Philosophical Reflections for Educators

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Chapter 18

Philosophical Questions: Their Nature and Function

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Abstract

Philosophy raises questions that address fundamental issues and beliefs and which require complex thinking rather than empirical research to answer. When we take a philosophical approach to these questions, we do not seek to provide settled answers but to develop new perspectives and alternative ideas so we can make sense of issues that are incongruent. Philosophical questions are best understood as seeking a distinctly "philosophical" resolution to a distinctly "philosophical" problem. We do not resolve philosophical problems by discovering new facts, providing accurate information or filling gaps in our knowledge. We resolve them by making sense of issues that do not seem to make sense even when we have all the information.

Answering Philosophical Questions

The aim of this essay is to give an account of what is distinctive about philosophical questions on education. The account I present draws heavily on the work of educational philosopher Matthew Lipman and the Philosophy for Children movement he founded.

To begin with, there are a variety of different types of questions that can be asked about education, requiring different ways to answer. For example, the question "How does the brain function when we learn?" can be given a settled answer that we discover by scientific research. "How has education changed?" invites historical analysis. "What subjects are taught in Australian schools?" is answered by collecting information about the school system in Australia. "Does student inquiry lead to improved grades?" requires empirical research.

Philosophical questions such as "What does it mean to understand something?" and "What obligations do teachers have to their students?" are answered in a different way. They cannot be given settled answers by gathering empirical facts, consulting expert opinions or doing calculations. These questions arise even when we have all the settled knowledge. "Philosophy attempts to clarify and illuminate unsettled, controversial issues that are so generic that no scientific discipline is equipped to deal with them" (Lipman, 1988, p. 91). No matter how much information is gathered about what happens when we learn, this will not be enough to answer our question "What does it *mean* to understand something?"

Because the facts do not determine the answers to philosophical questions and do not allow us to prefer one answer to another, these questions always remain contestable and problematic. There are no final answers that can be given to philosophical questions because they can always be opposed by contrasting views.

Because philosophical questions are contestable and problematic, they require complex thinking to answer. The facts are not enough to provide answers, so we need to use our own reasoning, inquiry and judgment to arrive at an answer. Complex thinking goes beyond simply gathering or remembering information. It involves making a number of interrelated and often demanding cognitive moves to resolve abstract and intangible issues (Bloom, 1964). The form of complex thinking required may be critical, creative and caring thinking to "clarify meanings, uncover assumptions and presuppositions, analyse concepts, consider the validity of reasoning processes, and investigate the implications of ideas and the consequences in human life of holding certain ideas rather than others" (Lipman et al., 1980, p. 108).[1]

Philosophical Problems and Resolutions

Philosophical questions are also used for a distinctive purpose. To understand philosophical questions, we need a better understanding of this philosophical purpose. It is important to use them for the purpose for which they were designed.

Genuine questions, where we do not already know the answer, are tools that we use to resolve problems. Yet, there are a number of different types of problems. When we ask "What is the average age of people in Malaysia?" we are trying to fill a gap in our own knowledge. The problem is lack of knowledge of something that we want to know. We resolve this problem when we find this missing knowledge. When we ask "What is the best way to get to Hong Kong from Singapore?" we want to know how to act. The problem is uncertainty about how to act, and we resolve this by gathering information and designing an action plan.

Philosophical problems are a special case of doubt or ignorance. The problems occur not because of the lack of knowledge, but because of an inability to make sense of something or to see how our ideas can hang together and make sense. Philosophical problems involve the perplexing, bewildering, puzzling or enigmatic. Lipman refers to "some aberration, some discrepancy, something that defies being taken for granted" (2003, p. 21), while Splitter and Sharp refer to the "problematic, confused, ambiguous, or fragmentary" (1995, p. 18).

We resolve philosophical problems by providing insight and meaning, gaining a deeper sense of understanding, illumination, discernment, or a "sudden grasping or apprehending" (Burgh et al., 2006, p. 73). We seek to create a new framework of ideas that allows us to remove the contradiction, inconsistency or cognitive dissonance.

Resolution of a philosophical problem transforms the problem (Lipman, 2003), giving us a new way of seeing things that allows the problem to dissolve. This change in what we see or do cannot be accounted for by an addition of more knowledge or information. Philosophical resolution transforms a problematic situation into a unified or meaningful whole.

To illustrate, let us pose the following question: Should students be taught to be critical thinkers? On the one hand, it seems essential that students learn to think for themselves so that they can deal with the unexpected challenges of a fast-changing world. Yet, on the other hand, if they think for themselves, it seems they will challenge the cherished traditions of society and be disruptive. The philosophical problem is how to resolve the tension between the beneficial and the harmful implications that arise from our understanding of teaching critical

thinking. We can resolve this philosophical problem by providing new insight or understanding about thinking and education. For example, we could broaden our understanding of thinking for oneself to include not only critical thinking but also creative, collaborative and caring thinking. From this perspective, thinking for oneself does not imply negative disagreement with the cherished traditions of our society. Students can think for themselves about these traditions, but they can do it constructively and collaboratively. Also, we might rethink what we mean by "our cherished traditions". Not all traditions are worth keeping. If they are really worthy of retaining, then students' thinking will be useful for them to uncover the value in these traditions. If they are not worthy of retaining, then students' thinking will help move society forward. If we change our perspective on thinking and on the cherished traditions of society in this way, the original philosophical problem disappears.

Resolving philosophical problems is not like providing a settled, final answer. The mysteries are never entirely dispelled. In the words of Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan (1980):

In philosophy, a teacher is not looking for terminal answers. . . . Like a terminal illness, a terminal answer gives you no options. . . . A good answer is instead like a candle in the dark. It provides both light and mystery. It should, of course, illuminate, while at the same time reveal the contours of the unknown so that the listener can surmise that there is much more to be investigated and learned (p. 203).

In the above illustration, we have not settled the problem once and for all. Others may come and challenge our resolution by pointing out issues that we have not considered. Furthermore, our resolution has raised *new* problems—for example, what does it mean by to think well and how can we teach thinking?

Better and Worse Philosophical Resolutions

An easy trap to fall into is to think that, because there are no settled resolutions to philosophical problems, there are no right and wrong answers to philosophical questions and so philosophy is all a matter of opinion. This would make philosophy pointless because we cannot get it right

even if we try, and one answer is as good as any other because we cannot get it wrong.

The trap is to overlook other ways to judge philosophical resolutions besides whether they are right or wrong. Although there are many possible resolutions to philosophical problems,

this is not to say that anything goes, or that it is all just a matter of opinion. Our answers can be more or less intelligent, well thought out, insightful, compassionate and life enhancing, or they can be more or less obtuse, stymieing or pernicious (Cam, 2006, p. 25).

Correct/incorrect or right/wrong are very crude standards to use. They overlook the richness and depth of different philosophical resolutions. To judge the merits of a philosophical resolution, we need to distinguish between better and worse reasoning, not right and wrong answers.

Even if we cannot decide what the "right" answers are to philosophical questions by conducting experiments or surveys, reading up on the topic, doing calculations or consulting experts, we can decide which are the *better* answers by using other more subtle standards. For example, Lipman suggests impartiality, comprehensiveness and consistency, or precision, relevance, acceptability and sufficiency (Lipman et al., 1980; Lipman, 2003). We can use these standards of good reasoning to evaluate different philosophical resolutions. A resolution that is well-reasoned, impartial, comprehensive and coherent is better than one that is not.

For example, in trying to answer the question "What obligations do teachers have to their students?" we could give multiple different answers. We could say "teachers have an obligation to be good role models to students". However, this answer is not as good as "Teachers have an obligation to be good educational role models because students learn from the model of the teacher at least as much as they learn from what the teacher says. Yet, given that their job is to help students learn, they can only be obliged to be a good *learner* for students to emulate. They cannot be obliged to be good or more thoughtful—it takes into consideration more aspects deeper and more thoughtful—it takes into consideration more aspects than the relatively superficial first answer. Regardless of its being a better answer, there may be even better answers that are deeper, clearer or better-reasoned.

Types of Philosophy of Education Problems

Generally, philosophical problems seek to resolve the fundamental concerns of the principal areas of human knowledge and experience (Beardsley & Beardsley, 1965; Lipman et al., 1980). For example, philosophy of education problems are concerned with the following:

- Education
- Teaching and learning
- Knowledge, meaning, insight, understanding, information and truth
- Opinion, belief and judgment
- Values, character, morals and ethics
- Autonomy, freedom, authority and discipline
- School and classroom
- Equality, ability, intelligence
- Competition between students and ranking of students
- Childhood
- Rights
- Growth and development
- Discovery and construction
- Curriculum
- Thinking, creativity and reasoning
- Questions and answers

There are a number of characteristic types of philosophical problems. Each type gives a new direction or approach that we can take when exploring a fundamental concern.[2]

Evaluative

Evaluative questions pick out philosophical problems about our values—what is right or wrong, fair or unfair, beautiful or ugly, or what we should or should not do and the justification for our values and preferences (Cam, 2006). These questions help us resolve dilemmas and conflicts relating to values so that we can judge what does or does not have value

and how we should act. For example, if we were thinking about knowledge, we could ask:

- Should you always try to know more things?
- Is lack of knowledge always bad?
- Is knowledge valuable? Why?

Conceptual

Conceptual questions pick out philosophical problems about the meaning of concepts, the relationships between concepts and the implications of these concepts. These questions help us resolve ambiguity, inconsistency and incoherency in our understanding of different concepts or in the connections and differences between them. For example, if thinking about learning, we could ask:

- What is learning? What does it mean to learn something?
- Can we have learning without teaching?
- Does learning imply change? Does it imply improvement?

Metaphysical

Metaphysical questions pick out philosophical problems about reality and about the essence or nature of what exists. We examine problems related to the nature of both physical entities, such as schools and atoms, and abstract entities, such as ideas and numbers. These questions help us resolve issues about the fundamental make-up of what we find in the world. For example, if studying childhood, we could ask:

- Is "childhood" a real stage in human development or is it merely an invention?
- Are children fundamentally different from adults?
- What is the essential nature of childhood?

Phenomenological

Phenomenological questions pick out philosophical problems about the appearance, nature and meaning of our experiences and the interpretation

of our lives as they are lived. Rather than investigating what our concepts mean or the essence of things, we seek to describe the objects of our experience (Howarth, 2005). These questions help us resolve any perplexing features of what our experiences are like, how they appear to us or what they mean to us. For example, if thinking about freedom, we could ask:

• What is it like to be free?
• What is the meaning or importance of freedom to our lives?
• Does an experience of freedom in the classroom change how school is for us?

Epistemological

Epistemological questions pick out philosophical problems about the nature of our knowledge, judgments and justifications as well as our criteria for certainty, belief and evidence. These questions help us resolve uncertainties about what we know, how we know these things and what criteria we might use to judge. For example, if thinking about children's rights, we could ask:

• How do we know what are the rights of children?
• What criteria could we use to tell if a child has particular rights?
• Are we justified in believing that children have rights?

Implications of This View of Philosophical Questions

Philosophical questions are tools that point to, isolate and articulate philosophical problems. We use these tools to try to provide philosophical resolutions to philosophical problems.

Philosophy starts with problems. Philosophical questions are tools that help us uncover problems and incoherencies, which we then investigate and shed light on. In this sense, they act as torches that illuminate the darkness. They are also tools for focusing on particular aspects of problems. In this sense, they are like magnifying glasses or telescopes. They are also like spades, shovels or scalpels that help us dig out the problematic concerns.

One implication of this view is that we need philosophical questions that are aimed at exploring a philosophical problem in order to do philosophy. Asking a philosophical question will not lead to philosophical inquiry if it is asked for the wrong purpose. For example, if a teacher asks a philosophical question such as "Is racism always bad?" with the intention to lead students to the teacher's preferred answer, then the result will not be philosophy. The students are not being invited to resolve a philosophical problem but are instead just required to figure out what answer the teacher thinks is correct. Likewise, if we are not using philosophical questions, we will not have philosophical inquiry. For example, the philosophical problem about the point or purpose of education cannot be resolved by asking "What is the curriculum in Singapore?" This question is not a sharp enough tool for resolving this philosophical problem. However, we can always develop new philosophical questions that will be useful for resolving our philosophical problem, for example, "What *should* be the point of education?"

A second implication is that when asking, answering or thinking about philosophical questions, it is important to understand the philosophical problem that the questions point to. If I ask "What is the point of education?" with a philosophical purpose, I am not interested in a historical account or what is in the current curriculum documents (though this is informative). If I ask "What does it mean to learn?" with a philosophical purpose, I am not interested in the psychological, biological or social causes of learning. I am more interested in the meaning and definition of learning and the evaluation of our reasons for choosing one meaning over another. This is the *philosophical* problem.

This means that, for example, if someone reading this collection thinks that philosophical questions are answered by gathering more knowledge, they will not be satisfied with what they read. They will expect the authors to just tell them the right answers and will be frustrated that the authors do not. This is because they do not understand the purpose of philosophical questions.

Also, if we do not have an *experience* of the philosophical problem that is being explored, then the questions raised, the discussion carried out and the resolutions suggested will be meaningless to us. Philosophy of education only makes sense to us if it grapples with a problem that we

perceive as a problem. We make sense of a philosophical problem by resolving it. But if we do not "see" the problem, we will not be able to appreciate a resolution and hence will not make sense of it.

The final implication is that we must start doing philosophy of education with a willingness to confront difficult issues and problems about education. We have to be willing to uncover and confront what does not make sense about our own treasured views on education. We must challenge the unchallenged. We must deliberately find problems that make our reassuringly secure views more insecure (Lipman, 2004). Because this is unsettling, time-consuming, complex and difficult, paraphrasing Lipman (1988) slightly, we could say it takes courage to do philosophy of education.

Notes

1. An alternative and simplified way of showing what is distinctive about answering philosophical questions is by using Cam's question quadrant (2003, 2006). Cam distinguishes between four types of questions: reading comprehension, factual knowledge, literary speculation and inquiry questions. Philosophical questions are a type of inquiry questions—those questions that you have to think about to answer and which have many different possible answers.

2. The types of philosophical questions described here are based on Golding (2006, 2007). For an alternative, see Burgh, Field and Freakley (2006, chap. 9), who divide philosophical problems into two types: inquiry into first principles and inquiry into values. They then divide the first type into ontology and epistemology, and the second type into ethics, social and political theory, and aesthetics.

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Further Reading

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