

Why teach philosophy in schools? Widening the case

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Abstract

The need for philosophy provision in schools has never been more urgent, and Gatley offers a rigorous and compelling argument for how philosophy is best placed to examine both ordinary concepts and conceptual challenges arising from a broad theoretical curriculum. In this response Hobbs explores what might happen if Gatley's two criteria were applied not only to individual arguments—as Gatley does with aplomb—but also to the package of potential benefits that philosophy can offer as a whole. She suggests that widening the scope of enquiry in this way allows us to place more emphasis than Gatley's framework permits on the creative as well the analytic and critical skills that philosophy can foster. This widening of the scope reveals with even greater clarity the central role that philosophy can play in both individual and communal flourishing.

Key words

conceptual challenges, creative thinking, critical thinking, flourishing, imagination, philosophy in schools

Within its own terms, Gatley offers a lucid, rigorous and persuasive case for teaching philosophy in schools. She proposes that any argument for teaching philosophy—or indeed any disciplinary science—in schools should meet two criteria: it should provide an educational good (or goods), and it should be the best placed means of providing that good. Gatley rightly situates her argument within the context of what should be the aims of education overall, and for Gatley, this is enabling students to act effectively within the world. This in turn requires their being able to respond appropriately to what Hand (2018) has termed 'prominent and pressing questions' (p. 19) in their lives: being able to do this is an educational good.

There are two ways that, according to Gatley, philosophy can be of instrumental assistance here, and which it is best placed to provide: firstly, philosophy offers the appropriate tools for the analysis of 'ordinary' concepts (i.e. concepts which are not specific to a particular disciplinary science); secondly, it can help students analyse the

conceptual problems that can arise from a broad theoretical curriculum, in which fragmentation can occur both between a particular disciplinary science and the student's real-life experience, and between the different disciplinary sciences themselves, each operating with its own distinctive conceptual apparatus. Philosophy, in short, is best placed to help students make sense of the curriculum as a whole: it enables them to see how to apply the diverse content appropriately to their own prominent and pressing questions (such as whether to experiment with cannabis at a party), and it helps them work out how to resolve tensions and boundary disputes between the different disciplines when dealing with complex issues which require an interdisciplinary approach, such as climate change, and which in some cases are entirely new, such as COVID-19.

Gatley builds her case with care, reviewing the history of philosophy provision in education and explaining why she thinks existing arguments for teaching philosophy—such as its contribution to civic and moral development, or skills in critical or creative thinking—do not, in particular, meet her second criterion that it be the only or best placed means of achieving these goods: philosophy might well help with creative thinking, for instance, or empathy and civic development, but so might literature just as well; maths and physics and history might prove just as effective at developing the ability to think critically. *Reasons* for teaching philosophy do not amount to failsafe *arguments* for teaching it. She explores in detail why she believes that a broad theoretical education that delivers content about the world is well placed to help students address the prominent and pressing questions they face and act effectively within the world, and she makes judicious use of Korsgaard's (1996) distinctions between extrinsic / intrinsic and instrumental / final. Her analysis of why philosophy is best placed to examine both ordinary concepts and conceptual challenges arising from a broad theoretical curriculum also makes good use of analytic philosophers such as Ryle, Strawson and Midgley. Her particular deployment of 'theoretical content' does much to resolve the issues arising from Hirst's (1974) 'forms of knowledge'.

Why Teach Philosophy in Schools is, then, a very good book indeed, of great value to all those involved in the theory and practice of education. I do not wish to dispute its main thesis and, with only a few caveats which I shall touch on below, I think her arguments work persuasively on their own terms, and in the framework in which she locates them. What I wish to do instead is explore what might happen if her two criteria for teaching philosophy in schools were applied not to *individual* arguments but to the *package* of potential benefits that philosophy can offer as a whole. Might we

find that only philosophy provides this complete package—and furthermore in a cost-efficient and time-efficient way? There is, of course, no reason for Gatley to want to do this, but as I think others might, I believe the points are worth raising.

If we widen the scope of our enquiry into the complete package of possible benefits that philosophy can offer then there is scope to place more emphasis than Gatley's framework permits on the creative as well as the analytic and critical skills that philosophy can foster; while Gatley is alive to the creative possibilities of philosophy, the focus of her two 'failsafe' individual (albeit overlapping in practice) arguments is very much on the powers of philosophical analysis, and her whole approach is deliberately situated firmly within the analytic tradition. She has, of course, absolutely no need to apologise for this; I am simply suggesting that if we look at the package as a whole, then we can highlight more the importance of thought experiments, counterfactuals and hypotheses, and indeed of the interpretative and imaginative skills particularly required in other traditions of philosophical writing which involve, for example, dialogue, imagery, paradoxes or even poetry (Plato's dialogues, rich in imagery and characterisation, and the vivid, teasing paradoxes and aphorisms of Heraclitus spring immediately to mind).

This emphasis on the creative potential of philosophy links to its capacity to help us imagine different ways of living and being. It is here that we meet a puzzle in Gatley's thesis. It is true that extending the imaginative possibilities about how to live would not pass Gatley's second criterion, as many disciplines—such as literature, history, geography—offer this too. However, philosophy offers it as well, and it could certainly be included in any overall package. It does not appear, however, that Gatley would be happy with this. Admittedly, her specific argument for a broad theoretical education is that it provides students with a variety of ways of seeing and understanding the world and thereby interacting with it more effectively; but she does not claim that a variety of ways of seeing the world can be found within philosophy itself. Perhaps she regards this as obvious; nevertheless, it does seem that even if that is the case, she would not want to extend the educational good from understanding the world in different ways to appreciating that there are different ways of being and living. Her argument (p. 82) for wanting to deny this step is that such imagining of other lives might not be helpful to those who cannot choose their lives or change them. I take the point, but still feel that this is rather too defeatist about the possibility of political or social change, a little too accepting of the status quo. The student in an apparently trapped situation with limited practical possibilities might go on to be one of the change-makers themselves once they are aware of other theoretical options. Her

position here also seems to be at least partly undermined by what she says on p. 120, where theoretical education is said to open up options and choices and help the student realise their dreams.

Another key element in the package that philosophy can offer is enjoyment. On p. 29 Gatley says that one of the reasons she taught philosophy in schools is that she enjoyed it, and that she could also see that the students enjoyed it; but that although her and the students' enjoyment were reasons for including philosophy in the curriculum, they could not amount to arguments for it. As part of an overall package, however, the enjoyment of students—and teachers—can also receive the emphasis it deserves; such enjoyment is certainly likely to motivate and facilitate better learning and teaching, and I see no reason why enjoyment cannot form part of the notion (to which we shall return) of 'effective interaction with the world'. If that claim does not win favour, then I would suggest that, in this case, school time should not be solely devoted to such 'effective interaction'—that the aim of education needs to be broadened. Gatley argues persuasively for the need for a case to be made justifying the infringement of liberty involved in compulsory education. School years form a substantial part of a person's life (and in some tragic cases the whole of it), and I would argue that we have a moral duty to try to make these years as enjoyable as possible. In other words, even if it is not accepted that enjoyment is an 'educational good' or leads to one, a case can be made that time at school does not have to be devoted solely to 'educational goods'.

This brings us to Gatley's assessment of flourishing as an educational aim. In her introduction, she argues that a theoretical education enables students to interact effectively with the world, and 'being able to interact effectively with the world underlies a range of different aims of education, from promoting individual flourishing to contributing to social justice' (p. 4). In Chapter 3 she discusses Hirst's account of Plato's view that the Good needs to be known and understood for people 'to live good lives, or to flourish', and she also mentions Nussbaum's emphasis on the importance of educating for human flourishing and developing students' intellectual and moral virtues. However, she notes, correctly, that 'a purely theoretical education would fall short of meeting these aims' (p. 79). She does 'not think that non-theoretical goods are unimportant' (p. 117), and she continues to argue that the 'broad utility of theoretical education contributes towards these other [non-theoretical] goods'. However, she also argues that 'a utility-based theoretical education can stand alone, without further specific or more complex educational aims. Educating people to interact effectively with the world is worthwhile in itself' (p. 117). Furthermore, it is

an aim 'with little theoretical baggage. There is no need to advocate for flourishing as an aim of education, nor to enumerate what constitutes flourishing' (p. 117).

Within the general context of trying to provide a clear, 'failsafe' argument for teaching philosophy in schools, it makes sense for Gatley to make the 'somewhat controversial' concept of flourishing just a possible future benefit rather than central to her argument. However, it is not transparent that her chosen aim of effective interaction with the world is necessarily clearer, and it would perhaps be helpful if she said a little more about this. Might 'effective interaction' itself be thought to include or even comprise flourishing? I accept that Gatley would probably not want to take this route, but others might. She also says that flourishing is likely to require luck and appropriate material conditions as well as education, but a) this would depend on which conception of flourishing you have in mind (it would not, for instance, apply to Plato's conception of *eudaimonia*); and b) 'effective interaction with the world' might equally be thought to require some luck and appropriate material conditions. I think there are ways in which Gatley could define 'effective interaction with the world' that would meet the strict requirements of her argument, but some might think that the price for clarity and rigour is a vision for philosophy in schools which is not as ambitious as it might be. I do not think there is any right or wrong approach here, but it should be acknowledged that choices have to be made. One of the choices will be whether one accepts that 'final value is determined by each individual, rather than by the nature of the activity valued' (p. 70). Those of us working towards an updated version of ancient theories of *eudaimonia* will clearly take a different view.

One final point: the above reflections concern the flourishing of the *individual*, as Gatley frames her discussion very much in terms of educational goods for individual students. However, there are of course those for whom the basic unit of interest and concern is not the individual but a society or some other group, and who focus on the *politics* of flourishing rather than the ethics of it. And even if one wants to retain the individual as the primary unit of concern here, it is undeniable that education is a matter which involves the *polis*, as indeed do any necessary material conditions. Gatley's entire methodology assumes an individual interacting with the world, but in future work she could perhaps say more about the world aspect of this, and (as I touched on above) the extent to which this world must simply be accepted as it is, or whether it can be changed, and whether some education in philosophy can help make that change.

None of this detracts from the fact that Gatley has written what I believe to be a very important book, which makes a compelling case for the importance of teaching philosophy in schools. It is a book which I very much hope is read not only by teachers and academics, but policy makers too.

References

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