DEMOCRATIZING PHILOSOPHY: SCHOOL FOR LIFE, LIFE FOR SCHOOL*

Abstract: Re-visioning education is critical to developing new ways of thinking and acting in the face of global threats to life. Like philosophy in Quine’s words, education is “losing contact with the people.” Education suffers this loss in part because education has lost contact with philosophy. My primary guide on this question in the essay’s first part is Nietzsche. His apocalyptic vision of philosophy may help students become more deeply engaged in all levels of schooling. The paper’s second section examines Rorty’s challenge to Nietzsche with the idea that philosophy’s tasks are finished. The third section shows how philosophy can be infused into all other subjects. The conclusion considers whether it is practical to teach philosophy to all students. Schooling that democratizes philosophy can reveal that many more human beings are gifted than we could have imagined. W.E.B. Du Bois in fact argues that virtually all humans should receive a university education. A compelling reason to democratize philosophy is to further democracy itself.

Keywords: philosophy, education, science, literature, Nietzsche, Rorty, Du Bois, Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Text: EPIGRAPHS

Again danger is there, the mother of morals, great danger…. Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, 402.

The greater the danger is, the greater is the need to reach agreement quickly and easily about what must be done. Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, 406.

Nietzsche (1992) stresses the origins of morality in danger and the need for collective action in the face of danger. Three crises confront the world: global climate change, weapons of mass destruction and the immiseration of billions in the Global South (Gardiner 2011). For the first time in our ~200,000 year history, humans may acquire the power to alter life globally. This danger calls for a new morality (Verharen et al. 2011). Re-visioning education is critical to


developing new ways of thinking and acting in the face of unprecedented dangers. Like philosophy in Quine’s words, education is “losing contact with the people” (Quine 1972, 191). Education suffers this loss in part because education has lost contact with philosophy.

My primary guide in the paper’s first section is Nietzsche. His apocalyptic vision of philosophy may help students become more deeply engaged in all levels of schooling. Nietzsche argues that new creations in philosophy evolve out of grave dangers. A committed elitist, Nietzsche held that only a few select human beings could respond to those crises by creating new commanding values. With more than a century’s experience of democracy beyond Nietzsche’s, we can argue for a democratization of philosophy. On the verge of being able to disrupt in dramatic ways life on the planet, we need all the help we can get.

The paper’s second part examines Rorty’s (2009a&b) challenge to Nietzsche with the idea that philosophy’s tasks are finished. The third section shows how philosophy can be infused into all other subjects in an education powerful enough to address our contemporary dangers. The conclusion considers whether it is practical to teach philosophy to all students. Schooling that democratizes philosophy can reveal that many more human beings are gifted than we could have imagined. W.E.B. Du Bois (2001) in fact argues that virtually all humans should receive a university education. A compelling reason to democratize philosophy is to further democracy itself.

My hypothesis is that education aims to teach students how to solve unsolved problems—their own, of course, but more importantly, the problems of the community members who make their educational institutions possible. In Rorty’s words, “We think that inquiry is just another name for problem solving, and we cannot imagine inquiry into how human beings should live, into what we should make of ourselves, coming to an end” (2009b, 11). The word problem in its etymology means “that which is thrown in front of us.” Problems divide into two kinds: negative and positive. Negative problems are barriers to our progress through life. Positive problems are challenges we find so compelling that we do not wish to move past them. In the very best case, we will gladly devote a lifetime of passionate research to solving such problems.

My claim is that every educational act should aim in the long run at the PhD, the doctorate of philosophy. We confer PhDs in recognition that their holders have acted on behalf of philosophy. Philosophy in its etymology stands for love of wisdom. In its simplest definition,
wisdom is total knowledge—theoretical and practical. No one can possess total knowledge, but PhDs can claim that they have contributed stepping stones on the path to wisdom. Dissertations (in the best case) are solutions to unsolved problems. The very best dissertations create new problems that future generations will solve. These problems cover a spectrum from the purely theoretical to the utterly practical.

Institutions grant PhDs. However, anyone who solves an unsolved problem of stature has a right to claim a virtual PhD. From their first moments of formal schooling, all students should be encouraged to aim at their PhDs—whether actual or virtual.

Introduction: Connecting School to Life and Philosophy to School

Nel Noddings’ *Philosophy of Education* makes two striking points. First, education is lost on many students because they feel no deep connection to the material taught. United States drop-out rates, particularly in our inner cities, confirm her wisdom. How can we meet the needs of children who do not respond to contemporary educational practices in satisfactory ways? School for many students is an odious task that can only be endured with great helpings of discipline.

Noddings’ second point is that the subjects to be taught in schools as well as their interrelationships should be matters for debate. She has hesitations about dividing education into the disciplines Plato prescribed in the *Republic*: literature, history, mathematics and philosophy, with “natural science as a less lofty component.” These subjects “still form the backbone of the academic curriculum” (2011, 10).

This essay works toward restoring the connotation of the word *school* to its ancient sense of *leisure* by infusing philosophy into the curriculum. Disaffected students think of school as drudgery rather than leisure. Plato to the contrary thought that school is the loftiest of human pursuits. On one reading, Plato’s *Republic* is a blueprint enabling the philosopher to spend her entire life in school—save for the twenty years from ages 50-70 she must reluctantly spend as *philosopher-queen*. Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* argues that the lucky man (and Aristotle did mean *man*) will spend the greater part of his life in the *schole* of thinking (Nussbaum 1986).
Although Noddings defines *philosophy* in her opening lines as “love of wisdom,” she does not carefully explicate that expression. Jane Heal defines *wisdom* through ethics: “Being wise is a matter of having a good (or the right, or some admirable) stance to the world, such that one apprehends, feels, acts in ways that are good (or right, or somehow admirable)” (Heal 2012, 39). Plato and Aristotle define *wisdom* much more broadly. Philosophers have only a highly generalized knowledge of everything (*Metaphysics* 982a21-24). Detailed knowledge is left to specialists in other disciplines. For Aristotle, philosophy is more like poetry than history because both poetry and philosophy try to capture universals, while history is content with the particular (*Poetics* 1451b1-11).

W.V.O. Quine follows Aristotle in claiming that knowledge is a spectrum, ranging from the hyper-generalizations of philosophy through the more modest generalizations of science, culminating in the practical arts of engineering (Quine quoted in Magee 1982, 143-44). Because of the highly generalized status of philosophy, philosophers cannot substantiate their theories through empirical investigation. Scientists’ theories in their most powerful guise are less general than those of philosophers (Quine 1951). Nevertheless, philosophy drives science by addressing questions completely beyond the competence of scientists to answer consensually, given the limits of knowledge of their times.

Contemporary cosmology and neuropsychology present clear evidence for this claim. Quantum mechanics has pushed contemporary physicists to propose a variant of Pythagoras’ claim that all things are numbers. The research program is called “string theory.” Physicists also begin to suggest that there may be billions of universes beyond ours. Most provocatively, they hypothesize that we ourselves may be simulations in the computational systems of species far ahead of us in the evolutionary process (Greene 2011).

Neuroscientists are now hammering at the mystery of consciousness (Thagard 2010). They propose research programs showing that not only our omni-competent linguistic capacities but also our capacities to be ethical are innate—just as Plato suggested, but for radically different reasons (Joyce 2006, 2001). Renowned neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga’s (2011) *Who’s in Charge?: Free Will and the Science of the Brain* makes the bold claim that the illusory character of our vaunted “free will” is now empirically demonstrable. Such speculation about the origins of the universe and the nature of consciousness must have been counted as utterly “wild guesses”
just a few decades ago. However, it is precisely this kind of radical philosophical speculation
that spurs current research in cosmology and neuropsychology.

Thousands of years may separate philosophical speculation from scientific application,
as in the case of Democritus’ atomism or Pythagoras’ number-based ontology. The capacity of
scientific generalizations like Newton’s to predict and control experience may blind us to the
limitations of scientific knowledge. Stephen Hawking (2010, 5) claims—without success—that
physics can now answer cosmological questions about our origins and purpose (cited in
Papazoglou 2012, 10). Confident of our control of experience, we may be reluctant to engage in
philosophical speculation that might yield new scientific theories with more massive capacity for
connectivity. Rare geniuses like Einstein replace old philosophical assumptions that served
perfectly well for the prediction and control of experience for hundreds of years with astonishing
new ones.

Focusing students’ attention on the wildly imaginative and speculative nature of
philosophy can help them understand that they are apprentices in the arts of solving problems.
As students, they are immersed in one of the most fundamental of all human problems: what is
education and how should it be conducted? Their own dissatisfaction with current answers to
those questions can serve as the best stimulus for them to rethink and revise their experience of
education. If students come to see themselves as apprentices in the art of solving problems, they
may no longer see school as the work of memorizing facts and learning routines that are of little
apparent relevance to their lives. All schooling, even at the most elementary levels, should be
conceived of as progress toward the highest degree, the PhD. The degree deserves its prestigious
title because it requires students to solve a problem, theoretical or practical, never before solved.

Can we give students a sense that they are partners in the adventure of solving unsolved
problems? In my introductory philosophy courses, I tell students that the greatest problem they
face in their lives is the perennial philosophical question: How should I live my life? The history
of philosophy broadly conceived is a cascading series of answers to that question. Given the
magnitude of our global problems, it should be clear to students that our current philosophies are
inadequate for their tasks. I charge my students with the mission of coming up with better ways
to ensure our own survival and flourishing—and to pass the joy of life on to future generations.
Every K-16 course should explore the idea that philosophy itself is the essence of education in the word’s historical sense of a leading out from ignorance to knowledge, and from knowledge to wisdom. For Dewey, philosophy is education: “If we are willing to conceive education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow men, philosophy may even be defined as the general theory of education” (Dewey quoted in Kitcher 2011, 249). Every classroom should be a place where students participate in humanity’s ongoing pursuit of wisdom. A key to philosophy of education must be philosophy in education.

Part I: Nietzsche’s Metaphilosophy

Nietzsche offers a poetic description of the philosopher: “a fatal human being around whom there are constant rumblings and growlings, crevices, and uncanny doings” (Beyond Good and Evil 1992, 420). Nietzsche’s hyperbolic language suits philosophy’s hypertrophic nature. As Aldous Huxley says, the brain is a reducing valve. Philosophy stripped to its essentials is the brain’s action of simplifying experience at the extreme limits of generalization. Imagine the Ancient Egyptians claiming as early as 5000 years ago that all reality evolves from a primitive, water-like chaos. Or the pharaoh Akhenaten insisting around 3500 years ago that the universe as we know it emanates from the light shining through the sun’s disk. Or the pre-Socratics such as Thales, Heraclitus, Democritus and Pythagoras speculating around 2500 years ago that our world springs from water, fire, atoms or numbers.

The hubris of these early philosophers! Their massive oversimplifications! Yet each of these earliest philosophers got something right. Our ordered universe emerges from chaos. Thales was “two thirds correct” inasmuch as water is two parts hydrogen. The Big Bang was a cosmic fireball. Atoms though not “uncuttable” as their etymology suggests are staples of current cosmology. Contemporary string theorists search for empirical evidence for Pythagoras’ most bizarre of all claims

What Huxley might have emphasized is that philosophy is both a reducing valve and an expansion valve. These early philosophers not only reduced the origin of reality to single principles. They also created new principles to serve as their reductive foundations. Nietzsche calls these new creations “lightnings” in the “storm” that is the philosopher’s work. The “storm”
emerges from a human being “who constantly experiences, sees, hears, suspects, hopes, and
dreams extraordinary things…” (ibid., 420).

Like Wittgenstein and Rorty who followed in Nietzsche’s wake, Nietzsche separated
philosophy from science. Science, like philosophy, is a product of the brain as a reducing valve.
The distinction between the two subjects lies only in their degrees of generalization. At their
intersection, philosophy and science are indistinguishable, like color bands on a spectrum.
Philosophy’s forte is generalization. Science’s is specialization. The inauguration of the PhD
degree in German universities in the 19th century heralded the separation of the two fields:
The dangers for a philosopher’s development are indeed so manifold today that one may
doubt whether this fruit can still ripen at all. The scope and the tower-building of the
sciences has [sic] grown to be enormous, and with this also the probability that the
philosopher grows weary...so he never attains his proper level, the height for a
comprehensive look, for looking around, for looking down (ibid., 314).

The brain’s “expansion valve” mode drives the proliferation of the sciences. The success
of the sciences in predicting and controlling experience forces philosophers into the respective
specializations of philosophy so prominent in contemporary philosophy. Imitating scientists,
philosophers have become specialists or even handmaidens to science. Against this tide,
Nietzsche advocates a return to the primal essence of philosophy—the creation of new values as
an expression of life’s force:

_Genuine philosophers...are commanders and legislators:_ they say, “thus it shall be!”

They first determine the Whither and For What of man, and in so doing have at their
disposal the preliminary labor of all philosophical laborers, all who have overcome
the past. With a creative hand they reach for the future, and all that is and has been
becomes a means for them, an instrument, a hammer. Their “knowing” is creating, their
creating is a legislation, their will to truth is—_will to power_ (ibid., 325).

Philosophy stands outside of science in several ways. It judges the value of science with
respect to life: the philosopher “demands of himself a judgment...about life and the value of life”
(ibid., 314). And philosophy creates the diverse methodologies or research paths that inspire
scientific creativity. Nietzsche identifies the philosopher as a “genius—that is, one who either
begets or gives birth, taking both terms in their most elevated sense....” He contrasts the
philosopher with the “scholar, the scientific average man” who “always rather resembles an old maid: like her he is not conversant with the two most valuable functions of man” (ibid., 314, my emphasis). Those two functions are precisely the “begetting” and “giving birth” to the direction of life and science as a part of life. Philosophical guidelines create new knowledge.

The philosopher is the advance guard on reduction’s path. Scientific reductions are limited to specializations like physics, chemistry and biology. Within those fields are even sharper reductions. Newton reduced the difference between motions in the heavens and on the earth to universal laws. Darwin reduced the differences between human and all other life forms to the common process of evolution. Maxwell reduced electricity and magnetism to a common set of fundamental laws. Teams of contemporary physicists reduce nuclear and electromagnetic phenomena to electroweak laws. And string theorists in pursuit of theories of everything or grand unifying theories seek the marriage of gravitational with electromagnetic and nuclear phenomena.

Nietzsche’s reduction exhibits a far greater and deeper scope. He would like to reduce all experience to its foundation in value. And like Hume, he finds the source of all value in feeling. The force of life or the will to power is in turn the source of feeling. Philosophy at its maximum performance aims to create new values, new rules for the direction of life under conditions of maximum uncertainty. Down from that almost impossible goal are the lesser tasks of philosophy: to create new ways to solve problems not in the whole of life but in the details of life.

The German invention of the PhD degree maps—albeit unconsciously—this function of philosophy forcefully. Think of the irony of receiving a degree in chemistry or business that is nevertheless a degree in philosophy. What have engineering or neuroanatomy to do with philosophy? Our careful separation of philosophy from the sciences and engineering is a creation of 20th century separation of intellectual powers. As Descartes strove for a distinctive philosophical method that would yield the objectivity of the mathematics and sciences of his day, 20th century philosophers like Quine and Wittgenstein saw philosophy as a handmaiden to science (Quine 1972).

Analytic philosophy, philosophies of language, mathematics, logic and science became the staples of philosophy departments in elite universities in English-speaking nations.
Philosophy’s old mission, creating values and rules for the direction of life, was left to modest redoubts in those departments or more robust fortresses in European universities.

Why regress to Nietzsche’s vision for philosophy now? If danger is morality’s source, then new dangers call for new philosophies. The more minds working toward those philosophies, the better the chances of their discovery. We must democratize philosophy. Our best hope for doing this is to re-imagine the role of philosophy in education.

Nietzsche’s flaw is to reserve the practice of philosophy only for the elite. A philosopher’s virtues “must have been acquired, nurtured, inherited, and digested” to prepare him for “great responsibilities, the loftiness of glances that dominate and look down, feeling separated from the crowd and its duties…” (ibid., 330). Nietzsche despised the socialism emerging in his times. Confronting Darwin’s theory of evolution, especially as promulgated through Spencer’s emphasis on “survival of the fittest,” Nietzsche fantasized that a “new man” shaped by the will to power would supplant humanity just as humans supplanted the other higher primates. In Zarathustra, he brought his own imaginative powers up short by claiming that in the long run the herd mentality characterizing the common man would overcome the true philosopher’s “loftiness of glances” (see Johnson 2010 for Nietzsche’s anti-Darwinism and Richardson 2004 for his pro-Darwinism).

What Nietzsche didn’t appreciate was the evolutionary force behind Christian and Marxist “herd philosophies.” The survival of a community depends most especially on its capacity for flourishing. Flourishing depends upon a community’s numbers or size, the strength of its binding principles and the excellence of each of its members. The implicit wisdom of both Christianity and Marxism is that their potential communities include every human being. The binding forces of these communities are so powerful that their members are willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their fellows. The human “herd” can only achieve its full potential when virtually all of its members reach the godlike status of Nietzsche’s “new man,” the “superman.” The path to that new man is through philosophy. As we will see in the essay’s conclusion, recent philosophers claim that new technologies may act as midwives to the birth of the new man (Verdoux, 2011).
Philosophy’s resurgence depends on educators’ recognition that philosophy can never be finished. The philosopher’s mistake is to imagine that her particular choice of a foundational value may capture an eternal truth:

“Philosophers’ error.— The philosopher supposes that the value of his philosophy lies in the whole, in the structure; but posterity finds its value in the stone which he used for building, and which is used many more times after that for building—better. Thus it finds the value in the fact that the structure can be destroyed and nevertheless retains value as building material” (Human, All Too Human, 157).

The world’s most renowned philosophers have seized upon important aspects of the nature of life and how we should live, but a new value is always waiting in the wings.

Philosophers become justly famous for pointing out that the things we think we want are in fact things we really shouldn’t want. We naturally want to survive and to make sure that those closest to us—genetically, linguistically and emotionally—do so as well. Against this “natural” inclination, Christ (among others East and West) lets us know that love is the objective, not survival. The Buddha famously claims that the key to human flourishing is to want to stop wanting altogether.

Every philosopher who has guided (or in some cases, summarized the guidelines of) billions of lives in new directions has amplified our sense of the nature of life, its meaning and how we should live. European thought seen from the greatest Nietzschean height emphasizes the importance of rationality over other human objectives. Imagine being told that you should spend your whole life in school! No one could possibly accept this preposterous rule for the direction of life. Yet that rule encapsulates the wisdom and power of Plato. Perhaps only Plato took himself seriously.

European philosophers focused on the power of reason, one of rationality’s primary instruments. Reason is our capacity to unify and thereby predict and control experience through the power of abstraction. Through concepts or ideas, we create or unveil patterns or forms (think of the terms in-formation) that weave our experiences together. Of course there were many exceptions to the global European emphasis on reason. For Hume, reason was itself the slave of passion or emotion. Nevertheless, he reasoned his way to this conclusion. Bentham and Mill
argued that pleasure must be the end of human life. But Mill, like Aristotle, reasoned that reasoning itself has the greatest capacity for delivering pleasure.

Other philosophers like Marx and Nietzsche assumed that freedom should be the primary objective of humans—a goal so important that it is well worth dying for. But Marx and Nietzsche came to this conclusion in part through the influence of Kant and Hegel’s insistence that reason is the pre-condition and primary instrument for producing freedom.

African philosophers in ancient Egypt, Nubia and Ethiopia saw harmony or peace as our primary ethical objective. That harmony included not simply humans, but also the whole earth community of living and non-living beings (Verharen 2012a).

Like Jews, Christians and Muslims, Hindu and Buddhist philosophers thought that the whole point of life had to be completely beyond life in a transcendent or spiritual realm. The Hindus believe that we must wake up to the fact that life is but a dream and that we in fact are God. Like ancient Africans, Chinese Daoist philosophers believe that our goal must be to achieve harmony and balance with all other life forms and the earth itself.

Nietzsche’s wisdom is to insist that philosophy can never be finished. My highly simplified (that is to say, philosophical, in Nietzsche’s sense) compendium of the global history of philosophy only reveals what we have learned about ourselves and our world in the last five thousand years of written history (Collins 1998, McEvilley 2002). If Nietzsche is right that new philosophies emerge from new dangers, then we must impatiently await the next great philosophers. Unlike Nietzsche, however, we should believe that philosophers are made rather than born: “For every high world one must be born; or to speak more clearly, one must be cultivated for it: a right to philosophy—taking that word in its great sense—one has only by virtue of one’s origins; one’s ancestors, one’s “blood” decide here, too” (Beyond Good and Evil, 330). Against Nietzsche, the more minds working on the problem, the better the chances of a solution emerging.

Philosophy as the evolving quest for the meaning and direction of life has barely begun its task. While our human heritage runs back millions of years, we as homo sapiens have only been on the planet for perhaps 200,000 years. We must see ourselves as utterly naïve, jejune, callow—featherless for the flights of fancy that the future will bring should we be wise enough to control the powers that science, technology, mathematics and engineering (STEM) unleash.
Oppenheimer’s recitation of Vishnu’s line in the *Bhagavad-Gita* is still apropos: “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.”

**Part II: Rorty’s Challenge to Nietzsche: The End of Philosophy**

Against Nietzsche’s view of philosophy’s immortality, Rorty believes that philosophy’s role in the evolution of thought is finished. Impressed by Nietzsche’s insistence that imagination is key to the pursuit of philosophy, Rorty sees the imaginative power of literature eclipsing the analytic power of philosophy. Like Heidegger (1997), Rorty believes that humanity has gone through several phases of intellectual evolution. The first phase is mythology and religion. The second phase is philosophy. When philosophy failed to yield objective (or at least consensual) answers to its fundamental questions, science—as we saw in Hawking’s declaration—attempted to usurp philosophy’s role as the “commander” of life. Because science restricts itself to empirical investigation, only literature has the capacity to project us into the future:

“For the religious idea that a certain book or tradition might connect you up with a supremely powerful or supremely lovable nonhuman person, the literary intellectual substitutes the…thought that the more books you read, the more ways of being human you have considered, the more human you become—the less tempted by dreams of an escape from time and chance, the more convinced that we humans have nothing to rely on save one another” (2009b, 13).

For members of the new literary culture, “philosophy was a transitional stage in a process of gradually increasing self-reliance” (*ibid.*). With Nietzsche, Rorty agrees that philosophy’s questions can never be answered in an objective, definitive way. Philosophy’s gravest mistake is to imagine that its objective was a final Truth capable of guiding humans safely through their lives for the duration of human existence. In the first version of his last essay before his death Rorty (2009a) proclaimed that literature must now assume philosophy’s historic responsibilities. Literature’s exercise of the imagination has been much more forceful than philosophy in orienting humans toward better ways to live. Shakespeare and Cervantes rather than Hume and Kant should be our models for reconceiving the nature of life and better ways to live.
Rorty takes Nietzsche’s call for grand reduction of experience to a single controlling value to its apotheosis. While Nietzsche kept a place open for new controlling values in the future, Rorty commits himself to an immortal value. Influenced by pragmatist predecessors like James and Dewey who were in turn influenced by revolutionary trends in 18th and 19th century philosophy, Rorty works toward a “a maximally free, leisured, and tolerant global community” (2009b, 13).

The purpose of literary imagination is to expand our conceptions of what it means to be free. Freedom is the precondition of survival, since the variety engendered by freedom is not simply the spice but more importantly the engine of life. Leisure and tolerance are indispensable to freedom. The former furnishes time for the exercise of creativity, and the latter allows the products of creativity to flourish. A global community grounded in cultural difference is humanity’s best hope for survival and flourishing (Locke 1989, Verharen 2001a). The global movement from small groups to tribes to nations to empires suggests that an evolutionary mechanism undergirds Rorty’s quest (Wrangham 2004, Pinker 2011, Verharen et al. 2011).

Unlike Nietzsche, Rorty depreciates the role of rational critique in the exercise of literary imagination. While Nietzsche disparages Kant’s philosophy as limited to critique rather than bold new visions of how we should live, he nevertheless insists on critique’s indispensability for philosophical creativity. The philosopher’s training must include all the less general exercises of the intellect, including science, history and art. However, the history of philosophy, including philosophers of pure critique like Kant, ignites philosophical imagination. It distills the complex systems of prior philosophers into terse summations that may be easily grasped—and thereby overthrown. For Nietzsche a “genuine” philosopher must have been “critic and skeptic and dogmatist and historian and also poet and collector and traveler and solver of riddles and moralist and seer.” But those roles “are merely preconditions of his task: this task itself demands something different—it demands that he create values” (Beyond Good and Evil, 326).

Rorty’s error is to favor literary imagination over rational critique. Bold new philosophical visions like those of Christ or the Buddha may have the emotional power to overcome their predecessors. But carefully reasoned arguments on behalf of new philosophies like those of Marx and Dewey amplify philosophical creativity.
A second error for Rorty follows in Nietzsche’s footsteps—an inclination to elitism. Rorty’s first version of his last article gives pride of place to literary figures who imagine new directions for life. Responding in the second version of that article to Richard Bernstein’s criticism of his sense that ethical truths can’t be found through argument, Rorty admits that literary imagination is simply one element of life—one that cannot be given commanding roles. Rorty inveighs against Oscar Wilde’s idea that poets, philosophers, scientists are “real men,” benefactors to all humanity: “The idea that some men are more really men than others contradicts Wilde’s own better wisdom, as when he says ‘There is no one type for man. There are as many perfections as there are imperfect men’” (2009b, 11). Literary productions must be measured against the standard of their “social utility” as judged by the egalitarian members of a “free, leisured, and tolerant global community” (ibid., 13)

Like Nietzsche, Rorty believes that neither great philosophy nor literature matters to the great mass of humans for whom popular culture is enough. Our collective experience with democracy is reason enough to reject their elitism. Humanity’s problems have reached such a pitch that we need the creative minds of virtually all humans to have any hope of solving them before they overwhelm us.

Part III: Philosophy’s Place in K-16 Curricula

In a recent article in *Metaphilosophy*, Tim Crane cites Wilfrid Sellars’ sense of philosophy: “The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term” (Sellars cited in Crane 2012, 21). Sellars’ description is incomplete. Philosophy also aims to understand how “things fall apart,” in Yeats’ immortal words (Staub 1989). However, Sellars’ sentiment captures the generality of philosophy. The expression *hang together* is perhaps the simplest formulation of thinking as an agent of connectivity.

Sellars seizes upon Nietzsche’s conviction that philosophical vision must be from a great height so that it may encompass all experience. Examining the principles whereby everything hangs together captures Nietzsche’s sense that philosophy must be the driving force of life. Ever seeking to expand the range of one’s vision, searching for hidden principles beneath obvious
principles, viewing the history of those principles with an eye toward replacing them—all these express Nietzsche’s definition of philosophy. Nietzsche has made no new discovery in defining philosophy’s roles, as both Plato and Aristotle saw philosophy as synoptic, foundational and self-correcting.

Introducing philosophy into education means exposing students to the deepest controversies in every subject they study (Graff 1992). In my introductory philosophy classes I ask students to explain why my pen falls when I drop it. They of course answer that it falls because of the force of gravity. Paraphrasing the title of a wonderful book (Loewen 2007), I say that this answer is one of the lies your teachers told you.

A better answer to the question is that no one knows why objects with mass behave in gravitational ways. Theories abound. Gravity may be a force carried by waves or particles called gravitons. Einstein can claim that mass warps the shape of space to cause gravitational phenomena. But why does mass warp space? Descartes explained gravitational movement through vortices in a hypothetical ether, the plenum of space. Newton saw gravitational force as acting at a distance through the vacuum of space, but he famously said he had no idea how that could happen: “hypotheses non fingo” (Verharen 2006).

Introducing philosophy into the curriculum in this example would mean simply confessing our ignorance and asking students for help: “We don’t know why the pen falls, but we can describe its behavior very precisely. We would very much like to discover why it falls. Would you please help us out with our research?” Posing such a question and making such a request, even to very young students, can give them an avenue to turn school away from the drudgery of fact-gathering into the joy of exploration and discovery (Matthews 1996, 1982).

This proposal is hardly new. Western philosophers of education like Rousseau, Dewey and Montessori have capitalized on the model of education as discovery. What is new in what I am proposing is that philosophy be introduced systematically into every subject at every level of education. Matthew Lipman’s Philosophy for Children Program at Montclair State University offers a K-12 philosophy curriculum. However, the program offers course modules in philosophy rather than saturation of the curriculum with philosophy.

Is there a hard and fast—and practical—way to separate philosophy from science? Philosophical problems are the sort that simply won’t go away. Scientific problems begin as
philosophical problems and then vanish. Heliocentrism trumps geocentrism forever once celestial parallax is confirmed. But the deepest scientific problems can never escape philosophy. The ultimate cosmological question, where did it all come from, is homologous to ancient Egyptian, Greek and contemporary cosmologists. The connectivity of the respective traditions’ answers to this question expands massively over time, however.

Dewey remarks on philosophical problems, ‘‘We do not solve them: we get over them’’ (Dewey cited in Kitcher 2011, 252). From Nietzsche’s point of view, Dewey could not be more wrong. We “try on” solutions, sometimes for the moment, sometimes for the millennia. For Nietzsche, “real” philosophy creates new solutions to old problems. That very process creates new problems. The generality of philosophical problems and answers renders them more unfit for verification than scientific generalizations.

A seductive test (in concert with other tests—see Verharen et al. 2011, Verharen 2006) of both philosophical and scientific generalizations is Dewey’s, however—practical application. This process requires varying time spans across the two disciplines. Hindu philosophy has sustained itself over three and a half millennia. Aristotle commanded numerous followers for 2,000 years. Newton’s science of mechanics had a much briefer lifespan, although his generalizations still have practical uses for predicting and controlling lesser masses and velocities. Quine and his fellow naturalists are right to say that all philosophical claims are “vulnerable to revision in the face of empirical evidence” (Lewens 2012, 47). Philosophy is indeed an experimental discipline, though its experiments may run for thousands of years (Appiah 2008).

Philosophy’s problems are compelling and urgent. While with Socrates we can be certain our solutions must be passing fancies, we must commit ourselves to those fancies in order to get on with life. We can wait millennia for consensual answers to purely scientific problems. But we must have instant solutions to the deepest philosophical problems in order to know how to live. Contemporary philosophers question the power of philosophy to solve problems: “Many contemporary philosophers see themselves as problem solvers—like natural scientists. This seems to be mistaking the characteristic philosophical vocation. To philosophize is to engage in a reflective activity, but it is hardly a domain where one expects to solve problems” (Hedley 2011, 115). Against this sentiment, I claim that philosophical problems must be solved in order to
know how to live. They may only be solved for the nonce—or perhaps for millennia in the case of long-lived philosophies.

Introducing philosophy into education means exposure to controversy at multiple levels of generality. Certainly this is true for the grand problems of life such as Kant’s “what can I know,” “how should I live” and “what may I hope for.” But it’s also true for problems of fine-grained detail. Every intellectual discipline’s mission is to solve problems within a specific area of experience. The philosophy of those disciplines dictates their unsolved problems and the controversial methods for research into their solutions. Such controversy is the life-blood of every discipline, from fine arts and practical arts through history, science and particularly philosophy itself. Controversy in the fields of mathematics, logic and grammar is more difficult to glimpse for the uninitiated. However, non-Euclidean geometries, Gödel’s discoveries of inconsistency and incompleteness in formal systems, Chomsky’s postulation of a universal grammar and the failure of Russell to derive mathematics from logic disclose the deeply contentious nature of these fields. The Bourbaki group inverted Russell’s hypothesis to claim that logic is simply a part of mathematics following from set theory.

Grounded in uncertainty and controversy, emboldened by its synoptic and foundational vision, critical of all its predecessors, saturating all intellectual disciplines (including itself—hence the journal Metaphilosophy), philosophy has the power to turn every discipline into a “blood sport.” Philosophy on Nietzsche’s definition is like life itself, red in tooth and claw: “I love only what a person hath written with his blood” (Thus Spake Zarathustra, 23).

Educators will have good reasons to resist this model of philosophical education. Students must learn the basics of a discipline before they can be competent to criticize well-established disciplinary practices. Teachers must retain autonomy in the classroom to ward off chaos. I appreciate these kinds of hesitation. However, apprenticeship in the basics of a subject must be conducted with student focus on the problem to be solved—with philosophical awareness that alternative solutions may exist. Students should be sensitized to search for those alternatives as soon as they are grounded in the field’s basic methods of research.
Conclusion: Democratizing Philosophy: Whose School? Whose Life?

Reflecting on the history of revolutions in ethics has compelled me to rethink the nature of philosophy and education in terms of evolutionary theory (Singer 2011, [omitted for refereeing]). To summarize once again the results of this research in Dewey’s words, philosophy is education and education is philosophy. If this premise is true, the consequences for education are provocative. If Nietzsche is right that danger is the source of morality and that grave danger demands a global response, then the survival of life as we know it commands a global infusion of philosophy into education.

The Senegalese historian, Cheikh Anta Diop (1990), puts it this way. Evolution drives us to survive. And creativity is our means of survival. As the leisure that makes creativity possible, school is the instrument of survival. We cannot have life without school. Conversely we cannot have school without life. What is more important—survival or creativity? Life or school? All are inseparable and philosophical reflection is their driving force.

The final questions are: Whose school? Whose life? A proper school aims at the PhD, the pinnacle of our schooled capacity to solve life’s problems. Whose lives should aim at the PhD? If we now face the gravest self-caused dangers to our survival, should not all humans aspire to the PhD—whether actual or virtual?

Preposterous! However, Nietzsche would insist that philosophical commands be outrageous to their first hearers. Think of Thomas Jefferson’s (1781/2011) absurd—for the times—proposal that rich men should pay for the grammar school education of poor men’s sons. W.E.B. Du Bois (2001) uttered his own command about proper schooling in the context of African American experience. He said that the point of a black university is not to train professional problem-solvers to go into their supporting communities to get high paid jobs. Rather university students should go into those communities in order to teach community members how to solve their own problems. Service learning with éclat!
Going even further, Du Bois said that African American colleges and universities (HBCUs) should create models whereby virtually every human being would have a university education. His inspiration for this proposal was the African American civil war troops in Kansas who took the idea of universal public education back to the South. In Du Bois’ eyes, those troops inspired an ideal for HBCUs to follow—universal public education not simply at the elementary and high school levels for African Americans, but also universal university education (Verharen 2001b).

Alain Locke (1989), the first African American Harvard PhD in philosophy, Rhodes scholar and founder of Howard University’s philosophy department, echoed Du Bois in advocating university-level education for adults who had missed that privilege. Anna Julia Cooper (1988), the first African American woman to receive her PhD in philosophy from the Sorbonne, used her house near the Howard University campus as a night school for adult university-level education. Howard University’s founding mission was to offer a first-rate education in problem-solving to students who would not otherwise have the opportunity. Civil War general Oliver Otis Howard thought that freed African Americans were most in need of higher education to solve their problems autonomously (Logan 2004). Du Bois capitalized on General Howard’s wisdom to insist that all humans be invested with a university-level education. In his vision, universities must no longer be instruments for the production of an elite corps of professional problem-solvers. Rather they must become instruments for empowering those populations most in need.

Distribution of university education to a global audience requires its de-institutionalization. Visiting Africa for the first time, Du Bois reveled in the West African integration of education with life: “[children] sat in council with their elders and learned the history and science and art of the tribe, and practiced all in their daily life. There could not be uneducated people. There could be no education that was not at once for use in earning a living and for use in living a life” (Du Bois 2001, 84).

Can new technology help turn Du Bois’ dream into reality? Harvard and MIT’s recent collaboration on the “edX” project will distribute STEM courses around the globe through MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). Stanford’s Sebastian Thrun offered an online course on introductory artificial intelligence to 160,000 from 190 countries (Auleta 2012, 47). Udacity
and Coursera augment leading research universities’ efforts to distribute university-level education throughout the world through for-profit credit certification. While MOOCs have severe student-retention problems, new adaptations of socially relevant computing, wireless broadband access to global networks and distance learning grounded in expert tutorial computer programs can make it possible for the university to come to the community rather than vice versa.

On a final note, a compelling reason to democratize philosophy is to further democracy itself. In its present guise, what passes for democracy relies on the “wisdom of the crowd” for its justification. In Du Bois’ vision of the future, a true democracy would guarantee that every member of that “crowd” be an aristocrat, educated in schools infused with philosophy. Du Bois had to overcome his former elitist view that only the “talented tenth” could profit from a university education. If his new vision is purely utopian, then Du Bois satisfies Rorty’s demand that philosophy be imaginative fiction. If his ideal is preposterous, then Du Bois salutes Nietzsche’s command that philosophy be provocative: “How I understand the philosopher—as a terrible explosive, endangering everything…” (Ecce Homo, 737).

* Portions of the paper are adapted from [omitted for refereeing].

References


