

PHILOSOPHY AS PEDAGOGY

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Abstract

“Philosophy as pedagogy” is a distinct approach to teaching and learning that is based on the original meaning of philosophy as a thoughtful life practice. In this thesis, I argue that limiting philosophy to an intellectual activity is a sophistic legacy, which has permeated all levels of education. I then discuss the need to practice philosophy as a means to deliberately think and act. I subsequently present motherhood as an example of a philosophical practice based on dialogic relationships between mother and child. Next, I connect this understanding of philosophy to teaching and learning, and propose to practice philosophy with students in “in-the-moment-dialogues.” This approach recognizes that children are natural philosophers who ask critical questions about human existence. It also validates young people’s need for philosophical inquiry, by opening a space for students to think together about *their* questions, leading them toward self-transformations, the goal of philosophy as pedagogy.

Dedication

Je dédie ce travail à mon fils Marc, le plus beau cadeau que la vie m'ait donné. Son existence m'a transformée en mère, le rôle que je préfère le plus au monde. Il m'a aidée à être une meilleure enseignante, mais surtout à devenir une meilleure personne. Je lui dédie aussi ce travail pour me faire pardonner les nombreuses heures durant lesquelles je l'ai négligé quand j'étais absorbée par une idée, une phrase ou un mot.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Literally, the word philosophy means the love of wisdom. Today this original meaning is lost in our common understanding. When I use the word philosophy or talk about my interest in philosophy, most people look puzzled. They often assume that I am interested in abstract ideas and esoteric concepts that would leave them clueless, speechless, or bored. I am often asked how I can be interested in such a dry subject. Others attempt to change the subject of our conversation to something more relevant to their lives. They are frequently surprised when I tell them that philosophy is actually relevant to their lives, my life, our lives; simply because philosophy addresses questions that touch the core of who we are as human beings.

As a child, I wondered about the meaning of life, and often felt lonely since most adults were not interested in my questions. Books helped me out in my solitude but did not always seem adequate, for I needed someone to talk to about “my questions.” As a teenager, I was lucky to meet a few wonderful adults who engaged me in meaningful dialogues and helped me make sense of a few of things along my path. I also “met” Montaigne who told me through his beautiful essays, that I was philosophizing when I was thinking and asking questions. He also confirmed my sense that existence could have a purpose if we decided to give it some thought. His teaching has stayed with me all my life, helping me to have a fuller life, while preparing me to face death peacefully. It was especially helpful when I was faced with cancer and the possibility of dying at a

relatively young age. As a mother, I understood philosophy as a practice embodied in layers of meanings, from giving birth to a new life to caring for this life. All along knowing how little control I had over my life and my child's life: the experience of the mystery of existence encapsulated in motherhood. As a teacher, I have brought these layers of understandings and experiences to my students. I have also found myself naturally sharing with my students the questions I asked myself as a child and as a teenager. I realized then that the practice of philosophy has always been part of my life, and is fundamental to who I am as an ordinary woman, mother, and teacher.

In the past years, I have become quite pessimistic about the future of our planet. I find such a feeling troubling, considering that I have a son to raise and students to teach, all of them hoping for a good future. I have again found solace in the practice of philosophy with both my son and students, since in our discussions we share our passion for life and look for alternatives to make life better. In some ways, philosophy gives us hope. In the following work I explore and discuss these thoughts and experiences.

In Chapter Two, I demonstrate that since the word philosophy was first used 2500 years ago, two parallel conceptions have emerged and coexisted through the centuries. The first conception focuses on theoretical arguments and is purely intellectual. Like Narcissus, in love with itself, academic philosophy is obsessed with its own intellectual discourse. This understanding of philosophy as an intellectual enterprise has restricted philosophy to an academic subject. In the process, it has excluded most human beings, especially children and teenagers from participating in an important conversation. I argue that academic philosophy's obsession with intellectual discourses has developed from sophistic ways of thinking, and is a betrayal of philosophy's original meaning, the

“love of wisdom.” This superficial understanding has led teachers to instruct instead of educating, focusing on the mind at the expense of the heart and, teaching trivialities instead of putting their energy into trying to support the development of ethical human beings.

The second conception is really about loving wisdom, “sophia.” It is the philosophy practiced by Socrates and most Ancient philosophers. It was embodied in meaningful dialogues in the here and now. It embraced all dimensions of human beings: intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual. These philosophers who truly loved wisdom did not study philosophy but practiced it as a way of life, aspiring and working at being and becoming the best persons possible. Their actions more than their words defined them as philosophers. In the Western world, these two conceptions of philosophy have played a fundamental role in the development of who we are and how we think. I argue that abstract theorizing, has been given too much weight in our education system, both in public schools and universities.

In Chapter Three, I propose philosophy’s original meaning, the pursuit of wisdom, as a worthwhile aim for teachers and students. At the time of Socrates until early Christianity, philosophy was a praxis where the philosopher’s thoughts and actions were converging in his/her daily life. Philosophy used to be a practical approach to solving daily problems and questions. Unlike today, philosophy was not viewed as an abstract and disembodied experience but as a way of being, grounded in every day life. When teaching, the philosophers who practiced philosophy as a way of life, such as Socrates and his followers, considered themselves and their students, ordinary people with ordinary questions, trying to make sense of their lives. They dialogued with each

other in order to develop a better understanding of themselves, others, and their environment. Their main goal was to improve who they were by thinking and acting thoughtfully. This work required that they actively engaged in taking care of themselves. By practicing self-care, philosophers became aware of themselves and could develop self-knowledge. This process prepared them with the necessary knowledge to authentically take care of others, and gave them the critical tools to know others. Philosophy's original goals are more valuable than ever today. They are essential for everyone, and above all, children. As a mother and teacher, I think that engaging our children and students in meaningful philosophical dialogues can help them in being and becoming the best human beings possible.

Personally, I have experienced motherhood as a transformative experience, which has touched every aspect of my being, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually. Every fibre of my being has been engaged with life and its inherent questions, while my actions and reflections have been woven together in the fabric of daily tasks. Like Ancient philosophers, my main goal as a mother has been to be and become the best human being possible, while raising my son to have the same goal. For this reason, since his birth, I have engaged in philosophical dialogues with my son, as many mothers and fathers do. I believe that all my interactions with my child are a form of dialogue even though at the beginning of our relationship, he could not participate in it with words. We were listening and responding to each other by being present in the moment, body and mind, touching and thinking. As he learned how to speak and use language, our dialogues took different forms. Our dialogues became thoughtful conversations, which required an attentive presence as well as reasoning skills.

Dialogues between parents and children have far reaching consequences in helping us raising ethical human beings. This is why I view motherhood, and by extension good parenting, as a philosophical practice. This understanding has led me to see my classroom pedagogy in the same light.

In Chapter Four, I propose philosophy as a frame of reference for teaching and learning. It is my belief that every one can philosophize, for the simple reason that we all share the same questions about our existence. We all have a limited time on this planet and therefore struggle with similar questions about the meaning of life and death. Children start struggling with these questions at a very early age and teenagers wake up with them every day. It is why the practice of philosophy is relevant to young people's lives. In particular, the use of philosophical dialogues in the classroom can bring their questions to the forefront. Teacher and students can engage in discussing them, using simple language. Over the course of my teaching career, I have identified seven areas that are useful when using philosophical dialogues: self-knowledge, questioning assumptions, considering uncertainty, exploring spiritual questions, thinking for oneself, understanding our interdependence, and leading an ethical life. All of these areas are interconnected and challenge students and teachers to become better human beings. The practice of philosophy with students has convinced me that they are natural philosophers, who just need to be given the opportunity to speak up.

In Chapter Five, I argue for the importance of a living voice in philosophical dialogues. When I use the word "dialogue," I mean a meeting between individuals, which requires their full attention, and presence. Such a dialogue also involves a deliberate desire to understand, inquire, and make sense of ourselves, others, and our

environment. When engaged in dialogues, we are present body, mind, and spirit. Children wonder and ask important questions. As teachers, we need to listen to their questioning and open a space where we can inquire together about what appears to be ordinary. This approach to learning and teaching is what I call “philosophy as pedagogy.” Philosophy as pedagogy is not a separate subject but a distinct approach to teaching and learning. It can be infused into everything we are doing in the classroom. It can grow from any event or comment made by a student. It can be found in any children’s picture book or novel. It can be planned from the multitude of topics emerging from the prescribed curriculum. Philosophy as pedagogy is about practicing philosophy as a simple and challenging way to question our thoughts, ideas, emotions, and actions. This approach has the potential to make students’ classroom experiences more relevant to their lives and hopefully, open windows of possibility in their hearts and minds.

Chapter Two: Education Viewed through the Lenses of Philosophy And Sophism

When will you begin to live virtuously, Plato asked an old man who was telling him that he was attending a series of lectures on virtue. One must one day also think about actual practice. But today we think that those who live as they teach are dreamers.

Immanuel Kant

Introduction

In a presentation at the College of France, Merleau-Ponti questioned why contemporary philosophy had lost its place of honour in our world (Hadot, 2001, p.193). He suggested that the philosophy that is written in books had ceased to attract people. He also pointed out the paradox that almost every western philosopher recognizes as his or her master Socrates. A man who did not write, and who simply enjoyed talking with people he met in the streets. Socrates is nevertheless a revered philosopher because he, without question, loved wisdom.

During Antiquity, the word “philosophy” was used in its literal sense, the love of wisdom. Philosophy was then a practical approach to people’s daily problems and questions. Stoicism and Epicureanism, for example, produced sensible rules of conduct, which could be used by anyone, rich or poor, man or woman, citizen or slave. The individuals, who followed these rules of conduct, were not “intellectuals” delighting themselves with abstractions, but ordinary human beings who focused on trying to solve concrete human problems. They simply practiced philosophy as a way of life.

Contrary to a common assumption, philosophers were not philosophers because they developed a philosophical discourse, but because they lived philosophically (Hadot, 1995). Socrates did not need to read or write, but he needed to act thoughtfully. True philosophy was therefore demonstrated in philosophers' everyday actions. These philosophers were ordinary individuals who faced the daily challenges of life with their heart and mind. They were people who were present to their own reality as well as the realities of others. They were merely walking their talk.

Today, we usually do not perceive philosophy as a way of life, but as an intellectual discipline. We therefore do not practice philosophy, but we study it. Philosophy limited to an intellectual discipline, is not committed to wisdom, but to the understanding of abstract ideas. While philosophy defined as the pursuit of wisdom also requires also to be intellectually engaged, it is, however, essentially grounded in people's lived experiences. It is both an intellectual and practical activity. It is a thoughtful practice, which cannot be dominated by mind games. Theoretical philosophy is therefore not the understanding of philosophy that has captured my interest. I am attracted to the original conception of philosophy as a way of life, a daily practice aimed at bringing inner peace to its practitioners.

I believe that philosophy has become of little interest to the vast majority of people because philosophers, or more exactly most of the individuals who call themselves philosophers, have unfortunately lost sight of philosophy's original quest: a quest for meaning, grounded in everyday life, and available to anyone. When philosophy is limited to an intellectual discourse focused on itself, it isolates itself from life, and like Narcissus gets trapped in its own reflection.

This idea brings me first to present the myth of Narcissus as a metaphor to describe the current state of academic philosophy. I will then question why philosophy has gone from an art of living to an intellectual game played by a chosen few. I present the argument that sophistic thinking and platonic elitism have for all intents and purposes influenced philosophy. Interestingly enough, sophists shared their time, space and probably thoughts with philosophers such as Socrates. The question I have therefore been asking myself is, why the sophist's pedagogy has taken precedence over a philosophical approach to teaching and learning?

The myth of Narcissus as a metaphor for the state of academic philosophy

*All he admires for which he is admired;
Unwitting, loves himself; yearned for, he yearns;
Seeking, is sought; with flame self-kindled burns.*
Ovid

Narcissus was a young man of great beauty who was loved by the nymph Echo. Despite her fervent courting, he remained indifferent to her passion, and Echo soon became a disembodied voice. One day while Narcissus walked in a forest, he looked into a spring and saw his own image reflected in the water. Seduced by his own beauty, he fell in love with his reflection. The object of his passion could not return his love, but he was unable to leave his image reflected in the water. Finally, Narcissus died of despair next to the spring

Narcissus falls in love with an image, which he takes to be himself, though it is nothing but a mere reflection. He takes this reflection to be his true self, not understanding he is captive of an appearance. Since Plato, philosophers have been

searching for truth, arguing against the world of appearances. However most of us have believed that philosophy was, for the most part, the study of the works of the individuals we recognized as philosophers. Through this narrow pursuit of knowledge, we have fallen prey to the very thing we wanted to avoid: we got trapped, like Narcissus, in a reflection, an illusion. We get trapped with ideas, “reflections,” forgetting to search for who we are and being who we are. We are infatuated with our own intellect, a powerful tool that can take us on a solitary maze, where no one will find us and shake us out of our hypnotic state. Essentially focused on abstract technicalities whose jargon can only be “understood” by a handful of people, philosophical discourses then become disconnected from reality, perverting our quest for truth.

Narcissus in love with his image as mirrored in the water is losing his sense of self. He has lost his self-awareness as well as his awareness of others. The basic philosophical precepts of *care of the self* and *knowing yourself* are lost.¹ As a result he can neither critically examine who he is, nor reach to others. In the same manner, theoretical philosophy can trap me in a world of appearances and reflections, which does not portray who I really am. I might not be able to express who I am because I feel I cannot allow myself to be visible in the academic discourse. I might think that my personal and professional struggles cannot clearly surface in my philosophical inquiries, forgetting that these struggles are philosophy’s seeds. It might seem therefore easier to conform and hide behind conventions and fashionable jargons than simply be myself.

¹ In Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates defends these philosophical precepts: “For I do nothing but go about persuading you all, old and young alike, not to take thought for your persons or your properties, but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of the soul” (1955). Caring for oneself is therefore caring for one’s self-improvement.

Narcissus obsessed by his own image, stops being. He is not fully alive anymore, since he ignores everything that sustains life: food, water, and foremost our interactions with others. Being alive requires us to act and reach to others in thought and action. Being also requires a free spirit that Narcissus does not possess anymore. Prisoner of his reflection, he cannot think clearly anymore and is unaware of his self-imposed captivity. He becomes oblivious to his human needs and the essence of life is deserting him. Philosophy restricted to a discourse on theory is also imprisoned in a reflection. Narcissus seeks himself, his beauty, like theoretical philosophers seek to define beauty outside life, where it has ceased to be. Like Narcissus, philosophy has also fallen in love with its own image. It is in love with what is believed philosophy to be about: mostly an abstract, disembodied discourse. Philosophy, however, is a lively activity, which emerges from our daily encounters with tears and laughs, joy and fear, life and death.

Narcissus fascinated by his image cannot leave the spring. He is frozen in time and space, captive of a lifeless reflection. This morbid fascination will bring him to his own death. Narcissus did not understand that we need the presence of other human beings to be able to know ourselves. Most theoretical philosophers recognize that we need to interact with the world that surrounds us to be able to exist. However it seems that we have some difficulties maintaining a viable connection with this world. While loving oneself is essential to be able to love others, loving oneself with no intention of reaching out to others is a meaningless pursuit, as is academic philosophy when it only focuses on itself. To limit philosophy to an intellectual pursuit can be understandable since it can give us the illusion of power and control; the deceptive sense that we can control ourselves and others with mind games. Theories and abstractions are also

seductive since they are malleable and do not require any human emotional connections, thus we can avoid what some of us might perceive as human miseries. They give us an intense pleasure without the risk of hurtful disappointments. However, I believe that we need to reach others with our thoughts, bodies, and feelings. My mind needs to interact with other minds, so I can face up to my narrow and limited vision. It is quite easy to believe that I am right about everything when no one is there to tell me I might not be. It is also easy to fall prey to feelings of conceit and vanity when I do not face my limitations, like Narcissus in love with his own beauty. Ideally, philosophy should give me enough lucidity to be humble when facing the limits of my knowledge, abilities, character weaknesses and lack of control over life and death.

Narcissus' self-love leaves him alone and isolated. His reflection cannot return his affection, love, or desire. Narcissus does not understand that he is trying to connect with a distorted reflection of himself. Many theoretical philosophers are facing the same fate, weathering away in their ivory tower, disconnected from life. Contrary to this narrow vision of philosophy, ancient philosophy was a way of life, a thoughtful understanding of our world embodied in daily activities (Hadot, 1995). Socrates, as described by Plato and Xenophon, is a man who participated fully in Athenian life. He was an ordinary man, a husband and a father. He enjoyed talking with people he met at the market or gymnasium and looked forward to partying and drinking with his friends.

Narcissus has no interest in listening to anybody or anything; he is just captivated by an image.² His sense of vision had taken over his sense of hearing. In the same

² While I recognize that academic philosophers talk with each other, I am especially making the point that their discourse is not connected with daily reality. Very few are like Socrates engaging with ordinary people at the market place, and very few are interested in the improvement of their soul.

manner, over time,³ the written word has taken over every academic discourse. Ancient philosophers preferred the spoken word to the written word, because it brought people closer to truth. I therefore wonder if the written word has taken us farther and farther away from truth. I believe however that our fascination and obsession with the written word has led us to neglect the vibrant life of dialogues. The very dialogues that we all need to become better people. Dialogues have become like the nymph Echo, condemned to repeat a few words here and there, in a lifeless voice. Epictetus, in the first century, was already warning us against this approach to teaching philosophy:

“ Come and listen to me read my commentaries.... I will explain Chrysippus to you like no one else can, and I will provide a complete analysis of his entire text.... If necessary, I can even add the views of Antipater and Archedemos”... So it is for this, is it that young men are to leave their fatherlands and their own parents: to come and listen to you explain words? Trifling little words? (Hadot, 1995, p. 108)

When philosophy is perceived as an intellectual discourse, we usually seem to value discourses more than actions. Academic philosophy seems to have fallen into this trap. The written discourse is usually valued more than real spontaneous human dialogues. At many lectures I have attended, eminent professors spent hours reading what they had carefully written, instead of engaging their audience with their ideas. This behaviour, which probably had a place in the medieval society where books were rare and precious, has no place anymore in a time and place where all written information can be accessed in a library or through the Internet. I do not need to be read to; I can do that myself very well. What I need and want is to meet the person and his/her passion for the

³ See Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, Harvard University Press, 1963. “Before Homer’s day, the Greek cultural “book” had been stored in oral memory. Between Homer and Plato, the method of storage began to alter, as the information became alphabetised, and correspondingly the eye supplanted the ear as the chief organ employed for this purpose”(p. vii).

subject he/she has chosen to study. Furthermore I am looking for simplicity, which is the most important quality for “any real communication with another man” (Lavelle, 1973, p. 183).

Narcissus, like academic philosophers, could have chosen to let go of his reflection and dive in the spring. The water, source of life, could have transformed him in a similar way as the practice of philosophy can transform each of us. Instead the spring probably became stagnant like most of contemporary academic philosophy. Narcissus and philosophy lost their souls when they stopped “being present to themselves and to others.”⁴

My sense that philosophy is meant to be a soulful enterprise, incessantly renewed in the flow of life’s challenges and encounters, has led me to wonder why such a distorted version of philosophy has developed. This question has also brought me to consider two competing views of philosophy and their impacts in the world of education.

Competing views of philosophy

During Antiquity, philosophy was mostly understood as a way of life, it was also already challenged by a fundamentally different conception. This conception did not value philosophy as a practice but as a discourse (Hadot, 1995, p.102). A discourse in this context was a passive presentation of ideas, concepts, or theories. In a discourse, knowledge was viewed as something that could be acquired and transmitted from teacher to student, and therefore not a dialogue. Dialogues were an essential component of philosophy as a way of life and required the presence of active participants in elaborating

⁴ Quote from Porphyry (c.232-c.304) describing Plotinus who was simply trying to “be present to himself and to others.” (Hadot, 2001, p. 134).

new understanding or knowledge. Knowledge itself was essentially recognized as a never-ending process, a life's journey in the pursuit of self-knowledge. Philosophy as a way of life was practiced by philosophers, while philosophy as a discourse was represented by sophists. Most sophists were trying to gain fame by shining through the subtleties of dialectic, whereas philosophers, the lovers of wisdom, wanted their students to commit to a purposeful and simple way of life. This simplicity especially expressed itself by thoughtfully embracing life's daily tasks and challenges, with a sense of purpose and peace, but without misplaced pride or feeling of one's superiority.

These two divergent understandings of philosophy have constantly been present in the western world. The *Essays* of Montaigne, the *Thoughts* of Pascal, the *Meditations* of Descartes, or the *Aphorisms* of Schopenhauer, among many other works, testify to the ongoing struggle between philosophy and sophism. We however have, for the most part, lost philosophy's fundamental aim: a journey in self-transformation. We usually do not distinguish anymore between sophism and philosophy and our language does not reflect anymore these two different realities. We generally use the term philosophy when we are mostly referring to sophistic behaviours. Why have we amalgamated these two very different concepts into one? Does our language lack clarity or is it simply reflecting the current reality of the world of education in universities and public schools?

The first teachers: the Sophists

When I first read Plato's dialogues, I did not question his criticisms of the sophists. I trusted the "expert." Later when I started to think about philosophy versus sophism in the context of pedagogy, my assumption was that sophistic thinking was solely responsible for the failings of our education system. Following my inquiry, I still

believe that sophistic ways of thinking are prevalent in modern pedagogy and have had a negative impact on teaching and learning, but I also came to understand that sophism has also had a positive influence on our education system. I will especially underline how sophists instructed their students more than they taught, believing that knowledge was transferable from teacher to students. However, I will also point out how they believed that the complexity of the world probably led to the possibility of different truths. So, who were the sophists and how did they impact our ways of thinking about education?

We know that the sophists were the first professional teachers. The word *sophist* originally meant “expert,” since sophists proclaimed to be knowledgeable about politics, institutions and popular questions of their time (Jarett, 1969, p. vii). It is however quite difficult to know exactly what they really stood for, since it seems there was the same diversity among sophists as there is today among teachers. Some of them wrote extensively⁵ but unfortunately very few of their works survived the trials of time. It appears that if we could compile all the fragmented pieces that we think were written by sophists, their work would barely cover twenty pages (Romilly, 1992, x). From these works and other works such as Plato or Xenophon’s dialogues, researchers⁶ have tried to discover who they were.

It seems that they were pragmatic people who essentially focused on teaching rhetoric, grammar, syntax and literary criticism. In philosophy, they were mainly interested in logic, epistemology, and ethics. These domains are still today the focus of

⁵ Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias and Prodicus in the 5th century BC, for example.

⁶ Such as Davidson (1894), Monroe (1905), Cubberley (1920), Jaegger (1933), and Jarett (1969). While the three earlier writers painted a rather negative portrait of the sophists, Jaegger and Jarett presented a more balanced rendition of who they might have been. Romilly (1992), however, presents a very positive picture. She argues that the sophists are responsible for giving us the possibility of an intellectual education, “from which each and every adult could benefit” (p. 55).

many courses in philosophy in our schools and universities. While sophists cannot be judged globally as a group of teachers who taught a “semblance of wisdom without the reality,”⁷ it seems that some of them gave a bad name to their profession. The sophist Isocrates, for example, wrote a text called “*Against the Sophists*,” where he critiqued sophists who “pretended wisdom and assumed the right to instruct the rest of the world” (Jarett, 1969, p. 213). In another text called “*Antidosis*,” he also stated “the power to speak well and think right will reward the man who approaches the art of discourse with *love of wisdom* and love of honour” (Jarett, 1969, p. 231). Isocrates, while a sophist himself, clearly rejected the behaviours of some sophists and their impact on education. He was a teacher who criticized the practice of other teachers: not a novel situation! Isocrates wrote *Antidosis* at the end of his life. This text might therefore be an apology for part of his past behaviour, when he did not see the love of wisdom as a necessary component to teaching and learning. For most Ancient philosophers, however, loving wisdom meant a life-long pursuit integrated in every aspect of their lives, since they ardently desired to be and become the best human beings they could be. They could not be wise but they could do their best to be as wise as it was humanly possible. If we assume that some sophists did in fact value wisdom and practiced philosophy as a way to become wiser, what made them different from philosophers?

Who were the Sophists?

In the middle of the fifth century BC, Greeks needed to speak eloquently to conduct all their affairs within the city. The oratory practices were first perceived as arts and as such were commonly accepted as gifts blessed upon a few. However, as Athens

⁷ Quote from Aristotle (Jarett, 1969, p. 20).

was developing into a cultural and political metropolis, more and more Greeks wanted to be included in the exciting affairs happening in the city. The need to be competent in the oratory arts became more pressing, and Greeks began to view eloquence not as an art but as a technique that could be taught. Consequently, paid itinerant teachers started to appear in every city and teach young men, eager to learn. These teachers called themselves *sophists*. Some of them, such as Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias or Isocrates, seem to have been respectable and interesting characters. Many of them however were ordinary people trying to make some money under the pretence of worthwhile knowledge (Jarrett, 1969, p.95). People, who wanted “to learn” as fast as possible, were ready to pay and believe charlatans.⁸ When using the word *sophist*, ancient Greeks could therefore refer to a highly respected man such as Protagoras or a charlatan. The word *sophist* did therefore carry both a positive and negative connotation (Hussey, 1998, p.175).

Pragmatism and Sophism

Most sophists were pragmatic people. According to James Jarrett, they would not define themselves as thinkers but as doers, practitioners, and teachers of practical arts (1969, p. 15). It is interesting to note that this definition would probably apply to most schoolteachers in the twenty-first century. In my experience as a Faculty Associate,⁹ I know that most of my student teachers came to the teacher program with one goal in mind: to learn how to teach, like you might learn how to cook.¹⁰ They wanted to be

⁸ In some ways this situation reminds me of the current *New Age* movement with all its self-proclaimed gurus who go from city to city to dispense their insights about the meaning of life. People who are starving for instant enlightenment are also ready to pay hundreds of dollars to have their life magically transformed over a weekend. People were as gullible then as they are now.

⁹ A Faculty Associate is a teacher in the public school system in British Columbia, Canada, who has a secondment from his/her school district to work at Simon Fraser University in the Faculty of Education. Their role is to supervise and guide student teachers during their Professional Development Program.

¹⁰ It is clear that cooking can also be an art as complex as the art of teaching.

handed in the cookbook that would allow them to become “teachers.” They wanted to be told what “to do” in situations that they perceived as typical teaching situations. They therefore were puzzled when we engaged them into thinking about their beliefs and experiences about teaching. Some of them were really struggling in seeing the connection between thinking about teaching and learning, and actually teaching and learning. In my experience as a teacher and workshop presenter, I also know that most teachers come to workshops to collect materials and practical ideas they can use the next day in their classrooms. The word “workshop” in itself sheds a light to this approach to teaching. In most staffrooms, teachers also rarely discuss with each other philosophical issues related to education. Even if teachers had the inclination to discuss ideas and critically examine their teaching practices, most of us have no time in a teaching day to do so. Being seen doing things is perceived as being productive; while being seen conversing is viewed as idle time.

Time spent thinking and reflecting is not valued in our educational system, despite all the educational jargon used around the need to be critical thinkers. By thinking and reflecting, I mean the genuine desire to inquire into what we perceive as problematic, the need to discuss what we see, feel, and think with others who have the same desire to ask questions and enjoy the process of struggling with uncertainties and possibilities. Reflecting also involves constantly questioning oneself on one’s motivations, thoughts, and actions. This kind of thinking requires determination, but also time and space. Yet, teachers are rarely given the opportunity to enter this space. We therefore can rarely model behaviours demonstrating quality thinking to our students, even though we might ask them to do so. Since students learn what they see us doing,

not what we tell them they should be doing, I wonder how much quality thinking is happening in our classrooms. I view this excessive focus on “doing” rather than “thinking” in school culture as a sophistic legacy. I also view this common attitude as lacking the philosophical edge that could help us improve our practice as teachers.

In the fifth century BC, sophists also led pragmatics push away the metaphysical questions that had fascinated philosophers. They considered these questions, “futile, barren and upsetting” (Jarrett, 1969, p.15). Sophists were mainly interested in what they would define as practical arts: logic, epistemology, and ethics.

Logic: speaking well and thinking well

Logic was understood as practical because it was aimed at developing an effective argument for practical purposes, such as in a court of law. In ancient Greek society, speaking well was an essential skill if one wished to become a powerful and successful citizen. Like today, being able to persuade an audience in a court of law or an assembly was the path to power.¹¹ Thus sophists were prized teachers because they taught rhetoric, the art of speaking well. Sophists taught their students to challenge others’ opinions, lay verbal traps, and speak eloquently. However, Plato underlined in the *Phaedrus* how sophists preferred appearances to reality, and persuasion to truth, referring to their use of eristic arguments. In the *Euthydemus*, Socrates ironically insists, “such is their skill in the war of words, that they can refute any proposition whether true or false” (Jarrett, 1969, p. 86). Aristotle like Plato, disliked the sophists’ use of eristic arguments and clearly says it in his compendium of fallacies, the *Sophistici Elenchi*:

¹¹ In Canada, out of 20 Prime Ministers, 12 were lawyers.

Just as cheating in a game and dirty fighting have a certain distinct character, so eristic is dirty fighting in argument. In the former case, those who are determined to win stop at nothing, and the same is true of eristic arguers. People who argue in this fashion merely to win, merely seem to be eristic and contentious. Those who do it for purposes of publicity and financial gain are considered to be Sophistic. Sophistry, as I have said, is a way of making money from a mere show of wisdom, and for this reason sophists are interested in a show of logical proof. (Soph. Elench. 171b, 22-30)

Another form of argument used by the sophists and criticized by Plato, is the antilogic argument. It is constructed around contradictory propositions and seems like the eristic argument to be more aimed at winning than solving a problem (Rankin, p.21). Antilogic arguments also often brought the argument to a dead end. *Aporias*, or dead ends, also concluded the early Socratic dialogues written by Plato. It seems however that there was a fundamental difference between the use of antilogic and dialectic arguments: the intent was different. The goal of a dialogue was to come closer to true knowledge, even though it meant the recognition that we could not know with certainty.

Eristic and antilogic arguments are still used today, especially by our politicians. They are not taught by sophists per say, but by their modern counterparts, professional campaign managers, image consultants and media advisors. While the skills they learn are as important today as they were in ancient Greece, the same question remains. What are their purposes: power, greed or the well being of the city and its citizens? These skills can help people to do well or badly, depending on each person's *virtue*, as Socrates would say.

Linguistics was another area related to rhetoric that interested the sophists. Protagoras is considered the first person to have introduced the formal study of grammar in a curriculum. In addition, he contributed to the development and organization of

Greek grammar (Jarrett, 1969, p.63). I personally love linguistic, researching etymologies and playing with grammatical rules. I also see a tremendous value in speaking and writing clearly. I therefore see this legacy as positive, but I also see it as potentially limiting if we do not use these skills to talk, read or write about subjects that have some relevance. As a French teacher, I sometimes need to teach French like a good sophist, teaching syntax, vocabulary and grammar. However I foremost enjoy conversing with my students about topics that matter. Depending on my students' skills, there is sometimes very little that can be said, but even when my students can speak French fluently as they do in French Immersion classes, I sometimes get interesting questions about my choice of topic. Recently, for example, a Grade 9 student asked me why we were talking about Buddhism in a French class since we were not in a Social Studies class. What was I suppose to talk about? Verbs and pronouns? What led this student to think that a French class could not include topics such as Buddhism? In the introduction to *Protagoras*, Socrates is portrayed as criticizing rhetoricians who pretend that rhetoric is a pure formal art. He rightly argues that a purely formal art of speech would only lead to a speech without thought.¹² I have the same concern about teaching my students how to speak French correctly without them being able to carry a meaningful conversation. I characterize this approach to education as sophistic and anti-philosophic, since such an approach does not *form* but *deform* souls.¹³

I very often tell my students that their sentences can be grammatically correct while not making any sense whatsoever and vice versa. Language is more than exact words, spelling or grammatical correctness. Plato underlines this idea in his introduction

¹² Idea also developed by Plato in *The Charmides*

¹³ In *The Charmides*.

to *Protagoras*, in the conversation involving Socrates and Hippocrates. Hippocrates is excited about the meeting because he wants Protagoras to teach him the art of speaking well. Socrates however wants Hippocrates to be informed about what Protagoras will be speaking about (Plato, 1967, p. 44). For Socrates, rhetoric was not an art since its practice could lead us to speak well but say nothing of importance. While it seems that some sophists such as Protagoras or Gorgias chose interesting subjects in their rhetoric classes, it might not have been the case for many of these early teachers. I believe that my students' limited understanding of language classes is part of their legacy. Our contemporary pedagogy is still too often aimed at teaching rhetoric at the expense of matters of substance, matters that are connected to philosophical thinking.

Sophists also taught us to analyse and critique poetry. Here again this approach to literature has its place and value in education but overzealously done it can simply destroy the magic of poetry. Many literature courses that focus on dissecting poems, not only kill any appreciation for poetry but also any desire to write poetically. As a teenager, I studied poetry in French literature classes. We were supposed to analyze, comment on, and summarize every idea in every poem we read. As a result, I can say that up until today, I cannot enjoy poems from the Romantic period. Victor Hugo and Lamartine still bore me to death. Literary criticism can kill poetry's soul, disconnecting us from its beauty and mystery; it also can lead us to believe that everything, and art in particular, can be explained. Rilke was absolutely right when he tells the young poet not to expect him to critique his poems because

there is nothing which touches works of art so little as does the language of criticism: nothing comes of that but more or less felicitous misunderstandings. Few things are in fact accessible to reason or to language as people will generally try to make us believe. Most

phenomena are unsayable, and have their being in a dimension which no words has ever entered; and works of art are the most unsayable of all – they are mysterious presences whose lives endure alongside our own perishable lives (2000, p. 173).

As an adolescent, I loved reading Rimbaud’s poetry because it had this “unsayable quality” Rilke is talking about. The following words, for example, still touch my soul, while I cannot explain their meaning:

J’ai tendu des cordes de clocher à clocher;
des guirlandes de fenêtre à fenêtre;
des chaînes d’or d’étoiles à étoiles,
et je danse.

Arthur Rimbaud, *Illuminations*, 1886

Epistemology: Episteme and doxa

Epistemology as practiced by the sophists essentially aimed at challenging the idea of immutable truth, foremost argued by Plato. Sophists’ epistemology also defended a common sense approach to life, based on empirical evidence. While Plato believed in an immutable order and one truth, a sophist such as Isocrates believed in a mutable order, and therefore, in the possibility of different truths at different times and places. This sociological relativism played an important role in challenging prejudices during the sophists’era, and later during the eighteen-century’s Enlightenment (Koyré, 1962, p. 43). It especially plays an important role in our societies, as we move more and more toward a global village, where extremely diverse understandings of the world are brought together. In order to understand and function in this village, we need to learn to put events in their geographical, economical, and socio-cultural context, and therefore take a relativistic view of most situations. This socio-cultural diversity is reflected in contemporary classrooms, and as a teacher, I need to aim at helping my students understand and respect

the differences that exist between themselves as well as in society at large. The sophists' relativistic view adds thus a positive note to pedagogy.

Isocrates also challenged Plato's conception of knowledge, *episteme*, by valuing opinions, *doxa*. He said, "it is much better to form probable opinions about useful things than to have an exact knowledge of useless things" (Jarett, 1969, p. 103). I think that as educators our role is partly to help students form "educated opinions" about the world that surrounds them. Knowledge is a personal life long pursuit, which takes many shapes and forms. As a teacher I cannot dispense knowledge, I just can lead my students on its path and in the meantime help them out with "useful things." Plato's *Protagoras* defines himself as a man who knows a lot about what is important to know. He also affirms that he can teach anything that matters. This will lead Socrates to ask him if he can teach *virtue*. While Plato's dialogue starts with Socrates saying *virtue* cannot be taught and Protagoras saying it can be taught, it concludes with Socrates saying it can be taught and Protagoras saying it cannot be taught. The entire discussion evolves around the understanding of the word *knowledge*. For Socrates knowledge means to understand. When we know/understand the difference between bad and good, we can recognize what is good and act virtuously. *Virtue*, understood as knowledge of what is right for oneself and therefore for others, can therefore be taught, because this search for understanding is the essence of philosophy. In this dialogue, Plato intended to demonstrate that Protagoras was not clear about what was really important to teach and therefore could not teach it.

For philosophers, to educate was not limited to instruct students about a variety of skills, but to lead them to become better people and therefore better citizens, who would act for the common good. While sophists, like Protagoras, might have had the same

intentions, they might have lacked the clarity needed to reach this worthwhile goal. In the same way, most teachers today say that they want their students to be knowledgeable and responsible human beings. However very few of us have spent time seriously grappling with the meaning of these very words. We not only do not really have a clear personal understanding of these concepts, but we also do not share a common understanding among ourselves. While we may use the same catchwords, we rarely mean the same thing, and are therefore rarely able to get anywhere. One of the results is a curriculum such as the current BC IRPs, with their lists of “prescribed learning outcomes.” The *Social Responsibility* curriculum, for example, proposes a series of possible activities followed by learning outcomes that can be checked off a list. I wonder who is socially irresponsible. Is it students who might misbehave? Is it curriculum designers who simplistically list these learning objectives? Or is it teachers who blindly follow these directions? John Goodlad (1994, p. 32), in his research about teachers’ attitudes, justly pointed out “inquiry into the aims of education has largely been replaced by a kind of reductionism...into behavioural objectives or outcomes.”

Goodlad’s research also underlines teachers’ conservatism and need to conform (1994, p. 18).¹⁴ Conformity is exactly what ancient schools of philosophy were fighting. “To teach to live, not in conformity with human prejudices and social conventions” was one of the fundamental goals of philosophy (Hadot, 1995, p.102). Socrates’ contemporaries described him as *atopos* because he refused to conform to public opinion and submit to the ruling elite, even at the cost of his life. In 500 BC or 2004, this philosophical stance implies difficult life choices that not every one is ready, or willing to

¹⁴ About resistance to change, see also Seymour Saranson, *The Culture of the School and The Problem of Change*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1971 [rev. 1982].

make. It is hard to go against the grain, even when we know that it is the right thing to do. Conforming is therefore easier on teachers than questioning and challenging the educational status quo. Teachers, who are motivated by self-preservation or blinded by the norms of their culture, generally conform and avoid making waves. This point of view is strongly supported by Lortie's research on teachers' attitudes toward change. He clearly shows how teachers, for the most part, are conservative and shy away from innovations. "What teachers consider desirable change can be summed up as "more of the same" (Lortie, 2002, p. 209).

When considering universities, it seems that conformity has also been a long-standing problem. In the nineteenth century, for example, Nietzsche remarked that philosophy teaching in universities was only "a critique of words by other words" (Shusterman, 1997, p.108). Alfred North Whitehead added to this view when he said that book learning is "one second-hand scrap of information illustrating ideas derived from a second-hand scrap of information," and this second-handedness is the secret of the learned world's mediocrity (Reimer, 1971, p.49).¹⁵ In the same vein, James Olgivy states that "philosophy as the love of wisdom is as ridiculous in the academy as romantic love in a bordello" (1992, p. xv).¹⁶ Olgivy goes on explaining that "tenure which used to be a means toward the end of protecting non-conformity, has become an end in itself, to which the means are conformity:"

Because they need clear proof of incremental progress in an assistant professor's chosen field, there are far more reward for finite steps than for valiant attempts to grapple with the infinite and the ineffable. Better to

¹⁵ I am aware that my quoting these authors is exactly what I am also criticizing in my writing.

¹⁶ In the same line of ideas, it is interesting to note that Xenophon (c.430-c.350 B.C.) defines the sophists as "prostitutors of wisdom" (Jarett 1969, p. 20).

build a career by figuring out how adverbs work than by seeking something as elusive as wisdom.

This need to conform in our schools and universities is contributing to keeping alive an approach to education that is superficial at its best, dogmatic and controlling at its worse. As a teacher, I think that practicing philosophy can not only help me question my values and motivations, but also help me challenge school conventions. Some sophists, such as Protagoras, challenged their society's status quo, but their understanding of knowledge might have limited their students' moral development.

Ethics: educational and moral aims

As I already pointed out sophists had a relativist attitude, based on their recognition of the diversity of people and places. In addition to their sense that things were relative, sophists had a secular attitude toward education. Pragmatic, they could not teach about the gods since they could not prove their existence.¹⁷ It is interesting to notice that this secular view of education is today predominantly reflected in western societies. Sophists seem also to have encouraged their students to be critical of the rigid aristocratic Athenian morality and to promote a form of modern democratic liberalism (Jarett, 1965, p. 108).

However the critique that emerges from Plato's *Protagoras* points out again to a lack of depth in sophists' thinking concerning their moral aims. Plato's main criticism was that sophists could instruct but they could not teach. They could instruct their students to deliver well-balanced speeches, punctuated with well-chosen literary references. They could therefore instruct them how to become successful citizens, but

¹⁷ Protagoras was tried for impiety and had to flee Athens.

they could not teach them how to be virtuous citizens, who would act for the well being of their community. As demonstrated in *The Republic*, Plato thought that moral and intellectual education could not be separated. As I already mentioned, the goal of education for ancient philosophers was to guide their students on the path toward knowledge; it was not about transmitting facts. Protagoras, in Plato's dialogue, says he knows a lot about things he considers important and can teach them to his students. This statement clearly indicates that sophistic pedagogy is fundamentally different from a philosophical approach, since it is based on the idea that knowledge can be transmitted from teacher to student.

While classical philosophers understood knowledge as a personal and ongoing process, sophists saw the transfer of knowledge from teacher to student as the foundation of education. This conceptual understanding of knowledge is still prevalent in most of our classrooms today. In the context of schools, it is clearly easier to embrace the sophist pedagogy. If knowledge is simply a body of facts, teachers can access, possess and dispense it to their students, as they *know* it. In case of an emergency, we can still refer to the infamous Teacher's Guides and look for the answers. Students in turn simply need to learn these facts and demonstrate that they *know* them. *Knowing* can only be defined in this situation as memorizing and regurgitating what the teacher or the textbook says. It is my experience that most students view learning as such. They want to know what the teacher wants, so they can get the best mark possible. They feel lost when there is no textbook to read, or no questions with right and wrong answers. They struggle with the idea of open book exams and tests, thinking they are cheating, or that they do not need to do any substantial work. For any kind of assignment, the recurring question I have got

from elementary, secondary and university students is: “How many lines do I need to write?” I also spend a considerable amount of time trying to convince my students that if they understand, they will not need to waste their time memorizing isolated facts. If it makes sense to them, they will be able to connect these facts together to form a meaningful story that they will be able to tell and share.

Teaching versus instructing

The difference between instructing and teaching is therefore fundamental, since it seems to me, that most of what we are doing today is instructing, not teaching or educating. Thus while sophists were probably well-meaning teachers, they were for the most part instructors. In the same way, most teachers in today’s schools are not teaching but instructing. What is missing is a serious philosophical questioning of our aims as teachers and of our role and place in this world.

When Socrates said that an unexamined life is not worth living, I do not believe he thought that just a few human beings should be able to do so, otherwise he would have been negating the life of most people. For Socrates, everyone can engage in philosophical inquiries and must do so in order to become aware of who he/she is and believe in. Kierkegaard described Socrates as someone “who refused to enter into a false and vain fellowship with clever heads, but felt an equal kinship with a tanner,” and who “philosophized with absoluteness everywhere” (Sauvage, 1960, p. 89). While definitely not a demagogue, Socrates was interested in talking with everyone and shaking people’s certainties, to push them to lead a meaningful life. However while Plato’s dialogues clearly show that he respected Socrates, he nevertheless had a different approach to life and philosophy. Socrates was an everyman who practiced philosophy with everyone.

Plato, on the other hand, was an elitist, who practiced philosophy with people he judged apt to do so.

Plato' elitist influence on philosophy

In his description of the ideal society, Plato strongly stated that forming his students' mind and virtue was the goal of a worthwhile education, but he also clearly stated that this type of education could only be reached by a few.¹⁸ Plato thought that philosophy could not be accessible to everyone and especially to young people. Thus, contrary to Socrates who talked to anybody, Plato was purposefully choosing his audience. For that reason, he created the first university, *the Academe*, based on the idea that only a few human beings were able to think philosophically. Considering that much of western philosophy is based on Plato, it is no wonder that most philosophy is understood as theoretical and elitist. Thinking is without a doubt hard work, but it certainly cannot be limited to a few of us. Philosophy, understood as a search for meaning, is a natural human quest that can be practiced by everyone. As a result, philosophy as taught in universities and represented by most academic philosophers is elitist and discredits philosophy's true meaning and possibilities. Instead of expressing a multitude of voices, in a clear and simple language, academic philosophy has become a distorted reflection of its true self. It seems to me that our unconditional subscription to Plato's elitism is partly responsible for leading us away from philosophy as a way of life and creating stale philosophical discourses.

Many researchers have argued to end Plato's influence on modern pedagogy and have encouraged us to revisit Sophists' teachings to help us support current pedagogical

¹⁸ See *The Republic*

research (Marback, 1999, p. 4). Some view platonic approaches to education not only as promoting an elitist educational agenda but also as limiting students' expression. Jasper Neel says, for example, "platonic notions only teach a kind of 'non-writing' of formal correctness" (Marback, 1999, p. 4). Michael Leff and Robert Scott have also rejected platonic beliefs in absolute truth and objectivity in favour of a sophistic faith in contingency and cooperative inquiry" (Marback, 1999, p. 4). These writers have rediscovered the Sophists' educational legacies as an alternative way to come back to a stronger and more democratic public discourse.

Both criticizing Plato's elitism and advocating Sophists' practices have their place into an argument in favour of a more democratic educational system, but the argument does not do justice to Plato's conception of philosophy. They forgot along the way Plato's teachings about philosophy as a spiritual exercise, a practical way to understand *virtue* and therefore become better human beings. We have therefore ignored the essence of philosophy as *love of wisdom*. If we read Plato without understanding that he was someone who practiced philosophy as a means to improve himself and others, we might only see a condescending theoretical philosopher. Philosophy understood like the Ancients, as a practice that involved body and mind, and addresses common human questions, is relevant and available to everybody, especially children and teenagers. I also can recognize the important role played by the sophists in promoting an intellectual education, as well as developing new educational perspectives and methods. I however believe that their approach was limited to knowledge delivery. It was missing the dynamic element of philosophy as a way of life, a transformative experience for teachers and students.

Conclusion

It seems that our modern day education has inherited many of the sophists' approaches to education. This situation makes sense if we consider that they were the first teachers. I am today a teacher among millions of other teachers who is following them. According to Jaegger, the sophists were pioneers in the development of educational theory and philosophy, but were not able to create a comprehensive theory of education (1945, p. 331). Jaegger thinks that the sophists lacked "the intellectual and moral foundations" to do so (1945, p. 331). I think that they actually lacked what philosophers were pursuing: wisdom. They lacked it then and we still lack it today. School officials and teachers alike use and abuse fashionable educational jargon such as "life-long learning, social responsibility, citizenship, or critical thinking." We however have, for the most part, like the sophists, only a superficial understanding of what we are talking about. We basically use the rhetoric of our time and place. We therefore cannot act on what we preach and continue to be blind to our ignorance.

Academic discourses have for the most part become intellectual masturbations, and like any self-absorbed activity, have little relevance to most people. We, therefore, live in a world where philosophy has mostly become a discourse disconnected from daily reality. It seems for the most part to be limited to abstract technicalities, whose jargon can only be deciphered by a handful of people. The discourse has become more important than the people themselves and the world we live in. Hidden behind the established and respected sophistic *blabla*, philosophy is generally perceived as an overwhelming intellectual activity reserved for an elite.

While I initially thought sophism was the main cause of philosophy's poor representation in our education system, I came to the conclusion that Platonism was equally responsible. Richard Marback (1999) makes an excellent point, in his book *Plato's Dream of Sophistry*, in arguing that platonism and sophistry are "inextricably intertwined throughout the history of rhetoric" (p.13). Through a fine analysis of the different interpretations of Plato's texts and references to sophists, from the neo-Platonists to Hegel, he points out to the fact that we have continuously used these texts to serve the ideologies of our times and places. We have been dialoguing with a text, not a voice. As a result, I believe that the combination of Plato's and sophists' interpretations have brought us to a place where we have mostly subscribed to an understanding of philosophy that has essentially favoured elitism and intellectualism. We have, however, forgotten philosophy's original meaning as love of wisdom.

I believe that this original meaning is essential to understand the powerful role philosophy can play in our lives as ordinary human beings, but also as teachers and students. As a teacher, I want to meet Socrates on the market place and be reminded that I do not know. I need to take the time to question the thoughts and understandings that lead my teaching practice. I need to question what I believe are the aims of education, a process of self-transformation leading teachers and students toward wisdom, *sophia*.

Chapter Three: Recovering Wisdom as the Aim of Education

Epicurus and Seneca's letters are not mere empty and fleshless letters holding together only by a delicate choice of words piled up and arranged in precise cadence, but letters stuffed full of the fine arguments of wisdom, by which a man becomes not more eloquent but wiser, letters that teach us not to speak well but to do well.

Michel de Montaigne

Introduction

Pierre Hadot (1995) established that a coherent philosophical tradition was developed between the pre-Socratic period and early Christianity.¹⁹ This philosophical tradition was coherent because it shared the common goal of self-transformation. Although each philosophical school developed distinct ways of understanding the world, they shared the common goal of teaching their students how to become better people. For example, Plato's academy, Aristotle's lyceum and the Hellenistic schools all focused on giving their students practical skills to help them improve themselves. These early philosophers used the word "philosopher" literally, and behaved accordingly by lovingly pursuing wisdom. While it was understood that nobody could achieve wisdom or become a sage on this plane of existence, the path toward wisdom was the official aim of philosophy. Philosophers and their students were walking together on this path, assisting

¹⁹ I will use Pierre Hadot's research on Ancient philosophy to support my argument. Pierre Hadot is a professor Emeritus at the Collège de France who has dedicated his life to the understanding of Ancient philosophers' quest for wisdom. He is the author of numerous scholarly works, such as *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (1981), *La citadelle intérieure, Introduction aux pensées de Marc Aurèle* (1992), *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (1995), and *La philosophie comme manière de vivre* (2001). Pierre Hadot also translated and commented the works of Plotinus, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus. While I familiarized myself with Ancient philosophers' ideas, reading as many primary documents as possible, especially Plato, Aristotle, and Epictetus, I mostly relied on Pierre Hadot's erudition to define philosophy's original meaning.

each other in their quest for knowledge. According to Hadot, their quest though was not a self-centered intellectual pursuit but a mindful way of thinking and behaving toward every one. These philosophers were recognized and celebrated because their words were embodied in their actions. Wisdom was not an abstract idea but a thoughtful way of conducting oneself in everyday life.

The goal of education was to love and pursue wisdom. Wisdom was understood as a process in self-transformation. This process required from its practitioners to be self-aware of their mind, body, heart, and spirit. Loving wisdom was not an ethereal concept but a conscious choice of thoughts and actions to become the best person possible. It was a life-long commitment that was not attain by reaching external goals, or passing examinations. The only exam was the reflective behaviour of self-examination that involved being fully present to oneself and others. Unlike the Sophists, philosophers did not aim at becoming “more eloquent but wiser.” Philosophers did not either aspire to fame but to tranquillity and peace of mind. Their quest therefore was essentially non-discursive, but nevertheless also entailed the practice of dialogues between teachers and students. If writing, their goal was “to teach us not to speak well but to do well.” This practice of philosophy was based on self-care and self-knowledge as well as the care and knowledge of others.

Knowing is being and becoming

When teaching, philosophers wanted their students to discover their individual path toward wisdom for themselves. For both teachers and students, knowledge was not to be acquired or exhibited as an object, but was an integral part of a person’s development, an essential component of their path toward wisdom. It also implied the

idea that all human beings were works in progress. We thus can talk of human beings, as *being* and as *becoming*. Knowledge was understood as a unique personal process of attempting to make sense of the self, others, and the world. This kind of knowledge was as much a part of the philosophers' lives as their breathing was. It transformed them and was being transformed as the lovers of wisdom went about their daily tasks and encounters. It was a way of life aiming at making sense of life.

It is evident that this kind of knowledge could not be transferred from teacher to student. This idea is well illustrated in Plato's *Symposium*. When Agathon asks Socrates to sit next to him, so he would be able to "catch a bit of the wisdom that came" with him. Socrates wittily responded by saying: "How wonderful it would be, dear Agathon, if the foolish were filled with wisdom simply by touching the wise." Knowledge implied an active participation of the student in the act of learning, which, if successful, would change him for the better. This process of learning and teaching was integrated in daily life, in the choices teachers and students made about their own conduct. Philosophers were simply people who were focused on the practice of being better people through their daily actions and interactions with everyone. Knowledge as such was conceived as a quest to understand and care for oneself and human kind. These qualities could be developed by anyone who had the desire and the will to challenge his/her thinking and decide to practice what he/she believed in. Philosophy therefore was not limited to an intellectual exercise but was a way of life, which was touching every aspect of philosophers' lives: physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. The aim of this practice was to work at *being* and *becoming* the best person possible. While thinking

clearly was an important part of this practice, it did not however necessarily include reading, writing, or rhetoric.

Being and becoming: A non-discursive experience

In the second century, Plutarch wrote that Socrates was a philosopher, not because he taught in a chair, but because he was chatting, joking and drinking with his friends (Hadot, 1995b, p. 69). For Plutarch, Socrates was a philosopher because of his ability and desire to engage in conversations with the people he met while conducting his life as an ordinary man among ordinary people, while at the market place, a party or war. According to ancient philosophers, true philosophy was demonstrated in philosophers' everyday actions, not in what they skilfully read, commented on, or wrote. Philosophers were ordinary individuals who lived philosophically because they were engaging their heart and mind in being deeply and resolutely human among other human beings. To do so, they did not need to develop a philosophical discourse, but to act philosophically, as wisely as possible. This conception of philosophy, then and today, is meaningful and attractive, since it makes philosophy available to every one who wishes to become more conscious of his/her thoughts and actions in order to have a more positive impact in the world.

From this perspective, the essential elements of a philosophical life are non-discursive. The Stoics, for example, made a clear distinction between the discourse about philosophy and philosophy itself. A philosopher, according to the Stoics, "no longer engages in theory about the physical world, but contemplate the cosmos. He no longer theorizes about moral action, but acts in a correct and just way" (Hadot, 1995a, p. 267).

It is his actions as a human being among other human beings, which define what a philosopher is. Epictetus, a Roman Stoic, explained this idea in this way:

A carpenter does not come up to you and say, "Listen to me discourse about the art of carpentry" but he makes a contract for a house and builds it... Do the same thing yourself. Eat like a man, drink like a man... get married, have children, take part in civic life, learn how to put up with insults, and tolerate other people...(Hadot, 1995, p. 267).

Socrates was such a man. He was married, had children, and enjoyed partying with his friends. He was very much involved in the Athenian political life, and went to war when required to do so. We do not know if Socrates could read or write, but it is likely that he could not, if we consider that in the fifth century BC, less than ten per cent of Greek people were literate. The fact that as far as we know, nothing was ever written by Socrates supports the idea of an illiterate Socrates. If Socrates could not write, it might explain why he did not leave anything representing his thinking. However considering that Socrates could have had access to scribes, he could have used one of them to write his thoughts. I believe that Socrates did not want to leave any traces of his thinking. He might have been too aware of the tyranny created by the written word.

Plato himself warned us against interpreting his thoughts:

On the subjects that concern me nothing is known since there exists nothing in writing on them nor will there ever exist anything in the future. People who write about such things know nothing; they don't even know themselves. For there is no way of putting it in words like other things which one can learn. Hence, no one who possesses the very faculty of thinking and therefore knows the weaknesses of words, will ever risk putting down thoughts in discourse, let alone fixing them into so inflexible a form as written letters (Hannah Arendt, 1971, p. 426).

Plato was not only aware that what he had written could be wrong, but also that he could be misinterpreted. This is why reading can be a tyrannical act since, for the most part, we

are reading and critiquing something out of its historical context. Furthermore, authors cannot defend themselves because they are not present to do so, or because their texts have no relevance to them anymore. If we consider for example, Alfred North Whitehead's comment (1978) that most of the European tradition "consists of a series of footnotes to Plato," we might wonder if Plato would laugh or cry if he were able to glance at the myriads of texts that refer to him.

Ironically, I would not be able to speak or refer to Socrates if nobody had written about him. Socrates lived in an oral culture²⁰ where the main mode of learning was done through oral communications, such as poetry, plays, public speeches, and conversations. Furthermore, philosophy as a way of life, was only practiced by living beings, since it was understood that only living beings present and engaged in conversations with each other could be transformed by the lived experience. This dialogic process was the art of Socrates

Philosophical dialogues

Hadot in all his works concerning ancient philosophy insists that philosophers' highest purpose was to form people and to transform souls. Considering that living and interacting human beings could only achieve this process, oral communications were the basis of philosophical teachings. Practicing philosophy was therefore learning to dialogue. Dialogues were essentially aimed at directing participants into being present in the moment, so they could focus on themselves. This focus was not a self-centered intellectual pursuit aimed at glorifying the ego. It was on the contrary a spiritual exercise

²⁰ As Havelock's research underlines (1976), Plato's work seems to have been created at a pivotal period of time in Greek culture, when it started to transform from an oral culture to a literate culture.

leading the participants to know themselves in an authentic manner. There was no ultimate destination to attain; rather they provided a path that students and teachers travelled together in search of meaning and understanding.

Dialogues were usually answering real questions asked by real people in real-life situations. They were not an abstract exercise, but a formative conversation between a philosopher and his students. Pierre Hadot underlines how Plato's style in his dialogues can make us, modern readers, uncomfortable, since Plato takes many detours before making his point. The reason for these detours is that Plato used dialogues as a pedagogical tool, forming his students, instead of giving them ready-made answers. His intention was to guide his students through complex questions, so that they would discover their own answers. Dialogues were deliberately used as a philosophical exercise for self-transformation as indicated by Hadot's comments:

Thanks to this detour, "with a great deal of effort, one rubs names, definitions, visions and sensations against one another;" one "spends a long time in the company of these questions;" "one lives with them" until the light blazes forth. Yet one keeps on practicing since "for reasonable people, the measure of listening to such discussions is the whole of life (1995a, p.101).

Therefore, a real dialogue included all the hesitations, and detours happening in a conversation, which fully engage people into thinking and clarifying their thoughts. It also openly underlined "the critical significance" of the participants, either teacher or student (Hadot, 1995b, p. 20).

An authentic dialogue is only possible if the participants really want to dialogue. This agreement to dialogue is renewed at each step of the discussion. Nobody imposes their truth on anyone; on the contrary the dialogue teaches us to understand each other's

point of view and put our point of view in perspective. Through this process the individuals, who seriously and sincerely engage in a dialogue, discover a truth that is both independent and transcendent (Hadot, 1995a, p.103). It is independent because it is different than our initial understanding and ways of seeing and making sense of the world. It is transcendent because it pushes us to reach for something that is bigger than ourselves, be it the world of rationality or the realm of spirituality. For these reasons, philosophers including Plato thought that the spoken philosophical discourse was superior to the written one (Hadot, 1995b, p.115). For Plato, only the concrete presence of living human beings could create the conditions for an authentic dialogue, where people could not only answer the questions asked, but also identify each other's possibilities and needs. It is a process in which knowledge and understanding grow at their own pace depending on each person's emotional, intellectual and experiential state and development. Knowledge and understanding cannot be transferred from teacher to student, but only discovered in its own time and place. A teacher can only assist students in this personal development by being present to their needs, and answer their unique questions. Students' development and understanding are the main focus of the dialogues, not teachers' discourses. It is why Montaigne pointed out "both in Plato and in Xenophon, that Socrates argues for the good of the arguers, not for the good of the argument" (2001, p. 1451). The fact that written texts have survived their authors, has led us to believe that these texts were more important than the people to whom they were addressed. Dialoguing is foremost a learning process which involves living human beings in a search for self-improvement and truth.

What makes the oral discourse a valuable exercise is that it implies the concrete presence of a living person. A true dialogue is therefore addressed to a specific person with specific needs, questions, and insights. As a general rule, “the written work was only a material support for a spoken word intended to be spoken again (Hadot, 1995a, p. 19). One of the recognized weaknesses of the written discourse was the fact that it could not answer the questions raised by the readers, and therefore provide the support students needed to grow. Pierre Hadot underlines this point when he speaks of the use of dialogues as tools for self-transformation:

For ancient philosophy, at least beginning from the Sophists and Socrates, intended in first instance, to form people and to transform souls. That is why in Antiquity, philosophical teaching is given above all in oral form, because only the living, can accomplish such an action. The written work, considerable as it is, is therefore most of the time only an echo or a complement of this oral teaching (1995a, p. 20).

The oral dialogue was a philosophical exercise happening between people who were alive, not with authors long dead and gone. During a dialogue, philosophers and their students were discussing issues relevant to their lives and circumstances, as well as their specific understanding of who they were at a very specific moment in time and space. The fundamental role of the oral dialogue in the ancient philosophical tradition is one of the reasons why many philosophers such as Socrates did not write. Dialogues involved people in the moment as they inquired about matters that concerned them. Thus the participants could avoid being theoretical and dogmatic. When Socrates was engaging people in conversations, I believe that he was not concerned with expressing a doctrine or trying to convert his interlocutors to a doctrine, he was simply focused on leading them to question and shake their certainties. Socrates’ dialogic approach was taking form as he was walking the streets of Athens and meeting people with ideas and

questions he could not foresee. This attitude to life and ethical questions could not be codified in a well-written doctrine, without losing the substance of the spontaneity of these encounters. I think that Socrates probably wanted to avoid any misrepresentation or misinterpretation of his thinking. He also probably did not see the point or the vanity of writing a treaty of philosophy about his knowledge of his ignorance. Socrates insisted on being a living voice, since for ancient philosophers, the practice of philosophy as a way of life meant “to be more a living voice than writing and still more a life than a voice” (Hadot, 1995, p.20). The ultimate goal of this life was to reach a state of inner peace, the peace of the soul that Greeks used to call *ataraxia*. The peace of the soul necessarily requires tranquillity and simplicity, not originality or fame.

Tranquillity and simplicity, not originality or fame

*If wrecked upon the Shoal of Thought
How is it with the Sea?
The only Vessel that is shunned
Is safe—Simplicity.*

Emily Dickinson

Socrates' life was his teaching. He lived philosophically rather than write about philosophy. Montaigne subscribed to this understanding of philosophy when he said “to compose our character is our duty, not to compose books.” For ancient philosophers and a few rare exceptions in later times, philosophy was a spiritual practice committed to improving themselves and appeasing their soul. Richard Shusterman (1997) defines this approach to philosophy as “a deliberative life-practice that brings lives of beauty and happiness to its practitioners” (p. 3). He also justly adds that such a practice is “as foreign to professional philosophy today as astrology is to astrophysics” (p. 3).

Ancient philosophers purposefully led a life of contemplation, organically weaving their thoughts and actions, bringing theory into practice. The history of Western Philosophy, however, “testifies unambiguously to the powerful tendency of our self-satisfaction with theoretical discourse” (Hadot, 1995a, p.32). Professional philosophy is essentially interested in pure theory. This theoretical approach to philosophy has led us to lose sight of the extraordinary role played by philosophy during Antiquity, as a choice of life and as a therapeutic tool for human soul. In her work on Hellenistic philosophy, Martha Nussbaum points out to the compassionate role of philosophy. She indicates that philosophers “practiced philosophy not as a detached intellectual technique dedicated to the display of cleverness but as an immersed and worldly art of grappling with human misery” (1994, p. 3). Philosophy essentially focused on every day human issues, such as questions surrounding illness; and death.

The theoretical conception of philosophy has also isolated philosophers from each other, since one can fathom that ideas and theories can be created by a single mind, by “a genial creator.” This new conception has led us to forget the importance of other human beings in our development and the pedagogic roles played by dialogues in understanding ethical concepts. By limiting philosophy to an intellectual enterprise, we have lost some of its essential elements, such as its personal and communal aspects. Pierre Hadot points out that as philosophy became more and more formal, its discourse became more and more complex and disconnected from ordinary human life (2001, p. 96-97). We also tend to believe that we are special or different from other people living in other times and places, when actually we are very similar in our best and worse. Through an arbitrary and simple understanding of history, we tend to forget that human beings were always human

beings, with the same needs and wants, desires and aspirations. Today, for example, we talk about how divorces and breakups can cause despair in our society, as if they were a unique phenomenon in the history of human kind, when, actually, a similar feeling was pervasive in ancient Rome during the first century (Carcopino, 1939). We have convinced ourselves of our uniqueness and originality. Originality has become a popular value in our western societies. The desire to be original is so common that, ironically, it makes us look pretty similar to each other, creating a uniform world of originalities. This quest for originality seems to be linked to an excitement-seeking behaviour, which is contributing to our society's spiritual vacuum. We live in a materialistic society and, for the most part, we believe that our salvation will come from having more or feeling more. It can be about the latest clothes and electronic equipments, or about louder music and scarier movies. This insane desire to have more is depleting us instead of giving us what we really need, a sense of meaning. It is crippling us to the point where we forget to appreciate the simple beauty of every day life with all its gifts, a smile, a laugh, a ray of sunshine, or a drink of water.

Some philosophical discourses seem also to seek originality for its own sake, sometimes to the detriment of an authentic desire for truth. I get especially annoyed when some academic philosophers glorify death as an exceptional event, trying to make an ordinary event in human's life appear extraordinary. Shusterman (1997), for example, compares Michel Foucault's death to Socrates', saying that he died "for the sake of truth" (p. 45). He did not die for the sake of truth. He died because he was an ordinary human being, sick with an illness for which we have no cure. Shusterman also seems to admire Foucault and Wittgentstein' games with suicide and death. These games are the luxury

of intellectuals trying to understand and control something over which they have no control. Philosophy as a process in self-transformation leads us to understand and accept our limitations physically and intellectually. Playing with death, for a so-called philosophical pursuit, is like wanting an easy answer to the unanswerable. I do not believe that there is any wisdom on this path, even though it might be an original path. The idea that playing with death can make a philosopher some kind of hero, who will be remembered, is absurd. This understanding is a very narcissistic way of living one's life, which has no connection with philosophy as a way of life. Such a pursuit completely contradicts the original aims of philosophy as a life devoted to truth and self-improvement, essentially lived in every day life, with its monotony and tranquillity. Over the years, I have come to understand Montaigne (2001, p. 1264), when he said that "the greatness of a soul is not exercised in greatness but in mediocrity," and I am increasingly inclined to appreciate and favour clarity and simplicity over any attention-seeking display of cleverness.

Montaigne is remembered, not because he wrote clever pieces on various obscure theories, but because he wrote in a simple, direct, crisp, and witty style inspired by the ordinary events of life. His essays honestly examine his life, warts and all, and reveal his different and successive transformations. Montaigne did not write to be famous, but rather to pursue a simple and meaningful life. Emily Dickinson meditating on fame wrote this beautiful poem that illustrates the same idea (1960, p. 351):

*Fame of Myself, to justify,
All other Plaudit be
Superfluous - An Incense
Beyond necessity -
Fame of Myself to lack - Although
My Name be else Supreme -
This were an Honor honorless -
A futile Diadem.*

I also like Iris Murdoch's attempt at defining humility as a behaviour that can bring us closer to goodness, a philosophical goal:

The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are. He sees the pointlessness of virtue and its unique value and the endless extent of its demand. Simone Weil tells us that the exposure of the soul to God condemns the selfish part of it not to suffering but to death. The humble man perceives the distance between suffering and death. And although he is not by definition the good man perhaps he is the kind of man who is most likely of all to become good (1970, p. 103-104).

Humility is a key characteristic of what Ancient philosophers called virtue. We need to develop this humility to be and become the best people we can be. Pierre Hadot suggests that if we want to stay faithful to philosophy's roots and inspiration, we need to develop a new ethics of the philosophical discourse. Philosophers especially need to stop taking their discourse as an end, and as a means to advertising their eloquence. Humility and tranquillity are therefore qualities we need to foster in ourselves and recognize in the works that Ancient philosophers have left us. Centuries later, we still read their words because their message continues to touch us. These lovers of wisdom are still reaching us because the way they conducted their life is still a part of their message. Philosophy was their life; life, their philosophy. This way of life was essentially based on four principles: self-knowledge and self-care as well as knowledge and care of others. I address each of these goals in the following paragraphs.

Philosophy's original goals

Together these principles guided ancient philosophers' conduct and were the foundation of philosophy as a way of life. First, I explore the concepts of self-knowledge and self-care together as they are closely linked. I then discuss the concept of knowledge and care for others in this "connected" manner.

Self-care and self-knowledge

*Ce sera moi qui aurait vécu et non un être factice créé
par mon orgueil et mon ennui.*

George Sand²¹

Socrates left us with a paradox: he knows that he does not know. He knows that true knowledge is not about knowing how to accomplish tasks, or collecting pieces of information. However, he knows that true knowledge is about knowing oneself and this knowledge is elusive and ever changing. Socrates is therefore forever searching for understanding, meaning and wisdom. There is no final destination to reach but a constant drive for coming closer to truth. The Pythian oracle declared him a wise man because he knew that knowledge could not be owned and exhibited as a trophy. This kind of knowledge cannot be learned in books or imposed by others. It is created by a personal and unique inner-work. Michel Foucault expands on this idea by conceptualizing it as "technologies of the self" (1988). He explains that

technologies of the self permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform

²¹ The literal translation is: "It will be me who would have lived and not a fake being created by my pride and boredom." Sentence said by George Sand during a conversation with her lover Alfred de Musset, and later used by Musset in his play *On ne badine pas avec l'amour*.

themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (p. 18).

This definition faithfully reflects the ancient philosophers' traditional understanding of self-improvement. Foucault also points out the original Greek principle behind this thinking: *epimelesthai sautou*, to take care of yourself. Taking care of yourself took precedence over the principle of knowing yourself, *gnothi sauton* (p. 19). Self-care meant to be concerned with choosing to act fairly in everyday life's situations. This purposeful practice did bring its practitioners in the realm of self-knowledge. One cannot carefully choose a path of actions without becoming self-aware, and therefore learn about oneself. George Sand said: "It will be me who would have lived and not a fake being created by my pride and boredom," because she could not fully live her life, without knowing if her actions were dictated by whom she thought she was and wanted to be. The alternative would have been to be unconscious and manipulated by feelings, such as pride and boredom which would have led her to a partially lived life, and dissatisfaction with the moment, and in the finality of death.

That is why Montaigne justly points out that "to philosophize is to learn to die" (2001, p. 124). While some people might view this idea as morbid, it is actually a celebration of life. Only by seriously meditating on our mortality, can we lead a meaningful life. If my life is limited in time and space, I need to take care of myself and seriously examine who I am, what I really want and need. I need to consider who and what is fundamentally important. Only through an honest scrutiny, can I give meaning to my life and hopefully accept death when it presents itself. Facing my death with serenity has been my goal since I first read Montaigne at the age of fifteen. However, I sleepwalked through part of my life and therefore was terrified by the possibility of dying

when confronted with cancer. I was lucky enough to survive and, since, have used this close encounter with non-existence to try to stay awake, even though it might be uncomfortable at times. This self-awareness gives more direction to my life and the choices I make. This experience has also led me to understand that to philosophize is a meditation on my life that requires qualities such as authenticity and integrity.

Authenticity and Integrity

Authenticity and integrity require a thoughtful examination of our true motivations behind our desires. It also often puts us in the difficult situation of being in disagreement with the people around us, and forces us to stand alone. Socrates himself had to face this most uncomfortable choice, but stubbornly resisted being swallowed by the appeal of conformity:

Yes, I think, my good sir, that it would be better for me to have a musical instrument or a chorus which I was directing in discord and out of tune, better than the mass of mankind should disagree with me, and contradict me, than that I, being the one, should be out of harmony with myself and contradict myself (Ruddick, 1995, p. 116).

To conform would have meant to live a lie, and live in disharmony with himself. Such self-examination might be perceived as self-centered, but actually is the opposite, since it is aimed at keeping our egos in check, by considering the right course of action when we are faced with choices. These choices might be from the domains of the heroic or the ordinary. I define the heroic as putting someone else's needs before our own in life-threatening situations. Many examples could be taken from the lives and deaths of Jewish families during the Second World War. One of them, being the situation of the parents who decided to send their children overseas in order to protect them while knowing full well they might never see each other ever again. The domain of the

ordinary is reflected in the multitude of micro-decisions we take every day about things that seem insignificant, such as making an extra effort to recycle paper and bottles, or not getting upset at people making mistakes while driving. Every decision can bring harmony or disharmony, depending on whether I have made my decisions with integrity. If I act with integrity, I am more likely to feel inner peace in the moment, and later when facing death.

Socrates could have chosen to leave Athens and not die. He chose to stay because he was a man with integrity. Being authentic in his case was to choose to die since he would not have been able to live with himself if he ran away. His life would have become a lie. By choosing death, Socrates chose to act in harmony with who he was, but also he shows he is not afraid of death and is therefore free. His constant questioning had led him to be aware of himself and the limits of his knowledge. By affirming that he did not know, Socrates clearly rejected the idea of a possible superiority or power over other human beings. He could find peace because his ego was under control. Self-care and self-knowledge are therefore connected to a state of inner-peace, a state that ancient philosophers were trying to achieve. This inner-peace was essential in living mindfully and not sleepwalking through life. It was also essential for caring and knowing others without being continuously bothered by the ego.

Care and knowledge of others

Porphiry, a Greek neo-Platonist from the third century, defined philosophy as a way to be present to oneself and others (Hadot, 2001, p. 134). I have already addressed the idea of being present to oneself, as involving caring and knowing oneself, in order to be and become a better human being. Through the practice of dialogues, ancient

philosophers were encouraged to focus on themselves, take care of themselves, and know themselves. Students of philosophy improved their self-knowledge, by becoming aware of their thoughts, feelings, needs and desires. This process demanded that each individual be grounded in the present moment. Being present to others also involves caring for others, as a means to connecting with other human beings. This focus on one's self was therefore not an end in itself. It was actually an open door to understand and accept one's own struggles, and therefore other people's struggles. Through the practice of dialogues, as a form of spiritual exercise, ancient philosophers were learning about what is meant to be a human being among other human beings.

Socrates cared for others by challenging them to become self-aware and care for themselves. In the *Apology*, he clearly states that Athenians care for their fortune, reputation, and honours, but do not care for their thinking, truth, or soul. Socrates was interested in questioning the beliefs and values that led our lives, to make apparent our contradictions and doubtful certainties. He wanted us to become aware, like him, that we do not know anything for sure. Even in our technologically advanced century, scientists keep telling us how little they know and how what they thought true is constantly challenged by new "knowledge." We, nevertheless, continue to act erratically pretending or believing that we know, and putting at risk our lives as well as all the life forms on this planet.

Socrates challenged everyone to think and question because he was also convinced that an unexamined life is not worth living. That is how Socrates cared for others. He wanted everyone to live a meaningful life, aware and awake. I personally did not meet Socrates, but I was fortunate enough to meet his message when I was faced with

cancer. I now do know the importance to carefully examine my life. When facing the possible prospect of dying soon, I became aware that I was not really ready to die. I was lucky to survive and to be given the opportunity to live a few more years. I gave myself time to think and reflect on my life, the choices I made, and honestly question what I wanted to be and become today and tomorrow. I made some drastic changes that are not always visible to an outsider, because these are changes in attitudes and ways of looking at the ordinary events of my life. I essentially try to appreciate being alive everyday, and having a body that is able to sustain me to be and become. I am also able to enjoy and welcome unexpected life's events with a smile, and a sense of wonder.

When thinking about more drastic and visible changes, I have in mind the story of Erica Rutherford. When that American artist was confronted with a life-threatening illness, she was on the verge of becoming a famous figure in the art community. However her name at the time was Eric Rutherford. She decided that to be true to who she really was, was more important than any social recognition. Instead of investing her time in her career, she decided to start the process of changing her sexual gender, and becoming a woman. While going through these challenging times, her paintings went from a very interesting but somewhat tormented abstract expressionism style to a more peaceful figurative style. Erica Rutherford is today living on Prince Edward Island, at peace with herself and the people close to her.

I have also in mind the story of the last months of a woman dying from cancer.²² She was forty years old when she died, but she kept saying that her cancer gave her the ability to live instead of surviving. She made her last months, a tribute to life, while

²² Story presented in *Life and Times* on Global TV, February 6th 2004.

accepting her death with dignity. Everyone around her, family, friends and doctors, all learned about their own mortality, the value and fragility of their lives, and the importance of spending our time with people who matter to us, as well as doing things that have meaning to us. She was a teacher in their lives. She also was a philosopher, taking care of her soul, learning about herself in the process, and therefore being able to understand and care for the people around her, while in fact becoming more and more dependant physically as her illness was taking over her body. She was able to find peace before welcoming death, a fundamental goal of philosophy as a way of life.

She became deeply aware of her existence in this world, and was able to embrace it as a whole, with its beauty and ugliness, joy and sadness. Merleau-Ponti said, “true philosophy is a way to relearn to see the world” (Hadot, 2001, p. 156). Illness, and especially life-threatening illnesses, usually pushes us in the philosopher’s seat. When confronted with our limitations, we need to relearn to see the world, open our eyes and take in what is, despite what we wish it to be. We become aware and accepting of “the presence of the world.” We realize that we always belonged to this world, but treated it with irreverence instead of awe. We ironically usually start seeing it when we are in the process of leaving it. Some of us are lucky enough to be given a second chance to use our eyes to see, our hands to touch, our feet to walk and our ears to hear. We finally can appreciate and embrace the gift of life because we know without a doubt that this gift is precious. The practice of philosophy has therefore the possibility to give us the chance to prepare for an unplanned but conscious meeting with life and death.

We know that truth is in living each moment with grace since tomorrow might not be. It is why I believe philosophy is the continuous act of being and creating ourselves

by connecting with our soul and the soul of other living beings. By caring for ourselves, we develop a knowledge about who we are, even though it might be sometimes the irritating realization that we are constantly becoming and being transformed by our life experiences and our reflections on these experiences; that there is no fixed self to discover but that we are just a work in progress, and a piece of dust in the universe. By caring and knowing ourselves, we can reach to others since, as human beings, we have some common grounds, and genuinely care for others by sharing who we are or where we are in our thinking and development. We can share our questions, possible answers, and puzzlement about the mystery of our existence. The practice of philosophy can give us a means to live our lives in harmony with ourselves, others, and our environment. Philosophy takes shape inside the miseries and beauties of our daily life, while at the same time giving us the extraordinary opportunity to question what we perceive as misery or beauty.

I am convinced that philosophy's original aim to transform us in more thoughtful and caring human beings is as relevant today as it was twenty-five hundred years ago. This aim is relevant to the needs of our world and to the needs of our children and students. Thinking and acting in a caring manner²³ is at the root of what makes us human and therefore a key element in educating our children. I also believe that the best example of thoughtful caring can especially be illustrated by motherhood. Most mothers, in my opinion, practice philosophy as a way of life, and are for the most part, the practical philosophers Western Philosophy has forgotten.

²³ Nel Noddings has extensively written about the idea of Ethics of Care, arguing for the fundamental need for care in every aspect of our lives.

Rediscovering the soul of motherhood

*There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is wisdom, **the Mother of all**, Natura naturans.*

Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia*

Over the centuries, some men have left exciting and unique accounts of their struggles in living a philosophical life. Montaigne, Pascal, Shopenhauer, Thoreau, for example, understood and practiced philosophy as a way of life. These men and their contributions to philosophy through their work as well as their actions are remarkable. However, when I look over the history of philosophy, unless I search for specific works, the contribution of women to philosophy is missing. We are just starting to discover the work of Hypathia²⁴ who lived in the fourth century and suffered a more terrible death than Socrates for the sake of her beliefs. I could also talk, among many others, about the writings of Christine de Pisan or Hildegard of Bingen whose lives embodied their ideas.²⁵ While not dwelling on this issue in the present work, I want to underscore how an important piece of our intellectual and philosophical history is missing. What is also missing is the specificity of a feminine contribution to knowledge. Women are different from men in ways that can inform us. Margareth Anderson appropriately pointed out that the concept of culture developed by men “assumed to present the entire and only truth.... [while] women’s culture... is invisible, silenced, trivialized, and wholly ignored” (1987, p. 223). Western philosophers have therefore never seriously considered mothers as thinkers. Even Simone de Beauvoir, whose *Second Sex* ignited feminist thinking, was trapped in an intellectualist and anti-bourgeois stance that rejected mothering as a

²⁴ See Dzielska for discussion between myth and reality about Hypatia’s life and death.

²⁵ See *A History of Women Philosophers*, ed. Mary Ellen Waithe. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992, volumes 1-4.

possibility for herself. Plato specifically advised us to reject women's ways of being and knowing, and choose a more enlightened and "superior" path, deciding that the world of physicality could not be spiritual:

Those whose creative instinct is physical have recourse to women, and show their love in this way, believing that by begetting children they can assure for themselves an immortal and blessed memory hereafter for ever; but there are some whose creative desire is of the soul, and who long to beget spiritually, not physically, the progeny which it is the nature of the soul to create and bring to birth. If you ask what that progeny is, it is wisdom and virtue in general.... Everyone would prefer children such as these to children after the flesh (Ruddick, 1989, p. 192).

This obvious misogyny is far from being rational, and might have simply been explained by Plato's own sexual preferences. The wish for eternity through spiritual work is also in contradiction with the idea of wisdom. As I understand it, wisdom, cannot be represented by such a self-centered goal. Over the centuries, this understanding of philosophy has excluded the work that mothers have relentlessly accomplished and pursued when giving birth and caring for their children. Christine de Pisan's *City of Ladies*, written in the fifteen century, especially exemplifies how women's intellectual and moral abilities were generally dismissed. It also shows that even women's affection for their children was criticized as infantile. Following in Plato's footsteps, western philosophers have continued to argue that rational thinking was a superior way of thinking, while at the same time dismissing women's thinking as emotional, and therefore irrational. Women's experiences were considered irrelevant, especially if connected to the emotional and physical realm of birthing and mothering. Lorraine Code, a feminist philosopher, expresses this idea with clarity:

The ideals of rationality and objectivity that have guided and inspired theorists of knowledge throughout history of western philosophy have been constructed through excluding the attributes and experiences commonly associated with femaleness and underclass status: emotion, connection, practicality, sensitivity and idiosyncrasy (Ruddick, 1995, p. x).

Among academic philosophers, the practice of mothering was therefore never seen as a possible epistemology. However, women were not always invisible, and at times were respected, even revered for their ability to give life. The stone sculptures representing pregnant women, as many other artefacts, appear to indicate the importance of women in prehistoric societies. During Antiquity, Greek and Roman stories and mythologies gave also an important place to women. Socrates seemed to have respected the wisdom of priestesses, and referred to them as teachers. In the *Apology*, he talks about the priestess at Delphi, and in the *Symposium*, he talks about Diotima.²⁶ As well the myth of Persephone and Demeter informs us how the Ancients were trying to make sense of life and death. In this myth, goddesses, not gods, have the power to give life.

The myth of Persephone and Demeter

Demeter and Persephone were the goddesses who represented the cycles of life and death. Only when Persephone returned from the underworld, could life flourish again. She was the creator of the eternal circle of death and rebirth. Furthermore only when Demeter, the goddess of fertility, is reunited with her daughter Persephone could the crops grow and feed people. This myth clearly points out the crucial role played by the goddesses as givers of life. It also underlines the eternal bond between mother and child as the necessary thread to our ongoing existence. Without this bond, life is not

²⁶ Ibid for an historical account of Diotima

possible. Persephone and Demeter, and by extension every mother and child, open the door to the possibilities of existence. The mysteries of Eleusis, which were practiced in secrecy, twice a year, in Demeter and Persephone's sanctuary, were probably about the very experience of existence. I think that goddesses, not gods, embodied the existential questions eternally asked by human kind and especially philosophers, because only women can give birth to a new life. My personal experience as a mother has been a spiritual experience, which has led me to understand mothering as a philosophical practice.²⁷

Being and becoming a mother: a philosophical experience and practice

Motherhood is a philosophical experience because it is profoundly transformative. Giving birth to a child throws us into the mystery of existence, with a mixture of blood, sweat, pain and joy. It is the true secret of Eleusis, the "moment when one plunges into the complete other, the discovery of an unknown dimension of existence" (Hadot, 1995, p. 28). Giving birth connects us to all humanity, past, present, and future. Becoming and being a mother made me question this mystery with a renewed interest, asking myself over and over again, where this beautiful child came from and where he was going. I know that despite our current understanding of biology, I will never be completely satisfied with the scientific answers given to these questions. However I believe that a philosophical approach to life can attempt to address these questions with simplicity and

²⁷ In the past decades, a wealth of literature has been published on motherhood and pedagogy, in an effort to put to the forefront women's unique experiences and thinking. Some of the major works are: *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* by Adrienne Rich (1976), *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education* by Nel Noddings (1984) as well as her following publications (1987, 1991, 1992, 1995); *Bitter milk : Women and Teaching* by Madeleine Grumet (1988), *Maternal Thinking* by Sara Ruddick(1989), and *Redefining motherhood: Changing Identities and Pattern*, edited by Sharon Abbey and Andrea O'Reilly(1998).

humility. Socrates viewed himself as a midwife, helping out his students delivering what already existed in them: a personal understanding of wisdom. In French, I find it interesting that the word ‘midwife’ is ‘sage-femme,’ which literally translates as the *wise* woman. My take on this French word is that people’s common sense showed them that wisdom was as much an action as a state of mind. Helping women giving birth to life demands both.

The caring attitude that most mothers show to their child contains, in my opinion, the essence of philosophy as a daily practice. The elements, which I have earlier identified as key components in practicing philosophy as a way of life, are all naturally embodied through motherhood. The elements are self-transformation, self-care, self-knowledge, care of others, and knowledge of others.²⁸ Each of these elements requires the qualities of presence, selflessness, authenticity and integrity.

Motherhood as a way to practice philosophy

Being a mother is a self-transformative experience, physically and emotionally. I found myself in a new place where I was less selfish and more caring. This self-transformation was a source of many discoveries I made about mothering. Being a mother grounded me in what was really important about life: giving it and taking care of it, in a simple and profound way. I left behind a lot of my selfishness, and without reservations, deeply cared for a life that was not mine. When I consider my personal experience as a mother, I know that as soon as my son was born, I matured in years that cannot be counted chronologically. At twenty-seven, I finally was leaving my

²⁸ The nurturing qualities I describe can naturally be part of a man’s behaviour toward his children. While a man can be transformed by his experience of paternity, I, however, think that his experience does not have the magnitude of a woman’s whose life is transformed by pregnancy, child-labour, and breast-feeding.

adolescence for adulthood. I stopped being a child because I had to take care of another human being. The needs of this child became more important than anything else in my life. I did all the repetitive tasks of taking care of a baby with love and care. When trying to define the quality of this love and care, I especially like Simone Weil's expression of *attentive love*: "This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth. Only he who is capable of attention can do this (1951, p. 115). Therefore attentive love requires our full presence and attention. This presence and attention is needed for us to really hear, understand, and accept the other. When I consider attentive love in my relationship with my son, I know that this kind of love is not always achieved. It is a work in progress, very similar to the work involved in courting wisdom. It certainly requires self-awareness, and a strong desire to connect and understand the other, since my child is without doubt other than I am. Furthermore, children have needs and wants that keep challenging our sense of being truly attentive and loving. Children, for example, tend to interrupt us when we are doing things we are likely to see as *more* important.

Children's interruptions: wisdom at work

While I was taking notes on Jean Hadot's books on the theme of philosophy as a way of life, my son interrupted me. He was playing with our dog and wanted me to watch them and share the fun and joy of the moment. I did not want to be interrupted, since I was focused on *an important task*. I probably showed him my lack of interest through my body language. As a consequence, my son told me in his customary fashion that there were more important things to do, and as usual, he was right. I let go of my

books, notes and pen, and watched my son and dog play together. I needed to be present to him, to the present moment, to the gift of life as it is given to us, unexpected, unplanned, but rich in unsuspected flavours. A child is a constant reminder that life is happening here and now. We need to be able to seize these special moments and when we are not able to do so by ourselves, we need a wise child to remind us.

As parents, it requires that we do not look at our children and see or expect improved copies of ourselves. Being attentive, present, or caring demands that we let our children be who they are or aspire to be. Kahlil Gibran (1969) tells us just that, in the beginning of this memorable poem:

And a woman who held a babe against her bosom said, Speak to us of Children.

And he said:

Your children are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

They come through you but not from you,

And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,

For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls,

For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth....

Understanding the deep meaning of these words means to be self-aware enough to know and recognize when and how we try to control our children's lives, so that we can readjust our behaviour to and let them be and become the human beings they are meant to

be. The philosophical precepts of self-care and self-knowledge are therefore essential in becoming the best parents we can be.

Mothering and Self-care and care of others

Mothering naturally reconnects philosophy to its ancient roots of self-care, self-knowledge and care for others. Self-care has taken many shapes and forms in my life, but I was especially confronted with its unpredictable challenges when I had to deal with two life-threatening illnesses. First, I was diagnosed with insulin-dependent diabetes, an illness that taught me to take care of my physical and emotional needs. Living with the daily roller coaster of low and high blood sugars, I quickly came to the realization that I could not be a functioning and responsible human being if I did not pay serious attention to myself. Above all, I could not be a mother to my son. To be able to do so, I especially needed to eat regular healthy meals. Without proper nutrition, I am simply useless. When living with diabetes, the body/mind dichotomy actually becomes a big joke, one of the most absurd human ideas. Through this process, I have become more self-aware and respectful of my body and emotions. I have learned the value of self-care and my son has learned with me to respect and care for his body.

I was then diagnosed with cancer and the possibility of dying at thirty-seven years old. My main worry was to leave my ten-year-old son. I believe that most mothers who are faced with similar challenges share the same anguish. For mothers of young children, death is frightening because we have not finished our job of raising our children. I think it is why I became annoyed with the idea of playing with death as “a philosophical experience.” As a teenager enjoying abstract ideas, it was easy and harmless to talk of death as an aesthetic experience. As a woman and a mother, it has become obscene.

Philosophy as a way of life embraces and respects life, but also respects death. Mothers do not play with death, because they need to live, so they can take care of their children. My will to live, and to live well, has especially been motivated by my desire to see my son grow up into a man. Both my illnesses have put me on a path where I was forced to consider what self-care really meant, not in a self-centered way, but in a healthy and generous way. My self-care also led my son to become more self-aware of his emotional and physical needs, while becoming more aware of my needs, and other people's needs. This process has created a circle of care that has put both of us in touch, with what Bernice Reagon calls "life extending self" (Ruddick, 1995, p. 57).

Being French and living in Canada, raised another sets of issues for me related to self-knowledge. When I became a mother, I became aware that I needed to examine as clearly as possible the values that I brought with me on this continent. I needed to decide which values were worth keeping and with which one were not. Realistically, I could not fight every aspect of a culture in which I was immersed and where my son will grow up. I therefore needed to explore who I was culturally, in and out of both the French and Canadian cultures. I needed to clarify what values I believed to be essential for me in raising my son, even though my choices might meet either approval or disappointment in Canada and France. This process was not easy, and required that I remained strong when I felt pulled in opposite directions. I was sometimes faced with my disappointed parents when my son did not behave according to their cultural norms, while at the same time trying to explain his apparently "different" behaviour to my Canadian friends. I believe that this process was essential for both of us.

I needed to feel in harmony with what I felt and believed. This aspect is again part of practicing philosophy, since it is concerned with the necessary qualities of authenticity and integrity I described earlier. It was therefore important that I acted in accordance with my principles wherever I was. The “where” could change, but the “who” needed some stability and direction, so my son could feel secure and respected. My behaviour was also teaching my son the validity of being true to oneself, and the possibility of being in disagreement with people for whom we care.

Another philosophical aspect, which I modelled through this process, is the idea that everything can be questioned. I did not, and I do not want a child who blindly accepts anything. I want a child who questions, inquires, challenges what he sees, hears, and is demanded of him. I want him to find his voice in the world’s babbles. I like Sara Ruddick’s description of this process as *a work of conscience*, since our ultimate goal is for our children to become individuals capable of discerning wrong from right (1995, p.116-117). I can see myself doing this work of conscience when I try to do my best to model and teach my son a deep respect for himself and life in all its forms. My ultimate goal is a philosophical goal, the common good. Pierre Hadot clearly identifies this goal in the practice of philosophy as a way of life (2001, p. 173). He also points out that ancient philosophers were working on the common good, by trying to make new disciples. They wanted to convert their fellow citizens to a way of thinking and behaving that could have a positive impact in their society. This “missionary element,” as Hadot calls it, is motivated by care for others, a care that extends from the self to an ever-larger world. This care for other, including its missionary element, is also embodied in the every day actions mothers do, while raising their children.

I can see myself being “a missionary” when I try to do my best to model and teach my son a deep respect for women. I was always aware that my son was a man in the making, and I have raised him with the intention that he will become respectful of himself and other human beings, and especially women. I want him to respect all women by first respecting me as a woman. For example, this meant not accepting any sexist comment from him without asking for an explanation and take him through a thoughtful conversation to help him understand the possible implications of his words. I believe that these reflective conversations are what philosophical dialogues are about, since we are being transformed by the experience, “working on our consciences.”

This work is, in my opinion, part of the tapestry woven by mothers. It is the philosophical weaving of theory and practice. The weaving is made of the thousands of multi-coloured threads created as we interact with our children. As any hand-made tapestry, each work is a work of art with its unique challenges and beauties. It is made with the elusive and fragile threads of our conversations, children and mothers’ ordinary but precious lives.

Mothering through dialogues

Dialogues are in my opinion fundamental to the education of children. We, however, cannot plan them and they rarely occur when we initiate them. Like for Socrates, dialogues with children take place daily, at home or at the market, while we are eating, chatting, and joking. Dialogues often happen when a child is sick and needs to accept to be sick, makes sense of his sickness or learn to take care of himself to get better. They also take place when a child is faced with a handicap. For my son, it was the realization that he was dyslexic. He had to accept his “difference” and learn to work with

it, so he could become a competent reader and writer. Sometimes dialogues take place when a child has lost a favourite toy or object and needs to learn to put things in perspective. I remember spending an exhausting day in Paris, sightseeing with my ten-year-old son, when we realized that we had lost a poster with his picture on the Eiffel Tower. He was very upset, but we finally agreed that while it was really sad we had lost this special poster, it was more important that we were both fine. Dialogues often happen when a child is frustrated with his friends and needs to understand how people react differently in different situations. Children can also be frustrated with their parents and dialogues can help them understand that we are just human beings with our own limitations and needs.

Conclusion

Mindful mothering is a philosophical practice because it is a daily act, which involves our mind, body, heart, and spirit. It is both humbling and nourishing. It is nourishing because mothers who attend to their children are fulfilled by their unique presence as well as pleased by all their progresses, adventures, and discoveries. It is nevertheless a humbling experience because there is no certainty, since children usually come to our world with already a set of dispositions we cannot control. Caring for a child also involves repetitive and usually unglamorous tasks that no one is going to see, appreciate or applaud. Mothering, as a means to practicing philosophy, does not promote radical originality. It simply reframes philosophy as a caring and compassionate tool, available to each of us. Mothering is one path that can lead us toward wisdom, by passionately engaging us with life, our life, and our children's lives. Mindful mothering is continuously challenging us to fully embrace the miseries and the beauties of daily life.

Giving birth to a child, as well as mothering, are powerful ways to think, feel, and act philosophically. Mothering is at the root of philosophy as a way of life: it is an act of being and creating oneself, which connects us with our soul, and the soul of other living beings. The philosophical role of mothers, and by extension of parents, is to teach our children that they are loved and respected, so they can transfer this love and respect to others, almost effortlessly.

Philosophy cannot have a better goal than this. When I consider how little value has been given to the essential work of child bearing and rearing accomplished by women over the past centuries, I wonder how much of this neglect has negatively affected millions of generations, leaving us emotionally crippled, unable to care for ourselves and for others. As a parent, I believe that we can use a practical understanding of philosophy to help our children develop in caring, reflective, and ethical human beings, who will be able to consider how little we really know and how far reaching are our actions. As a teacher, I think that we can use the same approach in order to develop pedagogy that could help us reach our students' humanity.

Chapter Four: Philosophy as a Pedagogical Model

...qui plus loquitur inquisitio quam inventio...
...because the search says more than the discovery...
Saint Augustine

Introduction

The overuse of sophistic practices has tainted our general understanding of what it means to learn and teach. This narrow understanding has in turn led us to betray the true meaning of learning and teaching demonstrated by Socrates and most ancient philosophers throughout Antiquity. For them, philosophy was a way of life, that, ultimately, transformed students and teachers from the inside out. Learning and teaching happened through an ongoing conversation between teachers and students. As I have argued, we have drifted away from this internal and dialogic process toward an external and individual process. Today, most students come to their classrooms to receive pre-packaged “knowledge” from a recognized “expert.” Their main goal is to acquire the necessary grades and diploma, which will help them succeed in our society. While this type of learning and training is as useful today as it was during Protagoras’ time, its narrow view tends to limit students and teachers’ intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development.

As an alternative, recovering philosophy as a pedagogical practice can lead us to reclaim a full human education, which will address and support our mind, body, heart, and spirit. Philosophy, defined as a practical activity dedicated to the betterment of

human beings, is the missing link in our educational system. By addressing the questions that deeply matters to us, philosophy provides a connection between time and space, between men and women, children and the elderly, one culture and another, one belief system and another.

Ancient philosophers used dialogues to connect with each other, and walked together sharing their questions. They supported each other in trying to make sense of themselves, and the world they inhabited. Ideas were explored in the context of an authentic search for meaning between people asking questions relevant to their lives. Such an approach is still valuable in today's world, and has without a doubt in my mind, a place in our classrooms. Thus, I propose philosophy, and in particular dialogues, as a pedagogical approach. This approach empowers students and teachers in a daily praxis: a continuous weaving of actions and questions brought to life by students' daily interactions with each other and the world they are a part of. The pedagogic model I propose is recognizing that both students and teachers are engaged in a process of learning about being human; a process, that, in due course, teach us to be and become ethical beings. I do not propose to design a curriculum, since this approach is not about what to do with our students, but rather how to be with them, and engage them with their questions - our questions. I will, however, support this approach with examples of activities that I have conducted in my classes, as well as with samples of my students' reflections.

In the following pages, I will first challenge the idea that young people are not ready to think philosophically. I will then underline why the practice of philosophy is relevant to children's education. I will then explain how dialogues are used in a

philosophical approach to learning and teaching. I will finally distinguish six key pedagogical goals that can be attained through this approach.

Can young people philosophize?

*Since it is philosophy that teaches us to live, and since there is
a lesson in it for childhood as well as for the other ages,
why is it not imparted to children?*

Michel de Montaigne, *Essay XXV*

Montaigne started to write his essays after the death of his dear friend, the poet Etienne de la Boétie. His writing helped him continue the fecund dialogues they had with each other. He wrote his essays over a period of twenty years, during which he was continually changing and acknowledging change in his heart, body, and mind. In French, the word *essay* literally means *to try*. Montaigne perceived his life as an exciting adventure. He tried to live as well as possible, making an authentic effort to search for truth and wisdom. His main goal was to try understanding who he was, and how to be and become a better person. His essays were part of his philosophical process, tools to reflect on his thoughts and actions. Montaigne was a true philosopher, according to the original meaning of the word, because he practiced philosophy as a way of life. In his essay on the *Education of Children*, Montaigne sees philosophy as more important to youth than adults, since for him, philosophy instructs us about life, we need its wise guidance at the beginning, not at the end of our lives. He encouraged his contemporaries to forego the subtleties of dialectic, and choose simple words to reach children. For him, a toddler is more able to philosophize than to learn to write or read (2001, p. 251). Every one however does not share this idea.

Diverging points of view: Montaigne versus Plato and Rorty

Plato was the first published philosopher to exclude young people from philosophy. He writes in *The Republic*, that philosophy should not be touched until the age of thirty (1964, p. 261). His main argument is that most young people do not have the necessary maturity to understand the complexity of issues presented to them and, therefore, can fall into some kind of nihilism. This, in turn, might lead them to be confused, and act inappropriately. He also thinks that most young people use philosophical arguments as a battlefield, arguing to win while proving nothing, but discrediting philosophy in the process.²⁹ This kind of tug of war and nihilism is far from the search for truth and the love of wisdom. I agree to some extent with Plato's arguments, as I do believe that we need to be careful with the kind of questions we choose to debate with children and our students. It is why I would say most questions have to be initiated by students, and approached in a way that is appropriate for their age and level of understanding. On the other hand, I believe that Plato never seriously considered the possibility that young children could philosophize. He only considered the education of young men, because he lived in a time when men, women, and children led separate lives. For Plato, philosophy was hard work, a way of life that could only be practiced by a few rare human beings. Plato's elitism logically rejected the inclusion of philosophy in early education.

A contemporary American philosopher, Richard Rorty, agrees with Plato's position. While Rorty is not as dogmatic as Plato in thinking that thirty is the reasonable age to think philosophically, he only includes students old enough and affluent enough to

²⁹ Typical eristic arguments used by the Sophists in debates. The goal is to win the argument by any means, very often at the expense of truth.

go to university. He thinks that elementary and secondary schools' role is to socialize children into the norms of a given society. It is not to teach students to think critically about society's values, but to socialize them in embracing these values. Thinking critically is, in his opinion, the responsibility of universities. He clearly says, "it is not, and never will be, the function of lower-level education to challenge the prevailing consensus about what is true" (2001, p. 110). While there is no doubt that schools have a fundamental role in socializing youth, it is however questionable to challenge our students to seriously think only when they are pursuing "higher" education. This raises two questions: What happens to people who do not attend university? What are the thinking skills brought by students who attend university?

Considering that the majority of our students do not attend university, I feel that our education system is somehow failing these students. They do graduate, but they leave our schools without having been given the opportunity to develop their thinking capacities. Without these opportunities, their ability to think critically is impaired, since they might never seriously engage in questioning themselves and society. Like the men in Plato's cave, they are trapped in very narrow ways of thinking and seeing the world.

Also, as Wittgenstein points out, philosophy is not intellectually difficult. It is difficult because it involves a work on oneself, a way "to conquer the resistance of the will" (1994, p. 263). This is difficult because it requires intellectual and emotional flexibility. I tend to think that the younger we are, the more flexible is our body, but also our mind and heart. This is why practicing philosophy with youth might be easier than with adults. At the same time, it prepares young people to become self-aware and open-minded individuals. Wittgenstein also underlines that "someone unpracticed to

philosophy passes by all the spots where difficulties are hidden in the grass, whereas someone who has had practice will pause and sense that there is difficulty close by even though he cannot see it yet” (1994, p. 286). For this reason, limiting access to philosophical learning to university students is going to have an impact on the way most of them understand who they are, and how they understand each other, and the world they live in. This understanding, in turn, affects all our decisions and actions, both personally and politically. A superficial understanding of any issue has the potential to be dangerous for individuals, others, and the environment. One example of such thinking is found in the use of pesticides and herbicides. We are just starting to understand that these chemicals are not only harmful for insects and weeds, but also to us, in ways we cannot yet fully comprehend.

This example points to the fact that thinking philosophically is an activity that has every day practical applications. It is an activity, which certainly can be practiced with students at every grade level, and that will equip them with life-long skills for thinking critically about every aspect of their lives. The thinking tools that they learn in class, such as questioning what is presented as truth, looking for evidence to accept or refute it, searching for reliable information, and presenting solid and honest arguments, can only help them make the best decisions possible.

If I consider students going to university, I think a philosophical preparation can only prepare them to develop well-thought arguments - a skill that will serve them well in their writing. Also, when we consider the increase in plagiarism connected to the use of the Internet as a main source of research, fostering a philosophical attitude, such as the desire for truth, can only have a positive impact on the quality of thinking happening in

both schools and universities. Overall, Rorty's position does not serve students well. It mirrors Plato's elitism, and patronizes teachers and students of "lower education." The other problem with considering philosophical thinking only appropriate for adults is that this view completely ignores the fact that we experience philosophical questions as children.

Experiencing philosophical questions at a young age

Montaigne definitely spoke from experience when he said, "it is very wrong to portray philosophy inaccessible to children" (2001, p. 251). He was lucky enough to have loving and dedicated parents who let him run freely in the countryside and socialize with every one, while at the same time providing him with an extraordinarily rich education. His father insisted conversing with him in Latin and Greek. At a very young age, he was therefore able to read Aristotle or Cicero in the original texts. For these reasons, thinking philosophically and discussing ideas were naturally part of his upbringing from a very young age.

Like Montaigne, I also believe that young people can philosophize, because like him, I also remember being such a child and teenager. I clearly remember how puzzled I was when I was trying to figure out what started everything. I was systematically banging my head against a wall, the wall of "No-Answer." I also remember the feeling of extreme solitude when faced with my questions and my sense of the infinite. I had a strong sense of my existence in my daily reality, while feeling at the same time that I was floating between realities or possibilities. In this context, I especially appreciate Mary Warnock's insightful comments about this sense of infinite. She says that,

The belief that there is more in our experience of the world than can possibly meet the unreflecting eye, that our experience is significant for us, and worth the attempt to understand it... this kind of belief may be called the feeling of infinity. It is a sense... that there is always *more* to experience and *more in* what we experience than we can predict. Without some such sense, even at the quite human level of there being something which deeply absorbs our interests, human life becomes not actually futile or pointless, but experienced as if it were. It becomes, that is to say, boring. In my opinion, it is the main purpose of education to give people the opportunity of not ever being, in this sense, bored; of not ever succumbing to a feeling of futility, or to the belief that they have come to an end of what is worth having. It may be that some people do not need education to save them from this; my claim is only that, if education has a justification, this salvation for those who do need it must be its justification (1976, p. 202).

My sense that there was *more* than met my eyes was especially fired up by questions such as: Who created us? How? Why? Yes, God could be a possibility, but who created God? How? Why? Every answer brought me to another question. As far as I can remember, these questions were part of my thinking. My questions are still unanswered, and will remain unanswered. It is why I find them interesting, challenging, and fascinating. I was able to keep myself entertained, and not get *bored*. However, I rarely found adults who wanted to share this questioning space with me. One of these rare persons was a wonderful teacher who guided me through the treasures of French literature and introduced me to Montaigne.

I loved the way Montaigne simply and directly expressed his ideas. I understood what he was talking about, and I particularly took a special interest in his thoughts on the education of children. He probably was the philosopher who led me to see, understand, and love philosophical thinking the way I do. I also believe that his ideas are as relevant and critical today, as they were four hundred years ago. His imagery makes him a pleasure to read. His writing style was described by Flaubert as a delicious fruit that fills

your mouth and throat, “so succulent that the juice goes right to your heart” (1958, p. vii). His essay *To philosophize is to learn to die* has occupied my mind and heart since my adolescence. His words have accompanied me all my life, sustaining me with a sense of direction and purpose. As far as I am concerned, Montaigne was right when he said that philosophy teaches us to live, and consequently is especially relevant to young people.

Children are natural philosophers

As a mother and as a teacher, I have had astonishing conversations with children and adolescents. These conversations have convinced me, that young people have the ability to think philosophically. I especially remember one situation with my ten-year old son that illustrates this point. I was conversing with a friend who was saying that her husband needed to change, but that he did not want to change. My son interjected with this comment: “But life is about change... every thing changes all the time...we are changing all the time.” I was impressed, especially considering that at the time, he still did not know how to write or read since he was struggling with dyslexia. This kind of insightful comment perfectly illustrates Karl Jaspers’ point when he said, “it is not uncommon to hear from the mouths of children words which penetrate to the very depths of philosophy” (Lipman, 1978, p. 38-39). When I consider my personal experiences as a child, a mother, and a teacher, I know that children wonder about the sky and the stars, who they are, and where they came from. Children simply think, like all human beings, about the meaning of life.

Children’s first philosophical questions usually start with the word why. Their attitude toward their environment is the inquisitive and respectful attitude of the philosopher. They look at the world with wonder, curiosity, and awe. Unfortunately, this

natural curiosity is usually not encouraged by adults. We often tend not to take children's questions seriously, and brush them away as a nuisance. We also sometimes answer in haste without considering why the question is coming up. We also might think that every question has an answer, and be afraid not to be able to give the "right" answer. Children at a very early age are faced with existential questions, which need to be acknowledged. Among many other questions and deeply human worries, children might be anxious about the death of a pet, and the possible death of their parents. This is why I believe part of our role as caring adults and teachers is to welcome philosophical questioning and dialogues in our daily classroom activities. We do not need to know the answers to their questions; we just need to participate in the questioning.

Philosophy is not a lifeless abstraction reserved for an elite. It is a practical art available to everyone who wants to contemplate the questions we all ask. Children are natural philosophers, because they are naturally curious about these very questions. As Montaigne pointed out "a child is capable of [philosophizing] when he leaves his nurse" (2001, p. 251). More than four hundred years later, an increasing number of educators (Daniel, 1992; Laurendeau, 1996; Lipman, 1978; 1991; Marcil-Lacoste, 1990; Matthews, 1980, 1984; Sasseville, 1999, Kennedy, 1999; Sharpe, 1978, 1984)³⁰ have become interested in doing philosophy with children. The expression *doing philosophy* implies an activity, which involves all participants, teachers and students alike. Philosophy is not viewed as a sterile body of knowledge, which needs to be mastered, or as a set of dogmatic principles. It is an exciting activity, which grows from children's natural gift

³⁰ Numerous articles written by educators who are experimenting with Matthew Lipman's *Philosophy for Children* program can be found on the website of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) at Montclair State University, New Jersey, USA.

for asking questions. It engages every one in “a dialogue between thought and life” (Marcil-Lacoste, 1990, p. 9). Classrooms can be welcoming spaces where this dialogue can take place, giving our students the opportunity to actively engage in a philosophical discourse of their own. However, one can still ask why practicing philosophy with students is pertinent to their lives.

Why is the practice of philosophy relevant to children’s education?

When we understand philosophy as a practice aimed at exploring questions we all think about, philosophy is an activity within everyone can *do*. Since philosophy is usually understood as the knowledge of the works and ideas of people we call philosophers, most people do not perceive philosophy as such an inclusive activity, available to each of us. This later understanding is intimidating for most of us. Even Montaigne was apprehensive when he compared his work with the work of ancient Greek philosophers.³¹ However, he thought, as I do, that everyone does philosophy. Every human being has unanswered questions about the origin and the meaning of life. We all try to find a meaning to an existence, which is both thrilling and painful. I believe that the need to make sense of who we are and what is our role in this universe is a basic human need, almost as strong as our need for food and water. For this reason, a more accurate name for our species should have been “Homo Cogito,” the thinking human, instead of Homo sapiens, the knowledgeable human.

To call our species Homo sapiens was erroneous in many ways. First, we do not know, as Socrates would say. Secondly, the assumption that we know, leads us to behave

³¹ “One needs very strong loins to undertake to march abreast of those men” in Michel de Montaigne, De l’institution des enfants, Essay XXV.

erratically with each other and our natural environment, consistently causing problems we cannot foresee, since we do not know. Considering our need to think and the limit of our knowledge, the practice of philosophy is relevant to children's education, because it responds to the needs of the Homo Cogito, while questioning the behaviours and thoughts of the Homo Sapien in each of us. More specifically, practicing philosophy with children and adolescents gives us the opportunity to develop positive human qualities.

Practicing philosophy as a way to become a better human being

The gain from our study is to have become better and wiser by it.
Michel de Montaigne, *Essay XXV*

Some writers often use the word “humanization,” when trying to define the qualities I want to talk about. I, however, have some problem with this choice of word. Being humanized does not in itself guarantee the human qualities we tend to infer when we use this word. For example, saying that an action is inhuman because of its cruelty is in some way absurd, since the simple existence of this action done by a human being, proves that it is human. We are all able to be cruel, and extreme cruelty, as we all know, is a pretty common “human” behaviour. In recent times, I could of course talk about the massacres in what used to be Yugoslavia, or in Rwanda, or the treatment of Iraqis prisoners by some American soldiers. I could also talk about the many forms of physical, emotional, and sexual abuses committed in families. And I will not omit to mention the incidents of children's cruelty, which happen daily in our schoolyards and classrooms. Furthermore, speaking of humanness, or humanization, as a positive transformation, continues to place human beings in a privileged position among other living beings. We are just a species among thousands others. Like any other species, we carry within each

of us the qualities of this species, both positive and negative. It is why I prefer to speak about the need to become better human beings. Human is what we are despite our superficial socio-cultural differences, like a cat is cat, be it a Persian or a Siamese cat. According to Hanna Arendt (1959), the difference between human beings and other animals is our ability to improve ourselves. As a species, we are able to free ourselves from our natural determinism, for the better or the worse. We are also able to make ethical decisions which should have a beneficial impact on who we are and our social and natural environments.

As I have already underlined, philosophy used to be practiced in Antiquity to achieve such a goal. I have also pointed out how mothers are often practical philosophers in their daily interactions with their children, aiming at rearing the best human beings possible. Now considering that we all are Homo Cogitos, as teachers, we have the opportunity to engage our students in philosophical discussions that might lead them to become better human beings. The main tool to achieve this goal is dialogue.

Dialogues, a tool to practice philosophy

As teachers, we can use philosophical dialogues, “not as a detached intellectual technique dedicated to the display of cleverness, but as an immersed and worldly art of grappling with human misery” (Nussbaum, 1994, p. 3). We need to create in our classrooms a space in which our students feel comfortable, so they can express their hopes, fears, and questions about the human condition. We need to find a place where fears can be discussed and put in perspective. Should we be more afraid of a meeting with a Grizzly bear or of its potential extinction? Is it appropriate to be afraid of sharks in

Canada? Or should we consider the eventuality of a war and its repercussions on the life of every one who is affected by destruction, fear, death, and terror?

A philosophical approach to learning and teaching means essentially to engage students in a dialogue between their thinking and their life. This kind of dialogue is not an abstract and superficial exercise about trivialities, but a formative conversation between teacher and students. Philosophical dialogues imply a thoughtful approach to every question. They require teachers to be honest and lucid about the fact that our knowledge is limited. Through this recognition, we can see and present ourselves as learners. This attitude allows us to open a space for our students to learn and inquire with us.

As I argued in chapter three, dialogues intend to guide students to recognize the complexity of most questions pertaining to human life. No truth is imposed on anyone; on the contrary dialogues are aimed at teaching students to understand each other's points of view and help them put their own views in perspective. For meaningful dialogues to take place, students need to be fully engaged in the conversation. Teachers also need to create a welcoming space where these conversations can naturally emerge. In such a space, students are encouraged to bounce ideas back and forth with each other and actively engage in meaningful and thoughtful discussions about themselves and the world they are a part of. Students naturally use their life experiences to argue, which then lead them to make valuable intellectual and emotional connections. In the process, they develop their knowledge and understanding of themselves, others, and their environment.

My experiences as a teacher have led me to identify seven important areas that can be explored through a philosophical approach to learning and teaching: to know

oneself; to challenge our assumptions; to consider uncertainty; to address spiritual questions; to think for oneself; to understand our interdependence; and foremost to lead an ethical life.

1. To know oneself

Know yourself is the precept passed on to us by Socrates as the most important endeavour in life. Self-knowledge is the basis of philosophy, since it is a knowledge that places us on the path toward wisdom. Without a deep understanding of who we are, our actions can be thoughtless, and dangerous for others and ourselves. The knowledge of my potential for violence allows me to see it in others and myself. It also permits me to control it. Ultimately I can be lucid about human behaviours, including mine. This desire to know and understand oneself can be addressed in our classroom with dialogues. Students can be invited to discuss, compare, and evaluate what they feel and think. These dialogues, as well as all the other dialogues that take place in their lives, gradually help them to develop a sense of who they are, and who they can be. Through dialogues, students can enter a place where they are able to discern what makes them unique by comparing themselves with their classmates who think and behave differently.

This process is about valuing and validating each student's identity in a respectful and non-competitive manner. When students are actively participating in dialogues, this process opens their understanding to what all human beings share in common, such as our inclination toward violence or peace. Many classroom incidents can be used to help students reflect on their behaviour, and question why this behaviour happened. Some situations and approaches are more enlightening than others. I am especially thinking of an American schoolteacher, who decided after Martin Luther King's death, to teach her

students about racism by having them experienced it first hand.³² She divided her students between blue-eyed and brown-eyed people. Over a two-day period, all her students experienced both being racist and being discriminated against without any rational reason, except the one she was giving them depending on the colours of their eyes on a specific day. During the debriefing period, she engaged her students to express their feelings and thoughts about what they had experienced. The comments of the kids were astonishing, and reflected a deep understanding of the cause and effects of racism. They learned about the unfairness and irrationality of racist attitudes. They also learned about the pain, shame, powerlessness, and anger felt by people who are victims of racist attitudes and policies. What is even more interesting and powerful is how as adults, they remembered what they had learned, and taught it to their own children. This teacher did a practical philosophical exercise in self-knowledge, which had a positive impact on the world at large. These children became more self-aware and knowledgeable about their own capacity for good and evil. They especially understood that “evil” is not in a distant place, but in themselves and with them every day of their life. This understanding is in my opinion the only preparation children and teenagers need for “the real world.”

³² *The eye of the storm* is a ABC News Productions video, produced and written by William Peters. Published Palisades, NY: Admire Entertainment (distributor), 2002.

2. To challenge our assumptions

Our qualities, not our peculiarities, are what we should cultivate
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
Maxims and Reflections

In this situation, as well as in other situations, children discuss with their classmates their ideas and feelings. They also discover that they are not alone to feel and think the way they do. They make intellectual connections but foremost emotional connections with their classmates and, by extension, to other human beings outside their immediate environment. They become open to their differences through the understanding of their shared similarities. They start focusing on their “qualities,” instead of their “peculiarities.” Considering the social, economic and cultural diversities of our classrooms, we need children to see, understand, and value both our common human qualities, and our individual differences.³³ Philosophical dialogues can challenge the assumptions, stereotypes and prejudices, which have already grown deep roots in our minds since our childhood. Bertrand Russell points out how “prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of [our] age or nation, and from convictions which have grown up in [our] mind without the co-operation or consent of deliberate reason” (1973, p. 91). In the same sentence, he characterizes a person living with prejudices as “imprisoned.” I see the role of philosophy as a way to try to liberate our mind from the prejudices of our time. It is, however, a difficult and never-ending task

³³ I especially appreciate Carolyn Shields’s contributions to this idea. She elaborates on the theme of “communities of difference,” rejecting the myth of homogeneity and the need to conform. She argues that for school communities to be genuinely inclusive, we need to create a climate of awareness and respect for students’ differences, even though these differences might not always be visible (2000, 2001).

that requires being consistently self-aware and humble. Again, I come back to the Socratic precepts: knowing ourselves and recognizing that we do not know.

As a teacher, challenging my students' prejudices while being sharply aware of my own blind spots can be a difficult task at times, since I could easily fall into the trap of dogmatism and indoctrination. I could therefore achieve exactly the opposite of what I intended to do, and go against what I believe to be true and worthwhile about philosophy. Imposing on my students a way of seeing the world that they do not understand, or with which they do not completely agree would completely contradict a philosophical approach to learning and teaching.

In the current socio-educational context where students are told that every opinion is valid and acceptable, defining what is true and what is not true can be especially trying. To be able to deal with these situations, William Hare proposes the cultivation of open-mindedness (1993). He defines this concept as "the willingness to form and revise one's views in the light of evidence and argument" (1993, p. 16). He also points out to Bertrand Russell's fundamental conceptual difference between a desire for truth, and an unshakeable certitude that something is true (Hare, 1993, p. 31). According to these two points, in order to avoid any kind of dogmatism and indoctrination, I first must be aware of the limitations of my knowledge about what I know, and believe to be true.

Furthermore, while aiming at finding truth, I need to be open-minded and flexible enough to be ready to change my beliefs, when presented with new evidences that challenge my current understanding. I try to be aware as much as I can of what brought me to my current understanding and attitude about life in general, and some issues in particular. As Maxine Greene so beautifully says, "To do philosophy, the teacher who wishes to be

fully conscious must confront the contingency of the real. He must become aware of how his consciousness grasps the world he inhabits” (1973, p. 10). By doing so, I try to see the complexities present in my daily life, and remind myself of the inherent problems posed by this complexity. A complexity that is also present in my students’ lives, in different shapes and hues. I try to make this complexity as visible as possible, so we can explore together the questions emerging from our multi-layered existences.

To be able to explore new ideas and possibilities, it is therefore essential that I foster and model an open-minded attitude among my students about themselves and others. Philosophical inquiry implies the desire to search for truth, even though this truth might not be the one we want to see or hear. We are always limited in our knowledge by the contingencies of our time and place. However, as long as we are ready to change our views when presented with new facts, we are in line with a good philosophical practice. A true desire for truth will always allow us to be ready to reconsider our position, and help us avoid any kind of dogmatism and indoctrination. It is not an easy task, but it is the only one that respects a serious philosophical practice. Personally, I try my best to keep this understanding as my mental compass and, through this process, try to support my students in developing an open-mind. This attitude is especially important when I consider that another goal of philosophical thinking, to accept the idea that in our life, very few things are certain.

3. To consider uncertainty

Let this variety of ideas be set before him; he will choose if he can; if not he will remain in doubt. Only the fools are certain and assured
Michel de Montaigne, *Essay XXV*

The nature of philosophy is to accept, as Socrates did, that we do not know. Admitting this, however, places us in a position of uncertainty. We become more vulnerable, and also stronger. Vulnerable because we become lucid about our lack of control in almost every aspect of our lives, and stronger because we learn to discern what is really important in our lives and worthwhile of our attention. This process is part of a life' work that we can initiate in our classrooms. Some philosophical questions, such as existential questions, help students understand that not every question has an answer. For the most part, there are no right or wrong answers: only the realization of multiple ways of seeing and understanding the world we live in. This realization is usually extremely liberating for students. I especially understood this early in my career when we talked about death and our beliefs and thoughts about God and after-life. My students were speaking freely and without inhibitions, since it was really clear for each of them that nobody needed to come up with any kind of proof or validation of their understanding. It is also confusing because most of them have been taught that knowledge can be acquired like a piece of clothing, but also because it confronts them with the uncertainty of life. While the only certainty we have is our death, most people including teachers avoid talking about this topic. Adults teach most young people that the goal of their existence, if not the meaning, is *to have*: have a career, money, toys, or life insurance. This discourse is reinforced by the media but also by teachers who push students to consume education as their ultimate salvation. I do believe that engaging our students in philosophical dialogues is an activity that has the potential to help them clarify what they deeply value and what is really important for them to experience. Our students are not customers buying a product called "life," they are human beings living their life, and

philosophy can help them make better choices, according to who they are. It can also prepare them to understand and accept life as a journey full of joy and sadness, which ultimate destination is our death, whatever that means for them. That is why *philosopher est apprendre à mourir*. For this reason, philosophical questions naturally lead to questions related to spirituality.

4. To address spiritual questions

To philosophize is to learn to die, because the more consciously we lead our life, the better prepared we will be when we face what all of us will face, death. This meditation on life connects us with the infinite mystery of existence. It gives us what Pierre Hadot calls “a cosmic conscience” (2001, p. 156). We all have the same basic needs: water, food, and shelter. And when these basic needs are met, we all have the energy to ask the questions that every human being asks when he/she wonders about where we came from, who we are, and where we are going. We however live in a place where the religious dimension of existence is disappearing, while our human need for spirituality still exist, and is not fulfilled. Furthermore, our multicultural society is also a multi-faith society. As teachers, how can we address existential questions in this context? Do we simply ignore them, under the pretence of political correctness, or because we are too afraid to offend somebody. I believe that we need to give our students the opportunity to discuss these questions. I know as a fact that at every grade level, they enjoy speaking about these topics, are curious about religious thinking and questions related to spirituality. Considering the potential to dogmatism, the practice of philosophical dialogues is intrinsically about staying open-minded. I also adhere to the ancient way of practicing philosophy as a spiritual exercise (Hadot, 2002), which goal

was to connect its practitioners with something bigger than themselves, while adhering to no dogma. This understanding and practice of philosophy can also help our students recognize their common need for meaning, while exploring how each of them makes sense, or does not make sense of his/her existence. It is not about preaching. It is about exploring the ways human beings construct meaning around something that might be, or seem meaningless. This non-dogmatic approach is respectful. It helps me address my students' spiritual questions, while creating a space where they can seriously consider their belief system.

5. To think for oneself

We live in a society, which prides itself on its freedom to such a point that most of us do not question if we are really free or not, or what kind of freedom we are experiencing. Are we free to think clearly about our needs and wants? Are we even able to make the difference between our needs and wants? We are continuously bombarded by images and discourses that have us convinced that our freedom is about choosing between dozens of salad dressings, or hundreds of TV channels. We are puppets in the hands of marketing agencies working for big businesses, which only goal is more profit, not our freedom to choose, even less our freedom to think. Aristotle defined slaves as lacking the integrity of one's choice since they are living tools of someone's plan of life (Nussbaum, p. 95). We are such slaves, slaves who do not know they have been enslaved. Slaves knew that they were not free, and as such, could fight for their freedom. We, however, for the most part, do not know we are enslaved, and for this reason, our thinking is not only limited by our personal and socio-cultural experiences, but also by the assumption that we are free to think. We not only wrongly assume that we know, but

we also incorrectly assume that we are free. In the best possible scenario, we might be aware, like Socrates, that we do not know, while being cognizant that our freedom is relative.

For this reason, Wittgenstein criticized how dogmas controlled the expression of all opinions and that “people will live under an absolute tyranny, though without being able to say they are not free” (1994, p. 296). We live today in such a place, and one of the dogmas is consumerism. In the so-called “free world,” we constantly talk about our freedom(s), while we often have a very simplistic understanding of what being free means. Most of us are unaware that our freedom is under attack, due to our lack of political involvement, our greed, our gullibility to the half-truth dispensed by the media.

Allowing our students the freedom to think critically

In North American modern society, it seems that despite their freedom, our students are not challenged enough to think critically. Literacy has been used to make compliant consumers and employees who do not question the status quo. It should not be surprising if we consider that historically, compulsory education was rarely sought by *the uneducated* as a means of liberation, but “rather imposed on them by a well-meaning ruling class in the hope of turning them into productive workers and well-mannered citizens” (Olson, 1994, p.10). Furthermore, Michel Foucault’s research on schools and the education of children shows that since the seventeen century, our schools have been part of a general process to control people (Foucault, 1975). He points out that the same techniques used to dominate and confine were and still are at work, in schools, hospitals, and the army.

While we have seen during the last decades changes in the way students are treated in schools, some of these past goals are still part of our educational system. I actually see them as the foundation of most schools. The enclosed architecture of most of our schools can give evidence of this need to control and confine students. Schools are not designed to promote thinking and freedom, but to efficiently control the maximum number of students: small classrooms with small windows, with more and more students per class, and shorter and shorter lunch breaks. This type of architecture and planning also reflects the prevalent view of schools as utilitarian and instrumental. Schools are training grounds for a complacent work force. In recent years, Canadian ministries of education have put more and more pressure on schools, to promote “literacy, computers, mathematics, science, problem-solving, decision-making, team-work and entrepreneurship, as a means of producing ‘skilled and flexible work force, comfortable with sophisticated technology;’” (Stewart, 2001, p. 53). The consequence of this situation is that our students, among others, are manipulated. Considering this deceitful situation, giving our students the opportunity to think is absolutely critical.

The need to think for oneself in a democratic society

This brings me to one of the key goals of philosophy in the classroom: the freedom to think for oneself. Meaningful and engaging dialogues can help our students clarify their thinking and feelings, and help them in situations when they are subjected to contradictory information and beliefs. Thinking for oneself is also a necessity if we want our democracy to flourish. Dewey understood democracy as a way of life, an activity that needs to be integrated with every activity and thought. He asks us “to get rid of the habit of thinking of democracy as something institutional and external and to acquire the

habit of treating it as a way of personal life” (1981, p. 228). I find it interesting that Dewey uses the term “way of life.” His wording reflects the Ancient philosophers’ attitude toward philosophy, pointing out to the similar qualities of philosophy and democracy. Both are about acting thoughtfully with ourselves and our environment. I, therefore, wholeheartedly adhere to Dewey’s view that democracy is not only personal but also political. Since a true democracy requires citizens who can think for themselves, philosophical questioning has, without a doubt, a place in our classrooms. If our students cannot tell the difference between lies and truth, the democratic process is flawed from its very beginning. If we cannot distinguish between demagoguery, and sound political decisions, we are in trouble. Most of our students rarely engage in thoughtful dialogues about complex issues, and often tend to oversimplify complex issues. The media, including daily-televised news, create entertainment out of human disasters and tragedies, and consistently reinforce their simplistic views.

Dewey also points out “no significant community can exist save as it is composed of individuals who are significant” (1987, p. 207). The practice of philosophical dialogues in our classrooms can make our students feel how their thinking and contribution to themselves and society are necessary to make their local and global communities work at their best. By engaging students in philosophical dialogues, we can challenge them to think together about their world. They can be challenged to question the values inherent to our materialistic behaviours, and maybe perceive the unquestioned state of mind of “I shop therefore I am.” They can also start reflecting and talking about policies that directly affect them, such as compulsory schooling, class sizes, school calendars and schedules, availability of junk foods, dress codes, age limit for drinking,

just to name a few. Through this process, they will start seeing the grey areas of each problem, as well as the complexities and paradoxes of human life.

They probably also will start to understand that politics are not an external entity which does not concern them, but something that is part of their life. This first step might lead them to make political action part of their daily life, making democracy a valuable and empowering system.

6. To understand our interdependence

Wonderful brilliance may be gained for human judgement by getting to know men. We are all huddled and concentrated in ourselves, and our vision is reduced to the length of our nose.
Michel de Montaigne, *Essay XXV*

While thoughtfully dialoguing, our students can learn from each other while understanding each other's impact on one another. They can see themselves as part of a group of people who are interconnected and interdependent. This understanding can lead to actions, which are well thought out in terms of their implications in the short and long-term. Students might have a better chance to grow up into adults who act responsibly in their immediate community and the world community. If I define being an adult as someone who cares for others and who considers the needs and the well being of the majority, one could argue that these students might simply become adults.

Considering these last points, I concur with Dewey's enlightening assertion that: "Only by participating in the common intelligence and sharing in the common purpose as it works for the common good can individual human beings realize their true individualities and become truly free" (Shusterman, 1997, p. 78). That is why questions addressing social justice issues have a place in our classrooms. I believe that asking

questions about our rights and responsibilities is fundamental to philosophical discussions. We need to consider the wealth of our “free world,” and compare it with the poverty of the “other world,” be next door, or in another country. We need to keep on asking why. We need to address the question of “otherness” in all its forms and shapes. We need to seriously consider our carelessness with our natural environment, and how by doing so we are affecting the well-being of every human being, animal, plant, particle of air, grain of soil, and drop of water. Our interconnectedness with each other and with every thing that exists on this planet needs to be understood and felt, so we can have the luxury to keep on examining the mystery of existence. Philosophy is the pedagogical tool we need to challenge our students to think and care.

7. To lead an ethical life

Engaging in philosophical dialogues implies that every topic can be discussed in a classroom. When teachers avoid questions related to topics such as sexuality and mortality, they create an artificial world, which does not reflect our shared humanity. Our classrooms tend then to look like a TV commercial, where every body is happy and young forever. It is “the nice world.” Dialoguing on important and relevant questions with our students is not about being nice or who is nice but about what is good in itself and for others. And if we are using Russell’s criteria, it is about what is the best possible situation considering the facts or circumstances we know. The practice of philosophical dialogues with our students first lead them to understand the importance of knowing themselves as a way to fully accept their own humanity and the humanity of others. This self-awareness is therefore not self-centered but open to the other. Developing the habit to engage in respectful dialogues with each other helps define who we are in relation to

the other. Consequently, we can face the consequences of our actions, be they personal, political, social, or environmental. These encounters when fostered in our classrooms can prepare our students to see the ethical questions that face them on a daily basis. Ultimately, philosophy can guide them on a path toward an ethical life.

Conclusion

Like ancient philosophers, teachers need to understand knowledge as a never-ending search for meaning. Like Socrates, we need to state that we do not know anything of real importance, and that we have a partial knowledge of everything. We will never know everything there is to know, even about the subjects we teach. In order to be able to face the reality of our limitations, we need to develop different ways of thinking about teaching and learning. A philosophical approach to teaching and learning is the path I have proposed taking. Young people think philosophically and enjoy philosophical questioning. Our students come in our classrooms with an abundance of experiences, knowledge, skills, and questions. They are not empty vessels, waiting to be filled with our personal, biased, and limited understanding of the world. As teachers, we need to create a welcoming space to engage with our students in meaningful dialogues that are relevant to their lives and their need for meaning. The practice of philosophy in our classrooms can help them fulfill this basic human need. This practice can help them develop a sense of who they are, while challenging their assumptions about themselves and others. It provides them with a safe territory where they can explore life's uncertainties and discuss spiritual questions. It gives them tools to think for themselves and be critically minded. Finally, it opens their eyes and heart to our interdependence and connectedness with every one and every thing, hopefully leading them to be human

beings, who thoughtfully choose to make ethical decisions. We do not need to add to an already overwhelming curriculum content, we just need to reorganize it around meaningful and relevant questions, which will involve our students in enjoying thinking and questioning. An important task we have as teachers is to keep on asking questions and encouraging our students to keep on asking questions pertinent to themselves and the world that surrounds them.

Chapter Five: Practicing Philosophy in the Classroom

*In this short Life
That only lasts an hour
How much - how little – is
Within our power
Emily Dickinson*

Introduction

When we understand philosophy as a daily practice based on the infinite variety of questions that present themselves to anyone alive, we are like Socrates strolling at the market among all kinds of treasures. Noisy chickens, delicious fruits, fragrant herbs, beautiful flowers, running children, and lively conversations are all part of this joyful place. It bursts out with life, a multitude of voices, colours, and scents, overwhelming our senses, and competing for our attention. Every day my life involves a stroll at the market. I am walking in a world about which I am full of questions. As a teacher, I want to share this life with my students, and engage them in debating timeless questions, as well as the issues of our time and place. I want their minds and senses to think, feel, and wonder about the mysteries of existence.

Socrates enjoyed the market because he could engage in conversations with the every man about every day life issues. Its legacy is therefore not an educational doctrine, but a way of life, a simple approach to life, and its challenges. In a similar way, the practice of philosophy in the classroom is not a specific program to be taught, but a

different approach to the way we are teaching and interacting with our students.³⁴ I am proposing pedagogy based on meaningful conversations between teachers and students. I believe that these conversations have the potential to bring both teachers and students into a community of inquiry, a space where all questions are welcomed, and all answers are seriously considered. This approach's main goal is to foster in my students the desire, and the skills to keep on asking pertinent and critical questions, about themselves and the world they live in. I am, however, aware, like Emily Dickinson, that in this short life, very little is in our power. As a teacher, the relationship that I establish with my students is even more short-lived. A ten months period is not always long enough to attain what I hope to achieve by practicing philosophy with them. I, therefore, often have doubts about what I am doing. Among my successes and failures, I still do not know how much, or how little is within my power, I however think that some of my experiences are worth mentioning and building on.

Considering the key-roles of dialogues in this approach, I will first speak about the importance of the spoken word in our culture, and in our classrooms. I will then

³⁴ Matthew Lipman has been a key figure in North America in arguing for teaching philosophy in elementary and secondary schools. In 1969, he created the *Philosophy for children Program*, which is today a K-12 curriculum of more than 3000 pages, translated in 21 languages. Included in this program is a set of novels to engage young people in philosophical inquiry. In 1978, he opened *The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children* (IAPC) at Montclair State College, New Jersey, where teacher training and curriculum development take place. The recent articles published by Lipman still support this program, but also include more and more discussions about teaching important thinking skills to students, in order for them to be competent critical thinker (Lipman 1978, 1987, 1989, 1993, May 1998, September 1998). He has been supported in his work by Margareth Sharp and Fred Oscayan. The three of them published *Philosophy in the Classroom* in 1977. Sharp and Lipman also published *Growing up with Philosophy* in 1978. Their work is interesting and valuable. I agree with many of their statements, especially about the need for philosophy as well as the ability of children to think philosophically. My approach, however, is different since contrary to Lipman I do not believe in the necessity to create curriculum materials to be used in the classroom. I think good literature is already available to us and can easily be used to start philosophical dialogues with children. Furthermore I argue for the integration of philosophical thinking in everything we are doing: philosophy as a way of life. This is why I am not supporting the development of a specific program, since, I believe, this approach to philosophy can be detrimental to the type of community I ideally want to see in my classroom.

address the importance of creating a space where teachers listen carefully to their students, and where students learn to listen to each other. Furthermore, I will underline the necessity of behaving authentically for creating meaningful dialogues. This, in turn, will bring me to the role of stories, as a way to connect with each other in time and space. I finally will give specific examples of activities that have strongly supported a philosophical approach to learning and teaching in my classes.

Importance of a living voice

Instead of writing his thoughts, Socrates insisted on being a living voice. He foremost valued actions over words, but he also valued the spoken word more than the written word. The written word was just a representation, or an extension of earlier conversations happening between people engaged in discussions relevant to themselves in the here and now. Some pieces of writing give us an idea of their ways of thinking, but nevertheless are just fragments, partial reflections of lengthy conversations.

However, it is thanks to these written words that these insightful fragments have been passed on to us. Furthermore, it is mostly thanks to Plato's work that we know about the richness and power of Socratic dialogues. For this reason, I can fully appreciate the written word's contributions to our society. Despite these gains, I wonder about what we might have lost in the process of quietening our voices.

Mute voices

It is only in the past fifty years that the majority of people in our society know how to read and write. Biologically, we are programmed to speak, not to write (Havelock, 1976, p. 91). Our ancestors survived very well without it. In the past, people

were relying on oral traditions to transmit their culture to next generations. It was a role taken by the Elders who were in charge of transmitting their knowledge, and the traditions of their people. The sharing of stories was the common means used to teach children about the mysteries of existence. Children and adults alike needed to carefully listen to the storyteller to be able to understand who they were, and what their place and role in their community was. In contrast, the written word has taken the place of the spoken word in the modern world.

Jack Goody (1987), in a book called, *The interface between the written and the oral*, calls for a re-evaluation of forms of knowledge that are not derived from books. He especially points out how in the last one hundred years, the development of schooling has created a situation where knowledge and tasks that are not obtained through books are considered more or less worthless. This general attitude brainwashes us into thinking and believing that higher learning is related to book learning. It is in some way ironic when we consider that western philosophy is based on Socrates' living voice. Book learning as well as writing has brought us to a place where the living voice is cheapened.

When I ponder the importance of the living voice in philosophical dialogues, I wonder, if as educators, we are overlooking a valuable tool used to understand, feel, and connect with each other. Alfred North Whitehead pointed out the multiple ways we all learn and teach. He especially recognized that some academics are teachers who are more comfortable with the spoken word than with the written word:

For some of the most fertile minds composition in writing, or in a form reducible to writing, seems to be an impossibility. In every faculty you will find that some of the more brilliant teachers are not among the one who publish. Their originality requires for its expression direct intercourse with their pupils in the form of lectures, or of personal

discussions. Such men exercise an immense influence; and yet after the generation of their pupils has passed away, they sleep among the innumerable un-thanked benefactors of humanity. Fortunately one of them is immortal – Socrates” (1949, p. 98-99).

This “direct intercourse with pupils” is the essence of teaching and learning in a classroom. It is through this dialogic relationship that we learn and teach, making the living voice a necessity for both teachers and students. This voice is also necessary to try to meet philosophy’s original goals: self-care and self-knowledge, and the care and knowledge of others. It is the voice that helps all of us in being and becoming, learning and growing, in all our interactions with each other from birth to death. In the context of philosophy as a practice, I am using my voice as a mother and as a teacher in my relationship with my son and students. I am part of a dialogic process during which we together can become better people - the ultimate goal of philosophy as a way of life.

Retrieving our voice

Truth and Reason are common to everyone, and no more belong to the man who first spoke them than to the man who says them later. It is no more according to Plato than according to me, since he and I understand and see it in the same way. The bees plunder the flowers here and there, but afterward they make of them honey, which is all theirs...

Michel de Montaigne, *Essay XXV*

Speaking about an idea without having written about it, referenced it with respected authors to give it some kind of stamp of approval, usually makes me less likely to be taken seriously in an academic conversation. I guess it is the nature of the beast, or more appropriately, what the beast has become after years of sophistic training. Part of this training is the eradication of “I statements” in formal essays. Attitudes are changing, but for the longest time using the royal “we” validated a thought that actually was deeply

personal, and therefore belonged to the “I.” It is especially ironic when the origin of the word essay means to try, to experiment, actions that are deeply personal and tentative. I personally tentatively wrote this work with a mix of “we” and “I,” trying to clarify as I went along which one really was a “we,” and which one was an “I.” Therefore, this work helps me retrieve my voice. Using “we” mutes my voice and spirit. Using “I” gives me back my voice and my soul. I can be one with myself, whole, body, mind, and spirit. As a teacher, I want my students to experience this wholeness, as they explore with each other their ideas and understandings.

Another aspect of this training is the need to reference every thought. There is without question a justified need for intellectual honesty. Used to excess, however, it can become stultifying, and dumb us down, since it sometimes seems like we are not entitled to our own thinking. A few years ago, I wrote a paper for a course in philosophy of education. The person who marked the paper commented that I needed to name my sources. In this case, I did not have sources. It was my thinking, which was the result of life experiences, and reflections. I felt quite offended, but also amused that someone would assume that these ideas could not be mine. As Montaigne said, ideas belong to no one. Ideas are part of our human consciousness. The only ideas I can imagine not being able to comprehend are probably ideas from another planet, or universe. Similarly, I know that my students are natural philosophers with thoughts to share and explore, even though these thoughts might have been discussed at length by reputable thinkers, I do not need to refer to them, and teach philosophy per se. I just need to encourage their thinking, so they can play with their ideas, naturally practicing philosophy as they engage in

meaningful conversations. In time, when they are ready they will meet and learn with the philosophers whose ideas they have always shared.

Through this dialogic process, my students feel empowered. They learn to trust their thinking and judgement. As their understanding deepens, they develop a sense of ownership about their ideas. I can say, like Montaigne, that it is no more according to Plato, than according to them, since he and they understand and see it in the same way. They are practicing making their own honey.

Making honey as we are talking

I find myself questioning the fact that I am writing while I am arguing for reclaiming our need to talk. I strongly value the ability to read and write, but I still believe human beings are speaking people, and that our literacy has robbed us of something precious. Our common human gift is in our ability to talk to each other.

On a personal level, I envy Socrates who did not need to write to communicate his ideas. I simply enjoy lively conversations with people, see and react to their comments, and take them or follow them on new roads. I also know that the more I speak with someone about an idea, the clearer it is. I have internal conversations. I interact with authors when I am reading. I also reflect and process information when I am writing. Despite all these, I still need to enter a conversation with another human being to really make sense of what I am thinking. Self-talk, reading, and writing are just appendices of what I consider the most important tool in my thinking process: talking and sharing my thoughts with someone. As I am speaking, my thinking becomes clearer and better

articulated. Most of my insights have usually come in the middle of a conversation, rarely alone facing a computer screen.

As a teacher, I feel that we generally do not acknowledge our students' intelligence. I have met many students who felt insignificant because of the huge emphasis that is put on reading and writing skills. These students are often considered stupid, and therefore unable to think about complex issues. It seems to me, that teachers are the ones who think simplistically, by looking at students through the monofocal lens of literacy. We are not able to see our students' ability to think, because we do not give them the opportunity to do so, especially if they cannot read or write. Each one of our students thinks. They all bring a world of experiences and questions to our classrooms, whatever their skills in reading and writing. I especially concur with David Olson when he says that our "focus on literacy skills seriously underestimates the significance of both the implicit understandings that children bring to school and the importance of oral discourse in bringing those understandings to consciousness" (1994, p. 13). Instead of engaging our students in meaningful dialogues about their lives and the world they live in, we keep on focusing on trivial content for the sake of reading and writing.

Philosophical dialogues in the classroom give me the opportunity to address significant questions with my students, whatever their level of literacy. As a mother of a dyslexic child, I also know that intelligence, understanding and knowledge are present in children who do not know how to read and write. I know first hand that many students who struggle with reading and writing, and as a consequence, feel devalued and excluded. Philosophical conversations are a way to help them speak up about a world that does not value their intelligence.

These conversations empower children, by giving them tools to make sense of their world. All our students think and speak, they all have something to say, and they all can fully contribute to thoughtful discussions. They learn to understand and make sense of their world by speaking with each other, thinking aloud, and bringing to their consciousness the thoughts that inhabit them. As teachers, we need to meet and hear these children, and engage them in conversations using simple language.

A simple language

*The speech I love is a simple natural speech,
the same on paper as in the mouth.
Michel de Montaigne, Essay XXV*

When dialoguing in a classroom, children naturally use their life experiences to illustrate their argument. The discussion becomes meaningful and worthwhile. They gradually learn to value their own thinking, respect their peers' thinking and argue in a thoughtful manner. By thoughtful, I mean that children learn to organize and critique their thinking, while remaining open-minded about alternative ways of understanding. They learn to think in a coherent and autonomous way. Consequently, philosophical dialogues help children to trust their judgement, which in turn helps them develop a positive sense of themselves. They also become aware of the connection between their thinking and their actions, and they gradually accept responsibility for both. Dialogues on topics such as the way we treat each other and our environment affect the way they choose to behave, and give us a shared language for discussing upcoming issues. Honest and open discussions on bullying, for example, have led some of my students to be aware of their behaviours and to make conscious efforts to change.

I remember a conversation on the fact that a student had kicked a locked door because he wanted to get in and was frustrated. Together we identified the feelings as frustration and the behaviour as a knee-jerk reaction. The students agreed that other ways of dealing with these emotions could have been more appropriate. The “knee-jerk” reaction became a metaphor, which my students continued to use over the school year to name similar behaviours. Our conversation was based on the premise that we all get frustrated and we all act inappropriately at times. We concluded that we might only try to be more aware and try to make better decisions. Such philosophical dialogues allow us to accept one another and grow with each other. This growth occurs because we are using our voice to think aloud, and because we listen carefully to each other.

A space to be heard and listened to

*I don't want him to think and talk alone,
I want him to listen to his pupil speaking in his turn.
Michel de Montaigne, Essay XXV*

Through dialogues, children can develop their self-knowledge and self-esteem. They can explore and learn about their interests, ideas, and attitudes. This is only possible in an environment where students feel safe - safe to say what is on their mind, safe to disagree, safe to be emotional, and safe to be quiet. One of the best definitions of such an environment is offered by Mary O'Reilly (1998). She defines it as practicing hospitality, being present, mindful, awake, a space in which students and teachers can reflect together.

The first step to establish this space is to listen to my students. Four hundred years ago, Montaigne pointed out the need for teachers to listen to their students, not

lecturing or interrupting them. Listening implies being present, body and mind, so I can hear what is said with an open mind. As a teacher, I need to model the act of listening, if I want my students to learn to listen.

A couple of years ago, I taught a group of Grade 6/7 students, who did not listen very well. One day I asked them if I needed to change my teaching style, so they would listen and work better. They told me they did not want me to change. So I asked them to tell me what specifically they thought I did right and what they wanted me to keep on doing. They told me I listened to them, valued their opinions, and gave them real choices. I was surprised how specific they were, demonstrating their capacity for thinking and analyzing. Considering that they identified the fact that I was listening to them as something special brought me to question how often they had been listened to, either by their parents, teachers, or other adults. I believe that if most of these students had not been listened to, it could explain why they had tremendous difficulties listening.

It was very puzzling. These children were intelligent, and like any other human being, they had questions and answers about the meaning of life, the meaning of their life. I just needed to attentively listen to them. This kind of listening involves the whole person, the listener as well as the person being listened to. Mary Rose O'Reilly uses the term *radical presence*. She beautifully explains this idea when she says:

...it attends not to the momentary faltering but to the long path of the soul, not to the stammer, but to the poem being born.... One can, I think, listen someone into existence, encourage a stronger self to emerge or a new talent to flourish. Good teachers listen this way, as do terrific grandfathers and similar heroes of the spirit (1998, p. 21).

When my students felt listened to, they felt respected and valued. They could take risks: speak up, make mistakes, learn, and grow. They learned about themselves and

others. They simply learned. They also gradually learned how to listen to each other and to adults. I believe that our philosophical conversations helped them develop intellectually and emotionally. However, creating this listening space is not always easy since it goes against the grain of public education. Students are not used to being offered this kind of space and it takes them time to adjust. They fill up this space with a lot of noise before starting to deeply understand its purpose and change their behaviour for a more respectful way of being. Based on my experience, I need to be patient, humble, and have faith. They have taught me that my listening will eventually be met by their listening, my presence with their presence.

Importance of authenticity

*The educational task, in the moral domain as well as in others,
is to find out how to enable individuals to choose intelligently
and authentically for themselves*

Maxine Greene, *Teacher as stranger*

This quality of presence implies authenticity on my part as well as on my students' part. However, here again, it is not always easily achieved. It is nevertheless a necessary component of a true philosophical practice. The desire to be authentic can be uncomfortable since it might lead us to choose not to conform to society's norms. This is especially true for children and teenagers who want to fit in. I believe that engaging in philosophical discussions with our students can help them identify who they are, and what they want to be, although that might be different from their peers. I believe that the more my students embrace these discussions the more they are able to choose for themselves, in an authentic and intelligent way. My task as a teacher is to give them the freedom to think in an open space, to think for themselves, and to choose what is right

and worthwhile, while considering who they are at every step. It gives them the tools to look at all forms of indoctrination, including mine, with a critical mind. It keeps them awake, away from the pervasive anaesthesia instilled in us since childhood.

Maxine Greene, following Dewey's lead, describes anaesthesia as "an emotional incapacity that can prevent people from questioning, from meeting the challenges of being in and naming and (perhaps) transforming the world" (2001, p. x). Greene's work is about engaging us with art as a way to fully experience life in all its forms, shapes, and colours. She points out how art allows us to confront our own experience that we otherwise would not confront (2001, p. 108). Through the power of our imagination art connects us to what we used to perceive as too different. It takes us for long walks in foreign territories. Art takes us to meet the other, and leads us to feel empathy for "the familiar heart of the stranger" (Greene 2001, p. 152). Stories, among other art forms, offer us a rich soil for philosophical reflections. They are a readily available resource in our classrooms, and give me never-ending opportunities to engage my students in philosophical questioning.

Importance of stories

Stories, whatever their genre, are all powerful tools we can use for philosophical inquiries in our classrooms. Stories took shape from human beings' need to make sense of their existence. As James Higgins underlines "they were the forerunners of the philosophers in that they first began to cope with the overwhelming complexity of experience by fashioning story models through which selection, definition and action became possible" (1978, p. 258). Thus, they provide us with a rich source of human situations, experiences, emotions, dilemmas, and questions. Stories connect me with my

students' feelings and thoughts. They allow me to engage in lively dialogues with them about the questions that emerge as they listen and react to the story. Stories are an open window into the world of human experiences and emotions, allowing us to learn more about who we are in this world.

Antoine de Saint Exupéry's *Petit Prince* is one of these stories. This story is a pleasure to read with both children and adults. It is written in a simple and beautiful poetic language, and delicately illustrated, making it without question a work of art. Its philosophical message generally touches people and triggers a variety of conversations. My favourite passage is in the introduction. The little boy has drawn a boa, which had swallowed an elephant. Showing his drawing to adults, he asks them if they are afraid of it. They are not afraid because they could only see a hat. Disappointed, the little boy stops trying to communicate with adults about important things such as boas, virgin forests, and stars. This part of the story illustrates adults' lack of "radical presence," the need for adults to carefully listen to children, inquire about their thinking, and seriously consider their questions. Saint-Exupéry also deeply regrets adults' lack of imagination and lost sense of wonder. All qualities that are woven in any meaningful philosophical inquiry. As *The Little Prince*'s conclusion underlines:

This is a big mystery. For you who love the little prince, like for me, nothing in the universe is the same if somewhere, we do not where, a sheep that we do not know, has, yes or no, eaten a rose.... Look at the sky. Ask yourself: Has or has not the sheep eaten the flower? And you will see how everything changes.... And no big person will ever understand why it is so important!

Philosophy starts with such questions. The little prince is the part of us that wants to awaken to existence. It is the part of us that still looks at the world with surprise, joy,

and excitement. Used in the classroom, this story allows me to connect with my students on many levels, giving us the opportunity to talk together about the “big mystery.”

Fairy tales

Fairy tales are also a wonderful resource for philosophical discussions, since most of them deal with ethical questions. As a child, I avidly read every tale written by Grimm and Andersen. One of these tales is still influencing my behaviour. It is about two girls lost in a forest. One after the other, they find refuge in a stable. An old man gives the first one some food which she devours without paying either attention to the old man or the animals. The second one, however, despite her hunger, decides to inquire about the old man and to feed the animals first, and magically, the stable transforms itself in a beautiful castle. This tale emotionally and intellectually helped me to shape what I felt and thought was an important aspect of life. It encouraged me to continue to care for animals but also to first think in terms of their needs, specifically in situations where they depended on me to be fed. By engaging our emotions, stories teach us with subtlety about our humanity.

Autobiographical stories

Autobiographical stories, such as *The Brown Suitcase* by Lillian Boraks-Nemetz, help my students see a world that they can barely imagine possible. This story speaks to them about the darkness and lightness of life, through the life of an ordinary young girl, going from the hellish Warsaw ghetto to a new life in Canada.

It brings to them the harsh realities of war and racial discrimination. It also “sensibilizes” them to the daily struggles of a new immigrant in Canada, and how a few

kind people can make a difference. This passage is a powerful rendition of what the author felt as a little girl, as she was escaping death, but also leaving her family behind:

“This is the way out of the ghetto, Slava. You are going to cross the line in a few minutes,” Father says gravely. “In the pocket of your coat, is a false identity card. The name on it is “Irena Kominska.” It says that you are a Catholic orphan from Warsaw. There will be a woman waiting for you on the other side. She will know you, and she will take you to Babushka’s.” I am frozen. I say nothing. Father gives me the suitcase. My hand can barely hold it. “When I tell you, start walking,” he says, “walk through the checkpoint at a normal pace. Do not hesitate, or run. Above all do not turn around to look at me.” He hugs me with tears in his eyes. “Now go! I look at him for one last moment, let go of his hand, and begin the longest walk of my life (1994, p. 52).

This walk between death and life has never been directly experienced by my students, whatever their age. It opens their mind and heart to human suffering. It takes them to a place of questioning about human behaviours and the choices we make in our lives for the better or for the worse. They can feel the range of emotions that this young girl went through, and empathize. They can sense the pulling between opposite feelings, vulnerability, and strength, sadness and joy, misery and hope. They feel close to someone they did not know, familiar with a stranger.

These emotions bring us to understand our human condition, and help us develop our sense of community. In the process, “the dialogues we enter into take shape across the differences, preventing those differences from tearing us apart, linking us in a desire to see more, feel more, understand more, listen more acutely, dip more passionately into life” (Greene, 2001, p. 148). I hope that the philosophical conversations my students engage with bring them to a place they feel passionate about and want to explore with all their senses, aware, and awaked to existence.

Examples of classroom conversations

Someone reproached Diogenes for meddling, though ignorant, with philosophy...Hegesias begged him to read him some book. "You are jesting," he replied, "you choose real and natural figs, not painted ones; why don't you also choose real and natural exercises, not written ones?"
Michel de Montaigne, *Essay XXV*

The practice of philosophy in a classroom is a dynamic activity. Like Diogenes, I prefer "real and natural figs to painted ones." Philosophical conversations emerge from a variety of situations and questions, simply reflecting daily life's activities. As a teacher, I must be open for these conversations and encourage my students to share their thoughts, so together we can exercise our philosophical abilities.

Unplanned conversations

For example, in a grade seven class, my students decided to have a snake as a class pet. They loved holding the snake. This was fine, but they sometimes did not respect the snake's needs. Consequently, we started a discussion around the following questions: Does the snake exist for your pleasure only? Their reactions and answers brought us to the next question: Do you exist for the pleasure of someone? They actively engaged in the discussion, deeply thinking, for example, about their relationship with their parents. They all agreed that they existed for no one's pleasure, and as such needed to be respected. They then agreed that they owed the same kind of respect to the snake. This discussion deeply affected their behaviour, as they looked at the snake with a new perspective, and started respecting its space and needs. This is an example of philosophy in practice, since my students' thinking affects their behaviour, transforming them in the process into better human beings.

Another possibility of conversation could be around something that happened to a student, such as an incident with a friend. We might then discuss how do we define friendship, the different degrees of friendships and, what are the qualities of a good friend. This conversation is relevant for any student, but especially for teenagers whose sense of identity and belonging is strongly connected to their relationships with their peers.

Another topic, which regularly comes up in discussions, is homosexuality. Here are a few of the questions that are regularly addressed in my classroom: How do we define homosexuality? Considering Ancient Greeks' different perception of homosexual behaviours, what does it say on our current perceptions? What are the prejudices faced by homosexuals in our society, and why? These conversations are extremely important in any high school where homosexual teenagers feel excluded, and sometimes so desperate that they commit suicide. If we also consider the high proportions of assaults committed against the gay community, these conversations are especially relevant.³⁵ I remember a grade seven boy who, in the middle of a conversation, flatly said he was homophobic. He explained his feelings and connected his views to his father's homophobia. He was not apologetic, just matter of fact. I really appreciated his willingness to speak his mind, as well as the fact that he trusted that he would be respected when voicing his opinion. I decided then to tell my students that I was homosexual. After the initial look of surprise, I asked them to tell me if their opinions and feelings about me had changed. Their reactions were varied, going from stunned to disbelief, but we finally had a constructive conversation about the essence of a person.

³⁵ *Gay-bashing season is well underway* by Daphne Bramham: In downtown Vancouver, between 2001 and 2002, out of 128 assaults, 62% were based on sexual orientation (Vancouver Sun, July 25, 2003)

They came to the realization that liking or disliking someone had nothing to do with their sexual orientation. At this point, a kid asked me if I was really a homosexual, a question I had told them I would only answer at the end of our conversation. I had to admit I was not. I still believe that this conversation was a powerful way for my students to explore their feelings around this issue. It opened windows in their heart and mind, on a subject that is, for many of them, confusing. I believe that open conversations about controversial subjects give my students the opportunity to think and choose for themselves, while becoming more aware of their own biases.

All these conversations are connected to my students' daily lives, and are therefore relevant and meaningful. Students have a lot to say and share. I never know what is going to be said or what is going to spark their interest. I just give them the space to express themselves in a safe and respectful environment. These conversations are not planned. They naturally emerge from what we are doing, seeing, and talking about. As a teacher, I just need to stay open to the flow of the conversation. Other conversations, I planned as part of the curriculum content I need to teach.

Unearthing philosophical questions in the curriculum

Another way to use a philosophical approach in the classroom is to focus on questions of relevance based on the prescribed curriculum. In my French classes, for example, we talk about the meaning of “to have” and “to be” when studying their grammatical importance in both French and English. Our conversations have led us to discuss how our needs “to have” and “to be” control of our lives. Consequently, my students better understand how to use these verbs when writing. Furthermore they continue to use these concepts in their conversations and assignments, consistently

showing me that they are still thinking about the inherent meaning of these two verbs. Approaching grammar from a philosophical angle helps them thinking differently about words and questioning why we use some words more often than others. It also lead them to recognize the impact of these words on their lives and become aware of the different choices they can make when deciding to be or to have, directly connecting them with the philosophical goals of self-knowledge, thinking for themselves, and making ethical decisions.

The Social Studies curriculum also offers many opportunities to bring philosophical questions into the classroom. We, for example, extensively discuss the concept of physical human beauty as it relates to the Renaissance ideals. Examining paintings helps my students understand that our perception of beauty is relative to time and space. This topic challenges their assumptions about what they believe to be beautiful. They usually very rapidly connect this topic to today's obsession with the perfect body and the variety of eating disorders suffered by many teenagers. Thinking about the concept of beauty is relevant to my students' life, because their sense of beauty, mostly dictated by fashion magazines and TV shows, does not always reflect their reality, causing many of them to live with negative self-image. This topic helps them question the beautiful image on the cave's wall while giving them an opportunity to articulate their frustrations and thoughts.

While teaching Social Studies, I believe, like Arne Naess (2002), that you can learn properly only what engages your feelings. The emotions we feel put us in touch with ourselves and others, creating a connection that lead us to moral questions. I want my students to feel first, so I can bring them to think in a caring way. This is why I find

extremely important in my teaching practice to first approach intellectual issues from an emotional perspective. I teach aspects of the French Revolution with a historical movie called *The French Revolution*. I do not show them the film in its totality, but choose key parts to help them understand this historical period. I also choose parts that will help them emotionally connect with the people of this time and place. For example, I show them the walk of Parisian women toward Versailles. I want them to see the essential role played by women during these tumultuous times, and feel these women's hunger, despair, and determination. I show them when Marie Antoinette's five-year-old son is taken away from her and put in a cell to die. I want them to imagine how she felt as a mother, not as a queen. I want them to imagine how this little boy felt when he was suddenly left alone in a dirty cell. Through this process, my students start understanding that human beings are essentially emotional beings. They can put a meaningful story behind a name that otherwise would have remained anonymous. In some ways it breaks the indifference for the past by emotionally connecting them with their lives. These are not just names in a textbook but people who felt joy and pain. Behind the veil of past customs and dresses, they are like us, we are like them. They needed and wanted the same thing: a good life. This experience connects my students with people in the past, present, and future. Through this process they feel compassion and understanding for strangers.

When my curriculum's subject is Canada in the nineteenth century, I focus on the new immigrants' daily life. I especially focus again on women, and their struggles to survive in a foreign, strange, and harsh environment. This approach helps my students understand that history cannot be reduced to big battles and mythical heroes. It is

however about ordinary people with whom we share the same needs, hopes, and fears. Ideally, they might develop a sense of compassion for every one, past and present. I especially want them to come closer to this feeling when I teach the Holocaust, since this part of our history demonstrates to us how destructive we can be when we only use our mind to think and act.

The Holocaust

When I teach the Holocaust, I use a real footage about concentration camps. We discuss how human beings can treat other human beings in such a way, and still do. I really take to heart this open letter addressed to teachers by Haim Ginot, a Holocaust survivor:

I am the survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness: gas chambers built by learned engineers, children poisoned by educated physicians, infants killed by trained nurses and women and babies shot and burnt by high school graduates. So I am suspicious of education. My request is: Help your students to become more human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns. Reading, writing and arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human.³⁶

We therefore discuss the goal of education. How educated people can coldly justify, and organize the systematic killing of millions of people. We talk about the process of dehumanization that we have created over the centuries to justify our actions, with women, slaves, or Jews. When confronted with the recent images of Saddam Hussein on television, being filmed while some educated person was checking his teeth, I asked them to tell me what they thought of this behaviour. Did they agree with such a “medical examination” being shown on television? What kind of justification do we

Taken from Canada and the Holocaust: Social Responsibility and Global Citizenship. Ministry of Education, British Columbia, 2000; a pedagogical resource for educators.

have? Do we choose to agree with a dehumanizing process, or do we choose to reject it as demeaning? They came to the idea that we had choices and that education essentially should bring us to a place where we can make choices. I explained to them that when we are confronted with choices, we are confronted with ethical questions. In what way my choice is going to impact everyone? They therefore realized their power in making ethical decisions, in choosing for themselves what is right or wrong, good or bad, in making decisions whose consequences they could live with.

Discussions around the Second World War led my students to see the complexities of the human soul at its worst and at its best. Since Hitler was democratically elected, it challenges them to question and seriously consider the democratic process. The Holocaust challenges their belief about humankind's basic "goodness," and leads them to question what kind of persons they would have been if they had lived during this time. Would they have chosen to be passive? See nothing, hear nothing, and say nothing? Would they have decided to be active? And if so, in what way? Martin Niemoller's poem asks us these very questions:

*They came for the Communists, and I
Didn't object-for I wasn't
A Communist;
They came for the Socialists, and I
Didn't object-for I wasn't a Socialist;
They came for the labor leaders, and
Didn't object-for I wasn't a labor leader;
They came for the Jews, and I
Didn't object-for I wasn't a Jew;
Then they came for me-
And there was no one left to object.
Martin Niemoller, 1892-1984³⁷*

³⁷ Ibid, but 1990.

I encourage them to try to imagine how they would have acted, if they were living in these dreadful times. How would they have dealt with their fear? If they take for granted the respect for life, how would they have acted toward a Jew? A Nazi? What decisions would they have made if they needed to protect their family? These questions and their answers are at the root of what makes us human. Our beliefs about what define us as human are put to the test in such tragic and horrific circumstances.

Studying the organization and role of government in Canada is also part of the curriculum. I therefore easily can branch out in discussing the meaning of the word democracy. Through our study of history, they develop an understanding how rights are fought for but also taken away. Hopefully, they develop a deeper understanding of their essential individual role in maintaining and improving our democratic society. Hence, they are this society, and “the sole warrant for the existence and endurance of democratic institutions” (Dewey, 1981, p. 92).

Examples of students’ work

The following samples of my students’ work were written after numerous conversations happening all year long on a variety of topics. This past year, my Grade eleven students did a research and presentation on the lives of Jewish orphans who survived the Holocaust and finally immigrated to Canada. After completing this assignment, I asked them to reflect on what they had learned by doing this work. One of my students wrote the following paragraph:

I find it almost impossible to imagine how Bill Gluck’ s life was. He only was a child, forced to endure one of the most horrible time in history. Bill Gluck was a very courageous man, like the other five people we discussed. But I think that it is important that I recognize the courage of every one

who has suffered because of the Holocaust. Not only the Jews, but also every one who was affected. Often we think that the poor people who lost their life during the Holocaust were weak, but this is not the truth. Every one who was affected by this tragedy was very brave and strong. Those who survived were very lucky, this is a miracle, but for me it is more than that. I think that the people involved in the Second World War, and the Holocaust in particular, were the strongest and most determined people in history. I think that it is also important to notice that even after the war and the Holocaust, life did not come back to normal. The effects of war were evident on Bill Gluck. After surviving so much violence, he himself became violent for a while. In most cases, it took many years for these people to get better: financially, physically, and emotionally. But they persevered and finally life came back to normal, or as close as possible. There are many lessons in the Holocaust. For me, the most important lesson is about human nature. On one hand, we can see that people are able to commit terrible crimes. But we can also see that we are able to find in ourselves unimaginable resources. If we reflect on these two sides, we might be able to see that the most important thing to remember is to always keep the sense of our humanity (Lionel).³⁸

I was impressed how this sixteen-year old boy articulated his thoughts, and how he expressed his thinking and feelings. He really tried to make sense for himself of something that was challenging his sense of being human, and found a way of both recognizing our potential for good and bad, while giving himself a sense of hope. This kind of work is what encourages me to continue to engage my students in philosophical questioning. It shows me that my students are learning and caring at the same time, developing their sense of self while learning to care for others

During another class, I invited a Holocaust survivor, Peter Parker, to come to talk to my students. During the presentation, he had the students' full attention. They were captivated and some were moved to tears by his story. Here is an example of another's student reflection, following this meeting with Peter Parker:

³⁸ Since I teach in French Immersion, I had to translate this paragraph, as well as all the other quotes I am using, from French into English. I tried as much as I could to respect the tone and style of each student.

There were moments on Monday during which I was embarrassed to be born during this time. The situations that Peter Parker has survived are tragedies in the history of the world. His will to survive inspired me a lot. His experience in concentration camps gave him the sense of what it meant to die physically, but never spiritually. Fortunately, he was lucky, with the kitchen job, and the choices he made. It was a great opportunity for the all class to see the truth of the Holocaust (Dominic).

Here again, is another example of learning to think and care. This student felt compelled by Peter Parker' story because by listening to him, he reflected on his own life, his own challenges to come, and how he would be able to face them. For him the strength of spirituality was reassuring.

Other questions related to ethics

I was especially pleased that most of my students integrated the word ethical in their vocabulary, using it in their research projects and oral presentations, as well as in our discussions. At the end of the school year, one of their assignments was to research a topic related to human beings' impact on our natural environment. Here are three examples of their thinking which include an ethical dimension.

Some students decided to research the domain of genetically modified foods and genetic manipulations on animals. A group discovered how some spiders' genetic elements were used in goats. They were shocked by their findings. I asked them why it was especially shocking. What dimension was missing in this scientific research? They all spontaneously said that it was not morally acceptable. The ethical dimension was missing in the scientists' work, but it was not absent in these students' thinking.

Another group did a research on the use of water. Here again, they were stunned by their discoveries. They were especially disgusted by the fact that we wasted so much

water, while poor people in some countries did not have access to water. The immoral aspect of this situation was clear for these students as well.

Lastly, a group did a research on vivisection. Here is the conclusion of their research:

Animals can feel not only pain, but also hope, love, sadness, fear, and grief. If animals feel the same emotions as us, is it fair to use them? We do not believe that there is a difference between doing experiments on animals and doing experiments on human beings, because we are animals ourselves, we just have more developed brains. That makes us think about this proverb: "Judge a man not by how he treats his equals, but by how he treats his inferiors." If it is true, that we are superior to animals, what do vivisection and the way we generally treat animals say about us? This is bizarre, because even if we are the only "intelligent" mammals, we do many stupid things, as history shows us. We cannot even treat human beings humanly! All the wars and massacres show that. During the Holocaust, even scientific experiments were done on Jewish people! Vivisection is only one example of our cruelty and human immorality (Carol and Laura).

I was also impressed with this conclusion because it showed a clear concern about human beings' behaviours, and raised pertinent and important questions about our humanity. Their argument was well articulated and supported, and they thought critically about concepts such as intelligence and human superiority. These two students are thinking philosophically. Like many other students, they proved to be natural philosophers. Another situation led me again to the same conclusion. During the spring 2004, the Dalai Lama came to Vancouver. He attended a round table with Desmond Tutu, Zalan Schachter Shalomi, Shirin Ebadin, and Joan Archibald. I taped this meeting on TV, and showed it to my students the next day.

Round table with the Dalai Lama

The topic of the dialogue was heart and mind. I was curious to see and hear their reactions to the comments of these eminent people from diverse cultures and religious creeds. At first, showing this video to high school students might seem unrelated to what we were supposed to do in Social Studies and French classes. Considering what we had studied and discussed in my Social Studies classes, it was absolutely connected. One of our questions after studying the Second World War was to try to make sense of human kind. Why did so many horrific events happen on every continent? How can we explain such things? How can we prevent it from happening again? The Round table addressed such questions, and my students were quick to notice the answers given, as the following samples of their work will demonstrate. In my French classes, despite the fact that the video was in English, all our conversations were in French. The content was also related to different topics we had discussed in class over the year, such as our belief systems and Buddhism. As usual, after our conversations around the film, I asked them to reflect on what they had learned. Most of them appreciated the simplicity and the sense of humor of these people. One student made the insightful comment that it was like a jam session - they all came with different backgrounds and were able to speak with each other and shared their ideas in harmony. Most of them liked Desmond Tutu, especially when he said that God was not Christian and that God might be a woman. Here are some examples of their reflections:

What interested me is that Desmond Tutu is Christian, but he said that God is not Christian. I think he is trying to show us that God can be represented by what we want it to be, even if we are not religious like me. I appreciate that he said that, because it shows that he is open to other possibilities. He is Christian but he knows that his beliefs are not every one's beliefs, and also that they might be wrong. (Natalie)

Desmond Tutu really shocked me. He was really calm and relaxed. It was a shock when he said that God is not Christian, and then when he said “she” referring to God. It was a surprise to hear she for God, but he was right, since nobody knows what is God’s gender, and God might be a woman, we don’t know.... All these people talked well and made us think (Julie).

The idea that stayed with me is what Desmond Tutu said. “God is not Christian.” In this age, where religious fundamentalism can cause wars and suffering, these words said by a man with some spiritual power gave me hope (Sylvia).

I liked when Desmond Tutu said that God is not Christian. Christians say that Jesus and God don’t like homosexuals, but if there is really a God, he likes every one. He also said that it is possible that God is a woman, not a man. I like also the idea that we need to stop feeling pity for ourselves, and that we need to do something about our problems. The idea really interests me and makes me think outside the box. I think that these ideas can improve the world (Katia).

Another topic that touched them is the idea that we do not spend enough time educating our heart, and that we are too focused on our mind. A student commented that the last time she felt that her heart was addressed at school was when she was in Kindergarten. They all agreed with the different comments made. Here are a few reflections:

I think that every discourse presented by each person was very important. They have open doors that I did not know existed. The ideas discussed showed me and led me to think about our situation, in our society, and in our bodies. I found interesting what they said about our heart and brains, and how they can or cannot be connected. Desmond Tutu remarked that when something comes from the heart, it is better than anything. They also proposed the idea that our society was completely directed toward our brain, and that we do not have the opportunity to know our heart, and to be one with it. I completely agreed, but I wondered how we could change an attitude that was part of us for many years. The answer came from the Dalai Lama. He said firstly we need to change ourselves, before we can change the world.... Myself I cannot change the world, but I can make small changes in my heart, and I will succeed. It is difficult to express but after seeing these people talking about topics so strange to me, I was really interested (Helen).

What interested me the most was Shirin Ebadin's idea. The idea that in a healthy society every one has the same rights as anybody else's, the only difference is our responsibility. A prime minister has more responsibilities but he has the same rights as anyone else.... I think I learned a lot about life and religion while watching the Round Table. It is an unbelievable experience when we talk/learn about our hearts, and not our heads (Alice).

Here another extremely well articulated reflection that summarizes most of my students' thoughts:

I also liked when the Dalai Lama said to change the world, we need to change ourselves first. I agree with this idea, and also with the idea that only our actions can change our society. Our thoughts influence our actions, but our thoughts alone will change nothing. When Shirin Ebadin spoke, I learned about citizens' rights and responsibilities in society. I would like it if every one in our society thought like these three persons (Nicole).

Two students connected with the idea that we need to have perspective before taking action. Here are their comments:

I liked the idea of looking at the big picture, of taking a step back and thinking of others' reality that the Dalai Lama put forth. If more people could realize that there are factors fuelling peoples' actions that we simply cannot see, I believe we could be a kinder, more understanding society. I also found it remarkable that individuals with such diverse backgrounds and beliefs could have such similar ideas and have such tolerance and acceptance for one another, especially as so much of the world is at war for few reasons other than intolerance and ignorance (Samantha).

I like what the Dalai Lama said about not just focusing our anger at a person, but looking at the bigger picture and why the person is that way, and what their reality is. Sometimes it's hard to put yourself in someone's else shoes when you are angry at them, but it's an important thing to learn how to do, and to continually practice doing (Melanie).

This last comment reflects the attitude of the philosopher, who practices his/her philosophy as a way of life. These students are on their way. Another topic that touched my students was the idea of forgiveness. Desmond Tutu was asked how he thinks

violence might be stopped. He answered by telling a story that happened to him after the apartheid regime fell. He was in a village where many people had been murdered in a massacre. The officer and soldiers who were responsible for the massacre were attending a public inquiry. Every one was so angry that the anger could be felt in the air. The officer first said he was responsible for giving the order to kill. The anger became stronger. Then, he said that he knew he had done something wrong; he apologized, and asked for the villagers' forgiveness. The anger dissipated, and gave room to forgiveness. My students were especially touched by this story because it was giving them hope. Here is one comment related to this story:

I like what Desmond Tutu said about forgiveness, while it does not mean to forget. In all the things in our life, we must take what is positive, as a lesson about ourselves. After hearing this, I have started to apply it to my life (Stephanie).

This student was transformed by Desmond Tutu's testimony, wanting to practice something that she thinks will make her life better. I believe that Desmond Tutu's story was powerful because he was part of this story, and was able to convey its full meaning with his heart and mind. Camus once said, "for a thought to change the world, it must first change the life of the person who carries it. It must become an example" (1962, p. 162). I believe that Desmond Tutu carried in him the idea and experience of forgiveness, and therefore was able to be an inspiring model for my students. They are well aware of the negative forces at work in our world, and this message gives them not only hope, but also a way of acting to change this world, a way of practicing philosophy. I will conclude with one last comment, which shows once again thoughtfulness and awareness:

I really really enjoyed the Round Table discussion, because it was inspiring. A lot of “important people discuss big ideas and debate about “important” things but the people involved in this discussion are extremely important figures in the world, and I expected them to speak of “big” ideas about politics and what not! Instead, they spoke of the heart, which seems so much more insignificant compared to politics in our society. But what I learned was that the heart is bigger and more important than what we value, and it is the foundation of everything along with mind. I found the people to be extremely humble and kind, and they were not proud as I expected them to be. They weren’t above anyone. Their mentality differs from some of our world leaders but I am beginning to agree with their mentality. They have made me realize that we are all equal, no matter what. We can’t boast that we are better than anyone else. One of the most important things I learned was that sometimes not even the most “important” people have answers. The rabbi, when asked a question about the education of the heart in our school system, asked the student what she thought the answer was. He didn’t answer the question, but seemed to convey that the answers to our own questions can be found within us (Laura).

I could not have put it any better than this student. All of my students enjoyed listening to the participants in the Round Table. Some of them thanked me for showing it to them. Others said how much they liked it because he made them think about things in a different light. One of them simply said: I like to think. Personally, I felt fulfilled as a teacher, since I was able to share important ideas with them, ideas that they all enjoyed talking about. No one was bored. They were all interested and engaged. It was a wonderful experience for all of us.

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated with these insightful reflections, young people do philosophize. They think and question the world they inhabit. They are also looking for possible ways to lead a more meaningful life and have a positive impact. They want to be better human beings and make ethical choices. Our classrooms are a space where we can welcome their questions and inquire with them. We do not need to think that the

prescribed curriculum is limiting us. We can reframe it to make it a living curriculum and engage our students in meaningful dialogues. It is a market where we need to take our time finding the best fruits, and share them with our students.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

To be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers that cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

My personal path with philosophy has led me to constantly question everything I do and think. My questions, answers, and actions have been woven together into the tissue of my being, making me who I am and who I am becoming. Despite my impatient nature, I have learned “to love the questions,” and I am still hoping “to live into” some answers. I keep questioning my thoughts and actions toward my son and students. I keep reading and writing, trying to clarify my thoughts while wondering what kind of impact I have on them, if any. I keep exploring different avenues aiming to understand who I am as a mother and teacher and, like anybody else, who I am as a human being among other human beings. This constant questioning has led to a path of never-ending self-transformations. Ironically, these constant changes and shifts, give me a sense of solidity and purpose. My sense of balance in uncertainty is my life’s paradox. It is also who I am and what I believe I bring to others, especially my son and my students.

Thus, philosophy as pedagogy is not a pre-packaged formula I can use to solve whatever ailment I think schools are suffering from. There is no recipe book or prescribed outcomes. It is a pedagogy based on being and becoming. It is a space in which students are invited to share their thoughts, emotions, and spirits. It is a pedagogy

where teachers and students are simple human beings, trying to be the best persons they can be, plainly aware of their failings, while hoping for more and more successes.

Living dialogues are fundamental to this approach to learning and teaching. They give life to what is basically a human quest to understand who we are in this world. Dialogues connect students with who they are and who they are becoming, allowing them to find some solid ground among uncertainties. As active participants, they learn to identify the questions that are important and relevant to them. My role, as a teacher, is to patiently bring them to enjoy the question more than the answer, to live “into” the question, and to make it “their question.” When dialoguing with each other, they develop a better understanding for each other. They rub their differences against one another, and enrich each other with new possibilities and meanings, developing what Mary Catherine Bateson (1994) calls “a peripheral vision.” This process helps them make some sense of a world, which is, for the most part, chaotic and apparently senseless. This pedagogy has the potential to help develop what is essential when practicing philosophy as a way of life: self-care and self-knowledge as well as care and knowledge of others.

I know that sometimes these “in-the-moment dialogues” touch my students’ hearts and minds, and takes them to a place of deep understanding about themselves, others, and the world. When this “magic” happens, I feel energized and satisfied as a teacher; I feel in harmony with the world, in other words I find inner-peace. Ideally, I wish that my students find their own paths toward inner-peace, while never ceasing to question:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*
T. S. Elliot (1952, p. 145)

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