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Teaching Philosophy to the Gifted Young

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Abstract

This paper begins by raising the question of whether we should introduce philosophy to the gifted young. Having sketched some of the problems associated with such an introduction, the paper proposes some procedures to make such an introduction possible with as little pain as possible and makes some concrete suggestions to enhance the experience of the philosophical neophyte.

Mort was one of those people who are more dangerous than a bag full of rattlesnakes. He was determined to discover the underlying logic behind the universe. Which was going to be hard, because there wasn't one. The Creator had a lot of remarkably good ideas when he put the world together, but making it understandable hadn't been one of them. [Pratchett, 1987, p. 12]

Should we introduce philosophy to the young?

When I was 16 years old my way to school took me alongside and over our local river. As a typical teenager, I wasn't ever in much of a hurry to get to school and often dawdled on the way. One day I stopped to look at boat moored on the river. I admired the way the river current flowed around the boat, carrying it out into middle of the stream. I watched the reflection of the boat ripple and shimmer in the flow. After some time, I moved on to the bridge. Once again I stopped to look at the boat and again I contemplated the swirling current, the tautening and loosening of the painter and the boat's rippling reflection. Of course, this was now a different reflection from the one I first noticed. Then it came to me—where is the reflection that I first saw? I could still see the boat, albeit from a different angle, but the initial reflection was no longer available to me. Was it somehow still there but unseeable from my present position? If so, was there not a host of presently unseeable reflections all somehow there ready to be seen but nonetheless actually unseeable from where I now stood? I was gripped with excitement as I thought about this conundrum and consequently was even later for school than usual.

This experience, not particularly profound and certainly not unique in the annals of human history, was nonetheless significant for me. I investigated the libraries and books to see if any other person had either had such experiences and more or less immediately I discovered that a subject, hitherto unknown to me, existed called philosophy and in short order, I read Bertrand Russell's *Why I am not a Christian*, and his *A History of Philosophy*, Descartes' *Meditations*, Locke's *An Essay on Human Understanding* (both volumes from cover to cover—not a good idea but I can only plead in extenuation that I thought that that was what one was supposed to do), Plato's *Republic*, Spinoza's *Ethics* and so on..

The effect of my newly acquired interest in philosophy upon my regular school work was disastrous. Compared to philosophy, chemistry, physics, French, and the like seemed trivial and boring. I came to regard attendance at school as a form of involuntary incarceration and I scraped through my final examinations and escaped from school with no intention ever of returning to the tedium of formal education: one of life's ironies, therefore, that I should end up as a professor!

For reasons not entirely dissimilar to my experience though not exactly the same, some eminent philosophers have had their doubts about the wisdom of introducing philosophy to the young. Plato believed that the young tend to regard philosophy as a sort of game, writing that "...when youths get their first taste of reasoned discourse they take it as a game and always use it to contradict. They imitate those who cross-examined them and themselves cross-examine others, rejoicing like puppies to drag along and tear to bits in argument whoever is near them." (*Republic*, VII, 539 b) Furthermore, the introduction of philosophy to the young can lead them into sceptical ways. "And when they have themselves cross-examined many people and been cross-examined by many, they fall vehemently and quickly into disbelieving what they believed before. As a result, they themselves and the whole of philosophy are discredited in the eyes of other men." (*Republic*, VII, 539 c) The old, in contrast, "would not want to take part in such folly" but would "converse in order to discover the truth rather than...merely playing and contradicting for play" (*Republic*, VII, 539 c)

In a similar vein, Aristotle expressed his doubts about the wisdom of teaching philosophy to the young. For Aristotle, the good is that at which all things aim (Aristotle, 1962, I, 1) and politics (the science of how to live together in community) is the master science of the good (Aristotle, 1962, I, 2). According to Aristotle, since "Each man can judge competently the things he knows, and of these he is a good judge. According, a good judge in each particular field is one who has been trained in it, and a good judge in general, a man who has received an all-round schooling. For that reason, a young man is not equipped to be a student of politics; for he has no experience in the actions which life demands of him, and these actions form the basis and subject matter of the discussion. Moreover, since he follows his emotions, his

study will be pointless and unprofitable, for the end of this kind of study is not knowledge but action. Whether he is young in years or immature in character makes no difference; for his deficiency is not a matter of time but of living and of pursuing all his interests under the influence of his emotions.” (Aristotle, 1962 I, 3, 1094b29-1095a10) While the possession of mature years is clearly not a sufficient condition for the kind of maturity Aristotle has in mind it is not at all evident that he would have thought that young people could be, as it were, wise beyond their years.

The basic fact which gives rise to Plato’s and Aristotle’s misgivings is that the data of philosophy are our lived experiences and that youth lacks the necessary depth of experience on which to reflect philosophically. There is therefore a danger that philosophy will become for them simply a kind of conceptual geometry, an intellectual game that fails to connect with real life. This danger is especially significant for the intellectually gifted for they tend to be those who possess a conceptual precocity in advance of their years and a verbal dexterity beyond the normal. Being clever with words, the gifted young (and old) are especially prone to the danger of not realising the difference between words and things and confusing the one with the other. It’s not that they don’t know this non-identity, just that they don’t realise this—that is, make it real and keep it permanently in mind. (see Weinberg 1959 and Korzybski 1948)

If you do introduce philosophy to the young, prepare the ground.

If, despite the warnings of the greatest philosophers who have ever lived, you do decide to introduce philosophy to the young, it might be useful to arrange a demonstration to show (i) that we know a lot less than we think we know; (ii) that much of our pseudo-knowledge results from our inability to distinguish between facts and inferences; (iii) that there are things that are inherently unknowable and questions (not obviously nonsensical ones) that have no determinate answers and (iv) that there are inherent limitations on knowledge deriving both from the way things are in the world and the way things are with us.

(i) We know less than we think we know

Begin by trying the following little quiz on yourself and your gifted students and see how you get on.

Quiz

1. How many wise men were there?
2. What's the most dangerous animal that has ever lived?
3. How do marmots kill people?
4. Who invented the concentration camp?
5. What man-made artefacts on Earth can be seen from the moon?
6. How do lemmings die?
7. How many political prisoners were freed by the storming of the Bastille? 700, 70, or 7?
8. Billy the Kid was born (a) William Bonney; (b) Kid Antrim; (c) Henry McCarty or (d) Brushy Bill Roberts.
9. Billy was born in (a) New York; (b) New Mexico; (c) New Jersey or (d) Kansas?
10. True or false: before Columbus's voyage, it was generally believed that the earth was flat.

Now, check your answers at the end of the paper. How did you get on? I'd be astonished if you or your students answered all the questions correctly even if my putting these questions to you in the way that I did made you suspect that the obvious answers were not correct. Most of the material in *The Book of General Ignorance* (Lloyd and Mitchinson, 2006), from which these examples are taken, belongs to the category of "things we all know that just ain't so". An astonishing amount of information in our heads belongs in this category. Much of what we know or rather what we think we know is second-hand, uncertain and personally experientially ungrounded. Of course we couldn't live long enough to acquire by personal experience all that we need to know to get on in life and there is nothing intrinsically intellectually unhygienic about accepting second-hand information. The problem arises when we forget the unreliability of these data and treat them as the utterances of sacred writ.

(ii) Facts and inferences

It is important to distinguish as clearly as possible between fact and inference. On one definition, a factual claim is one made after observation and in accordance with

accepted standards. Claims not based on observation or not made in accordance with accepted standards are *inferences* which may be reasonable or which may be wildly speculative but which, wild or reasonable, are not facts. It follows from this that all predictions are inferences and so is much, if not most, of our knowledge of the past. Most people are unlikely to take issue with the inferential nature of predictions but are likely to balk at the notion that historical knowledge is largely inferential. Much of what we read in the history books is guesswork (sometimes good, sometimes not so good), reconstructions based on hearsay, and even in the best histories, a narrative framed by a particular human being at a particular time, the whole enlivened by that writer's cultural prejudices, biases and interests. Once the initial intellectual vertigo is overcome, the realisation that history is largely inferential should have a remarkably liberating and stimulating effect on the young and gifted student. No longer is history a mass of data to be memorised and regurgitated. Instead, it becomes "a detective story to be unravelled." (Weinberg, p. 25; see also Korzybski, 1948 *passim*.) Similarly, most of science—almost all theoretical physics, a lot of chemistry, some biology, pretty much all of cosmology—is inferential. Again, the consequence of realising this should be liberation of the spirit of inquiry.

(iii) The intrinsically unanswerable question

Some not obviously nonsensical questions are unanswerable. What is the circumference of Great Britain? If you don't know the answer to this question, and I should be surprised if you did, your instinctive response is probably to reach for Google or, if you're from an older generation, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Google, although presenting 216,000 pp on this topic, is somewhat coy about answering it directly. Whatever the difficulty about finding the answer, it seems obvious that this is the kind of question to which there is an answer, unlike, let us say, "What is sound of blue?" But appearances are deceptive. This question has no answer—or, at least, no single absolutely right answer. The answer you get depends upon the measuring device you use, the object you measure and, to some extent, the purposes of your enquiry. Let's take the measuring instrument. Are you going to use a tape measure, a metre stick, a laser? What is its margin of error? No matter what measuring device is used, it always operates within specified tolerances and therefore has a built-in element of inaccuracy.

Leaving aside the not-inconsiderable problems with your tools of measurement, there is the additional problem of figuring out just what it is you are actually measuring? Do you measure every rock face, or every grain of sand, or do you make approximations? And just in case you hadn't enough problems there is the not insignificant fact the entity being measured is constantly changing. The coastline of Great Britain is in constant flux, ephemerally as the tide ebbs and flows (so which is the 'real' coastline—when the tide is in, when it is out or when it is somewhere in between?) and somewhat more permanently as the sea advances and recedes and coastlines crumble or new land forms. What, then, is the circumference of Great Britain? Absolutely speaking, there is no answer to this question; for practical purposes, take your pick.

(iv) Inherent limitations on knowledge

Philosophers have known for a long time that whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver. We tend to assume that the world in itself is pretty much what we see, hear touch, taste and smell but it is easy enough to show that this cannot simply be so.

Take the example of the rainbow which Barfield uses to open his book *Saving the Appearances*. (Barfield, 1988) It's a sunny day, there's been a quick shower of rain, you look up and there, arcing across the sky, is a spectacular rainbow. No problem there except, of course, that there is no rainbow arcing across the sky. A rainbow is constituted by a set of more or less objective conditions (the sunlight, the raindrops) and the presence of an observer with the appropriate visual apparatus appropriately placed in respect to the sunlight and raindrops. Absent any of these conditions, including the observer, and you have no rainbow. The hackneyed conundrum, beloved of generations of students— "If a tree falls in the forest when there's no one about, does it make a noise?"—is easily soluble. Only if an entity with a suitably disposed aural apparatus is within range of the waves produced by the falling tree do we have actual sound. Otherwise, only the objective conditions for sound are present. In general, without organisms possessing the appropriate sensory structures, the world is colourless, odourless and silent.

Well, we might think, rainbows and lonely falling trees are one thing; but for the most part, surely our eyes see what is there and our ears hear what is there? Well, yes and no. Our eyes are sensitive to a specific range of radiant energy, likewise our ears. Above and below these ranges we see and hear nothing yet there is just as much to be seen and heard in these ranges as in the ranges naturally available to us.

In addition to the intrinsically limiting factors on perception deriving from the nature of our sensory apparatus, there are specific modifying factors that depend upon the needs, desires and interests of the sensing animal, its state of health, its expectations, and so on. “What one will abstract—perceive—at any given moment depends on many factors. Some of them are: (1) Our position in space; we cannot see all sides of an object at one. (2) The structure of the perceiving organ. (3) the psychophysiological condition of the organ and the entire organism in which it is functioning. Fatigue, disease, accommodation, and adaptation change responses to stimuli. Motivation is very important; we tend to see, hear, taste, what we want and expect, with past experience, language patterns and emotional factors playing a large part in what is finally abstracted.” (Weinberg, p. 51) The world of our sensory experience, then, is a construct to which a variety of factors contribute. And this is not even to consider the specifically human factors of language and culture which make their own unique contribution to the construction of our worlds. (See Barfield on ‘collective representations’ and ‘figuration’; Barfield, 1988, pp. 19-21; 22-27)

The point of showing that we know less than we think we know, that facts and inferences are not the same, that some questions are intrinsically unanswerable and that there are inherent limitations on knowledge is not to turn our gifted young people into hyperbolic sceptics but to induce them to accept the necessity for a moderate sceptical methodology. If philosophy is to be taught to the young then it should be done in such a way as to avoid the inculcation of a general scepticism (which is what Plato was concerned about) while imparting habits of intellectual hygiene, intellectual coolness, critical distance, and a moderate and operative scepticism.

Education

Now that we have got some preliminaries out of the way, let’s reflect on education. So, what *is* education? Well, one thing it isn’t is schooling which is, at best, a means

of providing some aspects of education to some people some of the time in a particular manner. Schooling is not equivalent to education; nor is education equivalent to schooling: one can be educated without being schooled and schooled without being educated. Most education, even in environments where schooling is predominant, occurs outside or alongside the formal teaching environments.

Education is the process by which our basic capacities (both intellectual and moral) are more-or-less permanently modified. These modified capacities (sometimes called somewhat misleadingly, habits (*hexeis*)) constitute a kind of moral or intellectual capital. They enable us to know and to do easily and accurately what would otherwise be known or done intermittently and with difficulty. Their acquisition, like all capital acquisition, is achieved by restriction, by saving, by from abstention from the immediate gratification of natural pleasures. Learning is intellectual capital, and education is the process by which such capital is formed.

The difference between schooling (as a specific form of educational environment) and the educational dimension of the broader environment is particularly pertinent to the difference between the intellect and the will. Schools as such should not be charged with the direct moral formation of their students, either via traditional religious instruction or via various ersatz programs of quasi-moral formation—e.g. relationships education, education for life, etc. etc. (see Casey, 1996, *passim*) As Jacques Maritain put it: “...the main duty in the educational spheres of the school...is not to shape the will and directly to develop moral virtues in the youth, but to enlighten and strengthen reason...” (Maritain, p. 27)

There is a permanent and perhaps ultimately irresolvable tension in education. On the one hand, education requires the transmission from one generation to the next of the scholarship and learning already acquired. On the other hand, this acquisition is not and cannot simply be a matter of pouring water into a bucket. In his *Analects*, Confucius said: “He who learns but does not think is lost; he who thinks but does not learn is in danger.” (*Analects*, 2:15) and “A man who reviews the old so as to find out the new is qualified to teach others.” (*Analects*, 2:11) To absorb and regurgitate what has been handed on to one, without personally appropriating it, is a guarantee of stagnation—personal, social and religious. Even more dangerous, however, is the

belief that all that has gone before is simply worthless and that a clean start must be made. Whatever the dangers of such an attitude might be in the world of ideas—and they are considerable—we saw in the 20th century how destructive such an attitude can be in the real world. Think of the Cultural Revolution in China and the social re-engineering attempts of Pol Pot in Cambodia.

Given that both learning and thinking are essential to education, where should one start? My own view is that when dealing with gifted students, it is better to start with the thinking and follow that up with the learning. (For the purposes of this discussion I shall take the concept of ‘giftedness’ to be unproblematic. A gifted student is one who has a significantly higher than average set of intellectual capacities, however those may be measured, whether quasi-objectively in terms of IQ scores (say 130+), or qualitatively in terms of speed and range of learning ability.)

Specifically, one could employ a problem-based approach and, when the interest of the students has been engaged, move on to a consideration of a text-based approach. Let me be clear: what I am *not* recommending is that students begin their study of philosophy by reading the fragments of the Pre-Socratics, followed by Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Epicureans, Medievals, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Hegel, and so on. There may be students who would respond well to such a systematic approach. My guess is that most other students will have died of boredom long before reaching contemporary philosophy. The most important thing is to engage their interest: when that is done, it is time to turn to the sources.

What kinds of problems can engage the students’ interests? Here are some questions, in no particular order, that could be used to start a philosophical conversation. They are meant to be provocative. (A trawl of Amazon and related sites will turn up a plethora of books aimed at introducing philosophy to the young that can suggest many other topics and approaches.)

- What is happiness? [see more developed material below]
- Can you be both good and happy?
- Is work something to be avoided as much as possible or a necessary expression of human fulfilment?

- Are friends necessary to the good life?
- How is it that words have meaning?
- Can chimpanzees use language?
- Is it ever legitimate to discriminate between people?
- Is affirmative action a form of discrimination?
- What does equality mean when applied to people?
- What is thinking?
- We are said to have minds. We are said to have livers. Do we have minds and livers in the same way?
- Is the love of money the root of all evil?
- What *is* money?
- Can one become rich only at the expense of others?
- Should we pay our taxes?
- Can business people be honest?
- Is government necessary?
- Is force ever justified?
- Why is it generally accepted that it is in order to kill someone in the course of a war but not for private gain?
- What causes crime?
- What are rights and where do they come from?
- If I have a right, do you have an obligation?
- Do rights imply corresponding responsibilities?
- Do animals have rights?
- What is knowledge? Is there a difference between knowledge and belief?
- Do we have obligations to protect our environment? If so, where do these obligations come from? On whom do these obligations fall?
- Is religion the opiate of the people?
- Can you be good if you are not a religious believer?
- Who, or what, is God?
- Is God made in our image and likeness?
- Isn't atheism a rationally more defensible position than theism?

- Was Henry Ford right when he (allegedly) said that “History is just one damn thing after another”?
- Is law made or discovered? Are laws entirely arbitrary or do they have some natural grounding?
- What is intelligence? Is it measurable?
- Can we live together in society without politics?
- What is so wonderful about democracy? Wouldn't an enlightened dictatorship be as good or better? In what way is a representative democracy representative?
- Is advertising necessarily deceptive?
- I can eat whatever food I want. Why can't I ingest whatever chemical substances I want?
- Should our actions ever be restricted if they cause no harm to others?
- Is the insanity plea just a technical device to allow criminals to escape from the consequences of their actions?
- Is there such a thing as human nature? Is so, what is it and can we come to know it?
- Is evolution a fact or a theory?
- Are Socialism and Communism effectively the same system? Is either viable as a political or social system?
- Is economics a science or a more-or-less useful if fallible source for policy prescriptions?
- Can computers think?
- What is the difference between life and non-life?
- What is art? Is the value of a piece of art the price it can realise at auction? Can we judge one piece of art to be good and valuable and another not to be so?
- What is music? Are all types of musics equally valuable?
- What makes some pieces of writing to be literature?
- In the age of Wikipedia and the Internet, are universities and schools past their sell-by dates?
- What is the likelihood of there being intelligent life elsewhere in the universe? (What is the likelihood of there being intelligent life on earth?)
- Are there some forms of knowledge that are attainable by non-rational means?
- Shouldn't we be free to make and enforce any freely-agreed to contracts

- What is consciousness?
- Does the notion of reincarnation make any sense? Is it any more intrinsically implausible than life-after-death? Is death the end of all possible experience?
- Can you forgive someone who doesn't admit guilt?
- Is it possible to sin in the 21st century?
- Logic is all very well but what does it have to do with reality?
- Is science the E. F. Hutton of the intellectual world (when it talks, people listen)?
- Are utopias dystopian?
- Is suicide ever a rational decision or is it necessarily a manifestation of mental illness?
- We deliberately intervene with our animal populations to produce and retard certain characteristics. Is it time to reconsider the acceptability of human eugenics?

As an exercise, get your students to frame questions around the following subjects: Communications, the Orient, Eastern Philosophy, Banking, Divine Right of Kings, Development, Trade, Revolution, Weapons of Mass Destruction, Sport, Power, Wilderness, Infinity, Terrorism, Energy, Capitalism, Time, Space, Place, Race, Civilisation, Society, Panic. Better still, have them come up with their own topics and questions.

One topic developed: Happiness

Any one of the topics listed above can provide a locus for an extended discussion. Here are some thoughts on how the conversation on one of the above topics, namely happiness, could be developed.

What is happiness? Is it a thing? Is it having things? Is it pleasure? Is it fame? Is it having money? Is it just not being unhappy? Is happiness within our own control or does it depend on circumstances? Do we have to be good to be happy? Can you be happy without money? Without respect? Without goods? Is it possible to be completely and permanently happy?

What are we to do about loss, about destitution, about betrayal, about illness, old age. Above all, what are we to do about death? Is it a case of ‘Eat, drink and be merry—for tomorrow you die’ It used to be said that death and taxes were the two inevitabilities of life. Now, if you’ve got a clever investment analyst and a tax lawyer, you can wriggle out of taxes but nobody has yet solved the problem of death, the last obscenity in contemporary Western society—old age comes a close second.

It has been said that some people are never happy unless they’re miserable! Is this so? Human beings appear to be inherently restless beings, always in search of the missing ingredient, factor x? Can we ever be happy? It appears that we can abide anything but a steady state. Whatever situation we’re in, if it is monotonous and unchanging, eventually becomes unbearable. The reason papers print stories of death and disaster is that they are exciting, different. We crave excitement; we desire to escape from boredom, ennui. Discontent, dissatisfaction is what makes us restless; it is also what drives us to invent, to innovate, and to create.

Our needs, really our wants, tend to proliferate faster than our ability to satisfy them. No sooner have we acquired what we ‘always wanted’ than we become dissatisfied with it and want something else. So, ask yourself if you really want what you think you do. Often, the activity of acquisition is what engages us even more than the possession and enjoyment of what we acquire.

Perhaps it’s better not to ask questions about happiness: “Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so.” (Mill, 1873) Albert Camus is reputed to have claimed that “You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life.” (Camus, 1975) Likewise, Edith Wharton wrote “There’s only one way of being comfortable, and that is to stop running round after happiness. If you make up your mind not to be happy there’s no reason why you shouldn’t have a fairly good time. (Wharton, 2004)

Some think that ultimate happiness is impossible apart from God: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts know no rest until they rest in Thee!” (St Augustine, 1923) A frankly and refreshingly material view is expressed by one of Jane Austen’s characters in *Mansfield Park*, who remarks that “A large income is the

best recipe for happiness I ever heard of. It certainly may secure all the myrtle and turkey part of it.” (Austen, 1987) The middle-of-the-road view is given by the Duc de la Rochefoucauld, who remarks that “one is never as unhappy as one thinks, nor as happy as one hopes.” (Rochefoucauld, 1749). And then there is the Stoic view with its depressing low expectations: “Certainly there is no happiness within this circle of flesh, nor is it in the optics of these eyes to behold felicity; the first day of our Jubilee is death.” (Browne, 1887)

There are those who think that happiness consists essentially not positively in the attainment of pleasure but negatively in the avoidance of pain: “For all the happiness mankind can gain is not in pleasure, but in rest from pain.” (Dryden, 1966) The Buddhist sees desire, attachment, as the root of all misery. To search for happiness is, for a Buddhist, the surest way not to find it. Happiness is, perhaps, the only thing that can only be found by *not* looking for it. “The person who is searching for his own happiness should pull out the dart that he has stuck in himself, the arrow-head of grieving, of desiring, of despair.” (Anon, Pali Tripitaka, v. 592) John Milton expresses the common feeling that happiness is just out of reach, ever unattainable: “But headlong joy is ever on the wing” (Milton, 1929).

Is happiness desirable? Not everyone thinks so. “But a lifetime of happiness! No man alive could bear it: it would be hell on earth.” (Shaw, 1929) The snobbish view is taken by Dr Johnson who denies that all who are happy are equally so: “A peasant and a philosopher may be equally *satisfied*, but not equally *happy*. Happiness consists in the multiplicity of agreeable consciousness.” (Boswell, 1887)

Pointing out the essentially relativity involved in all matters human, Carl Jung comments: “There are as many nights as days, and the one is just as long as the other in the year’s course. Even a happy life cannot be without a measure of darkness, and the word ‘happy’ would lose its meaning if it were not balanced by sadness.” (Un sourced. See the extensive development of this point by Garan 1963, 1975, 1987)

You never feel so alive as when you just escaped death! Imagine you get up on a Monday morning, have the same breakfast you always have, go to work to the same place you’ve worked for the last 15 years, to face the same tasks you’ve faced since

the beginning of time. At work, you collapse and are taken to hospital. They run some tests on you, then come back and inform you that you're in the advanced stages of cancer and have two months to live. Later that afternoon, an embarrassed house doctor comes back to tell you that the hospital confused your records with those of another man with the same name and that there is nothing really wrong with you that eating a regular breakfast won't cure. How do you feel? As if reprieved at the last minute from the firing squad. How does the world look to you now? Suddenly, everything is alive, vibrant, coloured. Martin Bell of the BBC agrees: "I'm the happiest that I've ever been. The turning point was nearly getting killed in a war zone. After that, every day has been like the first day of the rest of my life. I am living not on borrowed time, but on donated time. Every day I wake up happy to be alive. (Bell, 2005) Walker Percy, in *Lost in the Cosmos*, believes that life regains meaning when we take suicide—the possibility of non-existence—seriously. In this, he appears to be in agreement with Jung in taking seriously the relativity of opposition. Our ability not to be, our choosing not to kill ourselves, is an affirmation of life. Percy writes: "The difference between a non-suicide and an ex-suicide leaving the house for work, at eight o'clock on an ordinary morning: The non-suicide is a little traveling suck of care, sucking care with him from the past and being sucked toward care in the future. His breath is high in his chest. The ex-suicide opens his front door, sits down on the steps, and laughs. Since he has the option of being dead, he has nothing to lose by being alive. It is good to be alive. He goes to work because he doesn't have to." (Percy, 1983, p. 81. See Percy 1954 for a sustained philosophical treatment of these issues, especially pp. 86-126. Camus remarked: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest — whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories — comes afterwards.")

Where do all these reflections lead? In the end it appears that happiness is not a transitory emotion, or a set of transitory emotions. It is a more or less permanent condition predicated upon the appropriate exercise of our dispositions towards knowledge and the ordered satisfaction of our appetites, with a sufficiency of material goods and with friends, the whole given meaning and significance because it is ordered by reference to some fundamental set of values that transcend the merely

personal. Happiness is not something to be aimed at directly, as if it were a good coordinate with other goods, such as having a cup of tea or reading a book. Happiness is the by-product of our doing or refraining from doing certain kinds of things and, more importantly, of being or not being a certain kind of person.

Conclusion

When students have been thoroughly intellectually engaged by the multifarious problems, chastened by an awareness of their ignorance despite their manifest intelligence, and encouraged by the realisation that the intellectual world still has room for intrepid explorers, then it is time to introduce them to the great thinkers of the past: having done some thinking, now it is time to learn. I have no particular prescriptions—the canon of the great philosophers is more or less uncontroversial and any list will contain Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and many others. As usual, it is much better (and not only for reasons of scholarship) to go straight to the originals and maintain a healthy distance from secondary sources. Not only are the originals in many cases easier to read, the students will also have the thrilling experience of direct contact with a great mind and will be in a better position to critically evaluate any subsequent secondary source they may later encounter.

Answers to the quiz

(I have taken this material from *The Book of General Ignorance*. Some of the answers to the questions in here are disputable.)

1: How many wise men were there?

We don't know. It doesn't say anywhere in the Bible.

2: What's the most dangerous animal that has ever lived?

The (female) mosquito.

3: How do marmots kill people?

By coughing on them.

4: Who invented the concentration camp?

Not the Germans in the 20th century. Not the British in the Boer War. It was the Spanish, in Cuba, in 1895.

5: What man-made artefacts on Earth can be seen from the moon?

None. No—not even the great wall of China or the Pyramids of Egypt.

6: How do lemmings die?

The same way other animals do—old age, sickness, and accident. Not by suicide.

7: How many political prisoners were freed by the storming of the Bastille? 700, 70 or 7?

Answer—None! 7 prisoners in all were released—four forgers, one sexual pervert, and two lunatics. Not a single political prisoner.

8: Billy the Kid was born (a) William Bonney; (b) Kid Antrim; (c) Henry McCarty or (d) Brushy Bill Roberts.

Unlikely as it may seem, Billy's original name was Henry McCarty

9: He was born in (a) New York; (b) New Mexico; (c) New Jersey or (d) Kansas?

Answer (a)—New York.

10: True or false: before Columbus's voyage, it was generally believed that the earth was flat.

False. No one with any pretensions to education has believed the earth to be flat since the 4th century B.C.

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