

EDUCATION FOR
MIRACLES: A RESPONSE TO
DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS

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In civic education, miracles are rarely proffered as a pedagogical tool. But in times of crisis, and especially times of moral and political despair, miracles not only have use; they are nearer than we think. In *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt wrote that, “The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted,” and “Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope[.]”¹ That is a bold claim, and an obtuse one. Here I hope to shed light on why we, as educators, should take this claim seriously today, and suggest how we might do so.

What is a miracle? A skeptical David Hume called a miracle “a violation of the laws of nature,” and gave little credence to miraculous accounts. For “as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws [of nature], the proof against a miracle...is as entire as any

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 247.

argument from experience can possibly be imagined.”² The very notion presupposes a “uniform experience against every miraculous event,” which is “direct and full proof...against the existence of any miracle.”³ Humans are gullible to them because of “gross and vulgar passions,” the sensations of wonder, surprise, and religious enthusiasm that miracles inspire. But this only leads to error, for where “the spirit of religion join itself to the love of wonder, there is an end of common sense.”⁴

Hume’s debunking of miracles is indicative of what Max Weber called “the disenchantment of the world” in the age of science, where “precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have withdrawn from public life.”⁵ He posits a tension between systems of *belief* and *faith* in human understanding, and advocates exclusively for the former. “A wise man...proportions his belief to the evidence,” writes Hume. And while the firmest beliefs “are founded on an

² David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 76.

³ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 77.

⁴ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 79, 78-9.

⁵ Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 30.

infallible experience,” which establishes a kind of “*proof*,” even in closer cases one still “considers which side is supported by the greater number of experiments.”⁶ *Faith*, on the other hand, is adopted not only when, but because such experience is lacking.⁷

Hume’s positivist approach anticipates not only modern scientific epistemology, but that of contemporary social and behavioral science. Today the generation, collection, manipulation, and monetization of human behavioral data form the backbone of human understanding. Social scientists take pride in their ability to predict human behavior via data analysis, while business models depend on it, and politicians adapt to it. A similar mentality shapes our day-to-day *Weltanschauung*, where beliefs spurred by aggregate data are transferred to individuals, and a defining element of our polarized political

⁶ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 73-4.

⁷ “And whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to [the veracity of miracles], is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.” David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 90.

culture is how little faith any partisan has in the human capacity to *act* in ways that are not predictable or pre-determined. It is as if our cynical beliefs about human political behavior, based on experience, have achieved Humean standards of *proof*, and civic behavior has its own *natural laws*. I mention three of them here.

Law 1: Public actors have neither the will nor ability to seriously address difficult problems. Indicative of this is a recurring headline in the satirical news magazine *The Onion*: “*No Way to Prevent This,’ Says Only Nation Where This Regularly Happens.*” The caption has appeared nineteen times since 2014, always referencing a real mass shooting in the United States,⁸ and each time reporting a nearly identical fictional response. Whether following “a violent rampage in Georgia in which a lone attacker killed eight individuals and injured one other,” or “a violent rampage in Las Vegas in

⁸ A search of www.theonion.com returned the following dates, each corresponding to a mass shooting in the United States: May 27, 2014; June 17, 2015; October 1, 2015; December 3, 2015; October 2, 2017; November 5, 2017; February 14, 2018; May 18, 2018; September 13, 2018; October 29, 2018; November 8, 2018; June 1, 2019; August 4, 2019; August 4, 2019; February 26, 2020; March 12, 2021; March 17, 2021; April 16, 2021; and May 26, 2021.

which a lone attacker killed more than 50 individuals and seriously injured 400 others,” *The Onion* reports that “citizens living in the only country where this kind of mass killing routinely occurs...concluded...that there was no way to prevent the massacre from taking place.” “This was a terrible tragedy,” each witness says, “but sometimes these things happen and there’s nothing anyone can do to stop them.”⁹

Law 2: All public actors are partisans, and all partisans are predictable. Consider the tit-for-tat struggle between U.S. Republicans and Democrats over federal judicial

⁹ *The Onion’s* reporting has been called “hyper-real,” in the sense that “[f]ake news can become more ‘real’ than real news...when [it] actually predicts future events,” and because news satire “offers social critique in ways that real news cannot.” Ironically, on multiple occasions *The Onion’s* reporting has itself been appropriated by mainstream media to capture the meaning of events. Gun violence is no exception—on March 28, 2021 for example, Meet the Press anchor Chuck Todd used *The Onion* to frame Congress’s predictable inability to cooperate on a response. “There’s truth in humor,” he said, “And in this case, it’s a dark truth...When it comes to our epidemic of gun violence, our political system has no answers.” See Dan Berkowitz and David Asa Schwartz, “Miley, CNN and The Onion,” *Journalism Practice*, 10:1, 1-17, 6; and Dominick Mastrangelo, “Chuck Todd ruefully mocks inaction on guns with Onion headline,” *thehill.com*, March 28, 2021. Accessed at: <https://thehill.com/homenews/media/545274-chuck-todd-opens-meet-the-press-mocking-governments-inaction-on-gun-violence>

appointments, most notably Supreme Court Justices. America's founders tried to shield federal courts from political pressure,¹⁰ but nothing is more predictable today than the bitterness, cynicism, grandstanding, partisan presumptions, and vicious attacks involved in the nomination process. There is little belief, or faith, in the independence of judicial nominees, and one law professor's description of the confirmation process is familiar: "The confirmation process is in a pretty poor place," he observed, "But I don't see any way out of it[.]"¹¹ The same assumptions underlie rising pressure for Court expansion and Justice Stephen Breyer's retirement while Democrats control the White House and Senate.¹²

¹⁰ In Federalist 78 Hamilton famously called the "standard of good behavior" for lifetime judicial tenure "the best expedient which can be devised in any government to secure a steady, upright, and impartial administration of the laws." Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 2014), 379.

¹¹ Jessica Yarvin and Daniel Bush, "Is the hyper-partisan Supreme Court confirmation process 'the new normal'?" pbs.org, September 13, 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/is-the-hyper-partisan-supreme-court-confirmation-process-the-new-normal>

¹² Adam Cohen, "Justice Breyer's Legacy-Defining Decision," *The Atlantic*, June 12, 2021. Accessed at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/06/stephen-breyer-legacy-retirement/619168/>

Law 3: Citizens are predictable, and politics is the art of exploiting predictable behavior. A flagrant example occurs in partisan gerrymandering, which in 2019 the U.S. Supreme Court found to be non-justiciable, and which rankles either party when disadvantaged. For our purposes, the important point is the behavioral assumptions behind partisan line-drawing, which grounds political strategy on the predictable behavior of American voters. It assumes that voters do not think critically or act spontaneously—they behave robotically. And those who recognize this behavior can exploit it with remarkable efficiency.¹³

¹³ See Justice Elena Kagan’s Dissent in *Rucho v. Common Cause* (588 U.S. ____ (2019)), which, in defending lower court decisions that overturned partisan-gerrymandered districts (decisions that the majority opinion vacated), notes that “[T]he courts below did not gaze into crystal balls, as the majority tries to suggest. Their findings about these gerrymanders’ effects on voters—both in the past and predictably in the future—were evidence-based, data-based, statistics-based. Knowledge-based, one might say...They refused to content themselves with unsupported and out-of-date musings about the unpredictability of the American voter...They did not bet America’s future—as today the majority does—on the idea that maps constructed with so much expertise and care to make electoral outcomes impervious to voting would somehow or other come apart. They looked at the evidence—at the facts about how these districts operated—and they could reach only one conclusion. By substantially diluting the votes of citizens favoring their rivals, the politicians of one party had succeeded in entrenching themselves in office. They had beat democracy.” It is worth noting that Justice Kagan’s own argument here

Widespread belief in these and similar “natural laws” exacerbates a general sense that political action is hopeless and politics meaningless.¹⁴ Hannah Arendt once linked this feeling to a cultural-political crisis she called “dark times”: “If it is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men,” wrote Arendt, “then darkness has come when this light is extinguished by ‘credibility gaps’ and ‘invisible government,’ by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet[.]”¹⁵ Drawing from her teacher Martin Heidegger, who described “with uncanny precision” how, in dark times, “everything that is real or authentic is assaulted by the overwhelming power of ‘mere talk’ that irresistibly arises out of the public realm,”¹⁶ Arendt linked dark times to a loss of faith in human action, in part because speech and action appear forever subsumed within

presupposes the same premise attributed to the gerrymanderers themselves—namely, that gerrymandering is a problem precisely because voter behavior is predictable.

¹⁴ Roger Berkowitz, “Miracles and Politics,” Hannah Arendt Center Amor Mundi Blog, August 17, 2012. Accessed at: <https://hac.bard.edu/amor-mundi/miracles-and-politics-2012-08-17>

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), viii.

¹⁶ Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, ix.

lies, dissimulation, and practical meaninglessness, and because so few models exist to demonstrate what courage and action look like: “[E]verybody who is publicly recognized belongs among the *salauds*, and everything that is exists in an opaque, meaningless thereness which spreads obfuscation and causes disgust.”¹⁷

During such times, how is one to throw light on human affairs? With Arendt, I would suggest that we supplement our diet of reasonable *belief* with a dash of *faith*, and a hint of *miracles*. “The work of faith,” wrote Arendt, “is what the gospels called ‘miracles,’” and “what all miracles, those performed by men no less than those performed by a divine agent, always must be...[are] interruptions of some natural series of events, of some automatic process, in whose context they constitute the wholly unexpected.”¹⁸ This is the essence of freedom, or man’s faculty to act—the ability to interrupt automatic processes in a manner that is “unforeseeable and unpredictable,” and where “the more heavily the scales are weighted in favor of disaster, the more

¹⁷ Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, viii.

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 168.

miraculous will the deed done in freedom appear.”¹⁹ As educators, we must encourage our students to appreciate this capacity to act, in themselves and others. And to do that, we must also intentionally demonstrate the extent to which others, even today (and even if one disagrees with them politically), frequently violate these “natural laws,” with sundry unexpected consequences.

As one concrete example, in American Government I would highlight the surprisingly unpredictable Supreme Court coalitions subsequent to Donald Trump’s three controversial nominations. Near the end of their first full term together, *The New York Times* noted that, in divided cases, the Court was on pace for the highest percentage of “liberal” outcomes since 1968.²⁰ And as written in *The New Yorker*, “if the expectation was that the country’s political divisions would be mirrored in starkly split decisions, it mostly was not met...Instead, the Justices repeatedly defied

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 170.

²⁰ Adam Liptak, “The Supreme Court’s Newest Justices Produce Some Surprising Results,” *The New York Times*, June 18, 2021. Accessed at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/18/us/politics/supreme-court-conservatives-liberals.html>.

expectations, with conservatives and liberals together forming majorities in high-profile cases[.]”²¹ A year earlier, many too were surprised by Justice Neil Gorsuch’s penning the decision of *Bostock v. Clayton County*, the case that extended Title VII non-discrimination protection to sexual orientation.²²

Nor have the voters always been as predictable as stats or polls would suggest. One must surely highlight the extraordinary surprise of Donald Trump’s 2016 election, which caught virtually all pollsters and social scientists off-guard²³; or for that matter, the election of America’s first

²¹ Jeannie Suk Gersen, “The Supreme Court’s Surprising Term,” *The New Yorker*, June 27, 2021. Accessed at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/07/05/the-supreme-courts-surprising-term>

²² Robert Barnes, “Neil Gorsuch? The surprise behind the Supreme Court’s surprising LGBTQ decision,” *The Washington Post*, June 16, 2020. Accessed at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/courts_law/neil-gorsuch-gay-transgender-rights-supreme-court/2020/06/16/112f903c-afe3-11ea-8f56-63f38c990077_story.html.

²³ See Vann R. Newkirk, II., “What Went Wrong with the 2016 Polls?” *The Atlantic*, November 9, 2016. Accessed at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/11/what-went-wrong-polling-clinton-trump/507188/>; and Nate Cohn, Josh Katz, and Kevin Quealy, “Putting the Polling Miss of the 2016 Election in Perspective,” *The New York Times*, November 13, 2016. Accessed at:

African-American president, Barack Obama, eight years earlier, something many thought impossible during their lifetime. Irrespective of how one processes these events, one can usefully proffer such moments as events in which human actions transcended routine behavioral expectations—in which humans revealed themselves as free and spontaneous actors who can defy expectations, for better or worse, should they will it—and frame them as such.

In conclusion, let me suggest that it is incumbent on social scientists, in our capacity as educators, to recognize that our obsession with behavioral laws bears with it an anti-political tendency to elevate all that is seemingly automatic about human affairs. We succeed as theorists when people behave like robots. But if we are to prepare students to act as citizens, we must give equal, if not more appreciation to events that defy our expectations and defy common sense. We must highlight with especial gusto how wrong we often are, and help our students appreciate the miraculous quality and boundless possibilities of human

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/11/13/upshot/putting-the-polling-miss-of-2016-in-perspective.html>.

action. We must convince them that freedom and responsibility exist. And we can do that by reserving real space—in our lectures, and on our syllabi—for contemporary moments of wonder and surprise, where expectations were defied, and freedom manifest, irrespective of party or ideology. By paying as much attention to these little miracles, and appreciating them as such, perhaps we can restore the faith.

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