NOT FOR PROFIT

WHY DEMOCRACY NEEDS THE HUMANITIES

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and continuous tradition will give us reference points for further analysis and theoretical sources to enrich it.

Starting in the eighteenth century, thinkers in Europe, North America, and, prominently, India began to break away from the model of education as rote learning and to pursue experiments in which the child was an active and critical participant. These experiments unfolded in different places to some extent independently, but eventually with a lot of mutual influence and borrowing. Socrates was an inspirational figure in all of these reform movements, but they were also inspired, and perhaps more so, by the sheer deadness of existing schools, and by educators’ feeling that rote learning and student passivity could not be good for citizenship or for life.

These school experiments all involved more than Socratic questioning. Much of what they proposed will concern us later, when we turn to world citizenship, and, especially, to play and the arts. In this chapter, we will need to lay out the basic ideas of each reform as a whole, in order to convey an overarching sense of each reformer’s aims, giving ourselves a framework within which to investigate the idea of critical thinking. As we do this, however, we shall then focus on the Socratic component of each thinker’s proposal, returning to other aspects of the education in chapters 5 and 6.

In Europe, a touchstone for all these experiments was Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s great work *Emile* (1762), which describes an education aimed at rendering the young man autonomous, capable of his own independent thought and of solving practical problems on his own, without reliance on authority. Rousseau held that the ability to navigate in the world by one’s own wits
was a key aspect of making a child a good citizen who could live on terms of equality with others, rather than making them his servants. A great deal of Emile’s education is therefore practical, and he learns by doing, a hallmark of all subsequent experiments in progressive education. The Socratic element is also prominent, however, as Emile is told nothing on authority from his teacher, but has to puzzle things out for himself, while the teacher simply probes and questions.

Rousseau did not set up a school, and *Emile* tells us little about what a good one might be like, since it depicts a single child with a tutor. In this sense, it is a profoundly nonpractical work, albeit philosophically deep. I shall therefore not dwell on the details of Rousseau’s rather schematic philosophical account, preferring to focus on real educational experiments inspired by it. For Rousseau’s ideas greatly influenced two European thinkers whose lives overlapped with his and who did establish schools in accordance with their views.

Swiss educator Johann Pestalozzi (1746–1827) took as his target the practice of rote learning and force-feeding, ubiquitous in schools of his day. The purpose of this sort of education, as he portrays it, was the creation of docile citizens who, as grown-ups, would follow authority and not ask questions. In his copious writings on education, some of them in fictional form, Pestalozzi describes, by contrast, an education aimed at rendering the child active and inquisitive through the development of his or her natural critical capacities. He presents the Socratic type of education as engaging and enlivening, and as just plain common sense—if one’s goal is to train the mind, and not to produce herdlike obedience.

Pestalozzi’s was not a narrow Socratism—he also gave significance, in education, to sympathy and affection. His ideal teacher
was a maternal figure, as well as a Socratic challenger. He was ahead of his era in urging a complete ban on corporal punishment, and he emphasized the importance of play in early education. We should bear this larger context in mind as we study his Socratic proposals, although we shall investigate it further only in chapter 6.

In the influential novel *Leonard and Gertrude* (1781), Pestalozzi describes the reform of education in a small town, from an elite sort of indoctrination to a highly participatory and democratic form of mental awakening. Significantly, the agent of this radical change is a working-class woman, Gertrude, who exemplifies the maternal, the inquisitive, and the down-to-earth, all in one. In her village school she educates boys and girls from all social classes, treating them as equals and teaching them useful practical skills. (“Surely it is human beings we are educating, not brilliant mushroom growths,” Pestalozzi at one point nicely observes.)

As with Emile’s tutor, Gertrude gets the children to solve problems for themselves—Pestalozzi is the inventor of the concept of the “object lesson”—and she always encourages active questioning. Unlike Socrates, however, and to some extent unlike Rousseau’s imaginary tutor, Gertrude is also affectionate and interested in cultivating the children’s emotional capacities along with their capacity for criticism. In the 1801 book *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children*, Pestalozzi summarizes the principles of good schooling, making it clear that family love is the source and the animating principle of all true education. He suggests that young men and women should both become more maternal and loving; princes, he suggests, have made people aggressive for their own selfish ends, but human nature is in its essence maternal, and this maternal care is the “sacred source of patriotism and civic virtue.” The Socratic
element in Pestalozzi must always be understood in connection with this focus on emotional development.

Pestalozzi was too radical for his time and place; the various schools he started were all failures, and Napoleon, whom he approached, refused to take an interest in his ideas. Ultimately, however, he had a great influence on educational practice, as people from all over Europe came to visit and talk with him. His influence extended to the United States, and both Bronson Alcott and Horace Mann owe much to his ideas.

Slightly later, German educator Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) conducted reforms of early education, in the spirit of Pestalozzi, that have changed the way young children in virtually all the world’s countries begin their schooling. For Froebel was the founder and theorist of the “kindergarten,” the year before “regular” schooling begins in which children are gently encouraged to expand their cognitive faculties in an atmosphere of play and affection, and one that, in a Socratic spirit, emphasizes children’s own activity as the source of their learning. Like Pestalozzi, Froebel intensely disliked traditional models of education that viewed children as passive vessels into which the wisdom of the ages would be poured. He believed that education should focus on eliciting and cultivating the child’s natural abilities through supportive play. The idea of the kindergarten is just this idea of a place where one learns and unfolds through play. Froebel has a lot of mystical views about the properties of certain physical objects, the so-called Froebel gifts: for example, the ball. By manipulating these symbolic objects, children learn to think actively and to master their environment. Modern kindergartens wisely leave Froebel’s more mystical flights to one side, while retaining the core idea that children learn to unfold themselves by active thought, reciprocity, and the active
manipulation of objects. Froebel believes that aggression is a reaction to natural helplessness and will drop away of its own accord when children learn to cope with the world around them, while their natural capacity for sympathy and reciprocity will be extended. In terms of our narrative of child development this is a bit too sanguine, but it goes in the right direction.

Because Froebel is concerned with extremely young children, Socratic techniques are not presented in any formal way, but their basis is firmly laid, by encouraging the child to be active, exploring and questioning rather than merely receiving. His idea that each child deserves respect, and that each (regardless of class or gender) should be an inquirer, is also thoroughly Socratic. Children all over the world today owe much to his contribution, since the idea of a type of early education through play in an environment of sympathy and love has created kindergartens more or less everywhere. This healthy idea is under pressure in our world, as children are pressed to drill at skills earlier and earlier in life, often losing opportunities to learn through relaxed playing.

Now our historical search moves to America, where European progressive reforms had a large and formative influence—perhaps explaining why the idea of liberal arts education has flourished here as it has not in Europe. Bronson Alcott (1799–1888) is best known today as the father of novelist Louisa May Alcott, and his school is lovingly depicted in her novels *Little Men* and *Jo’s Boys*. Louisa depicts her father (represented as Jo’s husband, Professor Bhaer) as following “the Socratic method of instruction”; he mentions that he is strongly influenced by Pestalozzi and Froebel. This appears to be an accurate characterization of Bronson Alcott’s orientation, although we must add to these influences that of German idealism and the poetry of Wordsworth.
At the Temple School in Boston, founded in 1834, Alcott taught thirty boys and girls, ages six to twelve. (Teachers, too, were both female and male.) In 1839 the school admitted a black pupil; many parents withdrew their children, and the school closed. But during its brief existence, it carried on and extended the legacy of European progressive education. Alcott’s methods are even more clearly Socratic than those of Pestalozzi and Froebel. Instruction always took the form of questions rather than assertions, as children were urged to examine themselves, both their thoughts and their emotions. “Education,” he wrote, “is that process by which thought is opened out of the soul, and, associated with outward things, is reflected back upon itself and thus made conscious of the reality and shape [of things]. . . . It is self-realization.” This is the language of Hegel, more than of Plato, but the bottom line, in terms of pedagogy, is Socratic. Education proceeds by questioning and self-scrutiny.

Like Froebel and Pestalozzi, Alcott diverged from Socrates in emphasizing emotional development and the role of poetry; classes often focused on the reading and interpretation of poems, Wordsworth being a particular favorite. Argument, however, was not slighted, and children were taught to take responsibility for defending their own ideas. For Alcott, as for his European predecessors, Socrates’ approach is incomplete because it does not attend to the emotions and the imagination. Nonetheless, Socrates supplied a major part of what all sought: an emphasis on self-examination, personal accountability, and individual mental activity as antidotes to an education that formed students into pliant tools of traditional authority.

I shall pass more rapidly over a figure of considerable historical significance, Horace Mann (1796–1859). A contemporary of
Alcott’s, but in some respects more politically mainstream, Mann might be the most influential figure in the history of American public education, before Dewey. Beginning with his pathbreaking reforms in the Massachusetts public schools, and ending with his work at Antioch College, which he founded, Mann, an abolitionist and a leading defender of women’s equality, always stood for inclusiveness: for a liberal education (not just manual training) for everyone, without cost; for free libraries all over the state; and for high standards of teaching in the schools that non-elite pupils attended. As with the figures we have considered, then, Mann was a reformer who detested mere rote learning. His reforms were closely linked to an egalitarian and inclusive conception of democracy. He held that no democracy can endure unless its citizens are educated and active. In matters of inclusion, he was a radical, insisting on equal education of all children regardless of race or sex, on a serious attempt to eradicate class distinctions in education, and even (at Antioch) on equal pay for women in faculty positions. It was under his influence that Massachusetts, in 1852, passed the first state law requiring compulsory school attendance.

In some respects, Mann also shared pedagogical ideas with our earlier reformers; he rejected ineffective and authoritarian methods of teaching, seeking understanding rather than routine. His emphasis, however, was typically on basic competence, literacy, and numeracy; and his critique of authoritarian teachers (especially dogmatic religious teachers who based their teaching on the Bible) was therefore somewhat limited, focusing on the evident nonsuccess of such methods in teaching reading and writing. His insistence on getting children to understand what they were reading was defended less by appeal to the intrinsic worth of questioning
and reflection than by pointing to the fact that children simply cannot learn reading by imitation, without understanding.

At Antioch, toward the end of his life, his radical inclusiveness continued (Antioch was the first U.S. college to educate women and men as full equals, and one of the first to educate black students and white students as equals). Meanwhile, his Socratic commitments became clearer: Antioch was the first college to emphasize classroom discussion, and it even offered independent study under faculty guidance.

Mann, in short, was a great practical reformer and a powerful champion of democratic education. At least where the schools were concerned, however, he focused above all on basic skills, and his commitment to Socratic and democratic values in the classroom was less central and less reflective than that of the other figures our historical excursus has discussed. With regret, we shall therefore leave him at this point and turn to a thinker who brought Socrates into virtually every American classroom.

Undoubtedly the most influential and theoretically distinguished American practitioner of Socratic education, John Dewey (1869–1952) changed the way virtually all American schools understand their task. Whatever the defects of American primary and secondary education, it is generally understood that stuffing children full of facts and asking them to regurgitate them does not add up to an education; children need to learn to take charge of their own thinking and to engage with the world in a curious and critical spirit. Dewey was a major philosopher, so, with him as with Rousseau, it will not be possible to go deeply into the elaborate ideas underlying his educational practice, but we can at least get a general idea of the connection he made between democratic citizenship and Socratic education.
Unlike all the theorists we have previously considered, Dewey lived and taught in a thriving democracy, and the production of active, curious, critical, and mutually respectful democratic citizens was his central goal. Despite Dewey’s wariness of classical “great books”—because he saw such books turned into authorities, and name-dropping substituted for real intellectual engagement—Socrates remained a source of inspiration for him, because he brought lively rational and critical engagement to democracy. Another important inspiration was Froebel—to the exposition of whose ideas Dewey, rarely fond of writing about his distinguished predecessors, devotes considerable emphasis.4

For Dewey, the central problem with conventional methods of education is the passivity it encourages in students. Schools have been treated as places for listening and absorbing, and listening has been preferred to analyzing, sifting, and active problem-solving. Asking students to be passive listeners not only fails to develop their active critical faculties, it positively weakens them: “[T]he child approaches the book without intellectual hunger, without alertness, without a questioning attitude, and the result is the one so deplorably common: such abject dependence upon books as weakens and cripples vigor of thought and inquiry.” Such a subservient attitude, bad for life in general, is fatal for democracy, since democracies will not survive without alert and active citizens. Instead of listening, then, the child should always be doing: figuring things out, thinking about them, raising questions. The change he wanted was, he said, “the change from more or less passive and inert recipiency and restraint to one of buoyant outgoing energy.”5

The best way of rendering young people active, Dewey believed, was to make a classroom a real-world space continuous with the
world outside—a place where real problems are debated, real practical skills evoked. Thus Socratic questioning was not just an intellectual skill, it was an aspect of practical engagement, a stance toward problems in real life. It was also a way of engaging with others, and Dewey always stressed the fact that in a good school pupils learn skills of citizenship by undertaking common projects and solving them together, in a respectful and yet critical spirit. Cooperative activity had, he believed, the additional dividend of teaching respect for manual labor and other trades; conventional schools often encourage an elitist preference for sedentary occupations. So Dewey’s Socratism was not a sit-at-your-desk-and-argue technique; it was a form of life carried on with other children in the pursuit of an understanding of real-world issues and immediate practical projects, under the guidance of teachers, but without imposition of authority from without.

Typically, students would begin with a specific and immediate practical task: to cook something, or weave something, or maintain a garden. In the course of solving these immediate problems, they would be led to many questions: Where do these materials come from? Who made them? By what forms of labor did they reach me? How should we think about the social organization of these forms of labor? (Why is cotton so difficult to prepare for weaving? How did these practical problems interact with slave labor? Questions might fan out in many directions.)

In short, the Socratic questioning grows from a real event, as children are led to treat these events, and their own activity, as “points of departure.” At the same time, by learning that producing cotton thread connects to all these complicated questions, children understand the complex significance of manual labor it-
self, and learn a new attitude toward it. Above all, children are learning through their own (social) activity, not by passively receiving; they thus model, and learn, citizenship. Dewey’s experiments have left a profound mark on early education in America, as has his emphasis on the interconnectedness of the world, which we shall discuss in chapter 5, and his focus on the arts, which we shall discuss in chapter 6.

I have spoken so far of a Socratic method that had wide influence in Europe and North America. It would be wrong, however, to think that a Socratic approach to early education was found only there. Rabindranath Tagore in India conducted a closely related experiment, founding a school in Santiniketan, outside Kolkata, and, later, as mentioned, a liberal arts university, Visva-Bharati, to go with it. Tagore was far from being the only experimental educator in India in the early twentieth century. A similar progressive elementary school was set up in connection with Jamia Millia Islamia, a liberal university founded by Muslims who believed that their own Quranic tradition mandated Socratic learning. All these experiments are closely connected to reforms of traditional laws and customs regarding women and children, such as raising the age of consent to marriage, giving women access to higher education, and, ultimately, giving them full citizenship in the new nation. Such reform movements existed in many regions. Tagore’s experiment, however, was the most widely influential of these attempts, so I shall focus on it.

Tagore, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, was one of those rare people who have world-class gifts in many different areas. He won the prize for his poetry, but he was also a superb novelist, short-story writer, and playwright. More remarkable, he
was a painter whose work is valued more highly with the passing years, a composer who wrote more than two thousand songs, which are immensely loved in Bengali culture today—including songs later adopted as the national anthems of both India and Bangladesh—and a choreographer whose work was studied by founders of modern dance such as Isadora Duncan (whose dance idiom also influenced his) and whose dance dramas were eagerly sought out by European and American dancers who spent time at his school. Tagore was also an impressive philosopher, whose book *Nationalism* (1917) is a major contribution to thought about the modern state, and whose *The Religion of Man* (1930) argues that humanity can make progress only by cultivating its capacity for a more inclusive sympathy, and that this capacity can be cultivated only by an education that emphasizes global learning, the arts, and Socratic self-criticism. All these aspects of Tagore’s genius made their way into the plan and daily life of his school. It was, perhaps above all, the school of a poet and artist, someone who understood how central the arts all are to the whole development of the personality. Although this aspect of the school will occupy us only later, in chapter 6, it is important to bear in mind that it established the context within which his Socratic experiment unfolded. Both the Socratic and the artistic aspects of the school were inspired by a hatred of dead and imprisoning traditions that kept both men and women, as he saw it, from realizing their full human potential.

Tagore, like many people of his social class, was learned in Western thought and literature. (He translated Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* into Bengali at the age of fifteen.) His educational philosophy may well have been influenced a bit by Rousseau, and a lot of
his thought shows the influence of cosmopolitan French thinker Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who also influenced John Stuart Mill, who wrote an entire book about Comte. Thus we could call Tagore and Mill cousins: Tagore’s idea of the “religion of man” is similar to Mill’s notion of a “religion of humanity,” and both have their roots in Comte’s idea of inclusive human sympathy. Tagore and Mill had a similar hatred of the tyranny of custom, and both were energetic proponents of individual liberty.

If Tagore was influenced by some Western thinking, however, influence went, even more clearly, in the other direction. His school was visited by countless artists, dancers, writers, and educators from Europe and North America who took his ideas home with them. He met and corresponded with Maria Montessori, who visited Santiniketan to observe his experiments. Leonard Elmhirst spent some years at Tagore’s school, and then, returning to Britain, founded the progressive arts-oriented Dartington Hall, a school that is still a beacon of the type of education I am defending. Tagore may also have influenced John Dewey. Although such links are difficult to trace because Dewey rarely describes his influences, we know that Tagore spent extended periods in Illinois (visiting his son, who was studying agriculture at the University of Illinois) at just the time Dewey was establishing his Laboratory School. At any rate, whether there was influence or not, the ideas of the two men about critical thinking and the arts are closely related.

Tagore hated every school he ever attended, and he left them all as quickly as possible. What he hated was rote learning and the treatment of the pupil as a passive vessel of received cultural values. Tagore’s novels, stories, and dramas are obsessed with the need to
challenge the past, to be alive to a wide range of possibilities. He once expressed his views about rote learning in an allegory about traditional education called “The Parrot’s Training.”

A certain Raja has a beautiful parrot, and he becomes convinced that it needs to be educated, so he summons wise people from all over his empire. They argue endlessly about methodology and especially about textbooks. “Textbooks can never be too many for our purpose!” they say. The bird gets a beautiful school building: a golden cage. The learned teachers show the Raja the impressive method of instruction they have devised. “The method was so stupendous that the bird looked ridiculously unimportant in comparison.” And so, “With textbook in one hand and baton in the other, the pundits [learned teachers] gave the poor bird what may fitly be called lessons!”

One day the bird dies. Nobody notices for quite some time. The Raja’s nephews come to report the fact:

The nephews said, “Sire, the bird’s education has been completed.”
“Does it hop?” the Raja enquired.
“Never!” said the nephews.
“Does it fly?”
“No.”
“Bring me the bird,” said the Raja.
The bird was brought to him. . . . The Raja poked its body with his finger. Only its inner stuffing of book-leaves rustled.
Outside the window, the murmur of the spring breeze amongst the newly budded asoka leaves made the April morning wistful.

The students of Tagore’s school at Santiniketan had no such sad fate. Their entire education nourished the ability to think for oneself and to become a dynamic participant in cultural and politi-
cal choice, rather than simply a follower of tradition. And Tagore was particularly sensitive to the unequal burden dead customs imposed upon women. Indeed, most of the searching questioners in his plays and stories are women, since dissatisfaction with their lot prods them to challenge and to think. In his dance-drama *The Land of Cards*, all the inhabitants of that land act robotically, playing out two-dimensional lives in ways defined by the card-picture they wear—until the women begin to think and question. So Tagore’s Socratism, like his choreography, is shaped by his passionate defense of women’s empowerment, as well as by his own unhappy experience in old-fashioned schools.

The school Tagore founded was in many ways highly unconventional. Almost all classes were held outside. The arts were woven through the whole curriculum, and, as mentioned, gifted artists and writers flocked to the school to take part in the experiment. But Socratic questioning was front and center, both in the curriculum and in the pedagogy. Students were encouraged to deliberate about decisions that governed their daily life and to take the initiative in organizing meetings. Syllabi describe the school, repeatedly, as a self-governing community in which children are encouraged to seek intellectual self-reliance and freedom. In one syllabus, Tagore writes: “The mind will receive its impressions . . . by full freedom given for inquiry and experience and at the same time will be stimulated to think for itself. . . . Our mind does not gain true freedom by acquiring materials for knowledge and possessing other people’s ideas but by forming its own standards of judgment and producing its own thoughts.”12 Accounts of his practice report that he repeatedly put problems before the students and elicited answers from them by questioning, in Socratic fashion.
Another device Tagore used to stimulate Socratic questioning was role-playing, as children were invited to step outside their own point of view and inhabit that of another person. This gave them the freedom to experiment with other intellectual positions and to understand them from within. Here we begin to see the close link Tagore forged between Socratic questioning and imaginative empathy: Arguing in Socratic fashion requires the ability to understand other positions from within, and this understanding often provides new incentives to challenge tradition in a Socratic way.

Our historical digression has shown us a living tradition that uses Socratic values to produce a certain type of citizen: active, critical, curious, capable of resisting authority and peer pressure. These historical examples show us what has been done, but not what we should or can do here and now, in the elementary and secondary schools of today. The examples of Pestalozzi, Alcott, and Tagore are helpful, but extremely general. They do not tell today’s average teacher very much about how to structure learning so that it elicits and develops the child’s ability to understand the logical structure of an argument, to detect bad reasoning, to challenge ambiguity—in short, to do, at an age-appropriate level, what Tucker’s teachers did in his college-level course. Indeed, one of the great defects of Tagore's experiment—shared to some degree by Pestalozzi and Alcott—was that he prescribed no method that others could carry on in his absence. Prescribing is, of course, a delicate matter when what one wants to produce is freedom from the dead hand of authority. Froebel and Dewey offer more definite guidance because they do not simply theorize, they also recommend some general procedures in early education that others
in different times and places have imitated and recast with great success. Dewey, however, never addressed systematically the question of how Socratic critical reasoning might be taught to children of various ages. Thus, his proposals remain general and in need of supplementation by the actual classroom teacher who may or may not be prepared to bring this approach to life.\textsuperscript{13}

But teachers who want to teach Socratically have a contemporary source of practical guidance (which, of course, must be only part of an overall program to structure a Socratic classroom in which children are, throughout the day, active and curious participants). They can find very useful and yet nondictatorial advice about Socratic pedagogy in a series of books produced by philosopher Matthew Lipman, whose Philosophy for Children curriculum was developed at the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children at Montclair State College in New Jersey. Lipman begins from the conviction that young children are active, questioning beings whose capacity to probe and inquire ought to be respected and further developed—a starting point that he shares with the European progressive tradition. He and his colleague philosopher Gareth Matthews share, as well, the view that children are capable of interesting philosophical thought, that children do not just move in a predetermined way from stage to stage, but actively ponder the big questions of life, and that the insights they come up with must be taken seriously by adults.\textsuperscript{14}

Lipman also thinks that children can profit early on from highly specific attention to the logical properties of thought, that they are naturally able to follow logical structure, but that it usually takes guidance and leading to help them develop their capacities. His series of books—in which complex ideas are always presented through engaging stories about children figuring things out for
themselves—show again and again how this attention to logical structure pays off in daily life and in countering ill-informed prejudices and stereotypes. Two examples from his first book, *Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery*, will illustrate the basic idea. Harry (whose name, of course, alludes to Aristotle and to Aristotle’s discovery—and Harry’s—the syllogism) is playing around with sentences, and he makes a discovery: Some sentences cannot be “turned around.” It is true that “all oaks are trees,” but it is not true that “all trees are oaks.” It is true that “all planets revolve about the sun,” but it is not true that “all things that revolve about the sun are planets.” He tells his discovery to his friend Lisa, but she points out that he is wrong when he says, “You can’t turn sentences around.” Sentences that start with “No” work differently. “No eagles are lions,” but it is equally true that “no lions are eagles.” The two friends happily embark on more language games, trying to sort out the terrain for themselves.

Meanwhile, real life obtrudes. Harry’s mother is talking to her neighbor Mrs. Olson, who is trying to spread some gossip about a new neighbor, Mrs. Bates. “That Mrs. Bates,” she says, “. . . every day I see her go into the liquor store. Now, you know how concerned I am about those unfortunate people who just can’t stop drinking. Every day, I see them go into the liquor store. Well, that makes me wonder whether Mrs. Bates is, you know . . .”

Harry has an idea. “Mrs. Olson,” he says, “just because, according to you, *all people who can’t stop drinking are people who go to the liquor store*, that doesn’t mean that *all people who go to the liquor store are people who can’t stop drinking*.” Harry’s mother reproves him for interrupting, but he can tell from the expression on her face that she is pleased with what he has said.
Logic is real, and it often governs our human relations. Lots of slurs and stereotypes work in exactly this way, through fallacious inference. The ability to detect fallacy is one of the things that makes democratic life decent.

Harry and his friend Tony, with their teacher, are working out the difference between “every” and “only.” “Every,” like “all,” introduces a sentence that cannot be turned around. Tony tells Harry that his father wants him to be an engineer like him because Tony is good in math. Tony feels that there is a problem with his father’s argument, but he doesn’t know quite what it is. Harry sees it: The fact that “all engineers are people who are good in math” doesn’t mean that “all people who are good in math are engineers”—or, the equivalent, that “only engineers are good in math.” Tony goes home and points this out to his father, who, luckily, is impressed by his son’s acuity rather than annoyed by his failure to like his career advice. He helps Tony draw a picture of the situation; a large circle represents people who are good in math. A smaller circle inside this represents engineers, who are also good in math. But there is room for something else in the large circle, clearly. “You were right,” says Tony’s father with a faint smile, “you were perfectly right.”

All this takes place in the first few pages of the first book in Lipman’s series, intended for children ages ten to fourteen. The series contains books that progress in complexity, but also cover different areas: mind, ethics, and so forth. The whole sequence, its rationale, and its pedagogical use are nicely explained in a book for teachers, *Philosophy in the Classroom*, which also discusses teacher training and the bare bones of an M.A. degree program in this area. The series as a whole takes students to the point where
they might begin to work through Plato’s Socratic dialogues on their own, the point, roughly, where Billy Tucker’s class begins, although it can be reached earlier by children with regular exposure to Socratic techniques.

This series is aimed at American children. Part of its appeal is familiarity, and the gentle humor that pervades it; so it will have to be rewritten as culture changes, and different versions will need to be devised in different cultures. What is important is to see that something like this is available, and that the teacher who wants to do what Socrates, Pestalozzi, and Tagore all did need not be an inventive genius like them. Some franchised methods are lifeless and excessively directive in themselves. Some become like this because of misuse. In this case, however, the humor and freshness of the books themselves, and their respect for children, are strong bulwarks against misuse. The books obviously do not constitute a complete Socratic approach to education. The whole ethos of the school and classroom has to be infused with respect for the child’s active powers of mind, and for this Dewey is an especially powerful guide. They do, however, supply one component of such an education in an accessible and lively way.

The aspiration to make elementary and secondary classrooms Socratic is not utopian; nor does it require genius. It is well within the reach of any community that respects the minds of its children and the needs of a developing democracy. But what is happening today? Well, in many nations Socrates either was never in fashion or went out of fashion long ago. India’s government schools are by and large dreary places of rote learning, untouched by the achievements of Tagore and his fellow Socratic educators. The United States is somewhat better off, because Dewey and his Socratic experiments have had widespread influence. But things
are rapidly changing, and my concluding chapter will show how close we are to the collapse of the Socratic ideal.

Democracies all over the world are undervaluing, and consequently neglecting, skills that we all badly need to keep democracies vital, respectful, and accountable.