



# Jane Gatley, "Why Teach Philosophy in Schools?"

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Volume 44, numéro 1, février 2024

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110362ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1110362ar>

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### Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

### ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)

1920-8936 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer ce compte rendu

Hudson, R. (2024). Compte rendu de [Jane Gatley, "Why Teach Philosophy in Schools?"]. *Philosophy in Review*, 44(1), 26–29. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1110362ar>

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**Jane Gatley.** *Why Teach Philosophy in Schools?* Bloomsbury Academic 2023. 212 pp. \$150.25 USD (Hardcover 9781350268357).

*Why Teach Philosophy in Schools?* is an extended, analytical argument for the conclusion that philosophy should be taught in schools. The book is commendable for its argumentative rigour and conceptual clarity. The dedication to which Jane Gatley engages in this project is impressive, and its specific conclusions, that philosophy should be taught ‘at least some of the time’ (148), ‘at some point in a child’s education’ (185), maybe just one course in philosophy during the whole of an education (4), are lukewarm enough to be highly acceptable as inferences.

As Gatley notes, philosophy is already taught in schools in many places, and has been for a long time. To that extent, her extended argument is unneeded since it concludes that philosophy should be taught at some time, and we already know that it is. Gatley’s intention may be to insulate philosophy from future excisions from curricula. Similar worries attend the instruction of philosophy at universities, where it is noted that activist administrations occasionally put philosophy on their cost-cutting radars. Doubtfully does any university administration have the intention to remove philosophy entirely from curricula of any modern-day descendant of Plato’s Academy. Gatley’s minimal curricular requirement – teach philosophy at some time – is always met. Philosophy is not *a priori* incoherent, and has a chance at school instruction, even if it typically fails to be recommended.

Gatley formulates two specific conditions under which philosophy should be taught in schools (K-12, presumably; Gatley doesn’t specify a range):

- 1) ‘teaching philosophy provides some specifiable educational good.’
- 2) ‘there is reason to hold that this specified good is only or best delivered by teaching philosophy’ (see 2, 27, 48, 51, and elsewhere).

Previous attempts to show 1) and 2) fail, Gatley claims — even the best contender, *Philosophy for Children* (30-43). Talk about some ‘specified educational good’ presupposes an account of the aims of education, for which Gatley lists a number of, on her view, faulty accounts (64-90). Her preferred account she calls a ‘utility’ account (91-123), where education has a role in providing answers to ‘prominent and pressing questions from the best sources’ (123).

On that basis, Gatley provides two arguments for teaching philosophy in schools. Specifically, philosophy is best placed to:

- 1) ‘address prominent and pressing questions based on ordinary concepts’ (131), and



- 2) ‘teach students how to apply theoretical content appropriately’ (150), where applying theoretical content appropriately is needed to act effectively in the world.

The former task, she claims, is the disciplinary preserve of analytic philosophy, in the hands of the likes of Gilbert Ryle and Peter Strawson who specialize in ordinary language philosophy. The latter task is achieved in the context of a ‘broad theoretical education fragmented into different theories, many of which are conceptually distinct from one another’ (170). ‘These different conceptual frameworks, Gatley explains, raise ‘interdisciplinary questions that draw answers from the different conceptual frameworks’ and ‘new questions where the appropriate conceptual frameworks for thinking about how to answer the questions have not yet been developed’ (170).

In general terms, philosophy is characterized by its focus on:

- 1) ordinary concepts
- 2) concepts from multiple, or interdisciplinary perspectives
- 3) novel concepts

Even more generally, philosophy is characterized by its focus on concepts, or ‘concepts’. It is an open question, in all modesty, whether philosophy examines concepts in themselves, in reality, or only what we name with the term ‘concept’. Either way, philosophy for Gatley is the only discipline taught in (K-12) schools that ‘involves the systematic study of conceptual problems’ (175), or at least does so in the best way, at least some of the time (i.e., her ‘lukewarm’ position).

If philosophy is defined as the study of ordinary concepts, or the study of concepts from multiple perspectives, or the study of novel concepts, and it is determined that these sorts of studies are needed to handle in the best way prominent and pressing problems, and handling in the best way these problems is the goal of theoretical education in schools (Gatley’s utility account), then philosophy is the best sort of instruction, at least some of the time, in schools, and should be taught.

This argument turns on its initial assumptions regarding the exclusionary nature of philosophy’s study of concepts. This exclusionary nature is uncertain. People talk about concepts, in ordinary, various, and novel ways, despite not being philosophers. Philosophers do not have a preserve on ordinary concepts, nor an exclusive claim on conceptual variety or novelty. To see this, consider the following examples.

Suppose a horticulturist is deciding what to name alternate varieties of apples. Some are sweet, so they are named ‘Sweet’. To make this semantic connection one needs to have the concept ‘sweet’. A horticulturalist can do this despite not being a philosopher. It is an ordinary concept, after all.

Suppose alternatively the local Diabetes Association condemns the marketing of this apple on the grounds that it encourages diabetics to avoid eating apples, Sweet or otherwise. So, the Association decides to sue the company selling the apple on these grounds. To address the issue, the company's defense lawyer consults medical physiologists with knowledge of various kinds of sugars, their glycemic indices, their metabolic character when treated with insulin, and related matters, plus specialists from a variety of other fields, however many are needed to put up a full defense, here inclusive of matters, so far, of business, law, medical physiology and biochemistry. The lawyer in this case needs a specialist interdisciplinary knowledge to function appropriately, despite not being a philosopher.

Or again, from pop culture, one can say, "Sweet!", when impressed with and slyly apprehensive about a fortuitous outcome. This is an interdisciplinary achievement, a meta-linguistic capability connecting two very different phenomena, one a sensation and the other a social proclamation, one any 'dude' can perform, despite the complete novelty of the original use of this expression, and again, despite the dude's not being a philosopher.

One can say that philosophy does these three things in the best way. That is only true relative to certain purposes, those purposes beyond doing philosophy itself. As regards how philosophy addresses those purposes, this is a completely open matter since it is completely open what those purposes are, philosophically and logical speaking. Philosophy, as Gatley makes plain, is a form of theoretical education.

As befits a utility of account of theoretical education, philosophy does more than espouse a doctrine or body of knowledge. It serves the practical aim of 'addressing prominent and pressing questions'. To illustrate this role, Gatley examines three applied cases: deciding to act in the context of either the COVID-19 pandemic, or the climate crisis, or with the prospect of recreational drug use. In all these cases, prominent and pressing questions are usefully handled with philosophical reflection involving ordinary, interdisciplinary, and novel concepts (164-9).

There is no reason to deny that philosophical instruction at the school level has benefits, even benefits exclusive to philosophy. The countervailing factors are logistical. Gatley is aware of the limited time students have (2, 112), and not all topics can be covered. Students already 'spend up to one third of their waking life in school' (28), leaving little room to leverage yet more theoretical education. So, if more philosophy is to be included on the curriculum, it is likely that something must be left out, or something else not included, and what would that be? Ideally, every relevant theoretical discipline of appropriate difficulty should be taught, at least some of the time.

The more fundamental question we need to answer, before using philosophical instruction to address prominent and pressing questions, is to decide what philosophy is, in the first place.

What is philosophy, or ‘a’ philosophy?

In saying above that a philosopher is something different from a horticulturalist, a lawyer, and a pop culture aficionado, I presume a common understanding of what a philosopher is. This is only a presumption on my part. There is no one, true, most justified, a priori, univocal description of philosophy. Philosophies differ widely and nothing requires mutual consistency. There are paradoxes of logic, skeptical hypotheses, hypothetical brains-in-vats, and the denials that there are such things, all of them reasonable philosophical positions.

As such, philosophical education is a contradictory affair. The philosophy teacher presents alternate points of view on basic philosophical issues that openly contradict one another. Philosophers are not dogmatists and consider the proponents of every other discipline to be dogmatists. Philosophers are the ones who take a meta-perspective, a metalinguistic perspective. Doing this involves a bit of mind-bending, as we speculate on contradictory hypotheses. Philosophers revel in possible world speculation, without limit. Is this an activity we want our children doing, at least some of the time?

Children are vulnerable, because of their youth. They rely on strict moral codes to keep themselves safe, and adults spend a lot of time morally correcting them to ensure this. Questioning these moral codes in the guise of mind-expansion is beneficial for some students. Other students find such questioning to be bothersome and trite, where they have a personal relationship with these codes, as described above. For them these codes are not abstractions, they are normatively apt, felt experiences.

So, on the matter of whether philosophy should be taught in schools, we need to proceed carefully. Effective philosophical instruction undermines behavioural conditioning by offering a ‘meta’ perspective. How to negotiate that influence with other kinds of disciplinary instruction requires deep philosophical analysis, for which Gatley has provided us with an excellent, first start.

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