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Philosophy Across the Ages

by Kirsten Jacobson

For the past six years, I have extended the reach and impact of my work as a philosopher at the University of Maine by creating an outreach program called Philosophy Across the Ages (PAA). PAA connects undergraduate students with Orono High School (OHS) students (and when possible, with retirement community members from Dirigo Pines Retirement Community) through exciting biweekly seminar-style discussions of philosophical texts from ancient to contemporary times. All participants come to the program voluntarily and are united by the simple but compelling desire to discuss serious questions of philosophy and to examine their relevance to our everyday lives. My interest in holding these cross-generational discussions reflect my convictions that (1) questions of philosophy belong neither to people of a certain age nor to people of a certain profession, but rather to us all; and (2) these questions are most fruitfully discussed in a cosmopolitan context and toward cosmopolitan ends—that is, in a context that invites us beyond what is familiar to us and in which we are challenged to recognize that the diversity of ideas is a reflection of a reality that will forever need to be interpreted and responded to anew. The core of this project builds on my primary commitment as a teacher: to continually ask questions of myself and others about the nature of human experience so that we might become increasingly adept at reflecting and responding to the reality of our situation.

This spring semester, for example, PAA participants were interested in exploring questions pertaining to the nature of sexuality and gender. In conversation with philosophical authors ranging from Sigmund Freud to Simone de Beauvoir, from Iris Marion Young to John Russon, students have raised and discussed vital and timely questions including “Is one’s gender a natural phenomenon, a cultural construction, or a mixture of these?”; “How is our sexuality shaped by our familial upbringing, our current cultural influences, and by the existential demands of human subjectivity?”; and “What ethical responsibilities do we have surrounding sexual intimacy, gender identification, and differential treatment of persons of different gender?” What impresses me most about the conversations that have arisen

through such questions is the students’ clear commitment to working on these issues because they indeed matter to their lives. (The Orono school district has been at the epicenter of a legal and political debate over transgender bathroom accommodations, so our discussions of gender and sexuality carry a definite gravity for OHS students.) The students participating in PAA are not satisfied with easy or ready-made answers; they have significant questions and in some cases quandaries in their own lives that demand that they work on how to think about and respond well to such issues.

In response to these and other existential questions and demands, I have aspired to craft through Philosophy Across the Ages an inspiring arena for thinking about significant issues that are integral to the participants’ lives. These issues can range from the ethical to the epistemological, the metaphysical to the political, the aesthetic to the phenomenological. While such topics may seem obscure when given these titles, they are in fact the meat of meaning in our lives. One student who came to the program in response to a friend’s encouragement noted her own initial reluctance to discuss what at first seemed to her to be irrelevant philosophic problems:

I admit that I had some reservations about getting involved with [PAA]. Philosophy seemed an aggravatingly idle and abstract pastime, the type of thing wealthy men had invented to fill their days. However, I have found it to be a delightful exercise. I’m getting to know my own mind better, and I feel parts of my mind expanding and connecting to one another....I always come home from sessions invigorated. This sort of thing is sadly lacking in public education.

This student discovered the importance of having an open and thought-inspiring arena in which to consider and question those essential activities in which we must engage as human beings. We must, for example, decide how to act when confronted by a racist, sexist, or otherwise prejudiced comment or practice; we have significant choices to make whenever we are called upon to cast a vote or to speak up or not in a political forum; we are constantly taking a stand on how we understand

and value ourselves and those around us whenever we engage with other people—whether casually or intimately; we shape the character of our surrounding environment through our support or lack thereof for the arts, nature preserves, and the stores we patronize. One student in the program found the key connection between philosophy and his own academic and professional interests in pursuing a future in the sciences:

At its most basic, philosophy is about questioning your environment. It is this one thing that leads to just about everything people have. This is also of particular interest to me because I want to be a scientist. Without a philosophical way of thinking, a scientist is nothing more than a walking textbook, only able to repeat facts about the world given a specific query. It takes a philosophical way of thinking to truly understand and be able to figure new things out in science. And that's the kind of scientist I want to be.

While we can easily plow through our education, our professional lives, or any of the existential actions I have noted, to do any of these or other essential human activities well, we must think carefully about them. And given that our circumstances are always changing, we must do this thinking over and over again; we must continually work at establishing and reaffirming how things count for us. Purposeful living needs to be a daily activity. To this end, the texts we read in my courses and through PAA are those that engage students' real-life concerns, such as the nature of fairness and justice, personal and social responsibilities, the demands of freedom and choice, the nature of embodiment, sexuality and gender, the role of family and interpersonal relations in our development as individuals, psychological health and its roots. Many of these issues are simply not talked about, or at least not openly, with young people.

While these points may seem obvious, the rush of life's demands and our own habits make it easy to act first and think later (even if our profession is a philosopher). Philosophy Across the Ages provides a site for a diverse group of thinkers to work with one another on finding their own place and responsibilities within the world of meaning. And as the observation of one high school PAA participant suggests, it seems that these conversations have nourished some of this important work:

PAA could not have introduced itself to me at a better time. I was 15, in the most critical point

in my struggle to identify myself...My pursuit of philosophy reorganized my world, peeled off layers, and gave me the skills to see them...I feel as if only now have I started really using my mind, and I find it hard to imagine what it was like before I started PAA...Thanks to this program I feel every minute freer, wiser, and happier.

This student's sense of the role that participating in Philosophy Across the Ages has played in his life is a great example of the importance of the humanities not just belonging exclusively to formal studies or conferences, or reserved for display in museums or recital halls, or even for moments of inward-turning self-reflection. The humanities are practices of action, of deciding upon and making commitments within our everyday lives. If these practices have been developed into fields for study and private or social reflection, it is because they arise from the issues, questions, and activities of our very real and very demanding human lives. In their rich articulation in arenas ranging from English to history, philosophy to sociology, art to anthropology and beyond, the humanities provide us with both the grounding and the unsettling experiences that bring us humanely together in the activity of pursuing an examined life. In other words, they provide us with the experiences that that prompt us to think, talk, and ultimately act upon the situations of human life and the questions of how we ought to live it. 🐙

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Kirsten Jacobson is associate professor of philosophy at the University of Maine. She specializes in nineteenth and twentieth century continental philosophy and the philosophy of art. In 2015 she received two teaching awards

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