

Revisiting the Community of Philosophical Inquiry through the Lens of Arendt and Butler

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to reimagine philosophy programs in schools, such as philosophy for/with children, through a critical analysis of the work of Hannah Arendt and Judith Butler, especially in light of their understanding of the space of appearance and plurality. Drawing on a critical reading of Hannah Arendt along with Butler's critique, I argue that during the enactment of the community of philosophical inquiry (CPI), the classroom becomes a space of appearance through the collective willingness of those present to be exposed to and recognize unknown others and matters in the condition of plurality. I begin by summarizing Arendt's notions of the space of appearance and plurality. Next, I introduce Butler's critique and reading of Arendt to focus on sociopolitical aspects of the space of appearance. Finally, I synthesize both Arendt's and Butler's analyses to show the phenomenological and sociopolitical aspects of the CPI.

KEYWORDS: philosophy for children, community of philosophical inquiry, the space of appearance, Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler, performativity, plurality

I. Introduction

UNDENIABLY, GIVEN THE ADVENT of a hostile and irresponsible political environment, the lives of some populations are under actual threat and more vulnerable than others. Such existential threat and struggle is not necessarily confined to designated "political spaces" but is also found in our daily spaces, such as streets, supermarkets, religious spaces, and schools, as seen in the recent mass shootings in the United States. These disturbing incidents make us self-conscious

about how we look and sound (e.g., in relation to race, gender, and class) to others. That is, how we appear to others is an increasingly sensitive matter for our communities.

As David Kennedy shows in the forward of *Inclusion Diversity, and Intellectual Dialogue in Young People's Philosophical Inquiry* (2017), this heightened political environment is an urgent communal issue for many of those who engage in dialogue with students as well. Reflecting on my own experience as a female, a foreigner, a person of color, a non-native English speaker, and as a Philosophy with Children (PwC) facilitator in Texas,¹ I cannot help but think that the experience of listening and speaking in a community of philosophical inquiry (CPI) can be very challenging but at the same time very powerful for both students and facilitators.

To form a CPI, we often sit in a circle with members of the community (students and facilitators) engaging in an open-ended philosophical dialogue based on selected readings (Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan 1980; Jackson 2004; Kohan 2014; Makaiau and Miller 2012). As Thomas Jackson suggests, in comparison with the traditional lecture room setting, CPI's face-to-face circle seems to construct a more egalitarian space "where all potentially have the right to be heard" (Jackson 2004, 6).

However, even though CPI can be very disruptive to the hierarchical teacher-student relationship, the question remains: does the CPI naturally grant this egalitarian space? Are we only concerned about the hierarchical relationship between "teachers" and "students"? For example, bell hooks suggests that the matter of who gets to speak and be heard is oftentimes embedded within racial and gender dynamics, and it also includes questions concerning what kinds of speech (dialect, vernacular, and underlined attitudes) are encouraged and excluded (hooks 1994). Gloria Anzaldúa reveals the hostility that a monolingual classroom creates for multilingual students who may be deprived of their ability to "communicat[e] the realities and values true to themselves" (Anzaldúa 2012, 77). Likewise, the same words may deliver different meanings to any given audience based upon racial and/or regional differences. For example, Karin Murriss, drawing on her teaching experience in South Africa, explains that her students take the word *respect* as the normative act of "obedience" to authorities (Murriss 2012, 53). That is, what unfolds in classrooms seems to concern not only the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student, but also the fact that listening and speaking are perceived differently based upon who speaks and hears.

With this in mind, what does it mean to form a CPI at school when students (and teachers) are neither born equal nor experience the world in the same ways, in or outside of the classroom? If the differences are acceptable, what conditions allow the formation of a community that neither excludes certain identities nor relies on a uniform identity? How can we understand the sociopolitical conditions of CPI when school is thought to be a politically neutral space? How can

we constitute a “community” of philosophical inquiry that is able to appropriately recognize the voices/silences, especially of those who are at the margins of social life?

In this essay, I engage with these questions primarily through a critical reading of Hannah Arendt and Judith Butler. My aim is not to develop a new pedagogical approach toward CPI, but rather to focus on phenomenological and sociopolitical aspects of CPI. Drawing on a critical reading of Arendt along with Butler’s critique of Arendt, I argue that during the enactment of CPI, the classroom can become a space of appearance through the collective willingness to be exposed to and recognize unknown others and matters in the condition of plurality.

I begin by summarizing Arendt’s political theory, particularly her notions of space of appearance and plurality. Butler argues that precariousness is distributed unequally, which provides the basis for an insightful feminist critique of Arendt’s failure to recognize both the vulnerability of our social existences and our political responsibility. Next, I introduce Butler’s reading and critique of Arendt because it can offer an embodied understanding of the space of appearance, plurality, and speech and action through the lens of performativity. Butler’s theories of performativity can help explain why the enactment of CPI is always within a sociopolitical dynamic and yet why the transformation of the classroom into a CPI is still important in the light of negotiation with power. Finally, I synthesize Arendt and Butler to show the phenomenological and sociopolitical aspects of the CPI.

II. Hannah Arendt and the Space of Appearance

Arendt’s political theory is founded upon the different forms of human relationality. Drawing on the ancient Greeks, Arendt configures two distinct forms of relationships which correspond with the two realms of human existence: the private and the public. Both are important for the political life of humans—as *bios politikos*.

According to Arendt, the main human activity in the private sphere is *labor* (one of the three human activities, the *vita activa*). Labor is the necessary activity for the sustenance of biological life. Life is a process of metabolic growth and decay; its function is common to humans and nonhuman animals (Arendt 1998, 7). Arendt understands life in the light of endlessness and cyclical process. Labor is not opposed to this cyclical nature of life, but rather is “enslaved” to its endless recurrence (Arendt 1998, 83). The private realm is where families live together, i.e., home (*oikia*). Home allows families to rest. It is considered a place where families can prioritize and take care of their own affairs (Arendt 1998, 22–30). That is, the dominant relationship in the private realm is kinship. Arendt considers the private realm to be a place where families, as *animal laborans*, act

out of necessity and kinship and remain in a pre-political dimension, i.e., nature (Arendt 1998, 30–31).

According to Arendt, leaving the private for the public sphere means that one is no longer subject to necessity or kinship. She states that “the foundation of the *polis* was preceded by the destruction of all organized units resting on kinship” (Arendt 1998, 24). Nevertheless, Arendt does not mean that the destruction of the private sphere is the necessary condition for the *polis*. Rather, Arendt contends that the private sphere precedes the public sphere; the private sphere is an important nurturing space which enables one to exercise political life. Arendt understands that the public realm is the only place where politics is possible, as “freedom is exclusively located in the political realm” (Arendt 1998, 31).

Drawing from the Aristotelian dichotomy between private and public realms, Arendt considers *praxis* (action) and *lexis* (speech) as two distinct forms of political actions through which we “insert ourselves into the human world . . . like a second birth” (Arendt 1998, 176). When people engage collectively in speech and action, according to Arendt, the collective action enacts a political space called the space of appearance. The space of appearance exists inherently in-between people and “predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm” (Arendt 1998, 199). That is, in theory, the politicality of the public sphere is inherently nonessentialist and relational, not deriving from any particular age, class, gender, linguistic tradition, region, race, or collective associations. Arendt considers that “*man* is apolitical” because politics is made possible only in the condition of plurality (Arendt 2005, 95). Thus, the public sphere is not a fixed location but a phenomenal space that can emerge and disappear depending on how people live together (Arendt 1998, 199).

For Arendt, our individuality is possible because each of us speaks and acts from our own locality. One’s own locality is never the same as that of others. That is, individuality is only possible through the presence of others, particularly of innumerable perspectives—“plurality.” Each of the perspectives in plurality is irreducible; thus, our common world is “the common meeting ground of all,” and yet “no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised” (Arendt 1998, 57). That is, the public realm, or the common world, is a space of infinite mutual exposure derived from “the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position” (Arendt 1998, 57).

Furthermore, Arendt discusses the importance of acknowledging our “anthropocentric” condition, in the sense of our physical and epistemic limits (Arendt 1968, 265). This can be found in her critique of scientific objectivism. Arendt argues that a rigorous quest for scientific objectivity (e.g., the Archimedean standpoint) undermines humanity altogether by reducing the multiplicity of the perspectives of the world into one standardized and universal language (Arendt 1998, 262–263). Arendt contends that such replacement of language renders our speech meaningless, because our action is replaced by mere behavior

(Arendt 1968, 279–280). In this vein, Arendt notes that we are earth-bound creatures (Arendt 1998, 3), and that our bodily condition makes it possible for us to speak and act from our embodied locality. That is, our innumerable perspectives derive from the fact that we each speak from our own locality, and thus we must be accountable as individuals.

Arendt perceives of this disclosure of oneself in the common world as a courageous action. As previously mentioned, one's uniqueness is possible through the condition of irreducible plurality in the space of appearance in which one's actions and speech are seen and heard by others with innumerable perspectives. For one to expose oneself to others through action and speech bears political risk, as the space is not constituted by any associations or pre-agreements, but rather on the condition of being with others—"sheer human togetherness" (Arendt 1998, 35–36, 180). Furthermore, being-together in the public space means that no one can choose "whom [one] reveals when [one] discloses [one]self in deed or word" (Arendt 1998, 180). Thus, drawing on the ancient Greeks, Arendt claims that political virtue depends on one's willingness to disclose oneself in the presence of others (Arendt 1998, 36). In other words, a world is not simply a space for being together with others in a passive sense; rather, it requires us "to participate with others in the collective shaping of the world" (Levinson 2010, 477).

What about the classroom or educational spaces in general? Is it possible for the classroom to transform itself into a space of appearance? In "The Crisis in Education," Arendt argues that the role of school is to introduce youth to a world as it is instead of what it ought to be (Arendt 1968, 189). Keeping in mind her belief that we have lost the sense of sharing a common world, Arendt pays close attention to progressive education in the United States, which promotes an egalitarian attitude and a pedagogical practice that challenges the traditional relationship between teachers and students. For Arendt, teachers are obligated to introduce children to the world which is "constructed by the living and the dead" (Arendt 1968, 177). That is, teachers—or schools—should guide students to connect the new to the old. Yet simultaneously educators need to protect children from premature exposure to the world and protect the world from children, who symbolize a raw newness that risks destroying the pre-existing world (Arendt 1968, 185–186).

She claims that every individual is born with natality, the ability to initiate new beginnings, and that human natality is an indispensable condition for sustaining and renewing a common world, and thus the essence of education (Arendt 1968, 174). That is, this process of initiation brings about a constant flow of newness into the world, about which nothing can be predicted other than "infinite improbability" from each natality (Arendt 1998, 178). The infinite improbability in human natality and the plurality of human actions, together, make people differ from each other and preserve uniqueness in individual being. Arendt contends that education should preserve children's natality instead of

imposing preset traditions and visions from adults regarding what children could bring into the world. That said, Arendt disapproves of progressive education, which often promotes the idea of children's self-learning. Although this may appear to enrich the natality of children, Arendt conceives of progressive education as a method through which teachers irresponsibly disown their obligation to the common world because it leaves children to figure out their relationship with the world by themselves (Levinson 2010, 470–471). Arendt believes school is a place where the natality of children should be cared for and protected (and the world should be protected from them) until they can exercise their natality in renewing the common world.

Thus, Arendt thinks of school as a transitional space between the private and the public where children can be prepared “for the task of renewing a common world” (Arendt 1968, 196). In “What is Authority?” Arendt clarifies this point as follows:

In the political realm we deal always with adults who are past the age of education, properly speaking, and politics or the right to participate in the management of public affairs begins precisely where education has come to an end. (Arendt 1968, 119)

As Gert Biesta points out, Arendt considers that education is in the domain of *preparation* (i.e., a pre-political domain) for the public realm in which (educated) adults engage equally in worldly affairs (Biesta 2010, 565). Politics is “a community of equals,” whereas education is a sort of natural domain in which older people have authoritative power over the young (Arendt 1968, 116). Thus, according to Arendt, the right of participation in political affairs can be acquired by first becoming biologically mature (adulthood); second, by being *educated* in accordance with consultation by the authority; and third, by being able to master and leave behind private matters.

Arendt's conservatism about the natality of children could be considered reasonable to the extent that (1) disclosure of oneself is politically risky; (2) in the common world, as a community of equals, individuals assume political responsibility toward each other; (3) children are a vulnerable population that lacks the experience necessary to take such risks and responsibilities readily; and thus (4) children require a designated pre-political space and time. Arendt's position is that children should be neither left alone on their own nor strongly imposed upon by adults about their future; however, educators should take responsibility toward the natality of children, raising children to be ready for the difficult task ahead.

III. Butler's Critique and Performativity Theory

Arendt's notion of the space of appearance is powerful to the extent that anybody, in theory, can come to be in the sphere of appearance *as long as* one is *biologically mature enough, educated, and liberated* from private matters. In the light of these

definitions, we can say that Arendt holds that childhood and the political domain are mutually exclusive. Children—along with other groups of people such as disabled people, women, the elderly, and the poor—have often been categorized as uneducated, immature, and dependent, whereas the political domain is reserved for those who meet those *privileged* conditions listed above. To put it differently, Arendt's dichotomy between the private and the public seems to be contradictory in terms of her own commitment to a non-essentialist understanding of political subjectivity. This view leads to the problem of the “naturalization of the private” in which lived experiences of those *private* people are naturalized and thus are considered to be pre-political or apolitical matters (Ingala 2018, 39). Thus, the voices and experiences of those who are confined to the private realm cannot be recognized politically; justice, equality, and freedom are exclusive property of those privileged in the public sphere.

I turn to Butler to pay close attention to the sociopolitical aspect of the space of appearance that Arendt does not adequately discuss. In *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), Butler critically engages with Arendt's political theory to reconfigure the political subjectivity of democratic society through examining recent assemblies. Although Butler does not focus on assemblies of children or any educational matters, Butler's reading of Arendt, along with her notion of performativity, can offer critical insight into how the disclosure of vulnerable populations is experienced and recognized unequally. Furthermore, her notion of performative politics opens up the very possibility of reconsidering the legitimacy of disclosure of these politically marginalized populations, such as children, in concert with others.

Butler argues that if the precondition for political freedom is independence, then Arendt's dichotomy between private and public operates upon the premise of disavowal and disenfranchisement of “those living and interdependent relations upon which our lives depend” (Butler 2015, 44). As previously mentioned, Arendt's notions of the private and public spheres imply that the private sphere is necessary for the public sphere. As Butler notes, Arendt's dichotomy presumes and necessitates the roles of those private people to offer *labor* (in the Arendtian sense) so that others (most likely rich, able-bodied, economically stable, male, heterosexuals) can leave private concerns behind to engage in political life. If the current political systems operate upon the contributions of those people for the sake of the political realm, and if the very same politics does not recognize the voices of those who are disavowed as pre-political, then, Butler says, “we need a politics that can name and expose that very contradiction and the operation of disavowal by which it is sustained” (Butler 2015, 206). That is, we should have a politics that can recognize the contradiction that results when we demand the sacrifice of the private for the sake of equality for the few. Then, if any school is thought to be an incubational space for future political beings, as Arendt suggests, it is also important for us to critically question whether school counters or

conforms to the systemic injustice of disenfranchising sociopolitical minorities inside and outside classrooms.

Furthermore, Butler explains that Arendt understands the public sphere to be a domain of independence in which bodily concerns should not enter; yet the speech act, which is bodily in the public sphere, is thought to be “a mode of thinking and judging” (Butler 2015, 45). This disembodied understanding of political space is very problematic if we accept that everyone is born and experiences the world differently but not equally. Given the fact that we are embodied and social beings, Butler asserts two conditions of our existence: we are all interdependent and precarious (Butler 2015, 118–120). However, Butler points out, importantly, that the distribution of precariousness—precarity—differs as our life often depends on our medical, educational, and other institutional systems. Yet the accessibility of these systems tends to differ depending on our demographic data, such as race, gender, and class (Butler 2015, 33, 118–119). That is, while everyone is in a somewhat precarious position, some populations may be able to access these lifelines more easily than others. Thus, for instance, the demand for equal opportunity in education for any person (body), regardless of ability, gender, race, and class cannot be considered separately from bodily and social experience in this material world.

In addition, Butler explains that this difference in accessibility should be considered a political rather than an existential condition because of the ways norms are produced (Butler 2015, 119). Our bodies are not passive—qualities such as masculinity and femininity are not placed upon them as an artist places colors on a palette; rather, they are performative. Butler explains:

To say that gender is performative is to say that it is a certain kind of enactment; the “appearance” of gender is often mistaken as a sign of its internal or inherent truth; gender is prompted by obligatory norms that demand that we become one gender or the other . . . ; the reproduction of gender is thus always a negotiation with power. (Butler 2015, 32)

Our bodies repetitively enact and reproduce sociocultural norms, such as gender, at both conscious and unconscious levels; identity is (re)produced performatively and is never fixed. In the course of expected and unexpected repetitive enactment and reproduction of norms, we may expand or reconstitute a “more possible and more livable” space for those who are at the margins (Butler 2015, 32). Thus, importantly, the (re)production of norms is never a solo work but always already in plurality. Like Arendt, Butler’s performative theory configures political subjectivity in relationality. However, what Butler elucidates more clearly than Arendt is that relationality is never neutral because normative production and recognition are always in negotiation with power. Our disclosure always requires the witness of others, and importantly, as Butler says, “our voice must be registered” (Butler 2015, 76). In other words, the space of appearance

is not struggle-free. If the space of appearance is a realm of the recognizable, and if the norms of recognizable and unrecognizable forms are produced performatively through a negotiation of power, then the space of appearance is an embodiment of political exclusion and struggle.

For example, Butler examines the recent assembly of marginalized populations, such as undocumented workers. When these workers—who may be from different geographic and linguistic regions—assemble, they take greater political risks by appearing in public due to their legal status. Even though “their labor is supposed to remain necessary and shrouded from view” (Butler 2015, 79), and even if their legal status works to dampen their claims, the fact that they are gathering on the street disrupts the power dynamic of the public sphere, and demands freedom to appear and the right to be recognized (Butler 2015, 26, 41, 81, 156). Regardless of their residential status and the manifested uniformity of their agenda or speech, their concerted bodily actions, even in their silences, enact political space, the space of appearance.

Although Butler acknowledges the problems of Arendt’s political theory, as shown above, she also recognizes the possibility that the space of appearance can make it possible for those who are stateless to seek “the rights to have rights” through plural performative actions such as assembly and resistance (Butler 2015, 48–49). To this extent, Ingala, by analyzing Butler’s political theory along with Arendt’s, says that “the space of appearance proves to be fundamentally performative” (Ingala 2018, 41). Importantly, Butler, as well as Arendt, provides a praxis of plurality that does not rely on identity:

Moreover, freedom is more often than not exercised with others, not necessarily in a unified or conformist way. It does not exactly presume or produce a collective identity, but *a set of enabling and dynamic relations* that include support, dispute, breakage, joy, and solidarity. (Butler 2015, 27; emphasis added)

Through Butler’s reconfiguration of Arendt, and Butler’s theories of performativity and precarity, we come to see that our bodies are not merely biological entities undergoing metabolic growth and decay—not merely a set of limits and boundaries—but rather and more importantly, our bodies live among others and demand and resist recognition. In sum, Butler provides the sociopolitical aspects of the space of appearance upon which Arendt does not focus.

IV. Revisiting Community of Philosophical Inquiry with Arendt and Butler

In light of the previous analysis, I now return to the CPI. As briefly mentioned, I am not attempting to develop a new pedagogical approach toward CPI. The contribution that I would like to make to this community is to carefully observe the phenomenological and sociopolitical aspects of CPI through the lens of Arendt

and Butler, which may help us understand why speaking and listening in the CPI can be a challenging, yet powerful experience to some populations given the current political environment.

First, is the classroom a space in which the freedom to appear and the right to be recognized are relevant concerns? Arendt's understanding is that by respecting the natality of children and providing a constructive educational space through school, education is important for them to be ready for the world-building task ahead; furthermore, politics occurs within a community of equals, and education does not. Therefore, she maintains that school should play a distinct apolitical role in society. However, the assumption of school as an apolitical or politically neutral space may overlook the racialized space of classrooms, the hostility against multilingual students or those who speak "broken English," the discrimination against LGBTQ+ communities, and so forth (Annamma et al. 2017; hooks 1994; Anzaldúa 2012; Benharris 2020). Besides, governments often directly impose and exercise their political views and values on school education, as evidenced by racial segregation and "the bathroom bill" in Texas.² Schools are always already political to the extent that they have historically and systematically made it harder for select populations to partake in the world-building task; the world that society envisions does not always recognize the presence of these populations. In "On Little Rock," Arendt herself famously fails to recognize that school segregation is not simply a matter of free social affiliation but a political matter (Arendt 1959; Burroughs 2015). If school is supposed to be a gateway to the world, we should understand that the gate simultaneously poses a significant barrier for some sociopolitical minorities, especially when school designs the gate in the light of privileged experiences and norms. Furthermore, Butler's theories of performativity help us understand that our social norms, such as gender, do not operate as an explicit transaction between producers and receivers. Likewise, we are already born into the entanglement of social norms. As Butler's notion of precarity explains, some populations are more likely than others to be affected or disenfranchised by our social systems, including schools, and this is certainly a political issue.

Besides, the issue is not whether children are capable of taking political responsibilities. Students have already exercised this responsibility, most recently by organizing school strikes against climate change, assembling to protest against gun violence, and demonstrating their philosophical and political acumen through dialogue in classrooms throughout the world. Beth, a twelfth-year Australian student who participated in a school strike to demand action on climate change, commented in "School Strike 4 [for] Climate," that students were dissatisfied with political leaders for their inaction, and thus were "skipping learning for the day to teach the politicians that we care and that we want a future to look forward to," even though they had to overcome a variety of obstacles such as gaining parental permission, finding the means of transportation to the site of

the demonstration, and standing up against non-supportive school staff (Beth 2019, 11). Such examples may show that the question is not whether children are capable of assuming political responsibilities, but rather how long—and at what price—we can continue to ignore, prevent, and bar their actions through theoretical, institutional, and material means. Their march demands instead that we start recognizing their voices.

It does not follow that educators must abandon their responsibilities toward children. Identifying and recognizing the barriers that mute the diverse voices of children is a serious job. Although some barriers may shield the lives of children from possible harms, the fact that children concertedly decide to walk out of classrooms into the streets suggests that the classroom can be a barrier for them to demand more livable futures. Arendt's critique of progressive education reminds us that letting children navigate this complex world on their own can be irresponsible. It is, however, the responsibility of educators to take into account the harsh realities of such a complex world and incorporate these into their pedagogy and class materials. Such effort may mitigate the impact of "premature exposure."

The question, then, is whether there are some (intentional and unintentional) obstacles that some students (and facilitators) experience in CPI. From a Latin American context, Walter Kohan contends that Philosophy for Children (P4C), under the principle of impartiality, does not adequately take into account the institutional and systemic injustice in CPI. With transformative and liberating education in mind, Kohan argues that the uncritical acceptance and promotion of ahistorical democratism and political neutrality in P4C is "the best ally of the status quo" (Kohan 1995, 30). Nell Rainville, from a North American context, also points out the lack of political recognition both in our society and P4C literature about the ways in which "democratic institutions have arisen out of, and continue to perpetuate, the political, economic, and ideological repression of Native North Americans" (Rainville 2000, 66). Given the lack of recognition of the social injustice against Native Americans, she suggests it is problematic to assume P4C (or CPI) naturally grants a truly open and democratic space. Not only may some students feel hesitant to discuss social justice issues fearing their comments are unwelcomed—due to an uninterested or unsupportive community of inquiry (Rainville 2000, 69)—but also

a lack of recognition for Aboriginal peoples and their concerns may make it difficult for students to formulate challenges towards, and to articulate their reasons for wanting to change, dominant societal and classroom perspectives. (Rainville 2000, 69)

Of course, inquiry does not have to be all about social injustice; Rainville's point addresses the ways in which democratic institutions—including P4C—that have been practiced in North America have never been politically neutral.

Corresponding to these critics of P4C, Amy Reed-Sandoval introduces her P4C programs in Oaxaca, Mexico, and the Mexico-U.S. border regions as an example of decolonial pedagogy. While acknowledging P4C entails certain colonial traditions, she argues that the democratic features of P4C, in which students are encouraged to think and question for themselves, have the potential to disrupt colonial practice, and may serve decolonization through explicit recognition of existing coloniality (Reed-Sandoval 2019, 30–33). For example, she suggests the use of books written from the experiences and perspectives of indigenous communities, and collaboration with local activists so that the classroom can become a more inviting space for students to discuss racial and colonial issues (Reed-Sandoval 2019, 38–39).

Addressing racial concerns, Darren Chetty draws from Critical Race Theory (CRT) and his own P4C experiences in the UK. In his paper, “The Elephant in the Room,” he critiques P4C’s community of inquiry as “a gated community” that operates upon Whiteness as a standardized norm which does not adequately incorporate the critical perspective of race into its inquiry (Chetty 2017, 52). For example, Chetty examines picture books recommended by P4C communities as good discussion prompts for racism and points out that the narratives generated by these books do not take account the historical and systemic injustices of racism; they may also falsely suggest that racism is simply about hatred based upon skin color differences (Chetty 2017, 44–48). Given this gated inquiry and drawing from Leonardo and Porter’s analysis, Chetty questions “the safety of whites” at the expense of silence (prioritizing the safety of whites) and the risk (of “being conceived of as illogical and irrational” through objections) experienced by people of color (Chetty 2017, 49; Leonardo and Porter, as quoted in Chetty 2017, 49).

Given these critiques, CPI is not a neutral space, but one that consists of some students’ struggles for the freedom to appear and the right to be recognized. Although Lipman et al. say that “when children are encouraged to think philosophically, the classroom is converted into a community of inquiry” (Lipman et al. 1980, 45), thinking philosophically together does not itself naturally transform the classroom into a politically neutral community, or an egalitarian sphere of recognition. Some students (and even facilitators) may struggle with the assumption of such neutrality. As we know, some people’s voices, experiences, or perspectives may be heard but go unrecognized as relevant, important, or valuable. In other words, some may need to deliberately work toward recognition while others may not even consider that such effort ever needs to be expended.

Notably, I am not suggesting that this power dynamic is always a binary or fixed condition between the recognized and unrecognized. As I have shown through a critical reading of Arendt and Butler together, the enactment of the political space is made possible through people’s concerted actions, and is always performative. Although cultural norms and attributes partake in and affect the ways in which we interact as social beings, the space comes to emerge through “a

set of enabling and dynamic relations” of people, but not due to their identities (Butler 2015, 27). It is certainly not identity politics. Besides, as Butler shows, we are all interdependent and precarious. To this extent, we all lead vulnerable existences although some populations can be more precarious than others due to the unequal distribution of precariousness.

Importantly, there are some notable similarities between Arendt’s notion of the space of appearance and the ways in which CPI is formed. The transformation of the classroom into a CPI, in principle, is also made possible through the engagement of the collective members in open-ended philosophical inquiry in the principle of plurality, rather than in identities or affiliations. In theory, CPI presumes collective willingness to being exposed to *and* recognizing unfamiliar others and matters in the condition of plurality. The objective of CPI, if any, is not to assimilate members’ thoughts into one unified view, nor to totalize or eradicate others, but to stand with the principle of plurality. For example, Ann Sharp writes that “the commitment to engage in a community of inquiry is a political commitment, even at the elementary school level. In a real sense, it is a commitment to freedom, open debate, pluralism, self-government and democracy” (Sharp 2017, 247). This may possibly disrupt the power dynamic and transform a classroom into a more open space for mutual recognition. Moreover, as others have said, the pedagogical practice of CPI often challenges top-down hierarchical learning; it tends to create an inviting space for students in which they can question elements of their own classroom experience and even their own school system. As a practitioner, I value many philosophy programs that take students’ voices and questions seriously, and co-constitute a more inviting educational space for all.

However, as I previously pointed out, this does not mean that how people in classrooms appear to others (e.g., in terms of gender, race, age, ability/disability, and religious affiliations) does not affect the ways they interact in CPI. If the plurality is the precondition of the community, we need to understand the power dynamics of the space of appearance. As Butler (2015) notes, Arendt’s understanding of plurality presupposes that “unwilled proximity and unchosen cohabitation are pre-conditions of our political existence” (114), and this situation leaves us with the obligations to “invest institutions with the demand to seek to make all lives livable and equally so” (115). Plurality is a political and moral commitment to live together with others.

Thus, if CPI should be a space for plural perspectives and equal recognition, we need to critically examine what theoretical, institutional, and material obstacles we face in order to achieve a more plural space; and critically question what counts as relevant, important, and valuable in our current discourse at the expense of the marginalized. We also need to acknowledge that some students’ disclosure requires taking greater political risks than others given current sociopolitical situations, even in CPI. For example, for transgender children to question “Why can’t I go to the girl’s (or a boy’s) bathroom even though I am a

girl (boy)?” can be very risky depending on where they are and to whom they are exposed. Likewise, for a student to question “Why is my family bad (illegal) even though we just wanted to have a better life in another country?” exposes the vulnerable relationship to power, yet is powerfully provoking.

In some of these cases, students in a classroom may disclose information about themselves very spontaneously. As a result, the room may turn silent for a while. However, this silence can be understood as a concerted act of listening. Creating the space for speech to appear necessitates the silence of others. Silence is the condition for speech to be heard. Others may respond with a mixture of disagreement, dispute, solidarity, and care, but no part of this exchange should be neglected or dismissed as if nothing happened. Of course, I am not limiting the ways of (concerted) disclosure to speech or listening. Children who experience obstacles to self-expression may navigate their difficulties by expressing themselves in different ways—through drawing, crafts, music, or dance. Such consideration is inevitable for the embodiment of pluralistic community.

To recognize their voices, we need to understand “controversial” questions as legitimate philosophical inquiries in the community. For example, Kohan argues that “dissatisfaction” is a legitimate source of philosophical questioning that should be added to other traditional philosophical sources, such as wonder and doubt (Kohan 2014, 6–7). Some of the questions that students form may be dismissed as personal because they are private matters; however, such questions can demand that we problematize the naturalized struggle and dissatisfaction of lived experience. Our collective willingness to be exposed to and to recognize unfamiliar or familiar matters from different angles and perspectives may transform a classroom into a space of appearance in the principle of plurality.

In summary, I have attempted to show some of the phenomenological and sociopolitical aspects of CPI through the lens of Hannah Arendt and Judith Butler. As a PwC practitioner, I sometimes sense tension when “controversial” topics emerge in a discussion. At the same time, I am also simply impressed with many students who are willing to expose themselves to and recognize things they were unfamiliar with before. To this extent, I am encouraged by philosophy programs such as Philosophy for Children (or, as some call it, Philosophy with Children), as many other practitioners are. That said, for CPI to stand in plurality, we need to work seriously to embody that plurality. On that note, I hope this paper can serve our community of philosophical inquiry as an invitation to think further about the theoretical, institutional, and material obstacles we face.

Notes

1. I have been working with a broad range of students, between four years old to college students in Denton, Texas.

2. For further information and details regarding the bathroom bill and public discourse, see Rebecca J. Stone (2017) “Which Gender is More Concerned About Transgender Women in Female Bathrooms?”

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