (Arendt, 1958/1961, p. 189). Along these lines, it is almost cynical to be involved in educating the next generation to have a better future and, at the same time, actively (though maybe not deliberately) destroy their chances at said future and even jeopardizing their health and livelihood. "You say you love your children

above all else and yet you're stealing their future in front of their very eyes" (Thunberg, 2018b). Thunberg's ongoing school strike #FridaysForFuture exposes this hypocrisy so powerfully: "[W]hy should I be studying for a future that soon may be no more, when no one is doing anything to save that future?" (Thunberg, 2018a). Any education that is not giving its all to make sure that there will still be a world in which future generations can explore their chances is missing the point.

Although writing with a different crisis in mind, we can once again draw from Arendt to point out the particular antinomical structure of this concern. An educational account of intergenerational responsibility faces two perils to possibly "strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us" (Arendt, 1958/1961, p. 196).

On the one hand, we need to stop overconsuming as soon as possible, so that there will be a future to educate for. In other words, if we do not leave future generations a livable planet, we effectively deny future generations the chance of a life of their own. This first thought emphasizes the *ecological dimension* of assuming responsibility for the future. *On the other hand*, we cannot simply impose our solution on future generations—regardless of how convinced we are of our suggestions. This is not just about the inability to foresee future problems. If we impose upon young minds our utopian version of a better life—even with our best intentions—we also undermine their chances of a life of their own. This second thought emphasizes the *educational dimension* of intergenerational responsibility.

Between refraining from indoctrinating our solution and the urgency of drastic carbon emission reductions, what we *can* do is: change ourselves and fix as much as we can in our lifetime. We made our bed, now it's time to lie in it. "I don't want your hope [...]. I want you to panic [...]. And then I want you to act [...]. I want you to act as if the house was on fire, because it is" (Thunberg, 2019).

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