

**Philosophy and Education Conference: 'The Philosophical Dimension of Learning',
Rugby School, 08/05/2012**

Arrival

Another fascinating conference in another beautiful location. As with the Cambridge children's literature conference, everyone was infectiously enthusiastic and helpful. If I were a cynical man I could chalk it up to the fact that the crowd assembled consisted mainly of 'believers' in the need for and merits of philosophy in a secondary school education, but the room buzzed with an energy and excitement that only a *fresh* and *invigorated* belief in a cause can create and only a hunger to learn and a willingness to engage can sustain.

As a philosophy PhD student in jeans, trainers, and a casual top, I felt somewhat out of place at first amongst the well-dressed teachers and education professionals. This soon wore off, however, as more and more people seemed genuinely intrigued in what I was studying and were thrilled to hear that part of my thesis would incorporate practitioners such as Matthew Lipman. Indeed, as I was repeatedly told, the more research done at *any* level in this area can only be a good when it comes to promoting philosophy in schools. This was at the stall for SAPERE – an educational charity who promotes Philosophy for Children/Community in the UK by offering support and training for professionals who want to get involved in the area. In the future I would very much like to become a part of that community and bring philosophy into schools, but just then I had to make do with leafing through some of the wonderful works of Shaun Tan and discussing how such books are used in the classroom.

A number of other stalls also grabbed my attention, but in particular The Philosophy Foundation (an educational charity that also works toward bringing philosophy to a wider audience, including school students) had a stall where Peter Worley was promoting his books *The If Machine* and *The If Odyssey*. When I brought up their forthcoming book *The Philosophy Foundation*, he looked at my name badge and recognised that I was one of the contributors. It was extremely gratifying to hear from him that my one of my two thought-experiment contributions was going down well when he had tested it out in the classroom, and, if I'm honest, I don't think I could have stopped smiling for the rest of the day if I had tried.

To mention just one more stall before getting onto the conference talks, a number of the local Rugby schools had sent students to lay out and talk about their own Extended Projects – a new qualification that counts as half an A-level designed to allow students to explore any area of interest and develop their critical, reflective, and independent learning skills. These projects were between seven and fifteen thousand words long, on topics ranging from the ethics of genetic engineering to the question ‘what is a number?’ Simply from leafing through them you could see how these projects had sparked skills and imagination beyond what is normally brought out in A-level subjects and the students themselves couldn’t stop talking about their projects or praising the course for giving them the opportunity. Indeed, after looking at some of the detailed time-plans I suddenly felt that my own time-management needed renewed and thorough scrutiny!

A. C. Grayling

The day’s talks began with an address from one of Britain’s most well-known and publically prominent philosophers, A. C. Grayling, on ‘The Philosophical Dimension of Learning’. ‘Philosophy’, he stated, is a word in need of disambiguation. What we are, or should be, aiming for in an educational context is philosophy defined as universal inquiry and critical reflection.

Grayling went on to also clarify the nature of education as he saw it. Education has always been: a) a process of conveying the characteristics and skills that are essential to social life, and b) a way to convey a certain attitude. This latter part of education, which tends towards the inculcation of *a* philosophy, should be distinguished from the introduction of philosophical kinds of questioning and what it is to be philosophical in the sense mentioned above – i.e. to aim to move one step beyond knowledge to understanding through critical reflection and inquiry.

Grayling also argued that we must not shy away from the task of bringing students (and ourselves) to the realisation that some problems may well be unsolvable. We must face this issue and show students how even these “uncrackable” philosophic nuts can fruitfully highlight considerations about how we think and why we think the things we do. Being fearless when faced with such apparent irresolution is what has driven the birth and maturation of areas such as natural science, psychology, and computer science, let alone the

personal development of great individuals. Indeed, in an age where children are becoming more and more adept at seeking out and questioning the ‘cash value’ of what they are being taught (a point made more forcefully by John Taylor in the final talk), the ability to highlight this and ‘sell it’ is necessary. It is this fearlessness and criticality, Grayling argued, that should infuse philosophy in the curriculum, not only as a stand-alone subject but as something which works its way into how other subjects are taught.

As a concluding note, Grayling added that the ability to question and critically evaluate material is of paramount importance as we are now confronted with “history’s greatest lavatory wall [...] where anyone can scrawl their graffiti”: the internet. Finding the internet’s real value requires a philosophical mind-set to be utilised by each individual, as, for better or worse, the filters of publisher, librarian, teacher, parent, etc. cannot so easily and completely stand between the child/student and the well of knowledge.

Angie Hobbs

Angie Hobbs, a lecturer here at Warwick and Senior Fellow in the Public Understanding of Philosophy, followed up with a talk on ‘Invigorating Modern Education with Ancient Greek Philosophy’. She began by outlining what she saw as the main functions of education: 1) to create a happy/stimulated childhood in itself (something too often overlooked), and 2) to actualise the potential of a child and set them up with the best possible chance at adulthood.

There is much to commend the use of Ancient Greek philosophy in secondary school classrooms. Firstly, these philosophers and their texts tackle “big” questions with gusto and without the strict boundaries between subjects that the contemporary curriculum must deal with (this interdisciplinary approach would become a focal point in the afternoon’s talks). Not only this, but they do so in an appealing manner through their use of paradoxes, puns, mythology, and a whole host of other techniques which tap into an endearing sense of fun. By utilising such tools these philosophers are valuable not only to the second function of education as Hobbs laid it out, but, importantly, the first as well. Secondly, these texts, Plato’s dialogues in particular, offer role and life-models not only insofar as they present potential ideals but also through their use and portrayal of historical characters whose lives we can discuss as results of certain ways of living or schools of thought – for example, was Socrates’ death at the hands of the state somewhat a result of his own personality and

philosophy? Thirdly, when it comes to using Plato, the dialogue form exemplifies philosophy at its pinnacle as a communal search for truth. These were the three points I found most compelling, but she also spoke of Ancient Greek philosophy's ability to address the gender divide through its use of language and wordplay, its ability to build confidence over arrogance, and how usefully inclusive it is in religious terms.

During questions, Hobbs responded to concerns about how 'relevant' these texts and their underpinning mythologies are. She argued that 'relevance' has become an over-used and ambiguous term bandied around far too often. She did not say as much explicitly, but her points seemed to gravitate towards the idea that anything can be brought to be relevant. She spoke of how these texts are "as relevant for their *differences* as they are for their similarities". Namely, being able to open children's minds to something so different, and to broaden their thinking in relation to other culture's and foreign ideas, is akin to putting across the lesson that "you are not trapped by your current place and time. People have lived differently before and can live differently again."

Lunch



After two stimulating talks it was time to mull over the ideas raised and mingle once more over a sumptuous lunch. During lunch I not only got to meet the man whose book *The Meaning of Things* began my interest in philosophy, and whom is perhaps the philosopher my dad continually asks if I have met yet, A. C. Grayling, but I also got to meet and talk to one of the men who sits

on the British Society for the Philosophy of Religion Committee, who sponsored my place at the conference (to them I again extend my thanks and gratitude for what I hope they can see was an invaluable experience for me), Robin Le Poidevin.

Julian Baggini

After lunch Julian Baggini, co-founder and editor-in-chief of *The Philosophers' Magazine*, spoke to us on 'Teaching Philosophy or Teaching Philosophically?' Before he embarked upon the main emphasis of his talk, Baggini wanted to balance out the overwhelming positivity of the morning with some of the potential pitfalls of philosophy and philosophy in secondary schools. First of all, he reminded us that the hard, empirical evidence that philosophy is a useful tool in schools is still somewhat lacking – although many practitioners proclaim it, there is little that yet *proves* it. Secondly, we have a tendency to overstate the case for children as “natural born philosophers”. It may be true that children are excellently poised for philosophical thinking insofar as they are readily open to entertaining thought experiments and are free of certain constraints, but their ability to follow a logical chain of argument is not founded upon a naturally occurring phenomenon. It requires hard work on their part, on any philosopher's part in fact, and is something that many may come to fail at. Children may already be ‘half’ philosophers, and that puts them at an advantage over certain adults, but they are not naturally ‘full’ philosophers. Thirdly, by placing too much emphasis on the virtues of philosophical thought we run the risk of breeding arrogance. We potentially teach children a certain smugness if we simplistically state that by thinking philosophically they have automatically become more open-minded, more rigorous in their thinking, and are more ‘intellectual’ than others.

After these caveats, however, Baggini moved back to speaking of philosophy's positives and how, even if it does not attain stand-alone subject status, it can infuse other subjects with a certain life and reflective capacity. Indeed, he argued, this option of using philosophy to infuse other subjects with a certain critical vitality may be preferable to having an individual philosophy course as it breaks down the interdisciplinary boundaries and comes to help reject the third problem raised above. There must be a recognition that philosophy itself doesn't have a monopoly on what we might label ‘philosophical questions’ and that specialist philosophers do not have a monopoly on teaching them. Both philosophy and its experts must have the humility to work alongside other subjects and their teachers to foster a much more productive, self-aware, and humble working environment – something which can then be reflected in how philosophy is portrayed to students.

John Taylor

Finally, our host John Taylor, Head of Philosophy and Director of Critical Skills at Rugby School, rounded off the day with his talk ‘Becoming a School of Thought’. Although he opened by saying that much of what needed to be said had already been said, Taylor wanted to underscore those points from the practical perspective of a full-time teacher.

He alluded to the issue of “the over-examined life”, at least in the sense of our examination-based educational system. Examinations are a thing that can be lived with, but there needs to be a change. If for no other reason, change is necessary simply in order to free up time. When, he asked us, do students now have time to think, reflect, and ponder beyond a surface level? The concerns being expressed by higher education institutions with regards to the pupils applying from A-level are three-fold and seemingly stem from this issue (of course these are not blanket across *all* pupils). Firstly, there is a poor display of critical thinking skills. Students understand or know what they are being taught, but they are unable to apply their knowledge and question it. Secondly, there seems to be a poor synoptic understanding in pupils and they display little knowledge of overarching themes and meta-narratives in subjects where such things are core to deeper understanding, such as history. Thirdly, they demonstrate poor intellectual curiosity. Pupils apparently think that learning is simply demonstrated by knowing the right answer. It is philosophy, or at least a philosophical approach, that can help address these issues.

Taylor argued from his own practice in, and experience of, philosophy in schools, that philosophy lessons, or even the mere addition of philosophical considerations to classes, can spark a chain reaction of thinking and exploration. Due to its nature, philosophy also allows time to think and wrestle with problems in a deeper way, and it can expose the contrivance of how we break up education, knowledge, and subject-areas (something integral to my own research). This is exemplified in the success and enthusiasm of students engaging in the new Extended Project mentioned above and the often interdisciplinary nature of the projects. The Extended Project also demonstrates a point which philosophers of education who are not themselves teachers sometimes overlook but that Taylor made clear: whilst philosophy may cause a spark, and one-off courses or lessons might ignite something, like a well-made fire which can enchant and warm us from first flame to final ember, there must be structure, development, and continual feeding in its construction.

Conclusion

All-in-all, this conference, whilst outside my comfort zone of a university, research-based environment, was a fruitful and engaging one. It reminded me that the goal of my PhD is not just a thesis but that I have aspirations with real-world impact. Philosophy and children's literature can go hand in hand to exemplify and fight for some the overarching themes examined at this conference: the need for invigoration of thought beyond answers to exams and 'cold' knowledge, the need for philosophy (and any area of study) to re-awaken to knowledge's true interdisciplinary nature and recognise that no subject holds a monopoly on ideas or types of inquiry, and that for all the talk of the benefit of philosophy in schools and education we must put our money where our mouth is and get out there, do it, and prove its value to ourselves, to schools, and to students themselves.