

# Philosophy and Raising Good Citizens

Stephen Law\*

Oxford University Department of Continuing Education.

\*Corresponding author. Email: [think@royalinstitutephilosophy.org](mailto:think@royalinstitutephilosophy.org)

**Keywords:** philosophy; schools; Holocaust; education

## Abstract

What's the best way to raise good citizens – individuals who will do the right thing even in the most challenging of circumstances? I argue that philosophy has an important role to play.

*This is an edited draft of a short talk I gave as one of the panellists at a British Academy event on 'What's the point of Philosophy?' in 2016.*

Here's one reason why I believe engaging young people with philosophy, especially in the classroom, is a good idea.

Two of Britain's best-known philosophy for children organizations are called *Sapere* and *Aude*. It's no coincidence that 'Sapere Aude' – *dare to know* – is also the motto of the Enlightenment. But how might the Enlightenment and philosophy for children be related?

The Enlightenment figures Diderot and d'Alembert defined the Enlightened thinker as one who,

trampling on prejudice, tradition, universal consent, authority, in a word, all that enslaves most minds, dares to think for himself.

Kant, in a short article entitled 'What is Enlightenment?', said that Enlightenment is:

emergence of man from his self-imposed infancy. Infancy is the inability to use one's reason without the guidance of another. It is self-imposed, when it depends

on a deficiency, not of reason, but of the resolve and courage to use it without external guidance. Thus the watchword of enlightenment is: *Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use one's own reason!

For Kant, Enlightened citizens are not just intellectual *able* to think for themselves, they also have the *courage* to do so. The contrast is with individuals who, while perhaps intellectually able, are also intellectually *submissive*: fearful of questioning what authority and tradition dictate.

Most proponents of philosophy in the classroom are in favour of raising citizens who are, in Kant's sense, Enlightened. Getting young people to engage in philosophy is an obvious way of getting them to think critically and independently about some of the most fundamental beliefs they bring with them into the classroom, including their moral and religious beliefs.

But why is raising autonomous critical thinkers prepared to rely on their own intellects, rather than on authority and tradition, a good idea?

In fact, by no means everyone thinks it *is* a good idea. There's no consensus that we *should* aim to raise Enlightened citizens. Some warn of dire



consequences. They argue that if young people are encouraged to rely on their own intellects rather than on the reliable moral compass that religious authority has traditionally supplied, they will end up *morally rudderless*, subject to whatever whim or malign influence blows their way. They're likely to drift into moral catastrophe.

I won't engage with this or other criticisms now as there isn't time. Instead, I'll quickly sketch three reasons why I think aiming to raise Enlightened citizens is, on balance, a good idea.

The first reason is that, like it or not, we just *are* each unavoidably responsible for making our own moral judgements. If an authority in chemistry instructs me to mix some chemicals and the resulting explosion kills several people, I can excuse myself by saying I was only following instructions. But if a religious authority tells me to go out and kill some unbelievers, and I do so, I can't excuse myself in the same way. I have an unavoidable responsibility to make my own moral judgement, a responsibility I can't hand over to

some supposed expert in the same way that I might reasonably hand over responsibility for making judgements concerning chemistry, or physics, or plumbing. Given we each have this unavoidable responsibility for making *our own* moral judgements, shouldn't our education system both confront us with it, and also ensure we have the intellectual and emotional maturity we'll need to discharge it properly? That, I think, is something that philosophy, when done well, does well.

A second reason for encouraging the next generation to take a step back and question what we have morally taken for granted, and to figure out the perhaps previously unrecognized consequences of our most fundamental moral beliefs, is that it's by means of such thinking that moral progress is made. Great moral advances in our attitudes towards women, gay people, and other races have taken place over the last century or so largely as a result of our being prepared to question received moral opinion and think things through in the way philosophy requires.

# ‘But why is raising autonomous critical thinkers prepared to rely on their own intellects, rather than on authority and tradition, a good idea?’

Here’s a third suggestion why it might be a good idea to raise Enlightened citizens. Traditional, authority-based approaches to moral and religious education – which encourage attitudes of submission and more or less uncritical acceptance – tend to produce *moral sheep*. Moral sheep *may* do the right thing. But only if that’s what the rest their flock are doing.

A society of moral sheep can be pleasant enough. While the flock follows a benign authority, crime may be non-existent and the streets litter-free. But a society of moral sheep is a dangerous thing. When some new, perhaps more charismatic and less benevolent, authority figure comes along, our flock will merrily follow them instead, perhaps down some very dark alley.

How do we best guard against that?

Professor Jonathan Glover, Director of the Centre for Medical Law and Ethics at King’s College, London, conducted research into the backgrounds of both those who were most eager to join in killing in places like Nazi Germany, Rwanda and Bosnia, and also those who worked to save lives, often at great risk to themselves. As Glover explained in an interview in *The Guardian*:

If you look at the people who shelter Jews under the Nazis, you find a number of things about them. One is that they tended to have a different kind of upbringing from the average person, they tended to be brought up in a non-

authoritarian way, bought up to have sympathy with other people and to discuss things rather than just do what they were told.

Glover added: ‘I think that teaching people to think rationally and critically actually can make a difference to people’s susceptibility to false ideologies.’

In their book *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*, the Oliners also report that one of the most significant differences between the parents of those who rescued and those who didn’t lay in the emphasis they placed on reasoning:

*[P]arents of rescuers depended significantly less on physical punishment and significantly more on reasoning.*

*[I]t is in their reliance on reasoning, explanations, suggestions of ways to remedy harm done, persuasion, and advice that the parents of rescuers differed from non-rescuers.*

The Oliners add that ‘reasoning communicates a message of respect for and trust in children that allows them to feel a sense of personal efficacy and warmth toward others’. By contrast, the non-rescuers tended to feel ‘mere pawns, subject to the power of external authorities’.

Incidentally, the Oliners found that ‘religiosity was only weakly related to rescue’.

## Conclusion

Some believe that if we want to immunize the next generation against sliding into the kind of moral catastrophes that marred the twentieth century, our best bet is religion. I suggest a better bet is philosophy.

Raise children within a religious faith if you wish. But I would recommend no child be educated in a school that discourages independence of thought, that places certain religious beliefs intellectually off-limits, or that encourages children to suppose that what religious belief they hold is not a matter of their own free choice.

‘... if we want to protect young people from being indoctrinated into such poisonous belief systems, *our best defence is not to get our own indoctrination in first, but rather to give each of them some immunity to that sort of indoctrination.*’

Of course we do all want to influence what others believe, and in particular what the next generation believes. I don’t want the next generation of citizens growing up sexist or racist. I certainly don’t want them falling prey to those who would indoctrinate them with violent, extremist ideologies.

My suggestion is that if we want to protect young people from being indoctrinated into such poisonous belief systems, *our best defence is not to get our own indoctrination in first, but rather to give each of them some immunity to that sort of indoctrination.*

They’ll need the ability to spot when they’re being emotionally manipulated, when they’re being sold intellectual snake oil, and so on.

Of course there’s a risk attached to raising individuals to have both these kinds of skill and the courage to apply them. They may just end up using their newly acquired intellectual abilities to rationalize their own prejudices, or cook up justifications for whatever they’d *like* to be true. That’s a risk. But I think the greater risk comes from raising a generation of moral sheep.

**Stephen Law**

Stephen Law is Editor of THINK and Director of the CertHE and Philosophy at Oxford University Department of Continuing Education.

**Cite this article:** Law S (2024). Philosophy and Raising Good Citizens. *Think* 23, 65–68. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175623000519>

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Royal Institute of Philosophy. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.