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Seeking Harmony: The Value of Precollegiate Philosophy

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Like a blast of audible punctuation, the beauty of a staccato note is in its brevity. Forcibly separated from the surrounding melody, the point of such music is precisely its pointedness: It highlights a song by jarring the listener with an abrupt, disconnected sound. But a song composed only of staccato notes would sound, at best, unsettling and, at its worst, cacophonous.

Sadly, this is the face of public education: Students spend roughly 12 years learning a jumbled, disconnected collection of subjects without the benefit of a guiding principle to tie them together into a holistic approach to life. As they wander the hallways of our schools without a unified sense of meaning or purpose for their efforts (apart from the escape that graduation offers), students may be able to pass a test, but find themselves ill-equipped to function in the real world. Our students must become more than mere graduates. They need to become the best citizens possible, capable of contributing to the public discourse and the common good. They need a workshop, a studio, an arena for critical thinking where they can integrate deep ideas into their daily perspectives. They need to be trained in philosophy.

In many ways, the value of precollegiate study in philosophy is readily apparent. Not only will students be exposed to challenging concepts, but they also will gain experience in asking thoughtful questions, rigorously working through arguments, and recognizing the importance of giving reasons for the beliefs they hold. Philosophy is not simply a habit of asking obvious questions draped in an aura of profundity; it is an exercise in analyzing the way we come to know everything that we come to know—and asking why we should care about it.

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While philosophy does sometimes focus on esoteric topics like the philosophy of existence (metaphysics) or the philosophy of knowledge itself (epistemology), we can just as easily discuss one's philosophy of science, of history, of art, and so on by asking: "What is 'science,' and how should it be practiced?" The key is to approach each discipline with a sensitivity for the arguments at work within it; to see how each experiment, each text, each painting or performance piece operates implicitly from a particular perspective to communicate some collection of possible truths. An eye for these matters is what philosophical education helps to open.

In this way, studies in philosophy can help precollegiate students to begin integrating the disparate pieces of their education into a comprehensive perspective on how to act in the world: a philosophy of life. For example, consider the Academy founded by Plato. While Plato was concerned with topics ranging from moral purity to pedagogy to politics, legend tells us that an inscription above the entrance to his school read, "Let No One Ignorant of Geometry Enter." Plato recognized that the functionality of arithmetic could only be consistent if there is something more fundamentally consistent about our universe that allows it to be so. Math, to Plato, was evidence for something like God. The point is that by thinking philosophically about geometry, Plato was able to draw deeper conclusions about reality. In a similar fashion, our students should be able to thoughtfully incorporate truths from each of their classes into their own approaches to life.

As teachers, the danger in leading such study is the necessity of teaching open-endedly, tailoring lessons to individual students as much as possible. Studies in philosophy cannot be allowed to devolve into acts of brainwashing, where views of the world are simply preached; the point of this type of class is to allow students the opportunity to begin processing how their other lessons fit together in meaningful ways. By equipping students with the tools to assess the accuracy and consistency of their own beliefs, we can

provide them with the ability to begin drawing interdisciplinary conclusions that have real-world implications. The history of philosophy is rife with examples of men and women who, by thinking about deep questions, did precisely this. These exemplars can serve both as inspirational models and technical case studies for how our students can do likewise.

Moreover, philosophical education is a gift of confidence in one's own beliefs and abilities. By teaching students how to draw well-founded conclusions from defendable premises, we help to assure them that they are on the right track about the things that they believe. The self-confidence that comes from such assurance can be a powerful motivator for further study—particularly in the face of external criticism or internal doubt. Philosophy offers more than simple things to believe: It provides students with the ability to figure out for themselves whether they should believe something—and why.

Incorporating philosophy into the standard precollegiate curriculum would be a powerful step in combating the disjunctiveness of the present school model. Education no longer follows an intentional narrative that leads students along the path toward becoming productive members of society. Instead, we are left with a meaningless collection of disconnected facts that are devoid of any overarching worldview. Philosophy can help equip our students to tie these loose ends together into useful perspectives that can shape them into responsible citizens. It is the study of philosophy, with the goal of forming a personal worldview, that can turn a student's education from a blended mixture of staccato notes into something harmoniously symphonic.

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