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Philosophy As an Antidote to Injustice

A philosophical education has to go beyond critical thinking, says Jennifer M. Morton

Picture yourself as a young mother with two children. You enrol in university to obtain a bachelor's degree, hoping to give yourself a better chance at a job that pays a living wage. Maybe you receive government loans to pay for tuition, and rely on your family's help, but you still don't have enough to pay for living expenses and childcare. So, you continue working at a job that pays slightly above minimum wage while taking a full load of courses. Every day you wake up early to get the children ready for school and commute an hour or more to university. After class, you pick up your children from school. If you're lucky, you can drop them off with a relative while you go to work. By the time you return home in the evening, you are tired, but still have many pages to read and assignments to complete. This is your gruelling daily routine. Now, ask yourself: what could philosophy do for you?

I teach philosophy at the City College of New York, an institution which, since its founding in 1847, has attracted a student body as diverse as the city it serves. Many of my students come from minority, low-income, or immigrant communities; some all three. They are strivers – seeking an education in order to become health professionals, teachers, engineers, or lawyers while holding onto jobs and taking care of families. Most of them are more fortunate than our imagined protagonist, but for many of them going to university involves great personal and financial sacrifices. Given that few of my students will ultimately find their way into the academy and that, within that already small cohort, only a fraction will choose to do so in the field of philosophy, the question of why study philosophy has a particular resonance for them, and for me as their teacher.

Philosophy is the antidote to the uncritical acceptance of the world

One answer to this question is pragmatic – philosophy teaches you to think and write logically and clearly. This, we tell our students, will be of use to them no matter what path they pursue. We advertise philosophy, then, as a broadly useful means to a variety of ends. There is a lot of truth to this dispassionate answer, but it is also rather disappointing. It sells philosophy short. A different sort of answer dives into

profundity – philosophy aims to discover fundamental truths. Many disciplines aim at knowledge but philosophers, we solemnly tell our students, go deeper – we seek Knowledge with a capital K. This is undeniably the goal of many philosophers, but it can alienate some students (in particular, those who are not interested in pursuing an academic career). Why, these students might ask, is the knowledge that philosophy aims at any deeper than that of more practical fields such as medicine, science, or the law? And why should they care about this kind of knowledge? Even if most professional philosophers aim at the deepest kind of knowledge, this does not show that it is a valuable enterprise for all students, especially for those who are already overcoming significant hurdles to attend university.

There is a third kind of answer that, without competing with the previous two, demonstrates the value of philosophy, even (perhaps, especially) for students like our imagined protagonist: philosophy is the antidote to the uncritical acceptance of the world and ourselves as we are. This answer falls squarely within the classical tradition of philosophy as an ethical and political enterprise. And if it is right, it is students like the one imagined above, with little time and few resources, who have the most to gain from philosophy, because it is they who stand to lose the most if the world stays as it is.

However, if this is the role that philosophy can play then we cannot understand it as merely a critical enterprise. Philosophy must also aim at a remedy – it must be constructive. This requires that it be both

critical and imaginative. In order to do this, a philosophical education should go beyond showing students how to be critical thinkers: it must also teach students to imagine how the world could be different than it is and, in so doing, to consider better ways for them and the world to be.

Philosophy must aim at a remedy

To encourage students to be critical thinkers, we push them to ask questions, to rigorously examine their assumptions, to unearth weaknesses in arguments. Consider the questions our protagonist could ask herself: Why should she have to take out student loans to finance her education? Why can she only find jobs that don't pay a living wage? Do her children have an equal opportunity to succeed? What might her life be like if the world was more just? To what extent are her actions explained by her situation? Do these explanations undermine her responsibility? How does her gender or race shape her identity? Why do the answers to these questions matter? When you're tired and busy and overwhelmed with worry, you often do not have the luxury to consider these questions. You simply accept the challenges in front of you as those you must overcome. But in many cases these challenges are the result of your actions, the actions of others, social and political institutions, or a combination of all of these. Therefore, the first step in this kind of philosophical education is to shake students out of a complacent and uncritical acceptance of the world as it is.

In order to do this, we encourage students to develop critical thinking skills – to think hard about soundness, validity, necessity, and possibility – but we also ask them to imagine how things could be different than they are. Many introductory philosophy courses, including mine, start with Descartes' First Meditation. Descartes presents one of the most well-discussed arguments for scepticism – the view that we cannot have knowledge – by asking the reader to consider the possibility that she is dreaming. Instructors (myself included) will teach students how to dissect those arguments into premises and conclusions and how to evaluate them for validity and soundness. In so doing, we teach our students to think clearly and rigorously. Being able to do this, we tell them, will be useful in non-philosophical contexts as well. But, of course, even an only halfway decent instructor will not leave it at that. There is nothing like Descartes' meditations to spark a vigorous student discussion about the nature of knowledge, evidence, certainty, and truth. Students resist at first: how can it be that we can't know any of what we thought we knew? We don the hat of the sceptic and push back. If all goes well, students grapple with profound questions concerning knowledge and truth. But, beyond posing these fundamental questions, Descartes asks us to engage in a fantastically unnerving imaginative exercise with him. Imagine that you are actually dreaming. Imagine that an evil demon is controlling your every thought. Imagine that everybody walking on the street is an automaton. When students take this imaginative exercise seriously, they start to feel as discomfited as Descartes himself must have. The ground starts shaking under

them. It is at this moment that philosophy starts its work. But, we must not forget that this was only the first step for Descartes. His ultimate aim was to reconstruct the foundation for knowledge.

The imagination can be a powerful tool for students to develop their critical faculties, but we must also think carefully about what the ultimate aim is of these imaginative exercises. Students can be moved by Alyosha's idealism in *The Brothers Karamazov*, disturbed by Margaret Atwood's dystopian vision in *A Handmaid's Tale*, or delighted by the imagined worlds in Jorge Luis Borges' *Labyrinths*. But though our students might find a refuge in fiction, the task of philosophy is not to shelter us from the world. Philosophy is not fiction and philosophers are notoriously suspicious of it. Plato is often read as being one of the staunchest critics of the imaginative arts, in particular poetry, because they have the power to corrupt and mislead the soul. Yet, Plato himself relies on his fantastic imagination in *The Republic*. His Allegory of the Cave, a centrepiece of many philosophy courses, develops a vision of people who live in a cave shackled so that they are only able to see the shadows in front of them. In class, this allegory is often used to consider the question of whether what we perceive as reality might not be but an imperfect version of the truth. But the critical question Plato uses the allegory to consider is that of the obligation incurred by those who leave the cave and encounter the truth, the philosophers. He argues that their duty as citizens is to return armed with knowledge to help govern their city. Philosophers, according to Plato, are failing as citizens if they turn their back on those in the cave who are less fortunate. This bit of imaginative fiction is used by Plato, not merely to analyse our concepts of knowledge, virtue, and justice as many contemporary philosophers would have it, but to discover what we are required to do in order to be virtuous and just citizens. The imagination allows Plato to crystallise his answer to the question of how we ought to live into a vision that we can subject to critical examination. This is the constructive step that we so often fail to take.

The first step in philosophical education is to shake students out of an acceptance of the world as it is

Encouraging students to take this constructive step is even harder than encouraging them to be critical, but it is essential to what philosophy has to contribute to their education and to their lives. To illustrate how this can be done let me use an example from my political philosophy class. On the first day of class, I engage students in an exercise, designed by John Immerwahr at Villanova University, which emulates the state of nature. I divide students into groups and ask them to imagine that each group is a family subsisting by fishing from a lake. If a group catches two fish, most of their family will survive, although some among the weak, elderly, or very young in the family could die. If the group catches three fish, all of their family will survive. If they catch any more fish, the excess will rot. However,

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two fish have to be left in the lake in order for the fish population to be replenished the following year. If the groups over-fish, famine ensues and all of the families will die. There are only enough "fish" (paper fish) in the "lake" (a bag I pass around) to allow for most families to take just two fish, if there are to be two fish left in the lake in the end. During the first round of this exercise, students inevitably take so many fish that there are none left in the lake. Students then discuss what has happened and what they ought to do differently in the next round. Some students have strong intuitions that everybody should take an equal amount, while others insist that all that matters is that in the end there are enough fish left to repopulate the lake. Not only is this exercise pedagogically engaging, but it leads students to develop proposals and to evaluate them critically. When successful, students use what they learned in this exercise to begin developing a sense of what they think would be a fair way of distributing resources and to critique the political and social institutions under which they live.

I, myself, was introduced to the most influential theory of twentieth century political philosophy – John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* – through an imaginative class exercise by one of my high-school teachers, Leilani Hall. Rawls asks his readers to imagine a hypothetical social contract in which the parties to the contract don't know their own social class, natural talents, intelligence, strength, and other factors, the knowledge of which might distort their judgments concerning what would be fair principles of justice. The deep underlying idea is that if we have to choose a social and political arrangement without knowing the position that we may occupy in society, we will choose fair principles to govern our social and political institutions. My teacher had our class re-enact a scenario very much like this one in class. We discussed the principles that would govern our imagined society before we picked our fate out of a hat. Until that point in my young life, I had never thought about justice in that way. The power of this exercise contributed in no small way to my becoming a philosopher. I have recreated a similar activity in various classes I have taught. The discussion it generates among students is reliably superb, but the best moment is when students discover their fate – whether they end up being a doctor or a garbage truck driver or a poor young mother – and have to reckon (at least for that class period) with their principles. Many philosophers have persuasively criticised Rawls' use of the original position as an argumentative tool. But we often forget, I think, how successfully it harnesses the power of the imagination to construct an alternative vision of what society could be like.

If she is like many of my students, our imagined protagonist will be initially moved by the power of the original position. But, if her philosophical education has sharpened her critical skills, she will then question the underlying assumptions. She might wonder if we should think of our political relationships using a contractual model. Like Virginia Held, a philosopher at CUNY, who has offered a feminist critique of social contract theorists, she might consider alternative models such as that exemplified by the relationship between a parent and a child. Our protagonist might also wonder whether Rawls can account for racial injustice. She might consider Charles Mills' racial critique of ideal theory. These critiques might help her connect fairly abstract questions concerning the nature of political justification and justice to her own experience of political institutions. In so doing, they will help her refine her burgeoning theory of justice.

Philosophy can be central to the empowerment of those who are so often disempowered outside of the classroom

Armed with a philosophical education, our protagonist is now in a better position to think about the challenges she confronts. She will be indignant because many of them are the product of unjust political institutions, but she will also have a critical understanding of what makes them unjust. She will have imagined fantastical possibili-

ties and subjected them to critical examination. Doing so will allow her to construct her own vision of what justice requires. Her interest in political organising might be reawakened. She might reach out to other politically-minded friends or join a political student organisation. If she doesn't have the time, she might simply express those opinions to her children and family. Her daily life might be largely unchanged, but she will be transformed because she will no longer uncritically accept the injustices she confronts as given and she will have an inkling of a better alternative. Ideally, the philosophy classroom is the place where she has the time and space to engage in this transformation. But this transformation can only happen if philosophy not only arms her with the critical tools she will need but also with the ability to imagine and construct an alternative.

The way injustice often undermines our agency is by shrinking the horizons of what we think is possible. We simply accept that things cannot be any other way than they are. The kind of critical thinking central to philosophical education allows us to question how things are and, often, to realise that how things are is not how they have or ought to be. Bertrand Russell, in his own impassioned defence of philosophy, wrote that "Dogmatism is an enemy to peace, and an insuperable barrier to democracy. In the present age, at least as much as in former times, it is the greatest of the mental obstacles to human happiness." Those who most benefit from pushing back against dogmatism are those who are unfairly treated by the system as it is – our imagined protagonist and all of those who start off already disadvantaged just because they were born in the wrong neighbourhood, with the wrong skin colour, with the wrong gender or sexual orientation. Philosophy, far from being an intellectual diversion for the elite, can be central to the empowerment of those who are so often disempowered outside of the classroom. It is, therefore, one of the ironies of our current times that an increase in inequality has been accompanied by a systematic attack on the humanities.

However, if philosophy is to serve as an antidote to the resigned acceptance of injustice, a philosophical education must embrace the constructive imagination. We fail if all we teach students is to be critical. We need to enable our students to conceive of a different and better way for things to be. One of the most powerful defenders of social justice in the twentieth century, Martin Luther King Jr, held up hope in the form of a dream. He imagined a possibility that was different than the reality he experienced and held it up as a beacon. Philosophy at its best enables students to find their beacon.

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