

Article

Sisyphus and Climate Change: Educating in the Context of Tragedies of the Commons

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Abstract: The tragedy of the commons is a primary contributing factor in ensuring that humanity makes no serious inroads in averting climate change. As a recent Canadian politician pointed out, we could shut down the Canadian economy tomorrow, and it would make no measurable difference in global greenhouse gas emissions. When coordinated effort is required, it would seem that doing the “right thing” alone is irrational: it will harm oneself with no positive consequences as a result. Such is the tragedy. And that is the challenge that we take up here. Though Garrett Hardin suggests that the solution is a governmental process that rules over all contenders, since a world government seems unlikely before the planet hits the tippy point, we suggest an educational initiative instead: one that holds a mirror up to the behaviour of individuals, rather than to the behaviour of individuals in groups. Such an educational initiative would be focused on priming individuals to keep constant track of what they do as individuals as opposed to focusing on the behaviour of humanity in general. Such an educational initiative would focus on tackling the “problem solvers” rather than just “the problem”.

Keywords: tragedy of the commons; climate change; Sisyphus; philosophy for children; increasing perspectives through dialogue; educating the self



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1. Introduction

Looking at a map of Africa in 1919 [1] (p. xxiii), one cannot help but be stupefied by the fact that, except for Ethiopia, South West Africa and tiny Liberia (i.e., significantly less than 10% of the continent), the rest of the continent either belongs outright to a European nation or is “a sphere of influence”.¹ How is that possible, one wonders? What is it that prompted the European nations to carve up the rest of the world amongst themselves in such an apparent frenzy? Historian Margaret MacMillan makes it clear through her narrative that the answer is the “tragedy of the commons” [2]. Since all the other nations were collecting colonies in order to access raw materials and find markets and thus remain economically competitive so as to ensure their very survival, every nation was under intense pressure to do likewise.

The situation was the same with regard to forming alliances, which, as it turned out, was a contributing factor to the madness of the WWI. Since other nations were forming alliances, each nation would have been under existential threat had they, too, not formed alliances. Since France formed an alliance with Russia, Germany formed an alliance with the Austro-Hungarian Empire—and, as it happened, it was precisely this alliance that led to the world at war. Once the Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war on Serbia as a result of the assassination of the Archduke, the alliance required that Germany do likewise. And so it went.

¹ This essay is dedicated to my friend and colleague Santiago Outon de la Garza who, on a train ride during the North American Association of the Community of Inquiry (NAACI) conference in Mexico in 2018, helped to plant the seed that became this essay; and to my daughter, Dr. Chelsea Himsworth, veterinary pathologist and research scientist, who continues to lay down the challenge that philosophy ought to get into the ring with science in trying to deal with some of the real-world challenges that face us all.

The same situation—this tragedy of the commons—is a primary contributing factor in ensuring that humanity makes no serious inroads in averting climate change. As testament to that fact, Jason Kenney, then the conservative opposition leader in the province of Alberta in Canada (now premier), in response to the question of whether climate change might be hoax, said “No” but “the problem is the tragedy of the commons. We could shut down the Canadian economy tomorrow, and it would make negligible, if any measurable difference in global greenhouse gas emissions” [3] (p. 21). Doing the right thing requires that we all do it, while doing the right thing alone seems irrational: it will harm oneself with no positive consequences as a result. Such is the tragedy.

If intelligent extraterrestrial life were looking down on us from afar, they might say: “Look at these humans! First, they bring misery to a large proportion of their own through conquest and slavery, then they chew up the best and brightest of their own through war, and now they are in the process of making their planet uninhabitable for human life. Surely they can find ways to fight back against this *inhuman* process”!

And that is the challenge that we take up here. Though Garrett Hardin suggests that the primary way to overcome the tragedy of the commons is through a governmental process that rules over all contenders [4], in light of the fact that a world government seems unlikely before the planet hits the tippy point, we suggest an educational initiative: one that holds a mirror up to the behaviour of *individuals*, rather than to the behaviour of *individuals in groups*. Such an educational initiative would be focused on priming individuals to keep constant track of what they do as individuals—something over which they have control and about which they can have optimism—as opposed to focusing on the behaviour of humanity in general, which can lead to paralyzing despair. Such an educational initiative would focus on tackling the “problem solvers” rather than just “the problem”.

So, let us begin.

2. How Important Are Scientific Facts?

Indeed: how important *are* facts? Clearly, being able to discern the facts—being able to estimate what is true—is critical for any decision maker. A deer in the woods would not survive long if it were unable to accurately discern whether the approaching shadow was friend or foe. Thus, given that *homo sapiens* (aka “wise men”) consider themselves as more rational than their animal cousins, one might suppose that we are experts at throwing facts at whatever challenges we face. And this would indeed be true if we were perfectly rational creatures (like Star Trek’s Data). However, neuroscience has shown that it is our emotional brain that responds to stimuli in the environment [5], and so it is our emotional brain that is ultimately the driver of our behaviour. And since, like deer, our survival depends on discerning friend from foe, aligning our views so as to ensure “goodness of fit” with those of the in-group is a force difficult to ignore. This is born out in brain studies that have shown that people will struggle mightily to maintain the political opinions that align with their tribe even in the face of strong conflicting evidence. Thus, in his book *How We Decide* [6], Lehrer argues that though “voters think that they are thinking, what they’re really doing is inventing facts or ignoring facts so that they can rationalize decisions they’ve already made”. “At such moments”, Lehrer goes on to argue, “rationality actually becomes a liability, since it allows us to justify practically any belief. The prefrontal cortex is turned into an information filter, a way to block out disagreeable points of view” [6] (p. 206).

This tendency to distort facts to preserve ideology is, in turn, exacerbated by the “fact” that many in contemporary Western culture—at least if Charles Pierce is correct [7]—have come to believe that facts themselves are a function of how many people believe them and how fervently they are believed [7] (p. 49)—hence the power of social media. Besides, Pierce notes (quoting American environmental lawyer James Gustave Speth), “nobody wants to believe bad things to begin with, and when you cannot see them, and you cannot verify them in our own experience, and then somebody tells you they are not happening,

well, it is very easy to conclude they are not happening" [7] (p. 215). So, throwing facts does little to nudge non-believers out of their cocoons.

As an aside, it is of note that a 2007 Gallop Poll found that 68% of Republicans did not believe in evolution [7] (p. 85). This fact should alert us to the fact that merely resorting to communicating facts, in ever-ascending volume, will do little to change minds.

3. How Important Is Philosophical Theory?

Environmental ethics is a popular undergraduate course. Such courses often begin with an overview of various normative theories, such as consequentialism, deontology, and virtue theory and then move to various specific problems, such as anthropocentrism, our duties to future generations, our duties to non-human animals, the importance of biodiversity, the problem of mass extinction, the threat of pollution and population growth, economic inequality, ozone depletion, and climate change. The result of this shotgun approach is often just despair. Nonetheless, a case can be made that having a clearer understanding of which theoretical approaches might (or might not) help us going forward is crucial.

Many philosophers have taken up this challenge. Dale Jamieson [8], for instance, suggests that, with regard to environmental change, deontology and contractarianism are unhelpful because the former focuses on what we intend to bring about (and no one intends to bring about catastrophic environmental change) [8] (p. 163), while the latter excludes all those who are not parties to the relevant agreements (such as future generations and non-human animals) (p. 162). Jamieson also dismisses act-utilitarianism on the grounds that humans are psychologically incapable of transforming into a moment-by-moment calculating devices [8] (p. 169). He does, however, recommend a kind of utilitarianism that he labels "virtue utilitarianism" [8] (p. 180), that, amongst other things, requires that an agent's decisions be "non-contingent" [8] (p. 176), i.e., not contingent on the agent's beliefs about the behaviour of others (contingency being the essential mechanism in a tragedy of the commons situation). In a tentative sketch of "green virtues", Jamieson argues that it must at least exclude ignorance, self-importance, or a lack of self-acceptance [8] (p. 181), and it must include a kind of temperance that is born of self-restraint and moderation [8] (p. 181), as well as mindfulness (as opposed to being unthinking and mechanical).

Ronald Sandler, in his book *Character and Environment* [9], echoes Jamieson's approach in laying out a virtue ethics approach to environmental concerns. His framework, however, brings with it its own tangles, such as his biocentric claim (similar to Paul Taylor's [10] notion of "teleological centers of life") that only life forms have inherent worth. As Katie McShane notes [11], this will be unacceptable to many environmentalists who care about natural entities such as rivers, rock formations, and islands for their own sakes, and think that it is the independent value of these things that makes preservationist attitudes toward them virtuous [11] (p. 215). And Allen Thompson argues that Sandler's 'noneudaimonistic'² teleological theory of environmental virtue is internally unstable [12] (p. 225), and in any case, Thompson suggests that it is time to bypass these distracting academic debates about whether an environmental framework is or is not sufficiently non-anthropocentric [12] (p. 225).

We ought to take seriously this latter comment, that these various academic debates may be just distracting. Whether one is inclined to embrace Singer's suggestion (contra Jamieson) that act-utilitarianism can hold one responsible for what one's behaviour contributes to the overall collective action [13], or Derek Parfit's suggestion that even if an act harms no one, it may be wrong because it is one of a set of acts that together harm other people [14] (p. 70), or whether we should rename "the tragedy of the commons" as "an argument from inconsequentialism" [15] (p. 230), philosophical theorists seem to be ignoring the elephant query in the room: Will exposure to these sorts of complex often contradictory theories have any impact on human behaviour?

² "noneudaimonistic" meaning unattached from human flourishing.

In 2014, a panel of Stanford scholars was asked a similar question: “Does Teaching Ethics do Any Good”?³ In response, the panelists agreed that ethics classes *cannot* be expected to make students more ethical. Still, panelist Benoît Monin, a social scientist and professor of the Graduate School of Business, said that he believed that his classes were nonetheless valuable because they give students a safe place to talk about moral disagreements and provided them with the language and social license to discuss topics they would not have otherwise felt comfortable bringing up. And philosophy Professor Tamar Schapiro argued that while exposing students to theorists such as David Hume and Immanuel Kant probably had little practical value, nonetheless her classes were important because they afforded students practice in engaging in productive dialogue.

These comments both suggest an educational detour. Instead of marking time in academic disputes about the pros and cons of various academic theories, the one thing we can be sure of is that individuals with strong characters, who have the capacity to think critically, and the propensity to dialogue cooperatively, will be absolutely essential if humanity is going to make any headway in tackling the enormous challenges we face. We should be focusing on the problem solvers, in other words, rather than the problems.

4. Focusing on the *Problem Solvers* Rather than the Problem

While it is certainly the case that ecological education is a necessary component of educating toward tackling the issue of climate change (all of us need to understand the potential catastrophic impact in order to care), and while analyzing the various possible philosophical perspectives on this issue may be helpful, neither is sufficient. We need, as well, to find ways to ensnare individuals into the cause through educational mirroring that reflects how their actions impact not just various problems, but their very identity. To do this, we need to educate the “engine of the self-development”. Specifically, we need to create educational affordances that help students learn how to *care deeply for themselves*—not in a superficial, narcissistic, all-for-me-in-comparison-to-you sort of way, but in a deeply-anchored, expansive and objective way; closer to what Fletcher, in his book *Situational Ethics* [16], refers to as *agape*. We need to educate students to want to be the best versions of themselves, even if growth sometimes seems painful.

We need to recognize that this might not be enough to save the planet; nonetheless, saving the planet should not be the only goal and may not be the best motivating force for action—at least, so it is being argued here. Nurturing human selves should also be a goal, which, in turn, may very well result in positive consequences for our environment. So, it is here that Sisyphus becomes our role model.

5. The Myth of Sisyphus

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was punished by the gods for impudence and defiance in the face of death by being sentenced, for an eternity, to roll an immense boulder up a hill only to watch it roll down again once it neared the top. Sisyphus was most famously portrayed in recent times by Existentialist philosopher Albert Camus [17], who describes him as an absurd hero.⁴ He is absurd because, though he may have to endure torment, he nonetheless says “yes” to life. He is master of his fate because he recognizes that “crushing truths perish from being acknowledged” [19] (p. 54); that human suffering is only futile if humans define it as such. Thus, at the end of the piece, Camus writes: I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one’s burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile.

³ <https://news.stanford.edu/news/2014/may/ethics-in-society-051314.html>.

⁴ Throughout his life, Camus pushed himself and those around him to engage in the timeless struggle against injustice (e.g., in the form of French colonial rule in Algeria, Fascism, Nazism and others). Though Camus understood that such struggles are often disheartening, he believed nonetheless that they ultimately make life worth living. In his biography of Camus [18], Zaretsky quotes Camus as saying: “It was the middle of winter, I finally realized that, within me, summer was inextinguishable” (p. 189): a sentiment that one can imagine are those of Sisyphus.

The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy [19] (p. 54).

How can this be, one wonders? How can Sisyphus be perceived as a hero, let alone perceive himself as one, when his accomplishments are negated? The answer is simple. All accomplishments are ultimately negated by death. What the typical Joe Hero did, or tried to do, 100 years ago, 500 years ago, or 2000 years ago has vanished into nothingness. It is in that sense that all lives are absurd. A true hero, therefore, is the individual who recognizes that, despite the tragedy of limited power when faced with the benign indifference of the universe (Camus' "The Stranger", [19], p. 49), one still has enormous power to *now* create the individual one wants to become, in light of the circumstances one must face, even if it is only how to bare one's suffering [20] (p. 162).

Creating an educational initiative that primes individuals to care for the self, however, is no easy matter, particularly since, in the materialistic, narcissistic, competitive world in which we find ourselves, the message can be easily distorted. That is, reinforcing the message that one ought to care for oneself might actually solidify the tendency of selves to be "problem creators" rather than a "problem solvers"—which is precisely why many ethical theorists and religions try to guide us away from "the love of self", and to care, rather, for the other. So, what kind of educational initiative would be such that it would motivate individuals to keep rolling the boulder up the hill: to do so *not* because of any instrumental advantage, but because one can do no other and still maintain the identity of who one is? What would an education that would promote an expansive, strong, positive self-reflection look like?

Given that a self quite literally comes into existence as a function of coming to see oneself and one's actions as being evaluated by others (initially by the primary caretaker [21], and given that a self continues to expand as a result of introjecting ever more viewpoints, we can presume that an education for an expansive, strong, positive self-reflection requires priming individuals to *expand the circle through which we evaluate ourselves*.

6. Expanding the Perspective from Which One Evaluates One's Self

Peter Singer talks about enlarging the circle of care: that we begin life caring about immediate family, and then, with moral maturity, that circle (hopefully) expands to include neighbors and friends, then citizens of the same county, then all humans and finally, with any luck, all living things [22]. The multi-million-dollar question, of course, is: what sort of experience is necessary to push out the circumference of that ever-enlarging circle?

In light of the apparent failure of Singer's suggestions to boost humans' altruistic tendencies or slow their break-neck continued destruction of the planet, we suggest a modification to his basic suggestion. Rather than attempting to get people to expand the circle of what they *care* about, we ought, instead, to begin with their built-in tendency to care about themselves and then alert them to the importance of expanding the circle from which they *evaluate* themselves. This is important because "who I am" is a matter of which evaluative predicates I can make stick, and the stickiness of those predicates, in turn, is a function not only of the reasoning that hold them in place [23], but, importantly, the size and heterogeneity of the community from which one receives evaluative splash back. A secure positive identity, in other words, is only possible if one's identity is not constantly subject to contradiction and assault. By expanding the circle of the evaluative viewpoints about which we care, we can "reasonably" steer our own responses so as to anchor an identity that is grounded in "objective" evaluation. We thus free ourselves to be who we truly want to be.

Supporting this view, Rosenthal and Burgeous note that Mead views the demand for freedom always as the demand to move "from a narrow and restricted community to a larger one" [24] (p. 161); and that "the only way in which we can react against the disapproval of the entire community is by setting up a higher sort of community which in a certain sense out-votes the one we find". They go on to say that Mead sees this process as "logically identical" with the replacement of an inadequate scientific hypothesis by a

new one that overcomes previous problems and conflicts. There is a “complete parallel” holding between the social situation and the situation of the scientists [24] (p. 162).

Immanuel Kant, in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* [25], makes a similar case when he argues that the easiest way to know what one ought *not* to do in any given situation is to imagine oneself being judged by a group of perfectly rational beings (a “Kingdom of Ends” that would judge “objectively”). This *universal* viewpoint is the ideal to which humanity ought to strive. And, indeed, perhaps this was the source of the aura of contentment that emanated from Sisyphus: he was confident of the reflected approval of an objective universal evaluative mirror.

7. Perspective Taking through Dialogue

Attempting to imagine how a Kingdom of Ends might judge one’s intended action is a handy short-cut when trying to assess its moral worth. There is a difficulty, however, that lies at the heart of this process and that is that the only check on the potential bias of one’s own thinking is one own biased self. “I have reasoned it through”, one may say, “and I can assure you that I am not the least bit biased”. But as Wittgenstein notes [26] (para 265), this is like checking the accuracy of a newspaper by going out and buying another copy of the same edition.

So, if “striving for a universal view “internally” is problematic, why not embrace the next best option, and go in the other direction, i.e., try to see the situation from as many *actual* points of view as possible, with the regulative ideal being an infinite number of viewpoints” [27] (p. 25).

Accessing a large number of *actual* points of view requires a lot of dialogue—something many might say is pervasive in this era of social networking—a point that is lent at least initial credence by a CNN report of a study that showed that the average US teen spends 7 h/day with their heads glued to a screen, and that does not include homework! [28]. However, dialogue that transpires in this kind of “connection” is not the sort that helps expand the circle of self-evaluation. In fact, the reverse is the case. Because of “filter bubbles” that result from computer generated algorithms that privilege information based on user location, past click-behaviour and search history (while filtering out the rest) [29,30], most of us are being insulated from viewpoints that differ from our own. The result is that many of us live in solipsistic echo chambers that diminish rather than enhance self-expansion. Sherry Turkle, in her book *Alone Together* [31], describes this new state of the modern self as “Tethered and Marked Absent” [31] (p. 155), which seems apt given the research that portrays the modern self as increasingly insecure, isolated, and lonely [31] (p. 157).

So, if strong selves are needed to withstand the forces of despair which blow forth from tragedies in the various commons of which we are apart, what selves need is not *just* dialogue. And nor, interestingly, is dialogue with those of opposing viewpoints sufficient. Having a discussion with someone with whom one radically disagrees typically manifests itself in a game of rhetorical turn taking, with listening happening only to collect fodder for counterattack. The goal in such situations is to win, not to genuinely reflect on the potential merits of the opposing viewpoint.⁵

Refusing to be open to opposing viewpoints should not be surprising. It is a natural offshoot of a distorted understanding of the self. Many believe that an attack on one’s position is an attack on one’s self, and that, therefore, under such an assault, mobilizing maximum resources to shore up the barricades is a justified response. As well, many believe that backing down or changing one’s mind in the service of acknowledging a stronger position is a sign of weakness, rather than strength.

⁵ A local historian discussing a recent committee meeting about the fate of a statue to Sir John A. Macdonald, the first prime minister of Canada whose policies had a negative impact on Indigenous people, is quoted as saying “I actually feel we all failed (because) we couldn’t find a way above all the yelling, blaming and shaming to listen to each other and hear the nuances of conversation that were opportunities for compromises and new ideas. We need to start over and review how we have these much-needed but very painful conversations. Next time, let’s not revolve around an axiom where somebody wins and somebody loses. Let’s find a way in which we can all win”. Vancouver Sun, 21 November 2020, p. NP5.

So, dialogue, even with those of differing points viewpoints, is not sufficient to nudge humanity off its collision course with fate. What is needed is an educational initiative that embeds within the self an appreciation for the kind of effective communicative interchange that expands the circle of self-evaluation and prompts self-development.

8. Perspective Taking through a Certain Kind of Dialogue

That the self can be more or less developed is a well-established thesis. It has been variously described as a function of perspective taking [21,32], dimensionality [33,34], the capacity for second-order reflection [35], the capacity for reflective self-governance [36], in terms of a hierarchy of needs [37], in terms of ego development [38], in terms of moral development [39], among others.

We will anchor the present discussion on the assumption that the self expands as a function of increased perspective taking. In terms of a developmental continuum, the initial or most primitive position of an individual's perspective-taking capacity can be described, using one of Piaget's terms [40], as "egocentric", i.e., viewing the world strictly from one's own point of view. In theory, the opposite pole is held down by the *regulative ideal* of being able to view any given situation from an infinite number of perspectives, i.e., a God's eye view. In between these two poles, again in concurrence with Piaget's theory of cognitive development, it can be presumed that the capacity for perspective taking—or what is sometimes referred to as differentiation—grows in an ever-expanding circle of differing perspectives.

Being able to converse with others so as to (a) entertain and (b) sincerely evaluate the merits of differing perspective is thus the key for self-expansion. However, given the brain-based propensity to hang on to that of which we are already certain [41], this kind of dialogue rarely happens naturally. It is for that reason that educative strategies that are anchored in "facilitated communal reasoned dialogue"—the sort exemplified in the Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI)—the pedagogical process that lies at the heart of Philosophy for/with Children (P4wC)⁶—ought to be considered essential for any educator who values strengthening selves.

Dealing with the notion of "communal" first, it is clear that a communal setting for dialogue is essential. If participants are to hear different perspectives, there must be individuals within that setting who, indeed, have differing perspectives. As John Stuart Mill has reminded us, one must be able to hear opposing viewpoints from persons who actually believe them, "who defend them in earnest and do their very utmost for them" [42] (p. 163). We must be able to *feel* the emotional force that is invested in those positions [42] (p. 164). A teacher playing devil's advocate just will not cut it.

For a community to be maximally effective, however, facilitation is needed for a number of reasons. For one, in such a collective, inevitably there will be those who are reluctant to speak due to personal, cultural or/and gender expectations. When this is the case, facilitation is essential to ensure that "silent voices" are given a space to quietly, even if reluctantly, try to articulate their position. As well, there may be those who suck the air out of the room by raging against a politically incorrect comment. Facilitation is needed in such instances to assist the community to regain its emotional footing so that participants are able to consider the merits of a potentially volatile suggestion that, heretofore, seemed *verboten*. Facilitation is critical also to ensure that those who are in the habit of "tuning out" when confronted with contrary views do not do so during the inquiry. Comments from the facilitator such as "So, John, what Sally just said contradicts your position. Would you care to respond to what Sally just said?" will keep participants engaged.

⁶ Philosophy for/with Children (P4wC) was created by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp as a pedagogy to foster thinking in young people. They established the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC <https://www.montclair.edu/iapc/>) at Montclair State University in the 1970s. Since then, P4wC centers have developed all over the world in multiple languages. In the English-speaking world, these include PLATO (<https://www.plato-philosophy.org/p4c/>); SAPERE (<https://www.sapere.org.uk/>); The Philosophy Foundation (<https://www.philosophy-foundation.org/>); Centers associated with FAPSA (<http://fapsa.org.au/>), and many others. There is also a UNESCO Chair dedicated to promoting philosophy for children. For a local center or practitioner, please contact ICPIIC (<https://www.icpic.org/>).

Aside from ensuring that different perspectives get into the game, facilitation is also essential to make sure that the game is one of reasoning together toward the most adequate of contending perspectives and not one of mere opinion gathering. It is pivotal, in other words, that facilitators understand that respect for *persons* does *not* translate into respect for all *perspectives* [43]. What we owe to one another, rather, is what Stephen Darwall calls “recognition respect” [44] (p. 33); to always be prepared to reason with others. For genuine reasoning to occur, facilitators must be able to screen communicative offerings through a critical mesh, so that, for instance, participants become aware of hidden premises to which they must assent given the argument articulated, that informal fallacies such as ad hominem attacks and begging the question are nipped in the bud, and that factual claims that do not have clear empirical support (e.g., that white Europeans invented slavery [45] (pp. 140–147)) are put in the freezer until and unless evidence becomes available.

Engaging in facilitated communal reasoned dialogue is thus a rigorous process that requires rigor from the facilitator. The payoff for participants, however, is worth the effort.⁷ Through this process, participants get practice in genuinely listening to and estimating the merits of viewpoints radically different from their own. They get practice in seeing positions, including their own, evaporate as a function of weak reasoning. And they experience, firsthand, the excitement of following reasons wherever they lead, even if it is into the arms of the opposition.

It is in this experience that they come to treasure a sense of an expanding self—a sense of becoming a member of an expanded evaluative community—a sense of the kind of emerging peace that comes with knowing that one need no longer always be defensive; that opposing viewpoints need no longer be blocked but rather welcomed as the fertilizer that feeds self-growth. It is through this experience that they come to realize that who they are and what they stand for is more important than anything of instrumental value. It is through this experience that they become Sisyphus.

9. An Example

The above may sound too abstract to be convincing, so let us supplement with a truncated description of a CPI that took place in a first-year university critical thinking class. Various thesis statements were put on the board as potential topics for mini-essays (one-page documents in which students must consider reasons both for and against). The class was then asked to pick the topic of interest. The question picked was: “I am justified in wearing low cut tops when waitressing as it brings me more tips”.

Note that the author of the claim was not known, so she was referred to as Sally. Note too that this is an instant of a young woman swimming in the midst of a tragedy of the commons.⁸ If all women are dressing in a sexual way in order to better acquire what they seek, to do otherwise seems irrational.

The initial few responses were of the following sort: *What’s the big deal? Who cares what Sally wears? If that is what she wants to wear, who are we to judge?*

Then the inquiry slowly moved to the following sort of comments: *It is fine for her to wear low cut tops as long as she knows the consequences. The consequences? Well, she won’t get much respect, will she? It’s her body: she can do with it what she wants. She is not hurting anyone, is she?* And on it went until the following comment emerged:

But wait a minute: Aren’t we supposed to be concerned about the objectification of women? If we are, then isn’t Sally contributing to the objectification of women. And if she is contributing to the objectification of women, then Sally is part of the problem.

So here, in abbreviated form, is the move from focusing on how one’s behaviour is measured by external factors (after all, she was not hurting anyone directly), to how one’s

⁷ Which may be precisely why the Stanford scholars located the value of their classes in student dialogue.

⁸ Or this can be referred to as “contingent behaviour”—what Sally is doing is contingent on what others are doing. Or this can be referred to “inconsequential behaviour”—what Sally is doing will have little to no consequence on the way women, in general, are treated.

behaviour reflects back on who one is as a person. The discussion moved, in other words, from focusing on the problem, to focusing on the problem solver.

What is particularly interesting about this move, as the ensuing discussion laid bare, is that even if Sally did refrain from dressing provocatively, it would not do much to change the sexist culture in which we live. Nonetheless, many in the inquiry believed that what was important here was the mirror; that ultimately Sally had to live with herself every minute of every waking day and that if that internal picture was one that she herself could admire from an “objective” point of view, her life to that degree would be more positive than if she had to live defensively, fending off the potential barbs of negative evaluation either from others, or from her future self should she come to decide, upon looking back, that dressing provocatively showed that she had become a pawn in the male game of female objectification.⁹

It was through this discussion that the participants themselves came to see the world as Sisyphus would: that what was important was not external rewards; what was important was that Sally was choosing who she wanted to be.

10. Focusing on Educators

Thus far, it has been argued that only focusing directly on a problem, particularly if it is collective in nature, often leaves us dumbfounded. It has been argued that instead of becoming distracted in the labyrinth of competing theories of how best to solve the problem, we ought to focus on the problem solvers, so that they learn to judge their actions from an ever wider more objective perspective. It has also been argued that promoting this way of being requires a certain kind of education, namely one that is critically and cooperatively dialogically person centered; one in which students are able to reflect on their own actions within facilitator-led dialogical interpersonal interchanges.

In so arguing, we have moved even further back in the chain of influence. It appears that the ultimate imperative is not that we should focus directly on the problem, nor even directly on the problem solvers. The ultimate imperative seems to be that we ought to focus on educators who are educating potential problem solvers.

What is needed is an education that focuses on student transformation, yet few educators assume that student transformation is within their purview of responsibility. In the field of psychology, for instance, few believe that learning about various theories of self-development actually fuels self-development. And few in the field of environmental studies believe that learning about the mechanics of climate change will have an empowering impact on the present environmental trajectory. And most in the field of philosophy would echo the beliefs of the Stanford scholars referred to earlier that taking ethics courses, be they environmental or otherwise, does little to make students more ethical.

One university professor found this state of affairs untenable. Matthew Lipman, then a logician at Columbia University, left his position in 1972, and devoted his subsequent career to pushing the stagnant stationary educational boulder uphill by establishing, and then working tirelessly for¹⁰, The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children¹¹ at Montclair State University in New Jersey. Lipman was adamant that educators corral their tendency to get distracted by information transfer, and instead educate so that young people actually learned how to think by engaging them in facilitator-led communities of inquiry (described above), and so be better able to make good judgments when faced with real-world challenges [46,47]. Lipman was also adamant that university elites get off their high horses of assuming that universities are societies’ crown jewels, and, instead, be a force for good though ensuring that an education for good judgment begins at the

⁹ It should be noted, however, that no particular action can be recommended as a result of this perspective. Sally may decide that she is prepared to benefit from the stupidity of men willing to tip more just for being able to see more skin. The right thing to do may not be to engage in a fruitless, unilateral reduction in one’s use of the commons, particularly if other more effective avenues are available, e.g., Sally might be pursuing a stellar education that will help her compete in a man’s world, and collecting more tips may help her do that.

¹⁰ Until his death in 2010.

¹¹ See footnote 5.

beginning, namely in elementary school [48]. Through all these efforts, Lipman becomes for us a role model, a Sisyphus in the service of transformative education that has the potential to transform the world.

11. Conclusions

Humanity is facing challenges that eclipse all past threats. Heretofore, we have managed to struggle forward through mobilizing the extraordinary reasoning power of our species. However, we now seem flummoxed by the fact that the most vicious of challenges are actually made worse through the use of reason. Reason tells us, after all, that if one country massively decreases its standard of living in an effort to do its part to combat climate change, but others do not follow suit, its citizens will suffer for no good reason. Reason tells us that if a young woman refuses to engage in the sort of sexualized behaviour admired by men, but others do not follow suit, she will suffer for no good reason.

So, what is to be done?

The answer is that we need to change what counts as a “good reason” from being that which is focused on instrumental value, such as social prosperity and collecting tips, to that which has intrinsic value. There is always a good reason for being the best version of yourself. Educational systems can nurture this process by ensuring that all students have access to ongoing communities of philosophical inquiry, so that, through this experience, they become comfortable with entertaining and sincerely evaluating the merits of different perspectives, and in the process feel the exhilaration of self-expansion. As a result, many may come to believe that doing one’s part to save the planet or doing one’s part to end the objectification of women is absolutely essential for maintaining a positive clear self-reflection, even if it is not enough to save the planet or end the often invisible oppression of women. And in the long run, if many become Sisyphus-like, then we will reinforce one another’s attitudes and actions, and though we may not be able to push each other’s rocks up hill, it will feel less lonely than being the only Sisyphus.

A strong self can withstand the irrational forces of a tragedy of the commons. A strong self is built through a process of perspective taking. Educators can initiate educational strategies that nurture the process of perspective taking. Educators, therefore, have it within their power to help humanity withstand the irrational demands of a tragedy of the commons. To have the way but not the will would seem unethical in the extreme.

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