

Philosophy Seminars for Five-Year-Olds

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For Harry

All of us, I believe, are extraordinarily active and creative intellectually when we are very young. Somehow, in the first few years of life, we acquire an identity, a consciousness of self; we discover, or create, a whole view of the world, a cosmology; and we learn to understand speech, and to speak ourselves. And we achieve all this without any formal education whatsoever. Compared with these mighty intellectual achievements of our childhood, the heights of adult artistic and scientific achievement all but pale into insignificance. It is reasonable to suppose that there is a biological, a neurological, basis for our extraordinary capacity to learn when we are very young. It probably has to do with the fact that our brains are still growing during the first few years of life. It is striking that there are things that can only be learnt during this time. If we have not had the opportunity to learn to speak by the age of twelve, we will never really learn to speak. Lightning calculators all begin to acquire their extraordinary arithmetical skills when very young. Some things, it seems, become too difficult for us to learn as we grow older. In our early childhood we are forced, by our situation, to be creative philosophers and metaphysicians, preoccupied by fundamental issues. One has only to think of the endless questioning of young children to appreciate something of their insatiable hunger to know, to understand.

The tragedy is that formal education so rarely helps us to recognize and to develop our early profound intellectual experiences and achievements. Instead of encouraging our instinctive curiosity to develop into adulthood, all too often education unintentionally stifles and crushes it out of existence.

Academic inquiry *ought* to be the outcome of all our efforts to discover what is of value in existence and to share our discoveries with others. At its most important and fundamental, inquiry is the thinking we engage in as we live, as we strive to realize what is of value to us in our life. All of us ought both to contribute to, and to learn from, inter-personal public inquiry. This two-way traffic of teaching and learning ought to start at the outset, when we first attend school. Young children, at school, need to be encouraged to tell each other about their discoveries, their experiences, their thoughts and problems. The teacher needs to encourage both speaking and listening. Such a class or seminar, devoted to the co-operative, imaginative and rational exploration of problems encountered in life, ought to form a standard – even a central and fundamental – part of all education, science and scholarship, from primary school to university.

If this were the case, then we might all discover how to use science and scholarship so as to develop our own thinking – and living. Telling others of our problems and ideas – and listening to others tell of theirs – would help us to discover and to value our own thinking. It is all too easy to dismiss our most serious and original thinking – those moments of bafflement, surmise and wonder – as mere wordless feeling, irredeemably private, signifying little. This is especially the case in childhood. Unarticulated, our thinking is liable to become neglected, stagnant, forgotten. If it is to flourish it is vital that we develop and constantly practise the difficult art of putting what we feel and think into public words. An education that gave an intellectually fundamental role to the development of this art would not only stimulate the growth of personal thinking, it would also enable us to discover vital inter-connections between our personal thinking and public scientific and scholarly thought. Academic education would be not an imposition but an invitation to participate from the outset.

I do not want to exaggerate. Education of this person-centred, participatory kind already exists, to some extent, in both the arts and the sciences. Teachers of literature, drama and the other arts appreciate that art serves, as it were, a double purpose. As we enhance our understanding and appreciation of literature, so too, incidentally, we may enhance our understanding of ourselves and of others. By exploring, in novels and plays, imaginary people

living imaginary lives, we can achieve a freedom to explore aspects of ourselves without the embarrassment or torture of public self-exposure. Furthermore, in order to improve our understanding of literature it is important that we try our hand at writing, which can enhance our powers of self-expression and our self-understanding. Analogous remarks can be made about drama, art, music, dance. And again, in science education at its best, it is appreciated that it is not just scientific results that need to be taught, but also, and perhaps most fundamentally, scientific *problems*. It has long been appreciated that in order to *understand* science it is essential to *do* it.

What is missing in all this is an appreciation of the central and unifying role of *philosophy* in all of education – philosophy pursued as the co-operative, imaginative and rational exploration of fundamental problems of living. Philosophy pursued in this way would effortlessly bridge the gulf between science and art, science and the humanities. All other parts of the curriculum – the physical and biological sciences, mathematics, geography, history, politics, literature, theatre, religion, etc. – could quite naturally and understandably emerge out of, and feed back into, the central, unifying enterprise of philosophy pursued as the open, rational exploration of fundamental problems. The very problem of how to unify all the diverse aspects of the world into a coherent, understandable whole could itself be recognized and discussed. The world we live in is a more or less inter-connected whole: it is not experienced as being split up into physics, chemistry, biology, history, literature, religion, and so on. Setting out to improve children's knowledge and understanding of the world in specialized, dissociated fragments, without any indication as to how the fragments fit together or, worse, without even an indication of the existence of the problem, is in itself an appallingly anti-rational and alienating thing to do. It amounts to the imposition of a sort of intellectual schizophrenia. It sets up a barrier between *personal* thinking and departmentalized *academic* thought, resulting in mutual distrust rather than mutual enhancement between these two kinds of thought. In important respects, academic learning cannot promote – it can only sabotage – coherent, rational thought about problems of living in this one, real, inter-connected world.

Failure to teach philosophy to five-year-olds, as a central, unifying part of the curriculum, is the result of mistaken

assumptions about both children and philosophy.

Philosophy, it is assumed, is too difficult and esoteric a subject to be taught to five-year-olds. Only adults can come to grips with such an advanced discipline. In fact it is, if anything, the other way round. Above all, it is young children who are compelled, by their situation, to be highly active and creative philosophers, daily concerned with fundamental problems about the nature of life and the world. Most adults have long ago settled in their minds, in one way or another, fundamental questions about the nature of life and the world. It is particular, detailed, and specialized problems that preoccupy adult minds. The mere fact that most adult teachers neither recognize, nor feel any discomfort concerning, the profound philosophical disorder of the curriculum they daily administer to children is itself a blatant indication of the unphilosophical character of the adult mind. Philosophy, one might say, is instinctively and naturally a concern of childhood, and only rather rarely and artificially still a matter of concern in adult life.

This in turn, of course, makes it difficult for adults to teach philosophy properly. The main mistake would be to teach philosophy as another academic subject, as a body of recognized problems, proposed solutions and debates. The pupil would be expected to learn this up. This would, of course, miss the point entirely.¹ For what is needed is, in a sense, not the *teaching* of anything at all, but rather the encouraging of children themselves to engage in the activity of articulating and scrutinizing problems and their possible solutions. Furthermore, it would be vital to do this in an honest and open-ended way, there being no prohibitions on what problems can be discussed, what solutions considered. The nature of the universe, war, sex, death, power, money, politics, fame, pop stars, parents, school, work, marriage, the meaning of life, evolution, God, failure, drugs, love, suffering, happiness: whatever it is that the children find fascinating or disturbing, and want to discuss, deserves to be discussed. Where there are no known or no agreed answers, the teacher must acknowledge this. The teacher must readily acknowledge his or her own ignorance or uncertainties. The main task of the teacher will be to try to ensure that the children speak one at a time, that everyone gets to speak, and that those who are not speaking, listen. The teacher will also, of course, try to establish a spirit of generosity towards the ideas of others, while at the same time encouraging criticism and

argument. The main object of the seminar is to enable children to discover for themselves the value of co-operative, imaginative, rational problem-solving by taking part in it themselves. Only good, experienced teachers could hope to make a success of the philosophy seminar run along these lines.

The purpose of the seminar is not to promote mere *debate*. Argument is to be used as an aid to exploration and discovery: it is not to be used merely to trounce opponents or to win converts – as an excuse, that is, for intellectual duelling or bullying. The seminar must not be conducted in such a way that it amounts to overt or disguised *indoctrination* in some creed – however correct or noble the creed may be judged to be. Insofar as a creed is implicit in the seminar, it might be put like this: it is proper and desirable for people to resolve problems and conflicts in co-operative, imaginative and rational ways. This creed is itself open to discussion and critical assessment – along with all other political, religious, moral, economic, social and philosophical doctrines. The problem of how to distinguish co-operative discussion from indoctrination deserves itself to be discussed when it arises. Again, the seminar is not *group therapy*. Its primary aim is not to solve the participants' urgent practical, personal problems (although it may occasionally and incidentally help to do this). Problems can be imagined and do not need to be lived. Ideas can be aired as possibilities, and do not need to be believed. Accounts of personal experience are welcomed when relevant to the discussion, but are not expected or demanded. The aim of the seminar is to explore possibilities, and not to reach decision about actions. Unanimity does not need to be sought.

It is nothing less than an educational scandal that seminars of this type are not a standard part of school and university life, available to everyone from the age of five years upwards. However, it is not just that there has been a general failure to organize all education around such a philosophy seminar. Worse still, there has been, and still is, a general failure even to see the vital need to do this. The very idea of the philosophy seminar for five-year-olds, as indicated here, has generally not been entertained. A major reason for this is that the proper purpose and character of philosophy, and of academic inquiry more generally, has long been, and still is, radically misunderstood, especially by academics themselves.

Academic inquiry is widely taken to have as its proper, basic intellectual task the improvement of expert, specialized knowledge and technological know-how. As long as academic inquiry is pursued and organized with this basic task in mind, the philosophy seminar, as depicted above, can scarcely form a normal, let alone a central, part of university work. Non-expert, non-specialized discussion of our problems of living – however imaginative, rational, co-operative and potentially fruitful – cannot contribute to the acquisition of expert, specialized knowledge. Groups devoted to such discussion may amount to worthy debating societies, group therapy sessions or Quaker prayer meetings: they cannot constitute standard *academic seminars*.

The fault here lies with the orthodox conception of academic inquiry. It is an intellectual and human disaster. When judged from the standpoint of improving specialized knowledge, orthodox academic inquiry must, it is true, be judged to be, on the whole, both rational and extraordinarily successful. But when judged from the more important and fundamental standpoint of improving human welfare, enhancing the quality of human life, academic inquiry must be judged to be grossly irrational and unsuccessful. In order substantially to improve the quality of human life on earth we need, amongst other things, to get rid of war, the threat of war, armaments whether nuclear, biological, chemical or conventional, the extreme poverty of the third world, tyranny, exploitation and enslavement. Humanity needs to discover how to resolve its local and global conflicts and problems of living in more co-operatively rational ways. But co-operative *action* requires co-operative *discussion*. If academic inquiry is to devote itself, rationally and successfully, to promoting human welfare, then it must give priority to providing such co-operative discussion; it must, as a matter of absolute intellectual priority, (a) articulate our problems of living and (b) propose and critically assess alternative possible solutions, possible co-operative *actions*. Problems of *knowledge* must be tackled in a subordinate way, scientific and technological research emerging out of and feeding back into the more fundamental concern with problems of *living*.

Contemporary academic inquiry, in giving priority to problems of knowledge over problems of living, fails to do what it most needs to do: create and promote a tradition of thinking devoted to resolving human conflicts and problems in co-operatively rational ways. In the absence of a general capacity to

act co-operatively, the mere provision of knowledge and technological know-how can do as much harm as good, as the twentieth-century record of science and war, and the nuclear arms race, so horrifyingly exemplifies.

We urgently need, in brief, a new, more intellectually rigorous and humanly desirable kind of academic inquiry, one which gives priority to helping us realize what is of value in life, individually, locally and globally. This new kind of inquiry gives intellectual priority to personal and social (or global) problems of living (rather than problems of knowledge) and endeavours to help us discover how to act, to live, in progressively more co-operatively rational ways, so that we achieve what is genuinely of value to us in the circumstances of our lives. The basic aim is to promote personal and social wisdom in life – wisdom being defined as the capacity to realize what is of value, for ourselves and others. Wisdom, so defined, includes, but goes beyond, knowledge and technological know-how. Given the existence of such a tradition of inquiry in the world, there is a real chance that humanity might learn how to make steady and substantial progress towards a generally happier state of affairs than that which we endure at present.

Once the academic community wakes up to the desperately urgent need to transform the academic enterprise in this way, so that its basic task becomes to promote not only *knowledge* but also personal and social *wisdom* in life, it will at once become blindingly obvious that the philosophy seminar, more or less as described above, does indeed need to be put at the heart of all inquiry and education, from primary school to university. Unfortunately, the academic community, despite being devoted to reason and innovation, is in many ways extremely conservative and highly resistant to change, especially when it comes to changing the overall aims and methods of inquiry. I am especially aware of this, having argued for some thirty years for the urgent need to change academic inquiry from knowledge to wisdom: so far I have seen few signs of change (see Maxwell, 1976, 1980, 1984, 2000, 2004). If we wait for the scientists, scholars and university administrators to wake up to what needs to be done, we may have to wait for ever. What we can do, and need to do, is begin with the five-year-olds. Professors may be past it, but five-year-olds are not.

The above was written long ago, in 1986, in complete ignorance of the philosophy for children movement. I then discovered Gareth Matthews' delightful little book *Philosophy for the Young Child* (1980), and as a result I laid aside this plea for philosophy for five-years-olds on the assumption that the matter was already satisfactorily in hand. Since then, philosophy for children has become a world-wide movement, and it might seem that this essay is redundant. This is not the case, for at least two reasons.

First, the philosophy for children movement seems to take for granted a thoroughly orthodox, analytic conception of philosophy, according to which philosophy is one discipline alongside others, concerned with puzzle solving and conceptual analysis. Given this conception of philosophy, it is difficult to see why philosophy should occupy a central and fundamental role in the curriculum. What is lacking is an awareness of the need to bring about a revolution in the aims and methods of academic inquiry as a whole, including philosophy and education, so that the basic aim becomes to acquire and promote wisdom, problems of living being put at the heart of the academic enterprise. Once one becomes aware of the need to bring about this revolution, it becomes clear that the philosophy seminar, along the lines I have indicated, ought to be central to all of education. The philosophy for children movement would, in my view, become more credible and cogent were it to join forces with the effort to transform inquiry as whole so that it takes up its proper task of promoting wisdom by rational means. Only within a genuinely rational kind of inquiry devoted to promoting wisdom can the philosophy seminar, as I have described it, come to have its proper place and role.

Second, in England the national curriculum all but prohibits the philosophy seminar as I have depicted it. Group discussion, listening and speaking, and problem solving are, it is true, all encouraged, and citizenship and personal, social and health education are included. Furthermore, the curriculum for primary education may well be sufficiently flexible to permit something like the philosophy seminar to take place in individual schools. But there is, in the national curriculum, no hint that group discussion might feed into other parts of the curriculum, into science, history or English. And when it comes to secondary education, the curriculum seems to be so rigidly constructed that it seems

impossible that the philosophy seminar could get elbow room, let alone influence the rest of the curriculum.

We need to bring about a revolution in the national curriculum here in England, and we need a world-wide revolution in education and academia, so that the philosophy seminar comes to play a central role, for five- to ninety-five-year olds.

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NOTE

¹ This mistake is evident in current A-level philosophy syllabuses.

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