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Doing Philosophy with Children: A Sometimes Moral Imperative

Nathaniel L. Jackson

Plato thought, though with notable reservations, that young persons are irresponsible and insincere with philosophy, so that to engage them would be either dangerous or not worthwhile, or both (*Republic*, Book VII, 539ac; Grube translation). Aristotle characterized children as incapable of choice ([*Nicomachean Ethics*], 1111b7) and unfinished relative to a human *telos* (Tress 19, 21), creatures of instinct who seek to satisfy their selfish needs, so that philosophy seems beyond them. Later, Rousseau's *Emile* argues that we ought to educate children without explanation or reasoning (169) and to limit verbal lessons, letting experience do the talking. Such thinkers have been broadly and deeply influential, and Matthews notes that no widely accepted theory of developmental psychology makes any real place for philosophical thinking in preadolescents (*Dialogues with Children*, 116). Consequently we are reluctant to think that children can do worthwhile philosophy.

While my thesis is dependent on children's being able to philosophize, it is not my goal at present to prove this rigorously. Anyone who questions whether children are capable of meaningful philosophic dialogue I refer to Matthews *Dialogues With Children*. Again and again, Matthews presents us with children who look, listen, ask, reflect, argue, and reason. Other books of his, *Philosophy and the Young Child*, and *The Philosophy of Childhood* show us how the experiments of Piagetian developmental psychology have been unfair in asking pointed questions under contrived circumstances, and how we have thereby overlooked the capabilities of children in supportive, authentic environments. Additionally, Sharon G. Palermo testifies that she has seen first graders think logically, sustain a train of thought, imagine circumstances from points of view other than their own, make distinctions, provide evidence, and wonder

imaginatively about phenomena outside their immediate perceptions, as well as think concretely and abstractly as the situation and subject matter require (249).

One might wonder whether we can actually call these activities "philosophy" without doing some injustice to the term, so it is clear that we need a definition of philosophy. First, we must note that philosophy means love of knowledge. My working definition of philosophy includes (1) the practice of asking and answering questions about basic assumptions, ideas, and beliefs, and (2) the body of work produced by those who practice philosophy. Philosophy includes the use of reasons, arguments, and empirical data. While philosophers employ many tools, a climate of openness to controversial claims, and of willingness to work through perplexity, are essential to using those tools philosophically. Wherever people are freely raising basic questions, and where they are using reasons, empirical data, and arguments to answer those questions, people are doing philosophy. Obviously there remains much to be said about how philosophy curricula would be best designed and administered, but it is my goal at present only to evaluate the ethics of philosophical education in general.

Once we accept that children can do meaningful philosophy, we must ask whether philosophy is desirable and justifiable in public, state-sponsored education. Restated, we must ask if philosophy is good for kids, families, and our society at large. Ideally, I might say it should not be a popular pursuit at all. However, given democracy, where governance is to some degree the responsibility of every citizen, it is clearly incumbent upon everyone to think about what is in their common and particular interests, and to represent these interests effectively. I will argue that doing philosophy is usually the best way to nurture these important, empowering activities, though there are some cases that warrant careful exclusion.

Philosophy is dangerous by nature. It is improvisational and easily enters controversial ground. It can challenge our most basic assumptions and leave us feeling naked, uprooted,

unsupported, disillusioned and/or nauseated. However, it can also affirm, empower, and authenticate. Obviously, the latter constitute our ultimate goals, so what follows will show how to foster them, and conversely, how to identify cases where we might do more harm than good.

A practical objection might be that doing philosophy in school will take away from time that would be better spent preparing students to meet graduation standards and developing skills required by high-stakes tests. Pritchard, in *Studies in Philosophy for Children*, shows us how the critical thinking skills, or critical imagination that philosophical curricula may promote can result in lower test scores. Pritchard identifies several kinds of test items that are ambiguous and mono-contextual (89-92). While Pritchard avoids entering the debate on what critical thinking essentially is, he does say that it is not only problem solving, but also problem creating (92). That is, critical thinking involves reframing questions and considering multiple perspectives, which is counter-productive to the standardized problem solving techniques that most standardized tests measure. While I know of no studies that either confirm or deny effects of philosophical thinking on test scores, Pritchard gives us sufficient reason to question testing as a measure of philosophy's instructional value.

I disagree with Pritchard when he goes on to say that taking standardized tests is not nearly as important in our lives as being critical thinkers, for the reason that high-stakes tests are increasingly determiners of important things like graduation, grade promotion, and school accreditation. The burden, however, is with test and policy makers to make sure that tests and requirements reflect higher-order thinking skills, as well as the basal level they were developed to measure. Therefore, until our high-stakes tests are unambiguous and consider contextual interpretations, it is not philosophy that would be shown to be flawed by lower test scores, but the tests themselves.

Unless a child is exposed to philosophical dialogue throughout early childhood, the method of philosophy itself, not to mention the content explored, will occasion what can be called an

experience of alternation. Berger defines an experience of alternation as one by which a new perspective on society is acquired (Berger 10). I extend this to include new perspectives generally, be they on society, the natural world, or an abstract concept. To acquire a new perspective, it could be argued, is not essential to understanding or being exposed to a new perspective, in that we need not adopt a belief in the validity of the perspective. But to understand or to be exposed to a new perspective necessitates the acquisition of something, whether reasons for why some people have that perspective, or arguments for why we should have that perspective. This will be important to us later.

Acquiring a new perspective may take years or just moments, but it is marked by the transformation of a world which we are taught to take for granted into one that is very questionable, or precarious (Berger 9). By precarious, Berger means arbitrary, absurd, and essentially meaningless. Besides facing strong legal challenges (e.g. *Mozert v. Hawkins*) which I will discuss later, we can see that facilitating experiences of alternation in schools might do many a disservice, raising questions that divide student and family, or that remove comforting certainties. We may end up inculcating, if not relativism, a disturbing ironism, students ending up with radical and continuing doubts about their fundamental convictions. However, with proper nurturing and support, experiencing alternation may help students to create meaning independent of social fictions whose mythical ambience may discourage the authentic development of belief and identity. The hope is that, having acquired a new perspective, one could be critical of past perspectives. After several experiences of alternation, probably, one will have a more mobile perspective that can even be critical of itself. Once one can be critical of even oneself, one can deliberately develop an identity and purpose rather than having it bestowed by the perspective itself. While I think that the latter state of affairs is a more likely outcome of doing philosophy with children if we do it respectfully (more on this later), it is almost certain that some children will be disposed to experience the former. Therefore, we need an argument that

does not depend on some notion of philosophy's universal beneficence, or on the mesmeric force of authenticity and autonomy.

I move to a more contextual justification. Given the conditions of modernity (commercialism and mass media; constantly converging diverse perspectives; rapidly changing demographics and mobile populations; etc.) under which the vast majority of U.S. youth currently live, and of democracy (to which dialogue and negotiation between holders of conflicting views is fundamental) to *not* make schools communities of philosophical inquiry where deep, probing discussion is allowed and encouraged would be to leave students with no recourse or method of justification to which to refer when faced with difficult decisions and dilemmas. It is better to undergo precarious states in youth, so that they are not so shocking when children grow older. Undergoing precarious states in a supportive community of inquiry is far preferable to the precariousness of having lived an unexamined life into adulthood, and then being confronted with unanticipated criticism in the absence of any sympathetic forum. If it is the responsibility of public schools to prepare their students to be responsible, functional citizens, it is incumbent upon schools to educate children in critical thought and to expose them to diverse ways of thinking.

It might be said that I am here moving illicitly from is to ought, committing the naturalistic fallacy. I draw a distinction: I am not saying that our society is composed of diverse views, so diversity is to be promoted in school; I am arguing that since our society is composed of diverse views, diversity must be considered and understood in school. Furthermore, I argue that a school curriculum exposing students to diversity in the absence of philosophy is disrespectful to the diversity that students themselves bring to class. So long as neither children nor parents reject the practice of philosophical inquiry and alternation, we can conceive of an educational method by which conversations would serve to educate children in capacities of both intrinsic and

extrinsic value that is, to help us better know and better deal with both ourselves and our peers.

Weil wrote about avoiding the uprootedness that domination and exploitation foster, and in so doing, gives us a vague though useful picture of how dialogue and interchange are a natural aspect of our interconnected world. Through this, we can see how philosophy would serve as a valuable forum to make explicit the influences that are exerted on us necessarily by virtue of our being's contingency. In other words, philosophy provides the opportunity to see how we differ, and it is this recognition of difference that clarifies our particular places.

A human being has roots by virtue of [its] real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expressions for the future. This participation is a natural one, in the sense that it is automatically brought about by place, conditions of birth, profession and social surroundings. Every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary É to draw well-nigh the whole of [ones] moral, intellectual and spiritual life by way of the environment of which [one] forms a natural part.

Reciprocal exchanges by which different sorts of environments exert influence on one another are no less vital than to be rooted in natural surroundings. *But a given environment should not receive an outside influence as something additional to itself, but as a stimulant intensifying its own particular way of life.* It should draw nourishment from outside contributions É and the human beings who compose it should receive such contributions only from its hands. When a É painter walks into a picture gallery, [the painters] own originality is thereby confirmed (Weil 41, emphasis added).

However, we clearly must consider what to do when students or parents views are fundamentally opposed to diversity of content and/or exercise of critical capacities. The case of *Mozert v. Hawkins* constitutes the most topical case of such an impasse. A

group of Christian fundamentalist parents, most expansively Vicki Frost, comprehensively and systematically rejected the content of a basal reading textbook series published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston that was used in their children's public school in Hawkins County, Tennessee. They claimed that the texts presented themes repugnant to their religion. The parents first argued that the school was forcing the student-plaintiffs to read books which teach or inculcate values in violation of their religious beliefs and convictions (*Mozert v. Hawkins*). When the defendant made a strong case that students were not at all required to agree with the text or believe in what is portrayed, the plaintiffs modified their objection. Frost and company argued that simple exposure to the texts might cause their children to come to conclusions contrary to their religious belief, and that that in itself violated the childrearing practices prescribed by the parents religion. In finding for the defendant, the 6th Circuit Court stated that there was no compulsion to believe or agree with the texts, so that school practices were constitutional and not in violation of the Free Exercise Clause. The only accommodations the plaintiffs would accept were in violation of the Establishment Clause, which protects public institutions from demands that they change unless they are found to have violated the Free Exercise Clause. The ruling depends on whether or not the plaintiffs religion was violated by simple exposure to certain content. The judgment states that there was no evidence that the conduct required of the students was forbidden by their religion. Therefore, the plaintiffs were found to have no constitutional claim on the government.

Clearly, however, reading from the Holt texts violated Vicki Frosts religious beliefs, or she would not have said that it did. What can constitute evidence that something is forbidden by a persons religion? If it is an explicit passage from a sacred text, we will be inclusive only of institutional religions, and only of those with literalist interpretations of their texts. These are very few, and I see no reason why they deserve more protection, if not for the reason that otherwise schools would be subject to constant

lawsuits, though this notion is explicitly denied (*Mozert v. Hawkins*, 1533).

Curren notes the dispute between comprehensive liberals and political liberals, (section 6, Political philosophy) in dealing with this dilemma. Gutmann and Fish, respectively, represent strains of these opposing philosophies. Gutmann contends that the plaintiffs objection is defeated by arguing that it undermines principles of reciprocity that are basic to democratic functioning. By not admitting exposure to ideas she does not hold, especially to ideas like human dignity and worth, Vicki Frost and company deny the school board the authority to teach future citizens the skills and knowledge that are necessary for protecting the liberties and opportunities of all citizens, including the parents and their children themselves (Gutmann 65). She requires that a judgment must have been deliberated to qualify as moral. Fish rejects this theoretical move, as well as the possibility of the apolitical, disinterested perspective which Gutmann distinguishes from the implausible beliefs of those who cite the Bible or the laws of nature (Mutual Respect as a Device of Exclusion 91) . Fish characterizes Gutmanns position as veiled in language of reciprocity, when her view itself is non-reciprocal with regard to cases like that of Vicki Frost. Gutmann, on Fishs account, argues that the deliberative morality has the distinguishing (and salvational) characteristic of providing the framework in which all the other, less capacious, moralities can disagree without being unduly unpleasant to one another; it provides a morally optimal basis. Fish admits, Yes, it does, for those citizens who already identify the moral optimum with the scene of rational reflection and debate (96). I follow Fish in allowing Gutmann no moral high ground.

No morality based on inclusion can *compel* inclusion when the very constituents it seeks to represent and include demand to be excluded. Inclusion of such constituents must consist in modifying practice so that either (1) exclusion is not demanded, or (2) those who refuse mainstream inclusion are accommodated under alternative programs. It would be an

outright failure of liberal democracy's own central tenets if it could not find room for those whose childrearing practices do not reflect its liberalism. Such a failure would clearly exhibit the ideological bias, and so there is nothing pure about liberalism, though it seems that accommodation of Vicki Frost is within the reach of its theoretical framework.

So when we have a conflict of interests such as in *Mozert v. Hawkins*, we have a dire political situation indeed, though in the presence of childhood philosophy I think such situations would be even rarer, and therefore somewhat less troubling politically, if just as perplexing theoretically. While I hold that it is the schools responsibility not to compel any practice that children or parents claim violates the mandates of their convictions, the state cannot always provide alternatives itself. Therefore, families whose most fundamental convictions bring them to reject the educational practices of their district ought to be assisted, in the way of tax credits, curricular support, or other creative means, to find or create alternative education, as careful consideration of the case warrants. This alternative education would be monitored to assure its constitutionality. That is, it must allow for basic cognitive development, and must not do things like incite violence. A liberal democracy, on its own principles, is not justified in doing otherwise, and would set a bad example if it did. In allowing for such alternatives, liberal democracy has a great opportunity to put on display its potential for the allowance of diversity.

But what about nuts who would fill their children's heads with notions of white supremacy? First of all, parents already have the liberty to teach their children such things. Secondly, while such a view may foster a gross disregard for many peoples worth and dignity, I frankly consider white supremacy to be a depraved position that will always implode, even if unfortunate circumstances may occasion its revival. In any case, given an informed populace under conditions of political freedom, I do not see any one set of views, especially not white supremacy, taking hold and imposing its will on any large scale. And any small-scale

cycle of racism would be just as probable under compulsory public education.

As suggested earlier, I distinguish importantly between: (1) a school curriculum that occasions experiences of alternation while providing no forum in which meaningful dialogue would offer the opportunity to explore the fallout of alternation, failing to affirm students own diverse states by not encouraging explication of why the curriculum may be relatively unacceptable, and (2) a curriculum which recognizes the controversial nature of almost any content, and which provides a safe space for understanding what the content means, and to compare, contrast, reconcile, or reject it. I wonder what Vicki Frost would have thought of the Hawkins County curriculum if, besides exposing her children to objectionable material, it engaged them in charitable discussion of their faith, and helped them articulate their positions among others doing the same. If Vicki Frosts children are ever to advocate on behalf of their own children, they will eventually need to be able to do this.

Now we seem to have a conception of how philosophy, being a method conducive to faculties and behaviors that are valuable to, or at least preferable for, children in our society, is justified in guiding educational practice. However, DAngelo examined several methods of philosophical education and found that each of them promotes a marked ideology. Gee also brings a model of discourse analysis that questions whether certain models of education for dialogue and critical consciousness are not just another form of indoctrination. I acknowledge that our discussions will always have ideological content, and that no presentation of material can ever be completely neutral, and that even complete neutrality would represent an ideology in itself. I contend though that when dialogues are conducted in a way that both affirms and challenges universally and particularly, and when methods of evaluation depend not on personal positions but on participation and understanding, even Vicki Frost might join us in the classroom in fact, she would be invited.

Of first necessity is a controlled environment. By this I mean an environment in which each student feels secure and threatened by neither teacher nor student. If the respect of an environment breaks down often, and students establish relations of dominance and submission, then students will be that much farther from the state of equality that breeds feelings of self-worth and ability. Thus each student is encouraged, for example, to explicate the advantages or righteousness of their position, but when one student glorifies itself at the expense of another, the hurt student must be validated in their feelings and the offender be brought to empathize. Then the offending party should have it explained that they can undo the harm they've done by apologizing, if not for the content of their statement, for the force of its delivery. I am firmly against forced apologies, because I am firmly against forced forgiveness. Naturally, for acts of apology and forgiveness to be understood by children, they must be reinforced by classroom role playing, discussion, games, etc. In short, I would want to establish a philosophical community where we have a universal respect for each other as holders of unique positions that we may not fully understand. If we work with students and their parents to affirm their respective roots and convictions in light of the diversity that constitutes our curriculum and our classroom, parents will be far less likely to demand alternative education.

The degree to which every view is simultaneously affirmed and challenged is the degree to which we reconcile the conflict between promoting the discursive elements of a given ideology with our goals of philosophic abstraction. When we can be comfortable with disagreement and difference of opinion, and understand the reasons for which we disagree, while neither accepting others views nor condemning more than what we understand them to be, we will have achieved at least a peaceful space where we can practice skills valuable to the democratic participation and modern life that pervade our culture and institutions.

In conclusion, doing philosophy with children is justified on many grounds, and is a moral imperative on several counts.

Perhaps not all children are psychologically disposed to benefit from philosophy. Additionally, the parents of some children may object to any school-sponsored exposure to diverse views, and they may exercise their right to remove their children from such curricula. However, there is great reason to believe that philosophical education will make our schools more inclusive, desirable, and beneficial for students and parents.

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