

**PHILOSOPHY IN THE AGE OF DEMOCRACY:  
MORAL AND CIVIC EDUCATION**

Presidential Address

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On the 27th of April, I had the honour to be invited, as President of our Association, to the launching of a project called *Prévention de la violence et philosophie pour enfants*. It is a pilot project centered on the prevention of violence against children that includes the professional training in Philosophy of teachers called upon to transform their classes, from kindergarten until the end of secondary school, in as many communities of inquiry, as a means to facilitate for their pupils, *inter alia*, the internalization of the democratic values of our society and the ideal standards of conduct within the school environment. At least a dozen of the elementary schools in the metropolitan area of Montreal will participate in this multi-year pilot project.

This large-scale project was launched through to the dynamism of Mrs. Catherine Audrain, the director of *La Traversée*, a help center for women and children who are victims of violence, with the assistance of her dedicated team of employees and volunteers, who took the necessary steps to convince the directors, principals and teachers at public schools on Montréal's South Shore that the project was significant and worthwhile. Furthermore, the group at *La Traversée* secured invaluable support from governmental and government sponsored institutions, such as the Law Commission of Canada, and several partners in the private sector, in order that this project could see the light of day.

The project has many facets to it. Most notably, it will be the subject of an evaluation. Surveys and studies will be conducted to verify if this educational project indeed contributes effectively to the reduction of violence in the schools, at a time one can observe in the advanced democratic societies, a constant progression, statistically verifiable, of violence in the schools. But the key element of the project consists of the professional training in Philosophy of these teachers called upon to transform their classes into communities of research and to conduct them in this spirit following the approach advocated by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharpe, and inspired by John Dewey's philosophy of education.

This professional training is offered in Québec by the Faculty of Philosophy at Laval University, by means of a Certificate Programme (10 one-term courses) and of a Micro-Programme (5 one-term courses) in Philosophy For Children, for which Michel Sasseville is responsible. Well over one hundred teachers at the elementary and secondary levels have already received this professional training and it is presumed they are applying that in their respective classrooms and at all levels the innovative and promising educational approach that is at the core of the Philosophy for Children Programme.

In recent years, Philosophy has made a spectacular entry into the school system in Ontario, and is on the verge of gaining the status of a recognized subject matter and being offered as such to students of the 11th and 12th grade. Though its place in the school system is not as well anchored as it is in Québec where, as most of you know, 3 one-term courses in Philosophy are mandatory in the CEGEP common core curriculum, there are already around 500 teachers accredited to teach Philosophy in the public high schools in Ontario. This tremendous breakthrough should not, however, be confused with the Philosophy for Children Project which aims not at introducing Philosophy as a scholarly discipline normally taught in the universities to high school students in the last years of their curriculum, but rather at helping to develop the higher thinking skills of children by turning them into budding philosophers from the earliest age, as the philosophical approach is taken to foster these skills like no other. Just as importantly, this approach requires on the part of those who partake in it the internalization of values that are also conducive to civil peace as well as to active and competent participation in a liberal democratic society.

Setting aside my original intention which was to share some thoughts with you on the state of the discipline in this democratic age, and my fall-back option consisting in the deconstruction, in *Derridean* fashion, of the very notion of a presidential address, I would like to seize the opportunity offered to me this evening to make a number of points on how Philosophy can make an even more significant contribution to the health of a democratic society in Canada than many thought possible until recently. First, I would like to argue that moral and civic education should be an essential component of the public school curriculum in any jurisdiction in Canada, from kindergarten to the end of high school. Second, that moral and civic education belongs together and should reinforce each other. Third, that the Philosophy for Children Programme offers the most appropriate approach to moral and civic education as an essential component of the public school curriculum, from kindergarten to the end of high school. Fourth, that not only is it the theoretically most appropriate pedagogical approach, but that proof is available that it is also the most effective, provided that those educators who bring to children and students in their classes the dialectical approach at the core of the Philosophy for Children Programme have themselves received sufficient education and training in this approach. Fifth, and in conclusion, I would like to share with you my views on how we could best support the Philosophy for Children Project.

Ethics or Moral Philosophy may have been understood from the beginning, that is to say, since in Ancient Greece, it became the subject of a political debate at the same time that it became the object of inquiry or study, like a matter which at once concerns the political community as a whole, indeed all of humankind, but also the individual alone grappling with his or her own conscience, on which, in the final analysis, no power of coercion can come to bear. In this sense, therefore, morals appear as the most important business with which the state must concern itself, impelling it to take care, as far as possible, that it is shared among its members, but in another

sense, it appears to be the strictly private and personal business of each individual, a matter with which society and the state do not have the slightest right to meddle.

The political debate on this question continues unabated in every jurisdiction in Canada and beyond. The curriculum still observed in the province of Québec, in accordance with article 41 of the Québec Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which grants to parents, since the early Seventies, the right to choose for their children between a course in religious education, Catholic or Protestant, and a course in lay moral education, seems to consider moral education to be at the same time a matter of conscience and individual, i.e. parental choice, and a subject that would logically become mandatory for all children of Québec, once this article is replaced by another more attuned to Québec's multiethnic reality. That said, at the time I was a parent living in Québec, like many other parents, I could only bemoan the lack of clarity and substance in the definition of the objectives pursued in the course in moral education. This context is undoubtedly particular to the Province of Québec, but the tale is not without resonance in the other provinces. It is the one in which the question is still considered of whether it might be necessary or even opportune to make a course in moral education mandatory for all students of the elementary and secondary levels, whether in public schools only or also made mandatory within provincially accredited private schools as well.

Confronted with the prospect of a mandatory course in moral education, there are three diverging, mutually exclusive perspectives. The first, and in a certain sense at once the most liberal and conservative, supposes that the child is not yet his or her own master, that he or she is still entirely under the tutelage of the parents, and that, if it is not up to the child, then it is up to the parents, and not to the state or to society, to decide to which moral orientation he or she should be subjected. It is easy to recognize that this perspective on moral education inspired the framing of article 41 of the Québec Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which basically considers that religious and moral orientations are fundamentally coeval and that both belong strictly to the private domain. That said, the same article makes moral education, whether denominationally based (i.e. Catholic or Protestant), or lay, compulsory, with the State taking upon itself the responsibility of setting the programme for each type of moral education to be delivered at public schools. This seemed to represent a compromise between the public interest, which required at least some kind of moral education as a substitute for civic education, and what was understood to be the fundamental right of parents to decide which orientation this moral education would take. This compromise of sorts left wholly in abeyance the question of whether there might be a notable, and perhaps fundamental and irreconcilable, divergence between lay and religiously based moral education.

The second perspective, adhered to especially in English-speaking countries, supposes that, as early as a child's first introduction to school, he or she already possesses moral autonomy, or a moral sense, and it is up to the public school to further awaken, stimulate and help develop this throughout the child's tenure there. This would be the objective the public school system would set itself to fulfil in a course in moral education designed for children.

The third perspective is that which is implied by the Philosophy for Children Project. It consists in facilitating the internalization by the upcoming generation of common values to all of Canadian society, those values without the respect of which life in a democratic and pluralist

society would be difficult, if not even impossible. It should be noted that this perspective does not take for granted that the children already possess a moral sense. This means that one must count on public education to inculcate fundamental societal values, while at the same time supposing that the children will be able to find these values by themselves, if they are placed in a learning setting that will bring them to discover or even to redefine these values for themselves.

The democratic State, like any State deserving of the definition, has the duty to ensure civil peace. However, unlike other régimes, the democratic State has the moral, if not legal, obligation to publish the rights and duties of its citizens, as defined in the laws of the State. Indeed, a democratic society must have an overriding interest in the observance of the law by all of its members as well as in their participation one would wish as active as possible in public life. To comply with the law, and to see to it that everyone respects their own and others' rights and freedoms, it goes without saying that everyone should be cognizant of the laws, if not of the letter, then at least of their principle and spirit. Furthermore, society must have an unquestionable interest in informing the upcoming generation of all legal modes of participation in a democratic society so that all are informed of the legal recourses at their disposal to make good on their rights and thus enable society to evolve through peaceful means, as it is understood that the laws constitute the conditions of civil peace. The State has, therefore, an educational responsibility in this regard from which it cannot exempt itself as soon as it acknowledges its duty of neutrality towards all religions and has subscribed, like Canada has, to the principle of multiculturalism. Thus, it is no longer possible, as was the case not very long ago, to depend on a religion, practiced by a majority of citizens, to turn the young people into good law abiding citizens.

Realistically, the State cannot expect every citizen to be cognizant of every law. It can, however, see to it that children who are obliged by law to attend school be at least exposed to the spirit or the morals of the law, i.e., to the full scope of their main rights and freedoms as well as to their obligations, as children first, and then as future citizens with full rights that go with adult citizenship. This would be, in a broad sense, the object of a course in civic education.

These rights and obligations lend themselves to a translation into moral values that are *de facto* common to society because they exist *de jure*, that is to say because they are law. These values could certainly be explained as part of a course in moral education, but the subject of such a course would practically be the same as for one in civic education. And nothing would stand in the way, at least from a philosophical point of view, of adopting the same pedagogical approach for one course or the other. Besides, such a course should be conceived in such a way that any good citizen could eventually become its facilitator. The question is then whether the explanation to children of their rights and obligations as children and as citizens should be the subject of a course in moral education when a course in civic education is planned, if not already extant in the curriculum. In other words, would it not make sense to integrate the course in moral education and the course in civic education into a single course that would run from kindergarten to the last year of secondary school? After all, the two approaches are mutually complementary: civic education requires an understanding that goes beyond the letter of the law and the mere knowledge of the workings of institutions and calls upon what can be summed up as "moral sense", or at least civic sense, while a moral education is based in the laws and institutions of a democratic State.

What are the pedagogical approaches to moral and civic education? – There might be several, but I believe that they can all be brought under the two following headings: the *catechistic* or *magisterial* approach and the *dialectical* approach. The first aims at the systematic transmission by the teacher of notions and definitions school children and students are expected to acquire and memorize, without their having the opportunity to question this teaching that rests on an authority presented as unquestionable. It would be expected that, within this approach to moral education based on *authority*, one would insist on sanctions and other negative consequences for all cases of failure to comply with the norms that are thus set forth and communicated to the children and students.

The *dialectical* approach eschews indoctrination for dialogue, as its name suggests. The teacher responsible for her class initiates and conducts the dialogue with each child, at first taking her cue from the interests, opinions and notions expressed by the child on questions of morality that concern all children, and then brings, through dialogue, to put them in question, in a manner reminiscent of Socrates, though always with full respect for the child in whom one wants to inculcate respect for others as a prerequisite for the success of this educational project. This approach seeks to cultivate in children a caring attention to others as well as the ability to express and articulate interests, opinions and ideas. It aims also to bring children to question their own prejudices, to practice their judgment and to put it to the test of the judgment of the other classmates and vice versa while showing the required mutual respect without which a community of inquiry could not effectively function. And in this regard, reflexive judgment, which is, following Kant, the form of judgment that typically comes into play in Philosophy, should not be neglected when dealing with children in favor of the determining judgment. Thus, the Philosophy for Children Project and the pedagogical approach inherent to it seeks to bring children to question the presuppositions in their own thinking and in that of others; it is what finally justifies its being called *dialectical*, as I suggested.

At first glance, the *dialectical* approach presents over the *catechistic* approach distinct advantages, but it also has risks one should not underestimate. Above all, the dialectical approach requires from the teacher that she give up her stance of authority conveying recognized knowledge to adopt the role of a facilitator, a guide and initiator of dialogue who then lets the children speak, allowing each one of them in turn to be heard. No one can predict in advance where this dialogue will lead or what the final outcome of each session will be, even though the starting point is shared. It could be a story specifically conceived to provide an example of the beginning of a community of inquiry composed of children, but it could also be, at a later stage, the school's code of conduct, specific rights and obligations children have with respect to their parents, their classmates, other children within their own family, within the school or beyond, the rights and obligations their parents, their teachers, school administrators, adults in general and society as a whole have with respect to children.

Furthermore, a productive dialogue cannot be conducted when everyone in the class is talking at the same time. Thus, before even learning how to speak in a class that is to be transformed in a community of inquiry, children must learn how to listen and therefore to make silence. Dialogue can only begin in an initial silence. The teacher must have the required authority to establish the initial silence and begin an orderly dialogue with the children. That said, once the dialogue has begun, the teacher, now the facilitator of the dialogue, must also accept to have her authority

questioned by the children who are also at liberty to question without any restriction all aspects of the pedagogical programme in the Philosophy for Children Project. That is why the teachers responsible for classes in which the approach advocated by the Philosophy for Children Project is adopted must have the appropriate professional training in Philosophy in order to ensure the success of the programme. That said, I should add that the children who participate in classes conducted following this approach learn quickly the explicit and implicit rules that govern any community of inquiry and are often ready, after a year or two of exposure to this pedagogical approach, to take turns in chairing a one-hour workshop. This practice greatly contributes to reinforce every participant's responsibility in a class in moral education. I should also add that the same skills that are cultivated within a community of inquiry are required as well for competent participation in a deliberative assembly.

The advantages of the dialectical approach should be obvious. The dialogue that is established in class in this manner aims at bringing the children and the students to articulate their interests and their opinions on issues of public morality that concern them in such a way as to make them more consistent or else to put them in question so that their views may evolve, through a process of self-correction, towards greater consistency. They are thus induced to make their opinions hang together so as to form a system of values it was intended for them to discover or to redefine as their own and at the same time temps as that of the community in which they are expecting to live. Need I add that in a democratic State, there is no canonic text describing or summarizing the system of values of a democratic society, and that we are all as citizens, just like philosophers, unremittingly engaged in the process of its discovery or of its redefinition? Finally, a course in moral and civic education that would set as its objective the discovery, redefinition and practice by children and young people of the values of liberal democracy while initiating them to democratic deliberation would undoubtedly allow the democratic State to fulfil its obligation to inform the upcoming generation of its citizens. It would also greatly serve the public interest by enabling the internalisation by young people of the spirit of the laws and of the rules of conduct that govern society, while providing them with the ability to articulate their interests, uphold their rights, without recourse to violence, on the basis of existing institutions.

It should be relatively easy to convince my audience this evening of the soundness of this pedagogical approach, since it is the one that is typically adopted and followed in philosophy seminars. But since we are talking about introducing the dialectical approach typical of Philosophy seminars in the schools at the earliest possible age and then pursuing it throughout the school curriculum as the most appropriate pedagogical approach to moral and civic education, proof can legitimately be requested by all those involved in and concerned with our educational programmes that would demonstrate that this approach is not only consistent with the subject-matter and objectives of such a course, but that it also makes a positive difference in the attainment of those objectives.

The web site maintained by the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, founded by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharpe, affiliated with Montclair State University, and supported by the American Philosophical Association, lists and reviews over one hundred empirical studies conducted worldwide over the last thirty years on the effectiveness of this pedagogical approach with regard to the enhancement of cognitive, social and affective skills in children. Invariably, the results reported in these studies show that the approach makes a

positive difference. But allow me to dwell a bit on the study conducted by the team of *La Traversée* that has been published and made available on the web site displaying a lot of information on the project I spoke about at the opening of this address.

Children from three public elementary schools located in economically underprivileged neighbourhoods on the South Shore of the Saint Lawrence in the metropolitan area of Montréal were surveyed at the beginning and at the end of a school year in 2002-2003. Teachers and children of two of the three schools participated in the Philosophy for Children programme, while the children in the third school that did not participate acted as the control group for the purposes of the study. The object of the study was to measure progress in the children's acquisition of social skills and self esteem. This particular study did not find any significant enhancement of social skills, but found a very significant increase in self-esteem within the target group, when compared to the control group. As the author of the study, Caroline Cinq-Mars, explained at the colloquium that was part of the launch of the project spear-headed by *La Traversée*, this is significant because low self esteem offers a breeding ground for violent behaviour as well as to silent acceptance of physical abuse, intimidation and humiliation. Surely, the Philosophy for Children programme pursues many ambitious goals, and so far with demonstrable success. But if it can be shown that it contributes significantly to reduce violence in the schools and enables children to reach their full potential in an educational environment that is all but free from physical abuse and humiliation, then a very strong case can be made for its implementation in all the public schools across Canada.

But before the implementation of the Philosophy for Children programme can even be considered, a rather risky long-term investment has to be made at an institutional level. The story behind the pilot-project initiated by *La Traversée* in Québec I referred to at the outset is rather telling in this regard. Here we have a not-for-profit organization of civil society taking the lead to effectuate a major change in the school system. It is not primarily a curriculum change, but aims rather at introducing in the schools a pedagogical approach inspired by philosophy and conceived by philosophers living in a democratic society, aspiring to make it work through Philosophy, but with one eye constantly trained on what works from a scientific point of view and another on what can achieve a consensus from a political point of view. This initiative, however, could not have gotten off the ground if the Faculty of Philosophy of Université Laval had not taken the risk, several years ago, of opening a position in Philosophy for Children and establishing certificate programmes in that field aimed at training teachers and educators in this novel approach. The Faculty of Philosophy of Laval was even so bold as to establish these certificate programmes on its own, without enlisting the collaboration of other faculties or departments within the university. It helped a great deal, of course, that this initiative received the full support of the Vice-Principal (Academic) at Laval.

If one were to want to open such a position and to establish such certificate programmes elsewhere, one might have to consider alternative strategies. Within the department itself, opening a position in the field of Philosophy for Children, or Philosophy in the Schools, or Philosophy of Education, should not be overly difficult, insofar as this would not be taking any student away from any other field of Philosophy, nor indeed from any other field of study in other faculties or departments, because the target student population is primarily the accredited teachers or the students in Education seeking the accreditation required for teaching in

elementary and high schools. As for the certificate programmes, they could be varied and given various names, other than Philosophy for Children, if that poses otherwise locally an insurmountable problem.

Obviously, before all else, collaboration with the Faculty of Education, where there is one, should be sought. Certificate programmes in Moral Education intended for schoolteachers at the Elementary level could be worked out with that Faculty, with possible input from the Psychology department as well as from the Faculty of Law. Certificate programmes in Moral in Civic Education intended for teachers at the High School level could well include collaboration with the Department of Political Science.

That said, I have attempted to make the case here for a continuum between Moral and Civic Education at the Elementary and High School levels that it would be important to preserve and that I believe can be agreed to by all concerned. This is why I think it is crucial that philosophy departments across Canada should take the lead on this initiative, embrace the Philosophy for Children project and bring it forward in their respective institutions, whether it is so as I have summarily presented it to you this evening or alternatively conceived.

It should be clear that the Philosophy in the Schools Project the CPA officially supports is not aimed at democratizing Philosophy, but is rather proposed as the most effective way to make the liberal democracy we live in not just viable in the long run, but indeed vibrant, and to enable all the children in our society to fulfil their greatest potential in all aspects of life.

In closing, and although all past CPA presidents of recent years have ardently supported the Philosophy in the Schools Project, I would like to acknowledge the particular contributions of two former presidents of the CPA: Stephen Davis, under whose presidency the CPA officially endorsed the project, and Frank Cunningham who has been successful in contributing to the breakthrough of Philosophy in Ontario's high school curriculum and has always been one of the most vocal supporters of the Philosophy in the Schools Project. I would also like to acknowledge, on behalf of the CPA, the terrific work of Danielle Brown on this project. Danielle provided me with valuable information for this address. I hope she will not have been too shocked by it.

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