

Philosophy, concepts and flourishing: Some responses to Hobbs and Kristjánsson

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Abstract

In response to Angie Hobbs' and Kristján Kristjánsson's comments on my book *Why Teach Philosophy in Schools*, I reflect on developments in my own thinking about a) the full array of benefits associated with teaching philosophy in schools; b) the value of conceptual analysis; and c) the role of flourishing as an aim of education. I explain why I am happy to concede that philosophy can provide students with a broad array of benefits; why I think philosophical analysis of concepts is more valuable than other ways of working with concepts; and how my focus on helping students interact effectively with the world is compatible with, but not dependent on, the educational aim of flourishing.

Key Words

conceptual analysis, flourishing, philosophy in schools

It is a privilege to have been asked to respond to the two generous responses to my book provided by Kristján Kristjánsson and Angie Hobbs. The fact that both a sceptic of philosophy in schools, and an enthusiastic advocate, can see some value in the book is surprising and welcome. I appreciate the different perspectives they bring: those of Kristjánsson whose expertise in psychology and cognitive science is relevant yet overlooked in my book; and the deep understanding of philosophy as a discipline and practice that Hobbs demonstrates throughout her response. I am going to respond to three of the points raised: Hobbs' suggestion that philosophy brings wider benefits than those highlighted by the book; Kristjánsson's queries about analytic philosophy and ordinary concepts; and the point raised by both Hobbs and Kristjánsson about the relationship of what I say about theoretical education and the educational aim of flourishing.

I am going to start with Hobbs' first question, because it is one that has been echoed in other reviews (e.g. Lone & Diamond 2025); it is also a question I have softened on since writing the book. Perhaps this is because my position has moved, from that

described by Kristjánsson—a frustrated philosophy teacher—to an advocate for teaching philosophy in schools. Hobbs asks whether a wider case for teaching philosophy can be made using the many benefits it brings to children.

While it is important to emphasise that the arguments in my book serve the purpose of giving definitive reasons for putting philosophy on the school curriculum, it is also the case that these arguments do not sum up everything that is valuable about teaching philosophy in schools. Since writing the book, Philosophy for Children organisations such as Thoughtful (formerly SAPERE) have responded positively to the arguments laid out, and have treated them as another tool in their arsenal for making the case for philosophy in schools. I think this is the right approach, and the book provides two careful arguments for the place of philosophy in a coherent school curriculum. However, much of real-world curriculum planning is rather incoherent, and using philosophy as an effective patch to fix issues with existing curricula is just as valuable an approach in real-world advocacy. In other words, in an ideal world, the school curriculum would be well planned and coherent, with space for students to develop their critical thinking skills across a range of different subjects, with emphasis on dialogue throughout, and with activities that appeal to all students as options. In most school systems this is not the case, and Hobbs is correct in pointing to the highly effective ways that philosophy can remedy issues elsewhere in the curriculum just through practicing methods of inquiry that are integral to the discipline of philosophy. For anyone in a decision-making position, please heed Hobb's list of the benefits philosophy can bring in the classroom.

Next, I want to address the question that Kristjánsson asks about ordinary concepts, because my thinking on this has deepened since writing the book and I have answers now that I would not have had then. In the book, I set out philosophy as the discipline that most systematically studies ordinary concepts, and so has valuable resources to help children make sense of the sorts of questions that involve ordinary concepts. Kristjánsson alludes to critiques of analytic philosophy, which by some is viewed as excessively abstract (e.g. Standish 2010), or entrenching biases (e.g. Martin 1981). While Kristjánsson himself does not take this approach, he does suggest that other disciplines could also be taught, such as psychology, drawing on its method of 'concept analysis' which might do a better job of providing clarity about ordinary concepts.

Kristjánsson (this issue) claims that 'concept analysis' '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' (p. 14), presumably because, in tinkering with concepts, philosophers are prone to have the opposite effect. In response, a more developed understanding of why students need to grapple with ordinary concepts can be provided, hinging on the idea that they need to be able to use concepts well, not just be clear about their ordinary usage. One dimension of this is that ordinary usage might be very clear, but lead to incoherent conclusions. Another dimension is that using concepts well is not just a matter of capturing common usage, but is a normative endeavour.

It is this second point that I have explored in more depth since the book was published. How we understand the meanings of concepts subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) alters what we think, say and do. So, while surveying how people ordinarily use concepts may lead to greater clarity about what they mean in practice, it says nothing about what they should mean. In the book, I use Kate Manne's (2018) analysis of misogyny as an example of how philosophy can help us to think about ordinary concepts. This is an ameliorative analysis; she points out that how people ordinarily conceive of misogyny fails to highlight the problems women actually face. Her aim is to 'offer a useful toolkit for asking, answering, and debating such issues, as well as to provide room for detailed, substantive accounts of misogyny as they affect particular groups of girls and women' (Manne 2018, p. 13). Since writing the book, I have argued that conceptual analysis that aims to capture ordinary usage is often insufficient. Instead, analytic philosophers need to be aware of the normative reach of concepts, and build this normativity into their analyses (Gatley & Norefalk 2024).

This does not render prior analytic philosophy problematic, it simply makes transparent an element of what philosophers have always done. In Plato's *Republic*, Plato analyses the concept of justice by pointing out the inconsistencies, but also the normative pitfalls of different conceptions. The method is not new, but being transparent about the normative drive behind conceptual analysis is a more recent development in the discipline. In response to Kristjánsson's question, it really is philosophers who are interested not only in how concepts are ordinarily used, but in how they ought to be used. Many ordinary concepts are contested, normatively or politically loaded, and difficult to pin down. Philosophers have the best resources for investigating them fully. This may well involve drawing on other disciplines, such as psychology, but it is a task driven by philosophical, often normative, thinking.

Third, I want to address the relationship between my claims about theoretical education and flourishing. This is something that both Hobbs and Kristjánsson bring up. Hobbs (this issue) describes my approach accurately as strategically steering clear of ‘the “somewhat controversial” concept of flourishing’ (p. 9). Certainly, I was keen to provide an argument for teaching philosophy in schools that would appeal to those who hold that the aim of education is flourishing, but also to those who think that flourishing is too lofty a goal for education. This is why I argue that something lesser—such as subject knowledge alone—is an adequate aim. Hobbs asks about the relationship between my claims and both individual and political flourishing. Similarly, Kristjánsson asks how my arguments for teaching philosophy in schools fit in with larger policy debates about the aims of education, particularly the push to take flourishing seriously as its aim.

In fact, I do have something to say about this—namely, that my claims are compatible and complementary to those who hold that the aim of education is flourishing. Here, I turn to parts of my thesis which I chose not to include in the book, and I thank Hobbs and Kristjánsson for the opportunity to set out this missing piece.

In the book, I work from the starting point that schools spend a lot of time teaching children content. I call this theoretical content, and argue that the clearest justification for this common practice in schools is that this content helps people to interact effectively with the world. By this, I mean that when you are told something valuable, it is valuable because as it helps you to see what is happening more clearly, and thus make a better decision about what to do in the circumstances you find yourself in. The relationship between this improved ability to interact with the world, and the aim of flourishing is that interacting effectively with the world helps people to be able to live flourishing lives.

The idea that theoretical content contributes to flourishing is relatively commonplace in the literature. Reiss and White acknowledge the role of theoretical content in meeting this aim. They claim that studying history gives students ‘a background understanding of the human world’ (Reiss & White 2013, p. 40); studying the natural sciences, mathematics and technology ‘help us to situate ourselves both temporally and spatially in the world in which we live’ (p. 42) and can contribute to education for work (2013, p. 45). These all contribute to flourishing on their view. Brighouse (2006) makes a similar point when he talks about the aims of education. He points out that if autonomy is an aim of education, then ‘an autonomous life cannot be led without the

information about the world in which it is led' (2006, p. 23). In *Educational Goods*, autonomy is held as a key capacity necessary for flourishing (Brighouse et al. 2018).

Linking to Hobb's question about political flourishing, Gutmann (1987) argues that democratic education includes a commitment to theoretical content because it helps 'children to learn how to live a good life in the nonmoral sense' (p. 51). Theoretical content can contribute to democratic competence because a good citizen is a well-informed citizen. People who have been taught content about the world are better able to exercise effective judgement, which helps to support a well functioning democratic state. Being acquainted with content about justice, legislature, political institutions, the history of citizenship, war, democracy, human-interactions, injustice, poverty, tolerance, and so on, is instrumental to developing the ability to making good democratic decisions and take part in fruitful dialogue. There is much more that could and should be done to educate for democratic participation than to provide a theoretical education. However, without some theoretical education, students are unlikely to develop the dispositions, or have the requisite knowledge and understanding of the world to be competent democratic participants.

This is not to say that theoretical education ought to take up all, or even the majority of school time. An education for flourishing involves much more than just providing students with theoretical content. But theoretical content is going to play some role, because it facilitates the different capacities that support flourishing.

Where does this leave my arguments for teaching philosophy in schools? The first argument is that the philosophical study of ordinary concepts is part of any broad and balanced theoretical education because it deals with prominent and pressing questions that students are going to face in their lives. As such, the first argument positions some philosophical content as an important part of the body of content that supports their broader flourishing. Being able to effectively address questions that rest on ordinary concepts (e.g. justice) contributes to being able to live a flourishing life.

The second argument is, as Kristjánsson describes it, more 'meta'. I appeal to the historical emphasis of the discipline of philosophy on thinking about different conceptual frameworks, how they translate, how they should be weighed against one another, and what to do when there are multiple different answers to a question. I argue that without the ability to deal with these sorts of tensions, a theoretical education risks becoming inert or unusable by the student in their day to day lives. In this case, teaching philosophy supports flourishing by helping students to think about

how what they have learned can and should be used as they live their lives. That might be in the political or the personal sphere.

Nonetheless, the arguments in the book stand apart from arguments for flourishing as an aim of education. This is important because not everyone subscribes to flourishing as an appropriate aim; from philosophical pushback (e.g. Carr 2021; Hand 2026) to the cursory treatment flourishing receives from important policy actors such as the OECD and DfE. As policy makers, politicians, educational philosophers and practitioners wax and wane in their views about flourishing, I hope that the arguments presented in the book will hold firm.

I am left with two general reflections, and these also relate to some of the questions I have been asked elsewhere since the book was published. First, although the book argues for teaching philosophy in schools, what it primarily argues is that the sort of education children are receiving in many countries across the world, where they are taught subject content, falls short of meeting educational ideals. This is because some questions people face in their lives are left unrepresented because they fall outside of dominant disciplines, and that some of the content children are taught is left free-floating and inert. Kristjánsson presses me to say whether I am open to other disciplines helping to solve these problems, and the answer is yes. If there is good evidence from psychology telling us how meta-cognition can address the problems, then schools should implement those findings.

Conversely, Hobbs presses me to be more open about what philosophy can provide children with. The book focuses on two problems with theoretical education, as I have narrowly defined it. This is not to say that education does not face other problems, or aim towards broader goals than just providing students with content in the hope of helping them to navigate the world. I do not think that theoretical education is the single end practice or goal of education, I think it is a means to a broad range of possible end goals. Whatever the end goal is, it will come with additional educational puzzles. It seems likely that philosophy—with its emphasis on discussion, links with democratic living, in depth questioning of the good life, and the enjoyment it provides to at least some students—has plenty to offer a comprehensive vision of education such as one that aims towards flourishing.

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