

Philosophy in schools for conceptual and theoretical understanding: Comments on Gatley

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Abstract

This paper pays respect to Jane Gatley's excellent book by analysing both its deconstructive and constructive parts. The deconstructive part explains well what is wrong with P4C as a formalistic movement. The second part explains why there is a different and stronger case to be made for teaching philosophy in schools. While agreeing in principle with Gatley's argument, I raise three searching questions about it.

Keywords

analytic philosophy, conceptual and theoretical understanding, philosophy for children, school philosophy, utility account

I am fortunate to have been asked to comment on Jane Gatley's (2023) book because I happen to rate it highly. My positive evaluation is based on two main reasons. One is obviously the quality and rigour of its argumentation and how it offers a powerful antidote to the received wisdom about educational philosophy being in terminal decline among the younger generation of scholars. Here is an exercise in educational philosophy that brings back memories of the heyday of British philosophy of education in the late 20th century—but without sounding antediluvian. The second reason is that this book has cured me of my own autobiographically conditioned scepticism about school philosophy.

Let me begin with the second reason. Although it may sound a bit self-indulgent, my own autobiographical journey carries some salutary lessons that tally with those given in Jane's book. Looking askance at philosophy in schools may seem surprising from my own point of view because I taught philosophy for four years at a sixth-form college before embarking on postgraduate studies in philosophy. I thoroughly enjoyed this teaching, and it seems to have had a transformative effect on at least some of my students, as six of them later embarked on philosophy studies at university and two of them currently hold academic positions in philosophy. In addition, some of the students who did not pursue philosophy further are in contact with me, decades later,

still talking about the life-changing experience that studying philosophy was for them. I taught mainly three courses: history of philosophy, logic and ethics. I was originally expecting the problem-based ethics course to carry the greatest attraction, but it turned out that the students cherished most the more theoretical history course, perhaps supporting Jane's point about students needing a dose of 'theoretical education' to counteract all the disciplinary fragmentation on offer in the school curriculum.

This relative personal success filled me with enthusiasm about teaching philosophy in schools. The most obvious avenue for continuing to pursue that enthusiasm at the time was getting involved in the P4C movement, and I went as far as co-organising the 8th international conference on Philosophy 'for' or 'with' Children in 1997. What a crushing disappointment! This was in the day when the Montclair people ruled the roost. Still haunting me till this day is the loud cracking voice of one of them, shouting at the end of each presentation that did not scrupulously follow the methodological purism of the movement: 'Yes, but this is not P4C!' I was so taken aback by the churlish narrow-mindedness of this approach, and the whole cult-like ethos of the conference, that I decided to have no further truck with school philosophy ever: a resolution to which I have stuck since – well, until now ...

What I particularly like about the *deconstructive* first half of Jane's book is how sensitive she is to the influence that the P4C movement has had on the development of, and discourse about, school philosophy in the Anglophone world, and the measured but compelling argument she makes that P4C has not made a 'failsafe case' for the positive effects of philosophy, taught along their lines, on academic or social skills, general school attainment or moral and emotional competences. As she correctly points out, the majority of the academic literature on whether philosophy should be taught in schools takes its cue somehow from P4C, and the empirical evidence for the success of P4C's so-called 'principled' strategies is, to say the least, mixed. Jane correctly identifies Dewey as the great influencer behind P4C. However, it must be borne in mind that P4C's use of Dewey was always very selective, drawing mainly on the early proceduralist Dewey (1916), who wanted to convert every class into a science lab, adhering to a formalistic 'democratic' process, but ignoring the later characterological Dewey (1939) who understood democracy not so much as a process as a personal frame of mind or a way of thinking. That said, Jane hits all the right notes about the shortcomings of P4C and the pernicious influence it has had on this whole debate.

At the end of the deconstructive part of Jane's argument, I only had one remaining question, and it is a genuine question, not a concealed criticism. When she says that a moral capacity such as empathy can be cultivated as well or better by reading fiction or watching a film than engaging in a P4C 'community of inquiry' pedagogy, I fully agree with her: that is, if the critique is aimed solely at P4C's methodological monism. However, if we broaden the understanding of a 'philosophical discussion' slightly, then I am not sure that a work of art can really exert this positive influence on the majority of students in default of a subsequent discursive analysis of a philosophical kind. Let us say I want to help 14- to 15-year-old students understand moral dilemmas and I show them the film *Sophie's Choice*. It is a great film, but it is not as if the message about the pain of moral and emotional ambivalence simply jumps out at any student, without further prompting. Why was Sophie's life destroyed, although her choice of the son over the daughter seemed to be the reasonable one, given the conditions in the concentration camp? I guess my remaining question here is simply a variation of Michael Hand's (2018) point of how difficult it is to make progress with respect to moral constructs without 'access to distinctively philosophical forms of argument and analysis' (p. 14). So, if we set aside the narrowness of the P4C approach, does Jane think that there is some essentially non-philosophical strategy for developing moral capacities, say moral virtues, in school-age children? And if so, how would she categorise it?

Let us now turn to the second and more *constructive* half of Jane's book. It is equally compelling and even more innovative. I particularly enjoyed the productive use she makes of the 20th century greats of analytic philosophy in general, such as Ryle, and educational philosophy in particular (Peters, Hirst, Wilson, White, Pring, etc.). If there has been a feeling in educational circles that their views are past their sell-by date, Jane undermines that sentiment powerfully. I also appreciate Jane's boldness in couching her constructive argument for teaching philosophy in schools in terms of a 'utility account', given the opprobrium that has become attached to anything utilitarian in contemporary moral and educational discourse, not least within my own neck of the woods, virtue ethics.

It would be tempting to summarise Jane's two-pronged argument and subject all of its premises to sustained scrutiny. I refrain from doing so here, however, for two reasons: 1) I agree to a great extent with what she says; and 2) most people reading these comments will either have read Jane's book or will (hopefully) be reading it soon. The most constructive use I can make of the remainder of this review is, I think, to continue to ask Jane questions (this time three questions) about her argument. I

hasten to add again that these are not criticisms disguised as questions; I am simply genuinely interested in Jane's views about issues that she does not address in a book that is—and again, this is not meant as a criticism—austerely mono-disciplinary in relying almost entirely on insights from educational philosophy.

The first question relates to the part of the positive argument that focuses on the non-expendable role of philosophy in helping students analyse and understand ordinary-language concepts, a task mostly if not wholly elided in traditional school subjects. Jane correctly notes that the discipline of philosophy analyses ordinary concepts and helps 'fix their meaning'. I happen to be a great fan of conceptual ordinary-language analysis of the Ryle-Austin kind, and I regret its fall into disrepute in the last 30 years—a story that is, notably, not recounted by Jane. However, philosophy is not the only discipline that analyses ordinary-language concepts. There is also a method within psychology, called simply 'concept analysis', as distinct from 'conceptual analysis' in philosophy, which also analyses concepts. This method takes as its starting point a criticism of the Procrustean ways in which philosophers often go about their business in trying to straighten the crooked timber of ordinary usage, in the name of conceptual clarity, coherence or economy. Psychologists tend to be sceptical here of the voices of the 'wise', as Aristotle called them, and recommend instead to look more carefully at the intuitions of the 'many'. (Aristotle actually thought we should study both and try to synthesise them.) Why not go even further than Ryle and Austin, in deferring to ordinary-language use, by recording exactly what people mean by the words they employ? Notice here that one of the most orthodox of contemporary philosophical conceptual analysts, Robert C. Roberts, decided to alter radically his specification of *gratitude* after he had seen how 10,000 UK language users and a few hundred American ones use the term 'gratitude', which contradicted his earlier account (Morgan et al. 2014; 2017). So my first question here to Jane is: is she adamant that philosophy is the only, or at least the best, academic discipline for carrying out the task of analysing ordinary concepts?

My second question relates to the other prong of Jane's argument, about the role philosophy, and only philosophy, can have in providing students with 'theoretical education': some sort of a comprehensive understanding of the relationship of more specific ideas from different disciplines. There is an old joke that when philosophers find themselves squeezed into a corner, they always rescue themselves by taking flight and 'going meta'. So here, basically, Jane 'goes meta' in her argument. I do find her argument persuasive, and I am tempted to think that philosophy is in a unique position to help students grapple with the kind of 'meta-questions' that Jane talks

about. Yet I would have loved to see this assumption being tried out by studying some recent social scientific findings about the development of synthesising wisdom in general, and of metacognitions in particular. There is a huge literature in psychology on when and how metacognitions are formulated (some of which is reviewed in Kristjánsson & Fowers 2024). Does Jane think that empirical evidence of this kind would be relevant for backing up or, in the worst possible scenario, disconfirming her argument about the discrete role of philosophy in helping students go meta, or is hers some sort of theoretical argument—transcendental perhaps—that is oblivious to empirical testing?

My third question is about the possible policy-relevant implications of Jane's argument about the value of school philosophy. Jane does not dirty her hands too much—and perhaps understandably so—by delving into the policy literature on school philosophy, apart from some early inroads into UNESCO policies. As many readers of this journal will know, the last 50 years have seen a constant battle between the two big international players in the educational policy game, the touchy-feely UNESCO, with all its humanistic ideals, and the hard-line OECD, held in thrall by what many educators see as its cheaply practical Human-Capital Theory. OECD has secured hegemony in the field through its controlling of the notorious international PISA tests. In the last couple of years, however, OECD has been seen moving closer to UNESCO and is in the process of replacing its 1960s style Human-Capital theory with a human flourishing paradigm, which would indicate a radical change of compass (Stevenson 2022). Now, it so happens that two of the educational philosophers that Jane cites copiously, John White (2011) and Harry Brighouse (2006), are among the most vocal theoretical proponents of flourishing as the overall aim of education. Jane only mentions the ideal of flourishing in passing in a couple of places. Does she think that the recent move towards human flourishing in policy circles is likely to facilitate the adoption of philosophy as a great flourishing-synthesiser in schools? Or what, more generally speaking, is the relationship between the kind of argument that Jane offers in her book and the arguments that one would hear at educational policy conferences, where the sub-discipline of educational philosophy is not necessarily held in high esteem?

I have tried to pay due respect to Jane's ground-breaking book by posing some questions: one about the deconstructive and three about the constructive part of her argument. This is a work of high philosophical and educational pedigree, which deserves and repays attention. The lingering question is not about the quality of arguments on offer in the book, which are second to none, but rather what Jane and

others will do with them in the future and how they can be brought to the attention of people outside of siloed philosophy-of-education and philosophy-in-schools circles.

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