Getting "the knack": Education as formation in Hunt for the Wilderpeople

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We are born weak, we need strength; we are born totally unprovided, we need aid; we are born stupid, we need judgement. Everything we do not have at our birth and which we need when we are grown is given us by education. (E.1, 38)

SETTING UP AN EDUCATIONAL PROBLEM

Education for Rousseau concerns the artificial transformation of natural man into civil man. This process of formation reveals Rousseau’s ambition to formulate a vision of how society might be transformed through education. Famously, in the first lines of The Social Contract, Rousseau asserts that “[m]an is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.” The chains that bind him are not forged from steel, but from the opinions of others. In his own time, Rousseau despaired over the inability of most people to recognize and act on their true needs, alienating them from themselves and leaving them helpless in the face of destructive external influences. A good society, Rousseau suggests, is made up of individuals who are self-sufficient and who love themselves before they are capable of entering into a “common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but a part of the unity […]” (E.1, 40). For Rousseau, “what makes man essentially good is to have few needs and to compare himself little to others; what makes him essentially wicked is to have many needs and to depend very much on opinion” (E.4, 214). Education as formation concerns the endeavor to create individuals capable of withstanding the corrupting influences of social life. This is not a natural process, but an active intervention thwarting the human tendency to be governed by passions such as anger, pride, vanity and jealousy. These inhibiting passions are believed to be reinforced and strengthened by a kind of education primarily aimed at preserving society such as it is. For Rousseau education is fundamentally about the transformation of society through the transformation of individuals. Without this process of formation, Rousseau claims that we will remain weak, unprovided and ignorant. Consequently, children need to be educated in the arts of self-sufficiency and self-love in order to become active and morally responsible persons, rather than passive victims of the opinions of others. While Rousseauan education is decidedly child-centered, it is thoroughly dependent upon a clear distinction between what it means to be a fully formed person and a person in need of education. Education, therefore, is always about becoming something else.

While Rousseau is often credited as one of the founding fathers of progressive education, the understanding of the child has undergone a radical transformation within contemporary progressive education through a wider reconceptualization of childhood since the early 1900s. With Ellen Key’s The Century of the Child, published in 1900, the almost universal ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 and the emergence of the new sociology of childhood in the early 1990s, the idea of the child as incomplete and in a process of becoming has been criticized and challenged. In 1990, Allison James and Alan Prout edited and published the influential book Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood, arguing for an emerging new paradigm for the sociology of childhood. In the preface to the second edition they explain how they set out to challenge the dominant understanding of “childhood and children as natural, passive, incompetent and incomplete.” In their view, such a reductive understanding of childhood reflects “ideas which in other areas of social science were regarded as obsolete, outmoded or under productive.” Seeking to advance the field of childhood studies, James and Prout propose that “children’s social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right, independent of the perspectives and concerns of adults.” As the new sociology of childhood is being established in the 1990s, it is clear that the fundamental problem addressed is rooted in the sharp distinction between being and becoming and that “[t]he division between beings and becomings is that between the complete and independent and the incomplete and dependent.” For Rousseau, the idea of children as becomings is a fundamental fact of education and of the forming of society. Destabilizing the child as becoming, and understanding children as beings in their own right, open up for a broader political project where children are no longer to be arbitrarily excluded from political participation, but are to be considered citizens with rights. In an educational context, the emergence of a new understanding of childhood has generated an
increasing interest in aligning education with a wider political agenda seeking to make children into active citizens. Reflecting on this development in a Scottish context, Jessop writes:

The aim of producing ‘responsible citizens’ is not a new or a particularly controversial one in education policy but what is important is that according to current policy, children are to be considered not citizens of the future but citizens now[...]. The effect of the notion that people are born citizens rather than gradually acquiring the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, or attaining this status at an age of majority, is that education for citizenship programs tend toward the involvement of children in public and political life.9

The involvement of children in political life is not unproblematic, however. Observing the early signs of the emergence of the modern child, emancipated from the influence of adults through progressive education, Hannah Arendt reflected on the inherent problems of decoupling the world of childhood from the world of adulthood and the related idea of the child as a political actor. Understanding children as political actors in their own right presupposes that the social world of childhood is autonomous and independent of adult authority. The problem with this assumption, as Arendt perceives it, is that the “real and normal relations between children and adults, arising from the fact that people of all ages are always simultaneously together in the world, are thus broken off.”10 A consequence of this is that without the guidance of adults, children are left to the tyranny of their own group, leaving them without shelter from popular opinion. Furthermore, Arendt claims that construing children as already political robs them of their chances of actually forming their own political future. For Arendt, the preparation and formation of children for the public world is precisely the purpose of education. She asks: “How could it happen that the child was exposed to what more than anything else characterized the adult world, its public aspect, after the decision had just been reached that the mistake in all past education had been to see the child as nothing but an undersized grown-up?”11 The problem Arendt points to has to do with the fact that the progressive political emancipation of children assumes that children are naturally equipped for the public world of politics, whereas she believed that “in politics we always have to deal with those who are already educated.”12 Including the uneducated into politics, Arendt warns, may result in an increase in world-alienation instead of political action.13

While Arendt and Rousseau have very different understandings of the relation between education and politics, they both stress the necessity of an artificial process of formation where “the natural man” or “the newcomer” is transformed into a morally responsible human being. Canovan argues that Rousseau “made a sharp distinction between ‘man’ and ‘citizen’, stressing that whereas the one is natural, the other is artificial and operates according to man-made rules.” Similarly, Arendt’s “point was that equality and rights which men do not possess by nature, and which are not naturally respected by others, exist (where they exist at all) strictly as human constructs, because men have joined together to create institutions that will secure them.”14 Human freedom, for both Rousseau and Arendt, therefore presupposes education in so far as political participation requires a cultivated understanding of oneself and the world.

In this essay, our point of departure is the tension just described between the modern idea of childhood associated with the notion of the child as being, and the idea, found in both Rousseau and Arendt, of education as formation and becoming. As the idea of children as political actors has become increasingly influential within the contexts of childhood studies, educational as well as child-welfare policies, and, as a result, in the general understanding of the role of children in society, the conceptual boundaries between adults and children have become blurred. From the point of view of educational philosophy, this is interesting because it highlights the problematic tension between an image of the child as already complete and the foundational idea of education as a process of formation. Using Taika Waititi’s recent film *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*15 as an example we aim to illustrate some of the possible consequences of blurring the boundaries between generations and to investigate how this might impact our understanding of education as formation in the making of moral human beings.
THE ABSENCE OF ADULTS

Ricky Baker is an unwanted product of society. He is “a real bad egg. […] We are talking disobedience, stealing, spitting, running away, throwing rocks, kicking stuff, defacing stuff, burning stuff, loitering and graffiti.” This is how Ricky is described by Paula, a representative of New Zealand’s Child Welfare Services as he is dropped off at the rural home of Bella and Hec, his latest foster family. Hunt for the Wilderpeople is a contemporary coming of age-film portraying the maturation of Ricky, a thirteen-year-old boy in the care of Bella, a nurturing and idealistic woman with inclinations towards progressive education, and Hec, a natural man (in the Rousseauan sense) rejected and withdrawn from society. In the setting of the New Zealand bush, the authorities believe that the “change in scene will help straighten him out”. When Bella unexpectedly dies one day, the real journey for Ricky begins. Running from the authorities, Ricky and Hec embark upon an involuntary yet transformative quest through the wilderness, a quest that will change both of them in fundamental ways. In what follows we will focus on two overarching themes concerning the complexity of contemporary intergenerational relationships and the challenging process of becoming morally responsible in a society characterized by world-alienation.

Throughout the film, Ricky encounters a series of representatives of the adult world. While these representatives are grown-ups, they come nowhere near living up to the ideals of what either Rousseau or Arendt would consider morally responsible human beings. Paula, from the Child Welfare Services, is the archetypical bureaucrat, more concerned with enforcing rules than tending to Ricky’s needs. Always adhering to her own slogan, “no child left behind,” she is determined to track down Ricky in order to “rescue” him from Hec and to save him from an upbringing outside of social institutions. Paula will spare no means to reinstate Ricky into an existing social order (that has already corrupted him). The aim is not to ensure that Ricky becomes self-sufficient and self-loving, but rather to make him a passive and compliant part of society. Paula’s understanding of a model citizen is a person who obeys rules motivated either by the fear of disciplinary sanctions or the hope of temporary rewards. In this, she becomes a kind of personification of the corrupting forces of a society governed by blind obedience, lack of personal judgement, compassion and understanding of the value of true needs.

Hec, Ricky’s reluctant guardian following the untimely demise of Bella, is in many ways the opposite of Paula. Hec is portrayed as an example of the “natural man.” Introduced as a “bushman” he is guided by the virtue of self-sufficiency and has actively turned his back on society. While he is intuitively familiar with what is required to satisfy his own needs in nature, he is unable to understand and communicate his inner life with other people. Having already failed in society (Hec is an ex-convict who has exiled himself from the company of others), he wants nothing more than to live out his life in solitude. His main driving force is to avoid responsibility and to stay as far away as possible from the demands (and potential hurt) of social life. While he is self-sufficient, he is driven by self-loathing rather than self-love, hindering him from reentering society.

Having been on the run for several months, Ricky and Hec encounter a ranger in need of medical assistance. Being unable to resolve the situation themselves, they decide to have Ricky locate help from the outside world. Ricky reaches out to Kahu, a young girl, and her father TK, living on the outskirts of the bush. TK and Kahu are father and daughter, but it soon becomes clear that their relationship is oddly reversed. While Kahu is rational and levelheaded, TK is in many ways a big child. His first impulse upon encountering Ricky, whom he recognizes from the local news, is to take a series of selfies with him in order to impress his friends. TK is caught up with and fascinated by the media image of Ricky as a run-away outlaw and instead of interacting with Ricky as an adult relating to a young boy, he relates to him as an equal, in the sense that he himself is more a boy than a man. This is evident from TK’s parting words: “You’re the man for me. You’re a boy, but you are a man. Bro. I love you Ricky.” In being unable to interact as an adult with Ricky, he becomes a representative of a generation of adults that have never matured into adulthood in Rousseau’s sense.16

The final example from Ricky’s encounters with the adult world is Psycho Sam, a paranoid and conspiratorial recluse on the run from “the machine” of society and its ever-present “form-fillers.” He identifies with Ricky and Hec as fellow victims of the oppressive bureaucracy, represented in the film by
Paula and the authorities. In his irrational rantings about the many wrongs of the Government, Sam exhibits an intuitive understanding of a society gone awry. However, his lack of knowledge about the world prohibits him from productively turning his political agenda into action beyond his irrational behavior of, for example, wearing a steel colander for a hat in order to prevent the Government from intercepting his thoughts. While Sam’s fundamental distrust of bureaucracy as an obstacle for human freedom is confirmed by both Arendt’s and Rousseau’s diagnoses of society’s ailments, he lacks any of the tools necessary for engaging in a collective endeavor to reconstitute society. As a result, his only option is to exile himself from society and to give up his claims as an active citizen.

These examples illustrate the absence of adults capable of providing role models for the younger generation. The adult positions depicted in the film and described above are limited to the unreflective bureaucrat, the self-loathing loner, the irresponsible man-child, and the anti-social recluse. Neither of these seem to offer the kind of guidance that both Arendt and Rousseau require from responsible adults. In Arendt’s case, being a responsible adult means to take joint responsibility for and represent the world as it is. It is to “stand in relation to the young as representatives of a world for which they must assume responsibility although they themselves did not make it, and even though they may, secretly or openly, wish it were other than it is.”17 Lacking the necessary judgement to think independently, Paula’s attempt at taking responsibility fails as her only rationale for action is blind rule following. Hec, TK and Sam, in different ways, all refuse to take responsibility for the world by trying to exclude themselves from the public sphere where all political action take place.

For Rousseau, a morally responsible adult is guided by his own rationality and self-knowledge, granting him a degree of independence from the forces of the social world of which he must be a part. Being self-sufficient, like Hec, may suffice for the natural man. However, for Rousseau “the object is not, for all that, to make him [the young person] a savage and to relegate him to the depths of the woods.” The role of the adult is to help insure that the maturing person “not let himself get carried away by either the passions or the opinions of men, that he see with his eyes, that he feel with his heart, that no authority govern him beyond that of his own reason” (E.4, 255). In relation to Ricky, neither TK nor Paula can offer any guidance beyond the reliance on the opinions of others or the authority of a bureaucratic social system. Having turned their backs on society, neither Hec nor Sam can offer any guidance beyond the New Zealand bush, leaving Ricky vulnerable and unprepared for reentering society. Having looked at the intergenerational aspects of the film, we will now turn to aspects of formation in Ricky and Hec’s evolving relationship.

RICKY AND HEC: FORMATION IN THE BUSH

During the first months on the run in the bushlands, Hec functions as an excellent but very reluctant teacher in the art of living self-sufficiently in nature. Ricky quickly discovers that he is incapable of surviving on his own. Upon observing Hec’s natural ability to survive, he becomes interested in knowing what it takes to do so. Hec reluctantly tells Ricky about what he calls “the knack.” When pushed to elaborate he gives the following vague explanation: “It’s not a thing. It’s just…You just get it. it’s a…Oh, It’s a way of, uhm, it’s a way of figuring things out, without having to think too hard or…or talk, more importantly.” While Hec is unable to verbalize his knowledge he proves quite capable of teaching by examples.18 This marks the beginning of Ricky’s education in nature, where he slowly acquires “the knack” by observing and imitating Hec. Simultaneously, Ricky’s insistent questions challenges Hec to begin to communicate his tacit knowledge and, what is more, to reflect on his life and his relationship to others and to society at large. While Ricky initially lacks all of the skills necessary to survive in nature, he is part of a cultural world (through books, films and music) that Hec knows nothing about. Even if this knowledge is insufficient (and sometimes even detrimental) in terms of surviving in the bush, it does allow Ricky to reflect on himself and his life from many different vantage points. His communicative abilities give him access to a social life that Hec is unable to engage with, being both illiterate and in lack of a sufficiently developed vocabulary. Initially Hec dismisses books as useless items, but increasingly, as his relationship to Ricky deepens, he senses the value of a common language for sharing life with others.
As Ricky is about to reenter society temporarily – reaching out to Kahu and TK in order to find help for the sick ranger – he has begun to acquire “the knack” from living alongside Hec in the bush. Telling Kahu of his adventures with Hec, he describes their relationship as follows: “He’s like one of the best bushmen in the whole country. He, like, taught me all of his skills, so now we’re, like, equal best bushmen in the country. Yeah, we’re best friends.” From this point, there is a change in the relationship between Ricky and Hec. As their friendship begins to develop further, Hec’s need for the communicative skills necessary for connecting with others becomes increasingly obvious to him. As part of his counseling before arriving at Bella and Hec’s, Ricky has been taught to compose haiku poems as a way of expressing his feelings. At first, the haikus serve the instrumental purpose of letting Ricky vent his frustration and anger. However, during the course of his growing friendship with Hec, they become central tools for reflecting on their relationship. The first time Hec openly acknowledges this is when he, from having dismissed books as useless, approves of Ricky’s haiku:

Trees, birds, rivers, sky  
Running with my uncle Hec  
Living forever

Toward the end of the film, after they have surrendered to the authorities and Hec is released from jail and is temporarily housed in a correctional rehabilitation and reintegration home, he sits on the doorstep teaching himself to read. As Ricky – now living with Kahu and TK – arrives, Hec announces that he has written a haiku himself. It reads:

Me and this fat kid  
We ran, we ate and read books  
And it was the best

With these few lines, Hec retrospectively acknowledges and verbalizes their mutual transformation. He also, for the first time, accepts his responsibility for Ricky. He is able to do this as his relationship with Ricky has given him a sense of higher purpose as a morally responsible human being, beyond his self-sufficiency as a “natural man.” He thereby willingly reenters society, accepting, for the first time, his role as Ricky’s “uncle.” In doing so he is able to turn his self-loathing into self-acceptance.

Formation for Rousseau is about becoming an individual capable of living in society without succumbing to the prejudices of popular opinion. Ricky Baker, being already corrupted by existing society, therefore has to begin his formation by unlearning his old ways modeled after images from popular culture. With Hec guiding him in the ways of the natural man, Ricky’s first task is to become self-sufficient in nature. Through examples provided by Hec, he gradually acquires “the knack,” allowing him a degree of independence in the wild. Having chosen the life of a kind of “civilized savage,” Hec is unable to reintroduce Ricky into society however. While Rousseau’s Emile is guided by Jean-Jacques through all of the stages of his formation, Ricky and Hec are dependent upon one another to develop the moral maturity needed to finally reenter society. Without recourse to morally responsible adult role models to guide them, Ricky and Hec have to find their own way where they depend on each other’s different strengths (Hec’s natural abilities to survive and Ricky’s ability to self-reflect using literature and popular culture) to help them navigate in unchartered territory.

CONCLUSION

In a sense, Hunt for the Wilderpeople illustrates the challenges of education as formation in a world where the consequences of the politicization of childhood complicates the separation of adulthood and childhood, being and becoming. In Arendt’s view, the crisis in education is not the fault of children but of an adult world that refuses to take responsibility and stand as representatives for the world that they themselves have created. By turning the child into a political actor, responsibility is displaced and education as formation made difficult. When Bella dies, early in the film, the only morally responsible adult disappears. Throughout
the rest of the film, the adult world is represented by grown-ups unwilling or unable to act as moral exemplars for Ricky. Lacking the conditions necessary for acting in a self-sufficient and self-loving way, they fail to impart this necessary knowledge to Ricky. When the image of childhood is portrayed as the antithesis to being passive, incompetent and incomplete, it is difficult to perceive clearly the role of formation. Education without formation risks ending up being not so much about teaching knowledge (aimed at the cultivation of judgement and responsibility) as it is about inculcating whatever skills are currently in vogue. Such skills, however, cannot prepare the way for Ricky and Hec to reenter society as “no longer one but a part of the unity” (E.1, 40).

Generally speaking, a view of education without formation risks losing sight of the aims of striving for human freedom and autonomy. If education is primarily geared towards the instrumental learning of skills – skills that change incessantly – it creates a hampering dependence on external expertise entrusted with the task of developing ever more skills to fit the fickle needs of a fast-changing society. Formation, as envisioned in different ways by Arendt and Rousseau, instead aims at creating the preconditions necessary for human freedom and for autonomy from external approval. In the world of today, it may be that education as formation is precisely the kind of antidote needed to counter the tyranny of the majority in a public world increasingly corrupted by fear and popular opinion. Without morally responsible adults to guide this process of formation, however, the Hecs and Rickys of this world are ultimately left to their own devices when it comes to finding ways of acquiring “the knack” for self-sufficiency and self-love needed to become responsible political participants of the common world.

7 James and Prout, eds. *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, 8.
15 *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*, directed by Taika Waititi (The Orchard, 2016).
17 Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 186.