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2002

Philosophizing with Teenagers

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Volume 30/Number 5 • May/June 2002

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Knowledge Quest

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I thought philosophy was the last thing I wanted to engage myself in, but now I'm considering at least minoring in philosophy when I get to college, and of course, majoring in philosophy for the remainder of my life. —*Seventeen-year-old girl*

"What distinguishes a crime from a misdemeanor?" I asked.

Twenty-five high-school juniors and seniors and I had just finished watching Woody Allen's film, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, the story of a man who has his mistress killed when she threatens to tell his wife and colleagues about their affair. Moral and existential questions nearly choke this movie, and I had started with the most obvious. After battling about some potential answers as they related to the action of the film, one student emotionally declared that, regardless of the murder, it was a felony that the main character didn't tell his wife about his affair.

"Why?" I asked.

There was a moment of silence before the class erupted, highly divided and equally passionate. Half of us thought it an act of caring not to tell; the other half of us thought it was an act of love to tell. We probed each other with hypothetical situations and questions challenging others and ourselves to change position. Does it make a difference if it was just a one-night stand? Does it matter if alcohol was involved? Students gave a variety of reasons for their beliefs (ignorance is bliss, breach of trust, lack of self and other respect, "you aren't really in love if you do that,"

etc.), and then gingerly began talking about their own experiences. In the short history of their involvement in romantic relationships, the majority of the class had found themselves in the position of the movie's wife or husband. This conversation led us to examine a philosophical question close to the heart and lives of these teens: What is the nature of love?

As the class period ended, students stayed rooted in their seats. They demanded to continue the conversation the following class and in their upcoming paper assignment. They wanted to know: How do you know when you are in love? What sort of behavior is required of those in love? Who are people in love primarily responsible to? They were hungry to think and talk about this. They had sacrificed three weeks of their summer vacations to live at Stanford University and to study philosophy at the Philosophy Discovery Institute.

As Matthews, Noddings, and others have pointed out, children and especially adolescents are naturally predisposed to philosophy.¹ They ask fundamental (some would say naïve) questions about their identity, the sources of their knowledge, what makes right and wrong, religion and relationships, and the world around them. They are in an intense period of "moral and ideological exploration, ferment, and consolidation. At this time in their lives, young people question their epistemological, moral, political, and religious assumptions, make critical career and other life choices, and rethink their sense of who they are and what is important to them."² They challenge authority, and they are self-reflective.

Yet rare is the American teenager who is ever exposed to philosophy within middle or high school. The vast majority of young people never encounter a formal classroom setting devoted to thinking about or reading philosophy. And if they do, it is usually by accident. Either a high school English or history teacher decided to offer an elective in philosophy, or students were required to take a philosophy component of some introductory sequence at college. Virtually all adolescents are philosophers in the sense that they ask and seek answers to questions that are at heart philosophical, but virtually none formally learn how to philosophize or how other philosophers have answered the questions they naturally find so puzzling.

Philosophical questions are essential to certain developmental tasks of adolescents. I want to encourage librarians and other adults who work with kids to listen carefully to teenagers' existential musings and to perceive them as opportunities to further some of the primary tasks of adolescence—self-understanding and definition.

Adolescence

The word adolescence derives from the Latin *adolescere*, meaning "to grow to maturity." Adolescence usually begins at puberty, about the age of ten, and continues until certain developmental tasks are substantially completed, sometimes into the early twenties. Developmental psychologist Erikson characterized this period as a break between the security of childhood and the autonomy of adulthood.³ As one teenager described his experience, "I don't know where it started and have no more idea if it's ended. Something inside of me tells me I'm in transition between something and something else, but I don't know what."⁴

When they leave adolescence, the world expects young men and women to have a solid grasp on their identity. We expect them to have a sense of who they are, what they stand for, and what they are becoming. "[Identity] provides the structure of the self, from which basic commitments, directions, plans and decisions are made."⁵ It is during adolescence that teenagers begin to explore, construct and define their selves.

In interviews I asked teenagers how adults could assist teens in this task. A thirteen-year-old girl told me that adults should:

Help them to express their self and get to know their self. That's, like, the biggest and hardest thing for a young person to do. To know who you are. Not who your best friend is, not who the cute boy over there is, but you. Know and love yourself also. You have to stop worrying about how skinny she is and how she's so perfect. And that's, like, very hard. So, you have to help them to express their self and know their self and identify their self. What kind of person they are and what kind of person do they want to be.⁶

With these tasks at hand, it is not surprising to see and hear teenagers working out big existential questions: Who am I? What do I believe? What do I value? What do I want in (and from) life? Who should I affiliate with? What is love? What is friendship? What is death? In large part, answering these questions constitutes the primary developmental task of adolescence.

Not only are these questions engaging and important to the teens being asked to deliberate about them, they are also utterly new and foreign. Any reflective person who works with or parents teenagers recognizes the (sometimes clumsy) playing out of this search for self through the testing of boundaries, ideas, and beliefs. We see it in teenagers' words and actions. As cognitive structures come online that enable adolescents to effectively explore the big questions and cultural requirements demand that they do so, philosophizing—formally or informally—can facilitate the process. It can provide a way to address the big questions in a rigorous, thoughtful, and supportive manner.

Philosophy and Adolescence

Despite being renown for its colossal impracticality, philosophy can be quite useful for adolescents given that its "aim is to push our understanding of the world and ourselves a bit deeper."⁷ The act of philosophizing consists of thinking and engaging other people seriously and rigorously about big existential questions.

Adults recognize that most teenagers have no trouble taking a position on an issue and declaring a belief or value. For example, some suddenly become vegetarians for moral reasons. Some reject the friends or religions they have grown up with. My own personal favorite was to self-righteously accuse adults of hypocrisy without considering the underlying moral complexities. Thinking philosophically requires that adolescents practice developing clear and coherent reasons for believing or doing something against other such positions. Their task is to evaluate the options before choosing among them. This can include consideration of "different ethical positions, religious beliefs, attitudes toward sexuality, ideological stances in relation to family and friends, and the acceptability of societal norms."⁸ The idea is that by engaging in philosophical debate, whether internal or among other people, an adolescent can begin to understand some essential questions of what is reasonably called the human condition.

Additionally, philosophy gives us the tools by which we can play out the logic (and logical consequences) of any ideological stance we are trying on. It allows us to take on and test multiple stances in the relative safety of our arm-chairs. Exploring the moral complexity of becoming a vegetarian in neutral territory can be better than testing the belief by announcing to your meat-packer parent that you will no longer be eating the food that, in a sense, supports you. The consequences for working out ethical or ideological stances in actual relationships with friends and family can be less forgiving than doing so in the abstract.

Finally, adolescence "is a time in which the values and perspectives of others become clearer to the developing mind."⁹ Teens become hypersensitive to what they perceive to be their peers' and parents' opinions on all manner of topics, from the mundane to the existential. Philosophy offers examples of how extremely creative and rigorous thinkers of both the past and present have detailed answers and provided clear and coherent reasons for justifying their conclusions and rejecting others. A study of what these philosophers thought and why they thought the way they did can provide teens with models of alternative

Recommended Fiction

- Camus, Albert. *The Stranger* (New York: Vintage Books, 1954).
 Gaarder, Jostein. *Sophie's World* (New York: Berkeley Books, 1991).
 García Márquez, Gabriel. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (New York: Knopf, 1998).
 Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1998).
 Kafka, Franz. *The Trial* (New York: Schocken Books, 1998).
 Morrison, Toni. *Tar Baby* (New York: Knopf, 1981).
 Olsen, Tillie. *Tell Me a Riddle* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Pr., 1995).
 Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).
 Wolff, Tobias. *The Night in Question* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1997).

Recommended Philosophy Texts

- Blackburn, Simon. *Being Good* (Oxford, England: Oxford Univ. Pr., 2001).
 Perry, John. "A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality." In J. Perry and M. Bratman, eds. *Introduction to Philosophy*, 3d ed. (Oxford, England: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1999).
 Nozick, Robert. *The Examined Life* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1989).
 Perry, J., and M. Bratman, eds. *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford, England: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1999).
 Bok, Sissela. *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).
 Pojman, Louis, ed. *Moral Philosophy: A Reader* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1993).
 Washburn, Phil. *Philosophical Dilemmas: Building a Worldview* (New York: Oxford Univ. Pr., 2001).
 Kierkegaard, Søren, Howard V. Hong, and Edna H. Hong, eds. *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Pr., 1985).
 Plato. *The Republic* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991).
 Blackburn, Simon. *Think* (Oxford, England: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1999).
 Nagel, Thomas. *What Does It All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1987).

Recommended Resource for Teachers

- Simon, Katherine G. *Moral Questions in the Classroom: How to Get Kids to Think Deeply about Real Life and Their Schoolwork* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Pr., 2001).

Philosophy in Your Community

There are growing numbers of people (including teenagers) who get together informally in coffeehouses across the country to discuss philosophy. Information about how to join (or start) a group can be found in the book *Socrates Café* (New York: Norton, 2001) by Christopher Phillips.

answers and a way of examining how the historical period in which one lives affects the way one thinks about existence.

It is a postmodern commonplace that we confront the world through the paradigms we create about existence and the values that underlie them. It is a psychological fact that our beliefs and desires motivate what we do. Adolescents

and philosophers focus on examining the paradigms we create and developing beliefs that affect who we are and how we act in the world.

Philosophizing with Teens

At the Philosophy Discovery Institute, students come to explore the existential questions they find naturally captivating. In the process they

explore, test, and modify their evolving answers to the big questions and the assumptions with which they view the world.

Fodder for philosophical conversation and learning is everywhere. It is in the news, in novels, in essays, in children's books, in films, in poetry, and in teenagers' relationships with others. It is a mistake to think that philosophy lives only in impenetrable tomes by Plato, Kant, Husserl, and Derrida. Philosophy lives smack in the center of our worlds. All it takes are well-crafted and directed questions to release it. After all, philosophy concerns itself with questioning and understanding "very common ideas that all of us use every day without thinking about them."¹⁰

The challenge with teenagers is to provide accessible entries into philosophizing and the substance of philosophy. Most teenagers need to be able to relate the big questions to their own lives. This is why literature, film, and theater can be powerful allies and provocateurs. These media provide engaging illustrations of the perennial questions philosophers examine and allow teens to develop and share their own intuitions without resorting to being "taught" philosophy. Given that the big questions form the heart of most, if not all, dramatic action, it is not surprising that they provide a portal into systematic examination of the big questions for teenagers.

Take, for example, LeGuin's short story "The Ones Who Walked away from Omelas."¹¹ The narrative leads us to a town whose abundant good fortune depends upon the cruel enslavement of a single innocent child. In the town, most people live under these conditions. Others walk away. Encouraging teens to make comments in the form of questions can start an interesting conversation. Would they be one of the ones who walked away? Are the ones who walk away cowards because they do nothing to liberate the child? In asking and answering questions like these, teens address questions of morality, justice, and personal responsibility. It is likely there will be diverse positions in the group. Philosophizing happens as teens begin to ask each other questions, argue (in the philosophical sense) about their positions, try out new ideas, and think of possible arguments against them. They can learn from each other and from adults who are fully engaged in the conversation as Socratic facilitators.

Not only do teenagers need accessible entries into philosophizing, they also need nonauthoritarian ones. As the thirteen-year-old clearly stated above, they want to be full and equal participants in the conversation. When adults act as Socratic facilitators, they "provoke and model the moves made by experienced thinkers in their own best thinking, avoiding the teacher's common roles as source of knowledge and instant evaluator of student responses. Their community takes on these roles."¹² Many teenagers crave these kinds of conversations, particularly with adults who are not their parents. We may be failing kids by not providing them. In the same set of interviews mentioned above, another fifteen-year-old girl told me that adults could help teens:

Teenager: Maybe just talking to 'em and getting your opinion on, like, me and you, give your opinion of what you think and what we think, stuff like that.

Interviewer: You mean have real conversations?

Teenager: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you think that we are not having the kinds of conversations that are real or meaningful to adolescents?

Teenager: At school all they talk about is just what you need to learn. They don't ever ask us our opinions or what we feel or anything like that.

Interviewer: Do you think that would help you?

Teenager: Yeah.

Interviewer: Help you to do what?

Teenager: Maybe have like a different aspect on life or something.¹³

In the Socratic method, the facilitator of the conversation is an equal participant while helping to birth the nascent ideas of others. As facilitators, we can deepen and extend existential questioning by providing outside materials that illustrate positions that the students are examining. For example, a conversation on the LeGuin story benefits from reading a few pages of Mill. He argues the utilitarian principle of the the greatest happiness for the greatest number.¹⁴ The teens can discuss this reading as it relates

to their positions. Then they may want to read Williams, who dismantles some of Mill's common sense in "Utilitarianism and Integrity."¹⁵ It needn't stop here. They can begin to think about what in their actual lives is analogous to the situation in the story. What are they actually doing about it and why? Are they walking away? Are they staying? They can ask themselves about larger social circumstances analogous to the story. How are we, as a nation, like the people in Omelas? What should we do about it? Facilitators can show teens how to ask increasingly complex questions that can challenge them to think about the answers that they give, the assumptions that they make, and the lives that they lead (or want to lead). As adult facilitators, we should wholeheartedly participate in the same process. After all, as Greene reminds us, we are also in the process of becoming.¹⁶

Conclusion

Philosophizing need not take place in a formal setting. It doesn't need a formally trained philosopher. It doesn't even need adults. It needs people interested in understanding their selves and the world in which they live. Teenagers are such people. They have some really big questions that they have a stake in answering. Adults can help them by modeling one way of addressing these questions—facilitating the act of philosophizing. Portals such as literature and film can open up meaningful conversations between adults and teenagers and can spur identity development. Providing material from other philosophers can deepen the conversation and challenge students to provide coherent and convincing evidence for the positions they take on important issues. It can help them negotiate their developmental task of self and world definition and understanding. ●

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8. Garrod et al., *Adolescent Portraits*, 8.
9. Ibid.
10. Nagel, *What Does It All Mean?* 5.
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