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Life is a journey

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The editorial board generally agreed that this reflection is a fine illustration of how philosophical teaching and dialogue is a two-way street. Many who would acknowledge this to be the case with graduate students and bright undergraduates would think it to be less the case with pre-college students. As this piece and others published in prior issues of Questions indicate, we should not underestimate the capabilities of pre-college students to reflect upon classic philosophical works and themes, nor their capacity for novel thought.—Editors

Life Is a Journey . . .

Maryann Krikorian

My partner and I ended our last philosophy lesson with the topic question of, “what is personal identity?” At the corner of the classroom there was a boy who sat patiently listening to the discussion. The discussion was moving rapidly. Students battled with one another over the basis of personal identity; was it distinguished by our personality or by our appearance? I could tell by the boy’s body language he was just waiting for the perfect moment to share his thoughts about the topic. Once the debate simmered down, the boy calmly raised his hand. When I called on him to share, the boy simply replied, “Life is a journey . . . and along the way you figure yourself out, maybe for better or for worse.” At first, I didn’t make a correlation with his comment and the material we were discussing as a class. I simply thanked him for his participation and moved on to the next student who had their hand up waiting to be called upon.



After leaving the classroom that day I was still pondering the boy's comment. The comment was such a unique interpretation of the discussion that it had me thinking all day; and then it dawned on me! The majority of the students were coming to the conclusion that personal identity was based on a person's personality. If the theory the students concluded was hypothetically correct then who we are is defined by multiple factors, such as environmental influences. My immediate response to that would be, through a combination of time and trial and error we learn to be "better" people. Up until this point, I hadn't thought much about the possibility of evolving into a "worse" person.

I have always believed that people are innately good. People may do bad things, for reasons unknown, but the nature of their being is not to be evil. The boy stated his comment with a tone of bittersweet serenity. I then realized that I thought people were innately good because it made me comfortable to think so. It was comforting to know that people don't mean to intentionally cause harm to one another. However, the reality of it was that my ideology could be incorrect. Philosophy is about finding and creating your own understanding of things by observing the world and critically examining it. I then concluded that because everyone experiences a totally different aspect of life we will examine and observe the world in a different light. Philosophy will always be relative to a person, and there will always be questions with abstract answers we will not know for certain. To accept this understanding was to feel the bittersweet serenity I felt in the boy's words that day in the classroom. It was a bitter feeling because we would never have a direct answer to all our questions, and it was a sweet serenity because the fact that we will never have a direct answer to all our questions was our answer in itself.

I entered the classroom as a "philosophy facilitator," and I left that class as an equal. In the end I was just as much of a student as he was a teacher. I was taught something I never paid much mind to before, and I realized that the teachings of philosophy have no boundaries. It didn't matter that I was a college student working on a minor in philosophy. A ninth grade boy was just as much of a philosopher as I was.