

PHILOSOPHY K-12

Maryann Ayim makes two points: (1) that philosophy should be taught at the pre-college level, and that (2) it is already; she provides examples.¹ Ayim asserts that if there is “any one area of elementary school curriculum which is crucial to the intellectual development of the child, and upon which any further growth in academic disciplines depends, that area would surely be reading,” by which she means not only decoding print but also “making inferences,” the latter “reveal[ing] the immensely important role that philosophy could play in the elementary school.”² Moreover:

Simply listening to the queries of young children will provide ample evidence that they are intrigued by many traditional philosophical concerns. They ask questions like "What happens to you when you die?" "Why is stealing bad?" "Does God love me?" and "Is my painting beautiful?" We can see in these questions the puzzlement which has been the occasion for an immense body of literature on metaphysics, ethics, religion, and aesthetics.³

Given these questions and concerns, “clearly ... a study of philosophy should be initiated in the kindergarten program,” as “it is important that these channels of inquiry be kept open, and it seems reasonable to suggest that the best time to do so is when the child reveals the interest, rather than trying to reawaken it in secondary school or college.”⁴

Another reason the secondary school curriculum should include philosophy is that the “traditional secondary school disciplines cannot be studied independently of value issues, and hence that they cannot be mastered without simultaneously mastering the skills for making value judgments,” implying (she suggests) “the necessity of developing certain philosophical skills.”⁵ Among the “numerous instances of such value issues which are integral to high school subjects” are, Ayim continues, are “the defensibility of the separatist movement in Quebec, the soundness of the argument from mathematical induction, and the relevance of observing scintillations on a luminous surface to formulating a theory of the existence of electrons.”⁶ Ayim is certain that “all high school subjects contain an indissoluble core of value judgments,” and that “it is essential that students be prepared to examine and analyze the arguments offered in support of those judgments.”⁷ She emphasizes: “No high school subject can be stripped of this value component and reduced to a collection of facts.”⁸ Even if it were so reduced, Ayim points out that curriculum questions remain, e.g. “which facts were most in need of study, or most worth studying, as well as the underlying value judgment as to what a fact is.”⁹

Ayim insists that “students [cannot] avoid adopting a philosophical stand in relation to their high school subjects” - nor can “their teachers.”¹⁰ Even those students “who have learned only to memorize but not to think, to recapitulate but not to criticize, have not opted out of selecting a philosophical view - they have merely opted for a weak or inadequate view, such as authoritarianism.”¹¹ “The most obvious solution,” Ayim offers, “is to make philosophy an official part of the high school curriculum either as a separate subject or a recognized part of courses already in existence - e.g., a logic section in a mathematics course, an aesthetics section in an art course, a philosophy of history section in a history course.”¹² She adds that “philosophical skills imply not only the ability to appraise, to think critically, to analyze, but also the ability to reconstruct, to put together again, to synthesize,” skills she deems especially timely given the “segmentation of the school curriculum.”¹³ Given increasing specialization, “the importance of the ability to see events and issues as part of a total picture can hardly be overestimated.”¹⁴

An “educated person,” Ayim asserts, exhibits more than “skills” or even “a knowledge of the various disciplines recognized by the school system,” as “an educated person must also be able to compare and connect these disciplines, to apply them to his or her own situation, and to weave them into a set of attitudes and way of life that might be referred to loosely as a world view.”¹⁵ Ayim has a solution: “the study of philosophy is the clearest way to achieve an education in this sense simply because questions of epistemology and ethics will cut through and reveal a common concern in all the disciplines typically studied within the school system.”¹⁶

“The teaching of philosophy in elementary and secondary schools is much more advanced in the United States than in Canada,” Ayim judges, “due largely to the work of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) working out of Montclair State College, New Jersey,”¹⁷ an organization non-existent north of the border.¹⁸ “[W]ith the single exception of moral education, almost no philosophy is taught in Canadian elementary or secondary schools.”¹⁹ What in curriculum studies is termed the hidden curriculum Ayim characterizes as “instantiating process” that is “conducted below the surface ... indistinguishable from indoctrination or manipulation,” a problem avoided, she suggests, by “openly include[ing] moral education in the school curriculum.”²⁰ Ayim concludes by reiterating that “philosophy at the pre-college level might have the advantage of helping students to continue asking significant questions, keeping open the road to inquiry and to alternatives, investing less in infallible answers than in a rigorous method, and analyzing and evaluating their own decisions in a world that has never been a greater need of critical rethinking in such matters.”²¹ Indeed, it “might.”

COMMENTARY

Ayim makes a strong argument for the inclusion of philosophy in the K-12 curriculum, leaving open the question of its status: as a stand-alone course or its inclusion in already-extant offerings. Ayim critiques the fragmentation of separate school subjects, offering philosophy – with its emphasis on epistemology and ethics – as the thread that binds them together. My argument is that any curricular integration that can occur does so at the level of subjective experience.²² I advocate reorganization of the K-12 curriculum, moving away from sequential school subjects (Algebra I and II) to electives (at secondary schools) and topics (at elementary and middle schools), informed by the school subjects but organized around issues of interest and concern to students and faculty, not unlike what occurred during the Eight-Year Study.²³

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ENDNOTES

¹ Ayim 1980, 15.

² Ayim 1980, 16.

³ Ayim 1980, 16.

⁴ Ayim 1980, 16.

⁵ Ayim 1980, 17.

⁶ Ayim 1980, 17.

⁷ Ayim 1980, 17.

⁸ Ayim 1980, 17.

⁹ Ayim 1980, 17. That these curriculum questions are also philosophical questions supports Samuel Rocha's (2020) argument for the disciplinary blending of philosophy of education and curriculum studies. That the latter is an interdisciplinary field precludes it being reduced to the philosophy of education.

¹⁰ Ayim 1980, 18.

¹¹ Ayim 1980, 18. That last concept one I, too, have invoked, if in relation to U.S. school reform: Pinar 2019, 2-3.

¹² Ayim 1980, 18.

¹³ Ayim 1980, 18.

¹⁴ Ayim 1980, 18.

¹⁵ Ayim 1980, 18-19. This expansive and ambitious conception of the educated person disqualifies me from being so considered, as I have neither knowledge of the Algebra or Chemistry I studied in high school, nor can I claim I have "applied" them to my life. My high-school Spanish is also almost gone, but I suppose the courses in history and American and English literature remain.

¹⁶ Ayim 1980, 18-19.

¹⁷ Ayim 1980, 19.

¹⁸ Ayim 1980, 20. For a discussion of the situation in China, see Gao 2015.

¹⁹ Ayim 1980, 20.

²⁰ Ayim 1980, 21

²¹ Ayim 1980, 21. Ayim's emphasis upon epistemology implies a training in analytic philosophy, maybe the dominant tradition in twentieth and twenty-first century

Anglo-American philosophy, one in sharp contrast to continental philosophy, important instances of which are existentialism (Greene 1973), phenomenology (Rocha 2015), post-structuralism and specifically deconstruction (Ruitenberg 2010, 2015).

²² Pinar 2020.

²³ Pinar 2010.