ON THE POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF HIGH SCHOOL PHILOSOPHY TO ETHICAL AND DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

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A significant amount of recent educational literature concerned with ethical and democratic education has, generally speaking, advocated for curricular and pedagogical emphasis on two related goals: 1) exposing students to what are often polarizing and difficult issues of social, political, and ethical importance, and doing so in ways that reveal the many different (and often equally reasonable) ideas about the good life that both underlie these issues and, more generally, characterize our diverse democracy; and, 2) engaging students in deliberation that attempts to work across our moral, political, religious, cultural, and other differences. While much of this literature has implied that there is a useful role for philosophy (its content or method) as part of existing subjects—most often English and social studies—in the typical high school curriculum, few have commented substantially on the potentially unique role that philosophy as a stand-alone subject of study could play in helping schools achieve these ethical and democratic ends.

This essay aims to give such consideration to the potential value of philosophy as a distinct subject of study in the high school curriculum. It argues that a more deliberate engagement with philosophy (as it will be defined here) can contribute in unique and significant ways to an education focused on moral-ethical and democratic ends—an education that I characterize as being concerned primarily with two things: 1) The cultivation of a student’s sense of self and her place in the world. This includes, for example, helping students develop the capacity to reflect on the notions of the good life and the moral-ethical perspectives in their immediate environments—especially those impressed upon them from within their family unit. It also includes, as a corollary to exercising this capacity for reflection, the development of one’s own conception of the good. I take these to be essential aspects of a related and more
obvious goal for moral-ethical and democratic education: 1a) working toward an understanding both of others and of one’s relationship to others and to the world in general; 2) Helping students learn how to deliberate respectfully and ethically across deep differences for the purpose of moving toward a just and democratic social-political order.

A consideration of philosophy’s role in the high school curriculum relative to these ends will necessarily need to address both theoretical and practical issues. Regarding the former, which will receive primary attention in this essay, it is important to ask, first, what is meant by a “philosophy” course and, second, how such a course might benefit ethical and democratic education, particularly at the high school level. For help in addressing both of these issues, I draw primarily on two early essays by John Dewey.

TOWARD A WORKING CONCEPT OF HIGH SCHOOL PHILOSOPHY

In an essay titled “Psychology in High-School from the Standpoint of the College,” Dewey recommended that psychology be given a central role in the high school curriculum. The separation between “psychology” and “philosophy” as we think of them today did not exist as clearly at the time of Dewey’s essay. Lewis Hahn (1967) reminds us that “for Dewey in the latter portion of the nineteenth century psychology was not merely a part of philosophy but was a way of introducing a student to the field of philosophy as a whole” (p. 219). And, generally speaking, Dewey had in mind a “psychology” course that would include some philosophical content and that would primarily emphasize philosophical methods—particularly critical, reflective and imaginative thought and inquiry into the self and one’s relationship to the world and to others.

This early Dewey essay gives us a good (though partial) indication of what he thought we should mean by “philosophy” in the context of the high school and how we can justify including such a course in the curriculum. For Dewey, an “adolescent”—a child between the ages 14 and 17—has begun “his subjective existence; the life which recognizes its own unique significance for itself, and begins dwelling upon its personal relations, intellectual and moral, and experimenting with them….These are the beginnings of self-questioning; of introspection; of inquiries into the meaning of things, and one’s relation to them” (1969, p. 83). This process, according to Dewey, is natural and inevitable for children of the traditional high school age, and so its cultivation should make up a significant portion of their education at the high school level. Elsewhere,
Dewey makes a similar claim that children of this age have a natural and “spontaneous interest in the whys and wherefores of life,” an interest which should be cultivated and nurtured through their education (cited in Hahn, 1976, p. 220). He considered a course in psychology to be one very important and, indeed, irreplaceable way of nurturing adolescents’ natural inclination to critical inquiry and thought.

Dewey’s suggested method of instruction also reveals something of the philosophical nature of his psychology course and its purpose. He considered Socrates to be the “founder of scientific psychology” and recommends the Socratic Method of instruction, in which the teacher’s function is “largely one of awakening, of stimulation.” In this way the student is taught how to think. The student’s mind is forced to work for itself; he or she is not cluttered with “dogmatic” ways of thinking and “shut off from...learning anything new,” but is instead left free to “gain a knowledge of one’s self.” The goal of this method of instruction and, indeed, the “chief end of the study of psychology” itself is the cultivation of minds that are “hospitable and not alien to ideas” (1969, p. 85-87).

So important to Dewey was the inclusion of psychology in high schools that he does not just recommend it as a component of other courses. Instead, it is to be a course unto itself, one that puts “greater meaning to the rest of the curriculum,” especially courses in “English literature” (1969, p. 84). There are two important points—both of which will be taken up more thoroughly later—to be made regarding this connection Dewey draws between psychology and literature. First, it is one way in which Dewey points up the importance of cultivating “imagination” and “aesthetic feeling and its modes of expression” as a crucial aspect of thinking and inquiry (1969, p. 84). He recommends taking “some literary classic, and [reading] it with especial attention to its psychological features—its treatment of perception, of imagination, of discursive thought, of impulses, of choice, etc.” (1969, p. 88). Second, Dewey gives the primary role to psychology in the connection between these disciplines. That is, Dewey recommends that literature be infused into a psychology course, not that psychology be infused into English courses. Psychology (and, as we will see shortly, ethics) is not to be an add-on to existing subjects in the curriculum. It was, for Dewey, to be a centerpiece of that curriculum, one that would give greater meaning and coherence to the other subjects and to a child’s educational experience on the whole. Other subjects were to be added and fitted around psychology (and ethics).
In sum, Dewey viewed high school psychology as a subject of the utmost importance to developing a student’s sense of self and others, and to developing a student’s natural inclination toward and capacity for open-minded, imaginative, reflective and critical thought and inquiry. He understood that education (and its subject matter) needed to address students’ interest in life’s bigger questions—especially those concerned with human relations and one’s own place in them—and that it needed to keep students’ minds open to new ways of thinking, to keep them from being “inoculated with a system” of thought that is dogmatic and rigid and cuts off “openness and flexibility of mind” (1969, p. 85-86). At such a formative time in a child’s development of self, mind, and thinking in general, the study of psychology as Dewey understood it was of particular and unique importance relative to these ends.

We can make the relatively easy connections between this psychology course’s ability to cultivate a child’s developing sense of self and others, on the one hand, and some key requirements of ethical and democratic education (as they are understood in this paper), on the other: Self-understanding (as part of understanding one’s place in the world and human relations), avoidance (or, at least, suspension) of dogmatic ways of thinking and, related, a willingness to engage with new and different ways of thinking and being. Such things are essential to the cultivation of effective and respectful deliberation in a diverse democracy. And such things are the work and business of psychology as Dewey understood it.

Dewey’s thinking about philosophy in the high school curriculum was not limited to the role he assigned to psychology. In a later essay titled “Teaching Ethics in the High School,” he focused specifically on another key area of study that more thoroughly rounds out his vision of high school philosophy: Ethics. Here, Dewey (1971) argues against teaching ethics if and when it is conceived as “the conning over and drumming in of ethical precepts” or when such teaching results “rather in hardening the mind of the child with a lot of half-understood precepts than in helpful development” (p. 222). Teaching ethics should not be equated with inculcating moral rules; this, Dewey argues, would be to teach a “false view of morals and a false theory of ethics” (p. 222). Instead, Dewey advances a notion of ethics that focuses on the study of “the ways in which men are bound together in the complex relations of their interactions” (p. 223). He advocates “the study of ethical relationships, the study, that is, of this complex world of which we are members” (p. 226).
This approach to ethics is grounded in the actual experiences of people in the world; it makes the central question not “what to do, but how to decide what to do” (1971, p. 56). The point of teaching ethics is not to encourage students simply to draw on abstract moral-ethical principles in deciding how to act ethically in particular situations. Instead:

The whole point...is to keep the mental eye constantly upon some actual situation or interaction; to realize in the imagination this or that particular needy person making his demand upon some other particular person.... The end of the method, then, is the formation of a sympathetic imagination for human relations in action; this is the ideal which is substituted for training in moral rules. (1971, p. 57)

It also becomes clear that, like his thinking about psychology, Dewey considers the teaching of ethics to be essential not only in and of itself but also for the effects it will have on other subjects—that is, it brings unity and coherence to the curriculum and to a child’s educational experience on the whole. Literature (again) and history are noted in particular as being only fully beneficial to students if joined in the curriculum by ethics. As with psychology, Dewey gives ethics a central place in the curriculum—other subjects must “correlate” with it and not the other way around—and sees literature and history as providing “new material, new problems and new methods for the ethical imagination” (1971, p. 60-61). Dewey makes the centrality of ethics relative to the other subjects clear:

Where there is one reason for the ordinary student to become acquainted with the intricacies of geometry, of physics, of Latin, or of Greek, there are twenty for him to become acquainted with the nature of those relations upon which his deepest weal and woe depend, and to become interested in, and habituated to, looking at them with sympathetic imagination. (1971, p. 60)

For Dewey, then, teaching ethics is not about helping students to discover moral-ethical rules or principles, and it is certainly not about dictating such rules and principles to students. It is, instead, about understanding how to make moral-ethical decisions, and responding in imaginatively sympathetic ways to particular others in the context of real (or fictional-as in literature) encounters. Such understanding, deciding, and judging necessarily requires that we help students both to cultivate their own and to understand others’ notions of the good life—that is, of
the values, ideals and beliefs and so on that characterize human diversity and human relationships (especially in a diverse democracy). Again, we can rather easily make the connections between the potential value of this type of course in ethics, on the one hand, and the imperatives of democratic and ethical education, on the other.

As we have seen, Dewey’s thinking provides us with an initial understanding of what we might mean by “philosophy” in the context of a high school curriculum and how it can be beneficial toward the conception of ethical and democratic education outlined earlier. Before moving on to a discussion of some of the practical issues involved in implementation, however, I want to re-emphasize a key point in Dewey’s thinking regarding the value of literature to the teaching of philosophy, while at the same time pointing out what I take to be a weakness in this thinking and suggest a possible remedy.

Recall that for Dewey, both “psychology” and “ethics”—the two components that I have argued make up his conception of high school philosophy and from which we can begin to develop a more contemporary conception—profited from the inclusion of literature as a means to cultivating imaginative as well as critical thinking. In other words, literature was to add richness and complexity to students’ thinking and to their moral-ethical judgments. I applaud Dewey’s emphasis on this role for literature (and the imagination). And, in fact, he has had good company among contemporary scholars who have advocated for this connection between moral-ethical thinking and literature (or art more generally) in similar ways. Michael Pardales (2002), for example, argues that “we engage in literature in a way that actually adds significant dimensionality to our experience…Through literature we can have experiences that we may not be able to have otherwise. We get a glimpse into the lives of characters that may be very different from our own, or to which we would not otherwise have access” (p. 432). Literature can be a powerful means to exposing students to a range of ideas about the good life—along with instances of injustice, oppression and inhuman treatment of others—that they may not be exposed to in their lived experiences. It can, in other words, provide us with “multiple and diverse narrative accounts of others” and “expose us to more, morally salient situations than we are likely to face in our real world experience alone” (Pardales, 2002, p. 434).

Dewey seems to have recognized this. But, perhaps not surprisingly, he seemed to have little to say concretely about how this relationship between literature and philosophy should be reflected in the
curriculum. Pardales is more explicit. He advocates for “ethics courses that use works of literature...as well as philosophical works” (2002, p. 435, emphasis added). Using the example of studying utilitarianism by reading John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism* alongside Charles Dickens’ novel *Hard Times*, Pardales argues that, “By using both, students become used to thinking about both the general and the particular. Not only will they engage Utilitarian theory in Mill’s *Utilitarianism*, they will see how utilitarianism might appear in the lives of particular people in Dickens’ *Hard Times*.” Pardales is sure to stress that literature is not to take a secondary role in this union of literary and philosophical texts, but he also makes clear the unique contribution of the latter, saying that either “one without the other will produce an imbalanced approach to the teaching of ethics” (2002, p. 436).

It is worth emphasizing that Pardales does not seem to (nor do I wish to) endorse the study of ethical theory in high school simply for the sake of studying ethical theory. Similarly, this is not an endorsement of studying ethical theory in a way that encourages students to choose entirely one systematic view of ethics over another or to understand perfectly the terms and names associated with the various movements within the history of ethical thought. Dewey’s warning against applying ethical precepts in abstraction should still serve as a check against this approach to teaching ethics. But there may be reason to believe that the inclusion of some study of ethical theory in a high school philosophy course can contribute to a student’s actual ability to think through and deliberate over particular moral-ethical issues. In this way it can make unique contributions to the kind of ethical and democratic education I have advanced in this paper.

In fact, it seems to me that the practice of deliberating over moral-ethical issues without any actual study of ethics is immediately problematic. Such deliberations would likely be devoid of some very rich and useful traditions of moral-ethical thought of both secular and religious natures. It would be largely uninformed by those most influential traditions from which humans have drawn throughout history and across a diverse background of cultures in answering moral-ethical questions—for example, Aristotelian (virtue) ethics, utilitarian and other consequentialist ways of thinking, Kantian and other deontological approaches, ethics of care, ethics of alterity, as well as religious views of morality and ethics as seen, for example, in Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, Christianity, and so on.
The point is not that these are the only or, perhaps, even the best ways of thinking about ethics in our contemporary context. Nor is it to say that children cannot fruitfully engage in moral-ethical dialogue without making specific use of traditions of moral-ethical thought. Further, this is not a call for an approach to moral education that exposes students (rather unreflectively in many cases) to some “immortal conversation.” However, human beings have undeniably amassed a set of moral-ethical ways of thinking that have become the most recognized and the most influential, and their passing of the test of time does give us some cause for claiming that they are worthwhile and useful in the education of children. As Martha Nussbaum (2000) has pointed out, “People are resourceful borrowers of ideas” (p. 48). We should take care to expose students to those ideas that have been most often and most substantially borrowed—by a variety of cultures and peoples—in the realm of ethical and moral thought.

An analogy may be useful in making this point more clearly: We would not ask students to deliberate over a social-political policy issue (affirmative action, for example) without some explicit instruction, research, and other preparatory work around that issue—work and preparation that would inevitably include the gathering and analysis of various historical and contemporary and diverse views on the issue (Hess, 2009, p. 53-76). Nor should we ask them to deliberate over moral-ethical issues without proper preparation that includes an equivalent gathering and analysis of historical and contemporary and diverse moral-ethical viewpoints. We certainly cannot include all perspectives on social-political or moral-ethical issues. But we can and should include those that, again, have proven to be most influential throughout human history, giving particular care to represent the world’s diversity as best we can.

I would like to point, also, to another way in which the use of literature can be uniquely valuable to ethical and democratic education. Much like Dewey and Pardales (and others), we can understand literature as a unique window into moral-ethical perspectives that are in some way alien to us and as a uniquely important opportunity for more thorough understanding of those perspectives. But we may also think of literature in a more personal sense. We may, in other words, ask students not just to engage with literature written by others, but also to produce their own “literature”—that is, their own personal narratives as captured through their own stories, poems, and plays. This use of “literature” as a means to the expression of (and further reflection on) one’s own perspective can serve at least two functions. First, it can
further multiply and add nuances to the moral-ethical perspectives represented in the literature students read and the ethical theories they study. Second, it can facilitate and lubricate the actual process of deliberation (perhaps the better term here, following Iris Young [2000], is “communication”) by allowing—and, in fact, encouraging—the use of multiple ways of communicating and engaging with one another, not all of which are based in strictly “rational” argument. For example, when we engage with others emotionally—through the sharing of our own stories or poems as embodiments of our moral-ethical (and other) perspectives—we suspend or give up entirely the requirement that ethical and democratic communication happen only according to reasoned and rational discourse and argument. We create, instead, a more inclusive realm of ethical and democratic communication. We can thereby foster in students a respect for not just what is communicated—that is, the content of different perspectives and the different emphases that certain perspectives contribute to communication—but also how those perspectives are legitimately communicated. Given that we are living in a world in which it is increasingly necessary to have a global ethical outlook, it is also increasingly necessary to recognize the value of a more inclusive conception of communication. Consequently, we must recognize the role that this broadened view of communication plays in our moral-ethical and democratic forms of education.

Having now engaged with and in some instances modified Dewey’s thinking about high school philosophy as “psychology” and “ethics” (and the role of literature as a supplement to both), we can state definitively a working conception of “philosophy” in the context of the high school curriculum. It is a subject that 1) focuses on cultivating reflective, open-minded, imaginative and critical thinkers; and 2) engages students in the study of ethics—combining ethical theory with literature and emphasizing both rational and affective factors in ethical and democratic communication. The argument has been that a philosophy course so understood can contribute to ethical and democratic education in a number of ways. It helps students develop their senses of self, and thus helps them develop their understanding of others, of human relations, and of their place within those relations. It cultivates an openness and flexibility of mind, leaving students hospitable to new ideas about the good life and alternative ways of thinking about and expressing those ideas. It provides them with a strong basis for understanding the time-honored ways in which humans have, throughout history, approached moral-ethical questions—a basis from which they can reflect
on their own and, again, engage with others’ ways of thinking about and being in the world. And, perhaps most importantly in the context of democratic education, it encourages the kind of inclusive, meaningful, and constructive communication that can help us work across our differences with compassion and respect.

**CONCLUSION: PRACTICAL ISSUES RELATED TO HIGH SCHOOL PHILOSOPHY**

This final section seeks to address (or, at least, to note) more explicitly than has been done to this point two particular practical issues that any attempt to include philosophy in high schools will surely face: Making time and space in the curriculum, and finding and training qualified teachers of philosophy. First, we have already seen that the issue of the crowded state of the curriculum was no issue at all for Dewey—quite simply, he said, other subjects needed to be fitted around the more central subjects of psychology and ethics. A similar attitude is demonstrated by Warren Nord’s advocacy for religion in high schools, particularly where he discusses the implications for the curriculum. In regards to the objection that there is “not enough time” or room in the curriculum to add even one course in religion, Nord (1995) says that eliminating one year of math instruction, for example—so that rather than twelve years of math and zero years of religion, we might have eleven years of math and one of religion—solves the problem (p. 212).

Of course, we can easily imagine a number of objections to this idea. For example, simply to drop some math, one might say, jeopardizes a student’s learning of the fundamental subjects that are essential to doing well on standardized tests, succeeding in the college entrance race, securing a job, and so on. Until we have empirical evidence to show that philosophy, too, can contribute to such things (rather than this mere talk of its contributions to ethical and democratic education!), we may not have a ready defense against such an argument—at least not one that speaks in similar terms. We might, however, argue that a view of education that pays no mind to the importance of philosophy may very well be clouded by our obsession with what Martha Nussbaum (2010) calls an “education for profit.” Such an education focuses too narrowly on educational goals connected to economic growth and development, production, jobs, and the like. An “education for democracy,” on the other hand, concerns itself with “the ability to think critically; the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a ‘citizen
of the world'; and, finally, the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person” (2010, p. 7). Such ends, Nussbaum argues, are equally or more valuable than those of an education for profit. If a course in philosophy can advance them—and the argument throughout this essay has been that it can—then it is worth sacrificing a year or two of mathematics or some other twelve-year course of study for one or two years of philosophy (as it is understood here).

To address the issue of preparing teachers of a high school philosophy course, we have first to address more directly the still lingering idea that philosophy might work best in the curriculum by simply being included in other courses. In their discussion of religion’s potential inclusion in schools, Nord and Charles Haynes (1998) argue that because most high school teachers are trained to teach a specific discipline (one that is not, typically, religion or, as is important here, philosophy) it is difficult for them to connect religion with their own discipline in ways that treat the former meaningfully and adequately relative to what it deserves. Further, Nord and Haynes argue that making sense of an important and complex subject like religion requires that it not be reduced to being part of another discipline (1998, p. 45). We can say the same about philosophy: Its potential importance to ethical and democratic education and its complexity as a discipline require that we give it its own place in the curriculum in addition to the various ways it currently permeates both curricular and extra-curricular aspects of schools—and that we develop teachers qualified to teach it as a stand-alone course.

Concerning this development of qualified teachers, Nord and Haynes (1998) recommend, in regard to teachers of religion, that “religious studies become a certifiable field for teachers” (p. 45), and Nord (1995) more generally recommends that we “improve teacher education” (p. 234). These are legitimate suggestions that deserve some attention. But they are directed only at teacher education or certification programs, and so are limited in at least two ways. First, such a narrow focus overlooks other possibilities beyond the realm of teacher education. We might, for example, be better served by including more philosophy in the general education that future teachers receive outside of their specific training as teachers. R.S. Peters (1967) seemed to have such an idea in mind when he distinguished between the training of teachers as teachers and the education of teachers as persons. Philosophy, he argued, should be part of the liberal education that future teachers receive during their “general education as human beings” (p. 153-154).
Yet, the degree to which college students are exposed to philosophy seems to be decreasing, particularly as college education, too, increasingly succumbs to “profit” motives for education rather than “democratic” motives. Second, a focus on pre-service teacher preparation does not help us address current teachers who will of necessity—in the absence of formally trained philosophy teachers—be asked to teach philosophy courses. Here, something like professional development or continuing education may be helpful, perhaps even aided by various out-reach programs with college and university philosophy departments and schools of education.

In fact, some recent work has focused on just this kind of professional development and out-reach. For example, the American Philosophical Association’s Committee on Pre-College Philosophy, as part of some recent steps to bring philosophy into high school classrooms, has established a mentorship program that brings together high school teachers, philosophy faculty, and curriculum specialists around the goal of teaching high school philosophy. This Committee has also initiated the formation of a new organization, PLATO (Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization), which aims to be a national resource and support network for any who are interested or already involved in pre-college philosophy. In addition, the Squire Family Foundation, a non-profit organization in Washington, D.C. that advocates for pre-college philosophy, offers one- to three-year grants ranging from $5,000 to $50,000 to assist those teachers with no background in philosophy. Finally, we might consider new possibilities for the field of “philosophy of education.” In ways similar to how those engaged in the fields of “math education” and “social studies education” are intimately involved with the teaching of those subjects in K-12 schooling, so too can scholars of philosophy of education become involved in the teaching of philosophy in K-12 schooling (high schools in particular). They may, in fact, occupy an interesting and unique point of intersection between philosophy and education that would be invaluable to efforts to bring philosophy to high schools.

If we are serious about promoting ethical and democratic ends in our schools, and if we acknowledge that those ends are best met in classrooms where respectful and consequential deliberation can take place, then we are wise to continue giving due consideration to philosophy as a stand-alone course within our traditional curricular structure. I have recommended one particular conception of philosophy—one that draws heavily from Dewey (an under-utilized
resource, I would argue, amongst past and current scholars and practitioners interested in this subject)—and I have argued for its inclusion as a stand-alone course of study. This is not meant to suggest, however, that there is one conception of philosophy or one way in which philosophy should be included in the curriculum. Indeed, current practices evidence a variety of reasons for including philosophy and a variety of means for doing so. Concerning the latter, for example, we have currently many elective courses, extra-curricular activities (such as ethics bowls and after-school philosophy clubs) and, as I have said, philosophical content and method being included in existing courses. A stand-alone course in philosophy should not be seen as a replacement of these various other forms of inclusion; suggesting otherwise would contradict the Deweyan spirit of de-compartmentalizing and de-fragmenting the curriculum. What I am suggestion, rather, is that we keep up another familiar aspect of Dewey’s educational thought—the spirit of experimentation—and that we continually apply it to our thinking and practice related to high school philosophy.

NOTES

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Twenty-First Annual Meeting of the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, Cincinnati, OH, March 2, 2012.

2 See, for example, Hess (2009), Kunzman (2006), Parker (2003), and Simon (2001).

3 This is not, of course, to deny the large body of literature concerned with philosophy in schools in general or the many actual instances of philosophy in schools (both past and present, both in the U.S. and elsewhere). The most notable and well-known example in the United States since the 1970s has been the philosophy for children movement started by Matthew Lipman and carried on in various ways by many scholars and practitioners as well as academic and non-academic organizations. But the history of philosophy in schools in the United States does, in fact, go back much further than Lipman, and philosophy’s inclusion in schools has been defended on various grounds and recommended for various purposes. The goal here is to use the work of John Dewey (more substantially, I would argue than has been done to date) as a theoretical justification for philosophy’s full inclusion in the curriculum and to suggest its value specifically to ethical and democratic educational ends.
A few comments might be helpful here. First, in regards to helping children of high school age develop this capacity for reflection about the moral-ethical perspectives and general notions of the good life they adopt from their families and immediate communities in early childhood, I want to make a clear distinction between attempting to challenge those notions and perspectives, on the one hand, and attempting to change them, on the other. The philosophy course I advocate here would attempt the former but not the latter. Students, upon reflection, may very well continue to subscribe to the same notions of the good life and the same moral-ethical perspectives found among their family or local community. In other words, reflecting does not mean changing. It means, as I use it here, coming to a deeper, more critical, and open-minded understanding. This will hopefully answer the potential criticism that a philosophy course of the kind endorsed here is actually an attempt 1) to subvert the moral-ethical outlook, ideals, beliefs, and values that parents wish to (and have the right to) teach their children, and 2) to advance some particular moral-ethical agenda. That is not and should not be the intention of such a course as I understand it. But, a philosophy course will and should challenge students to think more critically and reflectively about those outlooks, ideals, beliefs, and values taught at home, and the result will likely either be an affirmation of or some degree of change to their existing ways of thinking. Those families or communities who object even to this kind of challenge will still find grounds for criticizing the philosophy course advocated here. Second, it may be asked how the development of one’s “sense of self” flows into one’s development of an understanding of others and of one’s place in the world. As I understand it, a reflective sense of one’s self helps us to recognize more clearly where our differences with others exist and, perhaps, why they arise. It also helps us be more open to others’ challenges to our own notion of the good life in ways we may not be if we remain rigid and dogmatic about our beliefs. These, I would argue, are hallmarks of a working democratic way of life.


For a related discussion of this Dewey essay, see Ralston (2008).

Among some of the more well-known examples, see Greene (1995), Nussbaum (1997, especially chapter 3), Kunzman (2006, especially chapter 4). I emphasize Michael Pardales’s work here for the specific reason that becomes clear in the following paragraphs.

Pardales draws this specific example from Nussbaum (1995).

Jana Mohr Lone, email message to author, December 9, 2009. At the time of correspondence, Lone was the chair of the APA’s Committee on Pre-College Instruction in Philosophy and director of the Northwest Center for Philosophy for Children at University of Washington. The latter runs a program called “Philosophers in the Schools.” Its goal is to educate University of Washington graduate and undergraduate students about ways to introduce philosophy to pre-college students. These graduate and undergraduate students are then sent into Seattle public schools to facilitate philosophy sessions in classrooms.

The Squire Family Foundation has been particularly involved with three recent efforts to add philosophy classes to the high school curriculum in Long Island, NY-specifically at Huntington High School (Huntington), Bethpage High School (Bethpage), and Stanford H. Calhoun High School (Merrick). For
more on these classes see: Merle English, “Ancient Questions, Modern Dialogues,” Newsday, April 19, 2009.

REFERENCES


