A Retort from the Lunatic Fringe: A Response to Jackson and Ott

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In their comment Professors Jackson and Ott delineate five major concerns with the thesis of "Precollege Philosophy: Defined and Defended" (Ayim, 1980). I shall address each of these concerns in turn. For ease of reference, the term "respondents" will be used to refer to Professors Jackson and Ott.

1. What the respondents offer as their first concern is actually a conglomeration of three separate points, the first of which receives the most detailed treatment.

a. The respondents' articulation of the first major difficulty which they perceive in my position places them perilously close to committing the fallacy of appeal to authority. That is, they find it a shortcoming of my thesis that several prominent philosophers — Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, and Dewey — would not have endorsed it, and were in fact, opposed to the idea of instructing children in philosophy. It is incumbent on the respondents that they indicate why the view of the philosophers cited is a reasonable one; after all, even great philosophers have been found guilty of holding false beliefs. Aristotle (1941), for example, believed that slavery was justifiable on the grounds that slaves were "from the hour of their birth... marked out for subjection" (p. 1132, lines 1254a22-1254a23). He also argued for the natural superiority of males over females (lines 1254b11-1254b15, and p. 1143, lines 1259a37-1259b5) and for necessary limits to female as compared to male temperance, courage, and justice (p. 1144, lines 1260a8-1260a27).

The respondents do concede that the support of these thinkers "does not settle the matter definitively." I propose that the matter is not settled at all and that the passages cited by the respondents fail to even touch on any of the central issues of teaching philosophy to children. Professors Jackson and Ott suggest furthermore that the views of those who oppose the teaching of pre-college philosophy "are more far-reaching than those of Lipman and his colleagues." Since they offer no reason for taking this stand, it merits no response beyond pointing out its resemblance to the fallacy of special pleading.

I shall conclude my discussion on this point by examining each of the quotations from Plato, Rousseau, and Dewey, which the respondents

interpret as undermining the argument for teaching philosophy to children.

In the brief passage from Plato, we are warned that on their first exposure to argument, youngsters will tend to treat this new thinking form as a game, and will take such pleasure in contradicting people as to make themselves obnoxious. For such a claim to be a useful criticism of teaching philosophy to children, it would need empirical support, which it does not at present enjoy. Also, it is not clear whether it is the youth of the student so much as the fact of initial exposure to philosophy which brings about this unpopular argumentative phase. If the latter, then my thesis would stand untouched, for it would only entail that people exposed to philosophy as children would pass through this "obnoxious" stage at a much earlier age than those who first studied it as adults.

Rousseau's position presented in the passage cited by the respondents is similar but somewhat more complex. Reason, Rousseau suggests, is the epitome of intellectual growth, and if children already understood it, there would be no need for them to be in school. He also suggests that if adults try to engage children in reasoning processes beyond their capabilities, they will succeed only in turning out "argumentative and rebellious" children. Again, there is nothing in this passage which seriously threatens my thesis. If children already understood how to reason, it is true that they would have no need of school. It is precisely because they do not understand it that they need to be taught philosophical skills in the school. There will be a danger in teaching philosophy, as in teaching any discipline, of exceeding the abilities of the student. This is an argument for the exercise of care in designing courses of study, however — it is not an argument for the wholesale exclusion of a discipline from the curriculum.

The quotation from Dewey (1966) is a plea to relate thinking to the child's experience, so that children do not conceive of thinking as an activity completely extraneous to doing and experiencing. Dewey is by no means suggesting that thinking or even making intellectual distinctions has no place in the education of young children. Rather, he is arguing for a more efficient means to get children engaged in thinking, and this entails working out of the kinds of experiences which give children cause for reflection. He goes on to suggest

> That the situation should be of such a nature as to arouse thinking means of course that it should suggest something to do which is not either routine or capricious — something, in other words, presenting what is new (and hence uncertain or problematic) and yet sufficiently connected with existing habits to call out an effective response. (p. 154)

It seems to me that this view should be endorsed whole-heartedly by educators who wish to teach philosophy or any other discipline to children. Furthermore, one of the reasons for the success of the Institute for

the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) program is that they paid very careful attention to the advice offered by Dewey. This resulted in the writing of special philosophical novels particularly designed to capture the interest and experiences of young children, to fall within their level of intellectual development, and at the same time to offer the children something which they themselves would recognize as new or problematic and in need of reflection (Lipman, 1974; 1976; 1978; Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyan, 1977, p. 2).

b. The respondents further indict the teaching of philosophy to children on the grounds that students will require a critical consciousness only when their formal education terminates. This seems a very strange view for educators to take, given the many important decisions with long-term effects on their own lives that students make during the years they spend in school. It is difficult to envisage what sort of evidence would support the claim that students have no need of a critical consciousness till they leave school; this perhaps explains why the respondents themselves do not offer us any such evidence.

c. The respondents conclude this section with a word of caution "against the one-sided training of the intellect in isolation from the senses." This statement reveals an underlying assumption on their part — that the teaching of philosophy to children would automatically preclude other aspects of their development. To be taken seriously, such a view requires some weight of evidence in its favor — evidence which the respondents fail altogether to provide.

2. The second major difficulty which the respondents find with my position is that it has failed to take cognizance of the differences between children and adults and furthermore that the proposal to teach philosophy to children is based on this mistaken perception of them as "miniature adults." Professors Jackson and Ott claim, to the contrary, that children are creatures different in kind, not just degree, from adults — that "childhood is the age of the senses, the age of joy." "Intellectual sophistication," while appropriate for an adult, if forced on a child, will "deprive him [sic] of something which he can never recover — childhood — as well as good common sense."

No support is offered for the second of these claims — that intellectual sophistication will deprive children of common sense. Some attempt is made to support the first of these claims — that deprivation of childhood will follow on the heels of intellectual sophistication in children. For 10-year-olds to engage "in philosophical discussions of marriage, death, unemployment, and personal relationships" is seen by the respondents as "a recipe for the production of neurotic children." They express concern for the unkindness of this remark. What gives me cause for worry is not that the remark is unkind, but that it is uninformed. For 10-year-old children are very much concerned with exactly these issues, particularly where they have impinged on the child's life. Children with parents on

welfare are very much concerned with the problem of unemployment. Children who have had a loved grandparent die are often almost fixated on the phenomenon of death. To address the issues of death and unemployment with such children is not to saddle them with the problems of adults; it is rather to recognize and to take seriously the child's own overwhelming concerns with these matters. Philosophy classes in the schools provide a forum for systematically examining such issues under the guidance of an adult whose professional expertise specially equips her or him to help students come to grips with the complexities of these topics.

3. Professors Ott and Jackson point out, correctly, that in my paper critical thinking is identified with philosophical thinking. This identification prevents me, we are told, from seeing the fallaciousness of my claim that philosophy is the ideal vehicle for giving birth to that critical demeanor which is inseparable from understanding and knowledge. The respondents give two reasons why this statement is false. The first reason they offer is that "philosophy is not always the ideal vehicle for giving birth to the critical demeanor." That is, Professors Jackson and Ott claim that my statement is false because it is not always true, an instance of begging the question remarkable at least for its directness. Their second reason is that in early education the acquisition of knowledge must receive more emphasis than the acquisition of a critical demeanor. But one of the central arguments in my paper is that there can be no knowledge divorced from critical analysis. There can be belief, there can be memorization, and there can be unquestioning acquiescence to authority, but there can never be knowledge, which entails, among other things, having processed beliefs through one's critical faculties and judged them acceptable.

Nevertheless, one important point does emerge from the respondents' discussion here. They urge, correctly, that clear and critical thinking should characterize students' work in any discipline. I agree that it should, but worry that it often does not, and for this reason argue in my paper that the surest means to the development of this critical demeanor is through the teaching of philosophy. This by no means rules out the possibility of, nor discourages, the development of critical and analytic abilities from within other disciplines. Neither does it suggest that critical thinking is a substitute for thorough grounding in the literature and methodology of traditional pre-college disciplines. To cite an authority of my own, "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (Kant, 1963, p. 93).

4. Much of this portion of the respondents' paper is a reiteration of point 3 discussed above — hence they urge that traditional disciplines could be taught with philosophical sensitivity, thus obviating the need for the explicit teaching of philosophy. Four new points emerge under point 4 as well, and my discussion will be restricted to them.

a. The respondents appear to align the views of those who would advocate pre-college philosophy with "the lunatic fringe" who "would expect seven-year-olds themselves to undertake a significant part of the planning of their own educational experiences." Nowhere in my paper have I advocated that seven-year-olds design their own curriculum nor would I be prepared to defend such a view. Neither do I see any connecting links between teaching children philosophy and saddling them with full or partial responsibility for deciding upon "their own educational experiences."

b. The respondents take issue with my claim that the study of philosophy would not be prohibitively difficult for children — that we need only demand of philosophy teachers that they gauge the difficulty of the material to the age and ability of the children under their instruction, a demand we make of teachers in any discipline area. Professors Ott and Jackson suggest that there is a difference in kind between philosophy and traditional disciplines which my paper obfuscates — that whereas mathematics and literature, for example, do include both difficult and simple topics, what is peculiar to philosophical topics is that they are by definition abstract and difficult, and hence unsuitable material for the pre-college curriculum. I have no wish to dispute the difficult and abstract quality of philosophical questions; nevertheless children, even very young ones, reveal a deep interest in precisely these questions. Furthermore, abstractness admits of levels, and provided we take care to match the level of abstractness to the child's ability I see no problem. The respondents almost appear to be suggesting that any issue easy enough to be understood by a child is not sufficiently difficult to be philosophical. Since this would be to commit yet again the fallacy of begging the question, I hesitate to impute such a view to them.

c. Professors Jackson and Ott suggest that particularly in the elementary school, but even in the secondary school, students have insufficient experience on which to base philosophical discussions. They thus express "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." I fail to understand exactly what is at issue with these first two doubts, so I shall restrict myself to the third. If, as the respondents claim, student discussion of such topics is "muddy, deep, and dangerous," then such issues should no more be included in traditional subject areas than in a philosophy course. That there is in fact a great deal of discussion of the abortion issue from Grade 6 onwards from the perspective of particular religious denominations signals the need for a more neutral analysis of this very controversial topic. Furthermore, whether such topics be "muddy, deep, and dangerous" or not, few of today's high school students can remain untouched by such issues as abortion, employment, pregnancy, and so on.

This in itself is a very powerful reason for encouraging them to bring to these topics the highest degree of enlightenment and critical acumen possible.

d. The respondents appear to be claiming here that any notion of education, such as that of R. S. Peters, which involves broad understanding and "reflective appreciation" is unrealizable for the masses, and that this is another reason for dismissing the viability of pre-college philosophy. Such a claim, however, requires a defence which it does not receive from the respondents, who simply ask whether requiring such a broad and deep notion of "popular education . . . is to seek an unrealistic explication of what, for many, can remain tacit?"

5. The respondents express dissatisfaction with my report that reading scores and problem solving abilities of children who studied philosophy in several elementary school classrooms were higher than those of children in control groups. What I need to have established, they maintain, is

> 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.

It is not clear to me that the onus is on the defenders of pre-college philosophy, rather than its attackers, to investigate the potential of other non-philosophical methods as instruments for improving the reading and problem-solving skills of children. Neither is it clear to me why, if we have such time-tested, child-adapted materials available, the philosophy classes conducted by the IAPC group were able to achieve such dramatic success.

To conclude, "Children and Philosophy" was not helpful critique of "Pre-College Philosophy: Defined and Defended." The respondents raised no points which required a rethinking of any parts of the original thesis. Part of the reason for the weakness of their response can be traced to the tone of their language throughout the paper, which tends to be vague, unclear, and highly emotive, sometimes prejudicially so. Thus, for example, they say that unlike "philosophers [who] almost unanimously condemn it," sophists would condone the teaching of philosophy to children "and they, like Professor Ayim, promised wondrous results." In their defence of postponing philosophy until post-secondary school, they claim that it is unimportant that a child can perform "logical somersaults at 5 or 10." The respondents also insinuate membership of the pro-philosophy group in "the lunatic fringe" which would hand over to seven-year-olds the design of their own curriculum.

The charge of sophism I find distressing, and I shall conclude by defending myself against it. The sophists, in my understanding, were a group of itinerant teachers who taught for money in the rich private sector. Although it is not clear to me that they characteristically taught

philosophy to very young children, at least their classrooms entered the homes of anyone rich enough to pay for their lessons. Furthermore, the sophists themselves often had no real understanding of philosophical issues, but substituted rhetoric for finer philosophic analysis.

The philosophy for children program which I have supported controverts sophism in both of these respects. First, it would take philosophy into the forum of the compulsory public school, thus ensuring that all children, rich or poor, were exposed to it; second, it is precisely in order to prevent a mere superficial analysis of philosophical issues that it is important to have these matters addressed via a philosophy course and directed by someone with a thorough background in philosophy. It may be true that there will be a temporary difficulty in locating such teachers, but that is a separate problem. If I have extricated myself from the clutches of sophism, I am willing to take my chances at the hands of the lunatic fringe.

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