Comment and Response

Children and Philosophy: A Comment on Ayim*

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Professor Ayim's (1980) interesting and provocative paper argues that philosophical inquiry ought to be part of both the elementary and secondary curriculum and should even be "initiated in the kindergarten program." Early exposure to philosophy would, in her view, lead a child to a clarification of values, to a clear and accurate use of language, to an ability to recognize valid and invalid inferences, and to a critical consciousness. The works of Lipman and his colleagues are given as evidence in support of her position.

Clearly, the issue is not whether the above aims are desirable and worthwhile per se, but whether they are desirable in the education of children. This is an old and monumental issue. From the time of Plato, almost every philosopher has spoken to it, usually at length. We would both admit to having no hard and fast opinion on the matter, although we remain unconvinced by Professor Ayim's enthusiasm and would like to raise some matters of concern.

1. Almost since its inception, there has been a tradition in Western thinking of viewing philosophy as suited only for the most mature and informed minds. Plato's *Republic* does not recommend the study of philosophy much before the age of 40, and then only for the select few. Aristotle (1962), discussing ethics, suggests that children and adolescents lack experience of life and have not had sufficient time for reflection to enable them to distinguish the significant from the trivial nor to engage in other than verbal games with fundamental concepts. Since the question of teaching philosophy to children is really a very old one, and since philosophers almost unanimously condemn it, it would not be unreasonable to ask Professor Ayim to explore, even partially, their views. The sophists perhaps represent a second and contrasting tradition; they pro-

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posed to teach children about ethical and epistemological questions, and they, like Professor Ayim, promised wondrous results.

Three of the most gifted philosophical thinkers are Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey. Plato (1968) opposes such a practice because philosophical discussion easily turns into a sport and arguments into games to be won:

> You must have noticed how young men, after their first taste in argument are always contradicting people just for the fun of it... like puppies who like to pull and tear at anyone within reach. (p. 304)

Rousseau (1977) argues that such a practice begins at the wrong end:

> Those children who have been constantly reasoned with strike me as exceedingly silly. Of all man's faculties, reason, which is, so to speak, compounded of all the rest, is the last and choicest growth, and it is this you would use for the child's early training.... If children understood reason, they would not need education, but by talking to them from their earliest age in a language they do not understand you accustom them to be satisfied with words, to question all that is said to them, and to think themselves as wise as their teachers; you train them to be argumentative and rebellious. (p. 53)

And Dewey (1966) observes:

> The initial stage of that developing experience which is called thinking is experience. This remark may sound like a silly truism. It ought to be one; unfortunately, it is not. On the contrary, thinking is often regarded both in philosophic theory and in educational practice as something... capable of being cultivated in isolation. Even the kindergarten... techniques are so anxious to get at intellectual distinctions without "waste of time"... and to introduce pupils at once to material which expresses the intellectual distinctions which adults have made. (p. 153)

The fact that Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey (along with so many others, including Piaget) are against early instruction in philosophy does in itself not settle the matter definitively. However, when discussing the feasibility of such instruction, some reference to past thinkers would be helpful.

Their views are based on long-term considerations and the reasons they offer are more far-reaching than those of Lipman and his colleagues. One must not lose sight of the fact that education is a process which spans many, many years wherein children develop many different aspects of their natures at different times. Educational methods and subjects today should try to reflect the total growth of the child. What ultimately matters is not that a child reads by age 4 or performs logical somersaults at 5 or 10, but that when a child reaches the end of formal education he can leave school with a zest for living with positive emotions, informed intellect, and a determination to follow his own interests and curiosity. Only at that point is it important to have critical consciousness and the ability to be fully literate.

Precisely on the matter of appropriateness of curriculum, we have

much to learn from previous thinkers. Almost to a man they stress that early education should emphasize doing, not thinking. Physical fitness, the exercise of the body, the development of the senses, the exploration and observation of the natural world, the manipulation of objects are the prerequisites of later clear and distinct ideas. They build the foundation of later sound judgment.

These reasons against teaching philosophy to children far outweigh the reasons for teaching it. Precaution against the one-sided training of the intellect in isolation from the senses will reflect favorably in the long-term development of the child and in the eventual appearance of a philosophic attitude in the maturing adult.

2. The image of 10-year-old children engaged in philosophical discussions of marriage, death, unemployment, and personal relationships seems, as one colleague has put it, like a recipe for the production of neurotic children. The remark, though unkind, points to a serious problem — the nature of the child. The plain facts of the matter are these: that childhood is not the play of miniature adults; that discussions of philosophy of history make a lot more sense among people who have read widely in the field of history; and that therefore, not too surprisingly, the materials which attempt to teach philosophy to children are obviously contrived.

Lipman would argue that the problem is not making philosophy relevant to children but rather getting adults to recognize that children's questions and concerns are philosophical. They may not be articulated in quite the traditional terminology, but they are every bit as pressing and often formulated in a very penetrating way. Or so it seems, when they are viewed through the eyes of adults. Adults, so it would appear, just do not take children's concerns seriously.

This is precisely the point: What is it to take a child seriously? To take a child seriously is to see him in his own terms, to see that he is a child and not to look at him as though he were something else, an adult. An adult may see that a child's question is philosophical, but it does not follow that the child also sees his questions in this way. Nor does it follow that an appropriate response to the child's question is a philosophical treatise. Only a very literal mind (one perhaps trained in the reading of philosophical texts) could make this inference, and only a person insensitive to the richness of language and the varieties of literature could propose such a response. Consider the fables and fairy stories which are among the great works of children's literature. Consider the images, the myths, and the creatures with which the child populates his world.[1] It would be a poor parent (and a rash philosopher) who wished to stamp these out as not appropriate for a child. For a child they are appropriate. It is for adults that they are not appropriate. At issue is seeing the child's question at his level of development.

Childhood is the age of the senses, the age of joy. To force a child too soon to develop the intellectual sophistication of an adult may be to deprive him of something which he can never recover — childhood — as well as good common sense. It may also serve to give him a false appearance of sophistication. What is needed here is the understanding of a philosophy of childhood.

3. Professor Ayim, and she is not alone in this, tends to equate critical thinking with philosophical thinking: "The introduction of philosophy would be the ideal vehicle for giving birth to [a] critical demeanor," she argues. Although it is true that a study of philosophy tends to encourage critical consciousness, it does not follow that critical consciousness is served only or best through studying philosophy. Nor are the two synonymous. Indeed, this is far from the case, and we need to remember that clear and critical thinking (clarification of assumptions, the ability to reason logically, and so on) is a feature of informed reason in every domain of knowledge, be it the natural or the social sciences, the arts or the humanities. Hence, the best guarantee of eventual clear thinking on a particular subject lies in a solid grounding in that subject itself. Informed thinking in history or science does not come from first studying philosophy of history or philosophy of science, but from a wide knowledge of history and science. Knowledge in a particular field is a prerequisite to informed judgment and clear thinking in that field. This same relation applies whether one discusses fine art, music, the social sciences, or any other field.

Consequently, the most reasonable approach for the eventual appearance of critical thinking is a solid grounding in particular fields of learning. It is not the case, as Professor Ayim believes, that "the introduction of philosophy would be the ideal vehicle for giving birth to that critical demeanor which is inseparable from understanding and knowledge." Such a statement is untrue on two counts, quite apart from representing a very narrow view of philosophy: Philosophy is not always the ideal vehicle for giving birth to the critical demeanor; and a critical demeanor must, in early education, be downplayed in favor of acquisition of knowledge. Otherwise, there is the danger that children will be critical and outspoken without a full understanding of the issues.

There would seem to be at least three different foci for current work in the teaching of philosophy to children: Matthew Lipman's project at the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC), Robert Ennis' Critical Thinking Project at the University of Illinois, and a nest of approaches to the teaching of values (of which values clarification would be one, and developmental approaches, typically rooted in Kohlberg's findings, would provide other examples). In scope, Lipman's work is undoubtedly widest and, for this reason, truest to the nature of philosophy, attempting as it does to make all of the branches of tradi-

tional philosophy relevant to the interests of children and suitable for discussion at their level.

4. Nothing we have said so far should be taken to suggest that we would advocate a sharp divorce between education and philosophy. The planning of educational experiences for children does require considerable philosophical expertise, as Professor Ayim notes, for example, in the area of value judgments. But philosophically sensitive teaching is not the same as the teaching of philosophy. No one, apart from the lunatic fringe, would expect seven-year-olds themselves to undertake a significant part of the planning of their own educational experiences.

It is also true, as Professor Ayim suggests, that the objectives of education imply the development of an individual who has an integrated and coherent view of the world and his place in it, something rather like a philosophy of life. This too is a good reason for thinking that education is essentially philosophical, and that a solid training in philosophy is a crucial part of the preparation of any good teacher. But these are reasons very different from those proposed by Professor Ayim.

To argue, as she does, that the child's "philosophy teacher would no more attempt to discuss such abstract issues (as Descartes' argument for the existence of the external world or the positivist critique of normative language) than mathematics teachers would attempt to introduce trigonometric ratios or language teachers Shelley's 'Prometheus Unbound' " is to miss the point. Mathematics need not be trigonometry, literature need not include Shelley, but philosophical issues, by their very nature, must be "abstract." And this is precisely what provokes questions about their suitability. Perhaps what is meant instead is difficult issues; but, alas, if they were not difficult they would be neither issues nor philosophical.

As children grow older, however, they become more like adults. For this reason, arguments for teaching philosophy at the high school level cannot be so easily dismissed as others. Yet even here some of the same doubts remain: doubts about allowing students to make unwise career choices, about the background required for a meaningful discussion of philosophy of science, and about the experience needed for a worthwhile discussion of abortion or government employment strategies. The philosophical waters here are muddy, deep, and dangerous: muddied through students' immaturity; deep on account of the obscure issues involved; and dangerous because of likely over-simplification. In philosophy of science, for instance, the uncritical, unreflective acceptance of philosophical positions (such as the role of observation statements in scientific inquiry) is a very real danger.

Mere reference to "high school graduates who have learned only to memorize but not to think, to recapitulate but not to criticize" alone will not suffice to justify the introduction of philosophy. These can be criti-

cized as the products of poor teaching in history or science or literature. This alone will not justify the introduction of yet another subject: What is required is a positive account of the unique contributions of the new subject, and reasons for believing that it can deliver what it promises when other subjects have failed to live up to their potential. And how much more of a problem would it be to make such a case for the teaching of philosophy when there are so few teachers with an appropriate academic background?

Professor Ayim suggests that the teaching of ethics and epistemology in the high school would make a unique contribution. But, even then, are we justified in requiring, as a goal of popular education, that broad cognitive perspective (stressed by R. S. Peters and so many other educational philosophers) which demands both breadth of understanding and an explicitly reflective appreciation of that understanding? Or is this to seek an unrealistic explication of what, for many, can remain tacit?

5. There have been some quite specific claims for the merits of programs which teach philosophy. But that there should be improvements in reading scores in classes where teachers have worked intensively, reading and discussing together with children, should not be surprising. Neither should we be surprised if children who have been taught explicitly about the skills of logic and critical thinking can answer questions about those skills better than children who have not. We need to know that materials specially devised for teaching philosophy to children are superior to the skilful use of other materials, materials which the test of time would suggest are particularly well adapted for children and which indeed have become children's classics.

In summary, what we need is a philosophy of childhood, a philosophical account of the the child and what is appropriate for him at any given stage. Observations about the general ends of education and about the characteristics of educated adults will not suffice. It would be ironic (though perhaps revealing) if a proposal for teaching philosophy to children proved to lack just such a defensible philosophical account of the child.

NOTE

[1] This is not, of course, to suggest that every foolish, childish picture is to be viewed as a great artistic achievement. Nor is it to suggest that children should be left with their childish notions to emerge by a magical and spontaneous process as adults.

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