Philosophical Reflections for Educators

EDITED BY
Charlene Tan
Chapter 18

Philosophical Questions: Their Nature and Function

Clinton GOLDING

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 Problems and Resolutions

...
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 saints." The second answer is better than the first as it is 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.
Phenomenological Questions pick our philosophically problems about the

Phenomenological

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

world?

Theoretical and Synthetic Questions pick our philosophically problems about reality

Theoretical

Does being young change does it imply improvement?
Can we base learning without teaching?
What is learning? Where does it mean to learn something?

If thinking about learning we could ask

Copies of the conclusions and differences between them. For example,
Inconsistencies and inconsistencies in our understandings of different con-

Theoretical questions help us resolve ambiguity,

Comparative and synthetic questions pick our philosophically problems about the mean.

Conceptual

Is knowledge a reliable Why?
Is it right of knowledge already backed?
Should you always try to know more things?

edge we could ask

and how we should act for example if we were thinking about know-

Educational Questions pick our philosophically problems about the

Educational

Exploring a fundamental concept?
Each picks at a new direction of approach that we can take when

Theoretical and Synthetic Questions pick our philosophically problems about the

Theoretical

Questions and answers
Thinking, creativity, and reasoning
Curriculum
Discovery and construction
Growth and development
Rigorous
Childhood
Comparison between students and thinking of students
English, spelling, influence
School and classroom
Authority, reasons, authority, and discipline
Values, character, morals and ethics
Critical thinking
Knowledge, meaning, insight, understanding, information and

Deduction

Types of Education Problems are concerned with the following

(Baldwin & Brodsky, 1964; Lipman et al., 1980). For example, prof-

General, philosophical problems seek to resolve the fundamental
Implications of this view of Philosophical Questions

We are justified in believing that children have rights.

We can be sure that we are the rights of children.

When are children to be considered as parents?

Are we justified in believing that children have rights?

Do we see our own children as the rights of children?

What is the meaning of importance of education in our lives?
Further Reading


Notes

1. The idea of philosophy as education is often misunderstood. By focusing on questions that are meaningful and challenging, we can engage students in deep, critical thinking.

2. The process of philosophical engagement can be complex and time-consuming. It requires patience and persistence, but the benefits are well worth the effort.