

THE CULTIVATION OF PHILOSOPHICAL SENSITIVITY

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Introduction

Over the last several years I've been thinking more seriously about what is required to teach philosophy well. In the fifteen years during which I've been involved in pre-college philosophy, the pace of introducing philosophy into schools in the United States has been very slow. Over the last five years, however, there has been growing interest and engagement in the field, with new programs starting at many colleges and universities around the country. In this time, I've had several conversations with people working in the field about whether philosophy could one day be offered in every school in every state.

My excitement about the growing interest in pre-college philosophy is tempered by a concern and a question. My concern is that it is not clear (to me, at least, and I think to many or most people) who is going to teach all of these philosophy classes. My question is: What kind of training is needed to teach philosophy and do it well?

At this point, most of the people involved in this field are either philosophy faculty or graduate students, or high school teachers with backgrounds in philosophy. Most pre-college teachers have had little or no exposure to philosophy because, of course, for the most part, people educated in the US are not introduced to philosophy in any formal way unless they take a philosophy class in college. Although the philosophy faculty and graduate students interested in this field are often passionate about it, only a small minority of professional philosophers is drawn to this work, and those of us who are interested can only teach so many pre-college classes. If pre-college philosophy classes are to be more widely available, then we must look to K-12 teachers.

In this light, my question about what kind of training is needed to teach philosophy becomes a more critical one. A short and incomplete response is that what teachers need to teach philosophy well varies, depending on the grade level of their students. I believe that more training is needed for teachers seeking to teach philosophy in upper-level classrooms. High school students, for example, and especially seniors and juniors, are capable of analyzing much more complex philosophy questions and engaging in the study of primary texts. Therefore, the philosophy teacher who has been exposed to philosophical texts and trained philosophically is more likely to be successful at involving high school students in philosophy discussions.

Elementary school teachers, however, also need philosophical training if they are successfully to facilitate philosophy sessions with their students. There have been several recent publications that have suggested that elementary school teachers do not need to know any philosophy to teach it. I disagree. Although introducing philosophy to younger children does not typically involve reading primary philosophical texts, but rather focuses on inspiring conversations among the children about philosophical ideas, nevertheless the teacher leading these discussions must have both a clear sense for how to identify a philosophical question and the ability to recognize the philosophical content of the students' statements and questions. To be able to monitor a philosophical dialogue and support its progress, a pre-college philosophy teacher of any grade must have sufficient training to be able to identify the philosophical substance and assumptions inherent in student remarks and the logical relationships between various students' statements.

It is my view that a foundational skill for teaching philosophy at any level is the development of what I am calling "philosophical sensitivity," which I define as the capacity to engage in identification of and reflection about the larger questions that underlie most of what we think we understand about the world. I have written and spoken elsewhere at greater length about this topic, and my aim here is simply to provide an introduction to the subject.

Theoretical Conception: What is Philosophical Sensitivity?

Philosophical sensitivity involves the development of our ability to identify and analyze fundamental questions about the human condition. My conception of this perceptual capacity is based in part on Aristotle's idea of an innate faculty that we can develop over time and with training. Aristotle postulated a capacity for *moral* perception which, when cultivated, gradually enables us to perceive almost instinctively the important features of complex ethical situations. These perceptual skills, nurtured through training and experience, help us to foster a more nuanced ability to see aspects of moral problems that are not apparent to others who have not developed this capacity.

Similarly, philosophical sensitivity is a perceptual capacity that involves awareness of the unsettled questions that haunt virtually every aspect of our lives. What makes me myself? Do I have free will? What, if anything, is the meaning of life? This capacity, when cultivated, allows us to discern the philosophically significant aspects of ordinary experience by

identifying assumptions or unsettled questions that underlie situations. For example, a student might wonder whether it's fair that children under age 18 don't get to vote in national elections. Philosophical sensitivity helps a teacher notice that several philosophical questions are imbedded here: "What is fairness?" "What does fairness require?" "Is it always unfair to discriminate against particular groups?" "What is a child?" "What kinds of capacities are necessary to make good choices?" We exhibit philosophical sensitivity when we are able to identify and then explore the philosophical puzzles inherent in most situations; and as we utilize this capacity, it deepens. In other words, the more we notice and examine the philosophical features of our experiences, the more philosophically aware we become.

How does one identify a philosophical question? Unsurprisingly, this is not an uncontroversial question among philosophers. It's difficult to define the margins of philosophical questions without omitting something that should be included or including questions that we agree are not philosophical. However, one way to identify at least roughly when something is *not* a question of philosophy is to ask if it's possible to settle it by reference to empirical facts. If so, it's not a philosophical question, no matter how difficult it may be to answer. Of course, there are many hybrid questions, such as, for example, "What is the mind?" or "What does it mean to be alive?" that involve both philosophy and science, and for which there are no clear ways to delineate the borders for what's philosophical and what's not. In general, though, philosophical questions are not fully answered with facts about the world, and they tend to be questions that seem likely to be perennially unsettled.

Identifying a philosophical question involves the ability to recognize when a situation rests on assumption about the world that is open to question. Much of what we think, do and say rests on unexamined assumptions that can be uncovered through philosophical scrutiny. Such scrutiny generally examines the meaning of a concept or idea, suggesting questions that are not likely to be answered in any final way. This doesn't mean, however, that philosophical questions are questions without answers. Often students (and teachers) who are not trained philosophically understand philosophy as involving "questions that have no answers," and assume that discussions about these questions simply involve students stating their opinions. However, there's a clear distinction between a question that's *unanswerable* and a question that's *contestable*. An unanswerable question is one with no answers: "What does a married bachelor look like?" Philosophical questions are neither unanswerable nor just a matter of opinion. There *are* answers to them; they are just not final, incontestable answers.

Although philosophical sensitivity involves reflection about large and often abstract questions, for the most part these questions are raised in very specific ways. Our own unique experiences give us a particular philosophical perspective, and what we notice in the philosophical universe depends on that perspective. Philosophical sensitivity involves an awareness of the deep questions raised by the most ordinary aspects of everyday experience; it allows us to see, (as Bertrand Russell put it) "familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect." This demands acute attentiveness to the ways in which the individual details of situations give rise to certain philosophical questions. Thinking about such questions generally leads to recognizing related questions, so that the more we examine this dimension of experience the more these kinds of questions leap out at us in everyday life. As philosophical sensitivity is nurtured over time, it becomes almost second nature.

Cultivating Philosophical Sensitivity

Cultivating philosophical sensitivity involves training our perceptual capacities and, in particular, our skills at noticing the philosophical implications and assumptions contained in almost all speech and behavior. As we engage in philosophical reflection and are trained to see the philosophical features of experience, we come to understand the world differently. Our education and experience in philosophical questioning and deliberation enable us to notice and draw out aspects of experience that would otherwise remain elusive to us.

Training in philosophical sensitivity doesn't consist in learning a set of rules for when philosophical questions arise and how to address them. In another parallel with Aristotle's description of moral perception, no decision procedure exists to govern how to identify and grapple with philosophical questions. There is no list of all possible philosophical questions. However, basic knowledge about the core areas of philosophy-epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, logic, aesthetics and the history of philosophy- is essential to recognize the philosophical content of various situations. A philosophically sensitive person is one who is able to view a circumstance or set of ideas and recognize the philosophical facets involved. In order to be able to do this, some background in philosophy is required.

Probably the best initial way to develop one's capacity for philosophical sensitivity is to gain experience participating in a group in which philosophical questions are identified and explored in a collaborative community, whether in a college classroom or some other elsewhere. For example, teachers can begin to cultivate philosophical sensitivity by attending an intensive weekend training program during which they are introduced to the materials, discussions and conceptual methods relevant to teaching pre-college philosophy. Teachers can then begin trying out philosophy sessions in their classrooms and, in ideal situations, participate in ongoing professional learning communities with trained philosophers. Another promising model is the philosopher-in-residence program, in which trained philosophers both facilitate classroom philosophy classes and provide a philosophical context in which school-wide teacher training and support can be

conducted. Partnerships between philosophy and education departments, whereby philosophy majors take education courses and education majors are introduced to philosophy, is another possibility, as is the creation of online communities of teachers and philosophers where they can collaborate on theories and methods.

Most pre-college philosophy sessions, especially for younger students, are arenas for discussing philosophical questions, not lessons about what historical and contemporary philosophers have to say about these questions. That is, we engage young people in *doing* philosophy, rather than studying it. Instead of (or in addition to) reading the great philosophers and analyzing their arguments, young people explore in structured, collaborative classroom discussions the sorts of questions that have traditionally intrigued philosophers.

My view is that philosophically sensitive teachers can successfully facilitate such pre-college philosophy discussions without earning degrees or spending years of study in philosophy. In order to do so, two main pedagogical skills are essential: (1) the ability initially to motivate or inspire a philosophical discussion, and (2) a facility for shaping its progress.

What Makes a Discussion Philosophical?

A philosophical discussion involves the following three elements: (1) examination of an abstract, general question that cannot be answered empirically; (2) arguments given to support the views offered; and (3) a progression or development of either the meaning of the idea(s) being explored or the participants' understanding of a concept or concepts.

To be able to inspire such a discussion, a teacher must be able to identify the philosophical content in students' questions and comments, and to support the students' efforts to engage in mutual reflection about the questions that most engage them. One method for doing this is to construct what is sometimes called a community of philosophical inquiry (CPI), in which the teacher's role is to guide students in a dialogue about philosophical issues or concepts generated and explored by the group.

There has been a great deal written about the formation of a CPI, but I want just to articulate what I see as four key features of a CPI:

1. The group is engaged in a structured, collaborative inquiry aimed at constructing meaning and acquiring understanding through the examination of philosophical questions or concepts of interest to the participants;
2. There is a consensus of what historically has been called "epistemological modesty," an acknowledgement that all members of the group, including the teacher, are fallible, and therefore hold views that could end up being mistaken;
3. The teacher demonstrates a reticence about advocating his or her own philosophical views, and models a comfort with uncertainty since there are no final and agreed-upon answers to most of the questions being explored by the CPI; and
4. Participants refrain from using technical philosophical language or referring to the work of professional philosophers to construct their arguments. This encourages the group to focus on exploring the questions themselves and not the past or current history of the subject among philosophers.

The teacher guides the CPI without attempting to control it, a delicate balance between helping students achieve philosophical clarity and depth and refraining from imposing on the conversation the teacher's own preferences for subject matter. Being able to discern which issues are philosophical and which are not is particularly important for ensuring the philosophical integrity of the CPI; that is, that it principally engenders *philosophical* conversations and not something else.

In any pre-college philosophy session there will be periods of time when the conversation turns away from the philosophical into examples from science, say, or stories about personal experience. The point is not to prohibit such examples or stories, as they can be useful in the context of exploring a particular issue of philosophy, but to explore only those relevant to the conversation. The aim is to ensure that the discussion is *primarily* philosophical, as opposed an opinion gathering, group therapy or other kind of exercise.

Successful philosophy teachers have their own individual approaches for motivating this kind of philosophical community, but all are enthusiastic about philosophical inquiry, recognize where particular conversations might be headed, see critical junctures where the posing of a provocative question might motivate the discussion, and help students define clearly and examine carefully the questions they wish to explore.

Progress in Philosophical Inquiry

The second practical skill a pre-college philosophy teacher needs is competence at shaping the progress of a philosophical conversation, which ultimately should proceed in a forward movement. This doesn't mean that the discussion won't loop back and forth, touching several conceptual issues and coming back to earlier questions, rather than developing in a straight line. However, there should be some forward progress—at the very least, a better understanding of

what the participants in the conversation think, greater conceptual clarity, identification of key assumptions, and/or appreciation of alternative ways of viewing the subject.

Two related proficiencies are essential here. The teacher must be able to listen carefully to, and recognize the assumptions underlying, what's being said, and to articulate connections and distinctions among the views offered by the students.

Shaping the progress of a philosophical conversation also involves recognizing when it's going in circles and not moving forward in any meaningful way. At this point the teacher might consider what other ideas have emerged during the conversation and gauge whether the participants are interested in moving on to a new topic. Especially because philosophical conversations tend to end without a final resolution of the question being examined, it's important that the teacher help the group feel some sense of accomplishment at the end of a philosophy session by pointing out the progress that's been made.

Why Philosophical Sensitivity?

Philosophical sensitivity is important, it seems to me, because it is at the heart of the whole enterprise of bringing philosophy into the lives of young people and helping them to learn to think well and trust their own questions. One of the primary tasks of growing up is making sense of the world and one's place in it. To do this effectively requires an ability to take control over one's life, and this demands an ability to think effectively and to ask good questions. Thinking and questioning are central to philosophy. Because philosophical issues are complex, they demand rigorous and careful reasoning. Because they are unsettled, they inspire the formulation of clear and articulate questions.

Each year my colleague David Shapiro and I teach an undergraduate class on philosophy for children, in which we use children's books, games and other activities to explore a wide range of philosophical questions. For many of our students, it's their first introduction to philosophy, and for virtually all of them, it's their first experience examining philosophical topics through children's literature. They visit the Seattle-area K-12 classes we teach, and they often comment on the way in which the children's discussions are quite similar to the ones we have in our UW class. One college senior recently wrote to us:

The thing that meant most to me, the most valuable lesson I learned, came from visiting a session with a group of elementary students. I was really amazed at how well these children were able to discuss with each other. They came up with fascinating questions and well thought out responses; ones that were similar to the ideas that would be presented in our classroom. After that session I found new value and respect for a child's intellect. I work with children so I know they are quite intelligent but I never really imagined holding a philosophical conversation with one.

Philosophical conversations with children engender respect for children's ideas and perspectives, and allow adults to engage with children in an endeavor that involves *thinking together*. This is quite different from the traditional teacher-learner model: here the teacher is no longer the expert, but rather a co-inquirer who seeks *with* his or her students to explore philosophical questions.

I believe that attentiveness to the philosophical dimension of life is natural for most children. They wonder about the significance of being alive, the nature of identity, the meaning of friendship and love, how to live good lives, and whether knowledge is possible. Yet continuing to wonder about these issues does not become part of the fabric of most adult lives. I think that this is a loss, and that encouraging children to engage in ongoing and critical philosophical reflection can be an important gift. Probing the assumptions that underlie what we say and do and critically analyzing the meaning of our experiences involve developing deep reasoning skills. When we engage in philosophical inquiry with children, we provide them with some important faculties for taking control of their futures and developing the confidence to build meaningful lives. Thinking about philosophical questions pushes us to remain alive to the profound mysteriousness of the human condition. This awareness can enhance the depth and richness of all of our lives.