

Pre-College Philosophy: Defined and Defended

Maryann Ayim

university of western ontario

This paper argues the importance of teaching philosophy in the pre-college classroom. It is urged that the close connection between logical thinking and reading comprehension suggests the importance of teaching philosophical skills to the elementary school child; furthermore, the inseparability of value issues from most secondary school subject areas suggests that certain philosophical skills are a necessary condition to the secondary school student's understanding of such basic subjects as mathematics and history. This thesis is further developed through an examination of some current examples of philosophy offerings in the pre-college curriculum; special attention is paid to the work of the American Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children and the Canadian effort to establish moral education in the schools.

Dans cet article nous présentons des arguments qui prouvent l'importance d'enseigner la philosophie avant le niveau collégial. Nous soutenons avec vigueur que le rapport étroit existant entre la pensée logique et la compréhension écrite fait ressortir l'importance d'enseigner des éléments de philosophie à l'élève du primaire; en outre, les jugements de valeur étant partie intégrante de la plupart des matières enseignées au secondaire, nous prétendons que certains éléments de philosophie sont nécessaires à l'élève du secondaire s'il veut être en mesure de comprendre des matières aussi fondamentales que les mathématiques et l'histoire. Nous poussons plus loin le développement de notre thèse en examinant quelques exemples actuels de cours de philosophie au primaire et au secondaire. Nous portons une attention particulière aux travaux de l'American Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children et aux efforts déployés au Canada pour établir l'enseignement de la morale dans les écoles.

This paper consists of two main parts. First, reasons are advanced for the importance of teaching philosophy at the pre-college level, with slightly different arguments being marshalled for the elementary and the secondary school scene. Second, the thesis is further developed through a consideration of some current examples of philosophy offerings in the pre-college curriculum.

A DEFENCE OF PRE-COLLEGE PHILOSOPHY

The Elementary School

A viable argument could be made for a necessary connection between philosophy and education at any level of the educational ladder. What this paper attempts to illustrate in the case of the elementary school is less sweeping than this; nevertheless, it is of pronounced importance and

seldom given due recognition. If we had to pick any one area of the elementary school curriculum which is crucial to the intellectual development of the child, and upon which any further growth in academic disciplines depends, that area would surely be reading. It is the interdependence of ability in reading and ability in making inferences which reveals the immensely important role that philosophy could play in the elementary school. Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan (1977b), in their *Philosophy in the Classroom*, point out that although we read words and sentences, we read for meanings and ideas. The more children can relate what they read to their own situations, and the more interesting possibilities they can infer from what they read, the greater will be their motivation for reading. While neither phonetics, spelling, nor grammar will generate inferential skills, some exposure to basic philosophical procedures will. The authors cite some experimental work which supports this claim.

Some of the changes in reading performance, under controlled experimental conditions, have been breathtaking. One fifth-grade class, after a four month trial of the [philosophy for children] program as taught by their regular teacher, improved 16 months in reading age. Another class, at sixth-grade level, but reading only at 3.5 level, jumped the remaining 2.5 years that brought them up to the national norms, after just that one-semester course! (p. 6)

Prima facie, this considerably strengthens the evidence in favor of introducing certain philosophical skills to very young children. What might seem to detract from it is the incongruity of six-year-olds embroiled in hot debate over Descartes' argument for the existence of the external world or the positivist critique of normative language. Needless to say, however, philosophy teachers would no more attempt to discuss such abstract issues with very young children than mathematics teachers would attempt to introduce trigonometric ratios or language teachers Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound." As with all areas of study, it would be necessary in philosophy to determine the appropriate level of abstractness and complexity for children of various ages.

Simply listening to the queries of young children will provide ample evidence that they are intrigued by many traditional philosophical concerns. They ask questions like "What happens to you when you die?" "Why is stealing bad?" "Does God love me?" and "Is my painting beautiful?" We can see in these questions the puzzlement which has been the occasion for an immense body of literature on metaphysics, ethics, religion, and aesthetics. Clearly, then, if where the child is at is some sort of indicator as to what the school should be teaching, a study of philosophy should be initiated in the kindergarten program. It is important that these channels of inquiry be kept open, and it seems reasonable to suggest that the best time to do so is when the child reveals the interest, rather than trying to reawaken it in secondary school or college.

Finally, in terms of providing a basis for skills to be more fully developed higher up the educational ladder, the introduction of philosophy would be the ideal vehicle for giving birth to that critical demeanor which is inseparable from understanding and knowledge. What an immense advantage for anyone to have developed critical skills and interests over this eight-year period rather than starting from scratch at a time when one is more self-conscious, more threatened by the possibility of making a mistake, and more afraid of looking foolish before one's peers.

The Secondary School¹

The evidence in support of teaching philosophy in the secondary school does suggest a necessary connection with education. This is argued on the grounds that the traditional secondary school disciplines cannot be studied independently of value issues, and hence that they cannot be mastered without simultaneously mastering the skills for making value judgments. This implies the necessity of developing certain philosophical skills. There are numerous instances of such value issues which are integral to high school subjects. A few examples are the defensibility of the separatist movement in Quebec, the soundness of the argument from mathematical induction, and the relevance of observing scintillations on a luminous surface to formulating a theory of the existence of electrons. Given that these value-laden issues are inseparable from Canadian social studies, algebra, and physics respectively, it can be argued that the inclusion of philosophy in the high school curriculum is essential to achieving educational objectives within the disciplines currently taught by secondary school teachers.

In short, all high school subjects contain an indissoluble core of value judgments. It is essential that students be prepared to examine and analyze the arguments offered in support of those judgments. Minimally, this means that students require some general knowledge of the nature of arguments, the ability to recognize valid argument forms, and some understanding of how arguments can go wrong.

No high school subject can be stripped of this value component and reduced to a collection of facts. Even if one attempted such a feat, decisions would have to be made about which facts students would be exposed to within the discipline, and this decision would itself involve value judgments concerning which facts were most in need of study, or most worth studying, as well as the underlying value judgment as to what a fact is.

One might argue that it is the high school teacher rather than the high school student who requires some basic philosophical knowledge, insofar as it is the teacher who makes decisions about course content, curriculum materials, and student evaluation. Since it is the teacher who must ultimately answer to the principal, school board, and community, it is the teacher's value judgments which must be defensible. Such an argument presupposes that within the auspices of any particular high school discipline, the student's role is confined to recognizing and committing to

memory the value judgments sanctioned by the teacher and other acceptable authorities. Such a presupposition undermines the purpose of education, confusing it with socialization or even indoctrination.

Students can no more avoid adopting a philosophical stand in relation to their high school subjects than their teachers can. High school graduates who have learned only to memorize but not to think, to recapitulate but not to criticize, have not opted out of selecting a philosophical view — they have merely opted for a weak or inadequate view, such as authoritarianism. As Charles Sanders Peirce said, “It is when they promise themselves that they will not make any metaphysical assumptions that they are most in danger of slipping too deep into the metaphysical slough for deliverance, precisely because one cannot exercise control and criticism of what one does unconsciously” (1931-1958, Vol. 2, p. 68, para. 121). A student’s knowledge in any given discipline fails to qualify as education if it is not tied to a critical demeanor and cognizance of alternatives which are ultimately philosophical in nature.

If this is the case, then as educators we must decide upon how best to teach philosophical skills to high school students. One option is to wait until philosophical issues arise in the classroom, and address them as they come. This method is problematic for three reasons. First, if it were pursued conscientiously by all teachers, undue overlap would result. Second, such an option would be more likely to result in the exposure of students to a disjointed ad hoc collection of philosophical tidbits, rather than exposure to any systematic picture of philosophical issues. Third, this method would relegate the teaching of philosophy to teachers whose expertise lay in other areas.

The most obvious solution is to make philosophy an official part of the high school curriculum either as a separate subject or a recognized part of courses already in existence — e.g., a logic section in a mathematics course, an aesthetics section in an art course, a philosophy of history section in a history course.

Finally, it is important to point out that philosophical skills imply not only the ability to appraise, to think critically, to analyze, but also the ability to reconstruct, to put together again, to synthesize. At a time when the segmentation of the school curriculum could almost be calculated exponentially, the importance of the ability to see events and issues as part of a total picture can hardly be overestimated. This increasing level of specialization in the schools, reflecting the tendency of society in general, undoubtedly could not have been avoided. Nevertheless, it has had the undesirable consequence of turning the school curriculum into what C. S. Peirce referred to as a set of “artificial pigeon hole[s]” where arbitrarily segmented disciplines are stuffed, and labelled for recall “by some insignificant mark” (1931-1958, Vol. 1, p. 19, para. 44).

It is not sufficient for an educated person to have acquired a set of skills and a knowledge of the various disciplines recognized by the school sys-

tem — an educated person must also be able to compare and connect these disciplines, to apply them to his or her own situation, and to weave them into a set of attitudes and way of life that might be referred to loosely as a world view. The study of philosophy is the clearest way to achieve an education in this sense simply because questions of epistemology and ethics will cut through and reveal a common concern in all the disciplines typically studied within the school system. All subjects which give rise to values talk — e.g., history, geography, science, man in society, and family studies — provide a basis for ethical considerations and may be compared, contrasted, and interconnected under the rubric of ethics. Similarly, subjects which give rise to knowledge talk — e.g., mathematics, physics, consumer studies, and industrial arts — may be compared, contrasted, and interconnected under the rubric of epistemology. Although specialization is inevitable, a philosophical antidote may help to render it compatible with the goals of education. In this sense, philosophy epitomizes what Aldous Huxley had in mind when he stated that “The most important research is that which is aimed at the cracks in the armour between two solid scientific disciplines” (1969, p. 939).

PHILOSOPHY IN THE SCHOOLS — FACT OR FICTION?

The teaching of philosophy in elementary and secondary schools is much more advanced in the United States than in Canada. This is due largely to the work of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) working out of Montclair State College, New Jersey.² This institute is headed by Matthew Lipman, who brought with him an expertise cultivated during 19 years of teaching philosophy at Columbia University. The IAPC has projected a philosophy program from kindergarten through Grade 12. Their approach is to have the students read a philosophical novel; discussion of the episodes in this novel is used as the starting point for inquiry into philosophical issues. To date, three novels are available, the first two with an accompanying instructor's manual. The instructor's manual for the third novel is in preparation. *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* (Lipman, 1974; Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 1979), prepared for Grade 5 and 6 students, deals largely with formal syllogistic logic. *Lisa* (Lipman, 1976; Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 1977a), for use with Grade 7 and 8 students, deals with informal logic and applications to ethics. *Suki* (Lipman, 1978), for use with Grade 8 and 9 students, deals with philosophy of language and aesthetics, particularly as it applies to literature. In all three novels, there is a focus on issues of epistemology, metaphysics, religion, and science as well, although technical jargon is studiously avoided.

How effective is the IAPC program in terms of imparting skills in reasoning and thinking to the students who work within it? Some indication is provided by a test which Lipman administered (The California

Test of Mental Maturity) to a group of 40 elementary school children in New Jersey. This group was then subdivided into one that worked from *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* and another that did not. The same test was readministered in nine weeks, showing the philosophy group to have advanced 27 months in mental age and the control group hardly at all. Three years later the same two groups were scored on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, revealing that the "philosophy" students were still far ahead and thus that the effects of studying philosophy carried over a period of at least several years (Sheils & Boyd, 1976).

Unfortunately, we have nothing even closely analogous to the IAPC in Canada. As a result, with the single exception of moral education with which I shall deal below, almost no philosophy is taught in Canadian elementary or secondary schools. A few more courageous school systems (such as the University of Toronto High Schools) do offer experimental courses in philosophy, but these are few and far between. The Ontario Teachers' Federation in May 1975 sponsored a Philosophy Resource Team, made up of teachers from the high school system, arts faculties, and education faculties who share a common interest in teaching philosophy. This group has met several times and compiled materials dealing with the introduction of philosophy into the high school curriculum. The material has been fairly widely advertised and many requests for information have been received. Unfortunately, the level of interest (in terms of gross numbers) has not been sufficient to sustain workshop presentations by the resource team, without which it is unlikely that significant progress will be made in the near future.

Moral education was mentioned above as the one general exception to the virtual invisibility of philosophy in Canadian pre-college institutions. What philosophy does get done in Canadian schools tends to focus on moral (or values) education. It is in this area of philosophy that educational officialdom in Canada has shown the most consistent and concentrated interest. In Ontario, the publication of the Mackay Committee Report (Mackay et al., 1969), advocating the teaching of moral education in the school system, sparked an interest in this area in both the elementary and secondary schools. Mackay's emphasis on moral education along with the format which he recommended for its inclusion — namely, infusing it into already existent disciplines rather than teaching it as a separate subject area — received the support of Thomas Wells (1974), the Minister of Education for Ontario. This concern is reflected in official ministry literature (see Ontario Ministry of Education, 1975 and 1979). Unfortunately, interest and enthusiasm for moral education seems concentrated in the periphery rather than in the schools themselves. According to a recently published report on moral education in social studies (a heavily value-laden area which we would expect to be one of the most appropriate vehicles for introducing moral education) extremely little energy has been expended on this area in Canadian schools them-

selves. At the level of curriculum planning, "only five provinces, Alberta, British Columbia, New Brunswick, Ontario, and Saskatchewan, identify objectives in values and/or moral education in social studies curriculum documents" (Cochrane & Williams, 1977, p. 1). The authors of this study also found "that no province requires or provides any systematic professional development in values instruction or moral reasoning for social studies teachers" (p. 3).

It is important to recognize that, for better or for worse, the instruction of values is going on in the schools in any case. Children learn values from their teachers' attitudes, from the textbooks, and from the hidden curriculum. They learn, for example, that single parent families or working mothers are oddities, that certain kinds of work are men's work and others women's, that cleanliness and punctuality are virtues — in short, that middle class values are the ideal. This is not to say, however, that values or moral education necessarily goes on. As long as the value instantiating process is conducted below the surface, as it were, what is happening may be indistinguishable from indoctrination or manipulation. The only way to avoid this subliminal transfer of values is to openly include moral education in the school curriculum. Furthermore, teachers will have to be familiarized with the relevant philosophical materials and methods; otherwise it would be unrealistic to expect them to be willing or able to carry through successfully with a moral education program. If the argument for the necessity of some form of philosophy in the pre-college classroom is taken seriously, then faculties of education must assume a responsibility for imparting the pertinent skills, methodologies, and bodies of knowledge to prospective teachers and to teachers already in the system through continuing education programs.

In conclusion, philosophy at the pre-college level might have the advantage of helping students to continue asking significant questions, keeping open the road to inquiry and to alternatives, investing less in infallible answers than in a rigorous method, and analyzing and evaluating their own decisions in a world that has never been in greater need of critical rethinking in such matters.

NOTES

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¹ A similar argument for the necessary connection between high school subjects and basic philosophical expertise is presented in Ayim (1976).

² Important work in this regard has also been done by the Illinois Critical Thinking Project. See, for example, Ennis (1961, 1971, & 1975), Ennis, Finkelstein, Smith, and Wilson (1969), and Ennis and Paulus (1965). For a summary of the literature, see Bruce L. Stewart, *Teaching logic in grades 7-12: A literature review*, Critical Thinking Project, Bureau of Educational Research, University of Illinois, 1977.

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Maryann Ayim is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy of Education at the University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario N6G 1G7.