



## Finalists, 2007 Kids Philosophy Slam, High School

### 2007–National 3rd Place Winner:

Meaghan Coombs, Massachusetts.

#### *My life, Impacted by Violence*

The past few years of my life have been exceptionally significant in terms of growing up. I can strongly say that the person I am today, as well as my maturity level, has been shaped due to the impact that violence has had on my life. Therefore, after looking back and thinking about society, including my own life, I feel that violence has had a greater impact on society than compassion. Violence is defined as damage through distortion or unwarranted alteration. Unwarranted alteration has affected my life immensely, and compassion, a deep awareness of the suffering of others, did not make that go away. In order to understand another's suffering, violence has to occur. Compassion does come out of violence, and I feel the greater impact on society has been violence.

Five and a half years ago the terrorist attacks on September 11th affected thousands of people across the nation. This violent act sparked compassion, yet families still suffer day-to-day without their loved ones by their side. I lost someone I loved on that day. On his way to a business trip, my dad was on flight eleven when hijackers took over the plane and crashed it into the World Trade Center. Along with the rest of society, my family is an example of personal devastation due to an extremely violent act.

The minute the news of my dad's death was public, friends, family, relatives, and even people we had never met came to our help immediately. Through violence came an amazing act of compassion. However, without this violent act, society and small communities probably wouldn't have come together to build a strong, helpful, compassionate unit. Of course, my family and I appreciated society's compassion, but that did not make the pain go away. Compassion did not erase the violent act that forever changed my life.

If violence never occurred, would society have come together like it did? This question remains unanswered, because society does not know life without violence. Whether on the news, in an individual's personal life, on the streets, or even in different parts of the world, violence has, and will continue to impact society greatly. As Faith Evans sings,

*Wish I could take away the pain out of your hands and help you hold them high. I know it ain't easy but it will be okay. I wish that we only saw good news every time we look at CNN, Wish I could bring back the people that died, I know it ain't easy but, it will be okay.*

This song truly depicts the violence that happens in society, and the compassion an individual feels for the victim affected. The narrator of this song wishes she could take away the pain, but her compassion cannot undo violence and the pain which is now buried deep inside of many victims of violent acts. If compassion means feeling the suffering of others, violence would have to occur first. Compassion sometimes improves violence, but it will never make it vanish forever; therefore, violence impacts society more than compassion.

### 2007–National 2nd Place Winner:

Tori Spearman, South Carolina

The issue of which is more influential, compassion or violence, has faced man over eons. But how can man even debate this issue when some of the greatest people in history have shown the importance of compassion?

Alfred Nobel is an example of a person who saw the importance of compassion over violence. This might appear ironic to us once we learn that he was not only the

founder of the Nobel Peace Prize, but also the inventor of dynamite. He saw that the violent explosiveness of dynamite may prove to be effective, but he saw more effectiveness in compassion. Nobel chose to give special recognition to those who sought peace: the ultimate end of compassionate thought and behavior. He found compassion to be more satisfying. "If I have a thousand ideas and only one turns out to be good I am satisfied." Employing compassion instead of violence may fail a couple of times but in the end it is more than worth the effort.

Nonviolence is the strongest weapon of compassion. Gandhi believed in the power of nonviolence. "Nonviolence is not to be used ever as the shield of the coward. It is the weapon of the brave." It is the brave who will use nonviolence to help bring positive change in the world. Gandhi pushed for compassion instead of violence because he believed that "We must be the change we want to see in the world." If compassion is the way people want to rule the world then people must first demonstrate it.

It is the compassion that people remember. While, it is hard to forget the violence that people have seen or suffered from, it is the compassion that will be celebrated and be inspirational to others. The best example of this is the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. was probably the most influential person of this movement. It was King who said "Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. . . . Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that." Martin Luther King, Jr. believed that compassion was much stronger because compassion is the only force that can overcome violence. Violence breeds more violence, people must learn to show love to solve some of the conflicts of the world.

Compassion is the strongest forces in the world. But people must learn to use it just like they must learn to crawl before they can walk. In order to solve some of the sins in the world everyone must learn to love and lend a helping hand rather than to employ violence and hate. Once people are able to do that the world might be able to reach the ultimate goal of peace.

### 2007–Most Philosophical Student in America:

James Cook, Virginia.

Violence has always had the greatest impact on mankind. Human existence is characterized by conflict, and violence is simply the most extreme form of such. Violence terrifies us, it excites us, it forces us to break from the norm. Without violence, or the fear of such, there is no motivation for action. We require struggle in order to develop as a species. It is as the dialectic defined by Hegel. It is the conflict between the thesis and the antithesis that makes society progress to the synthesis. Had the first humans possessed all they needed to be happy, they would have had no need to develop agriculture. If people then had been empathetic, or compassionate, and shared their surplus food with the less fortunate, then there should have been no need for war, which ultimately lead society to where it is now. Violence is the strongest motivation for change in a person. As Machiavelli said in *The Prince*:

*Upon this a question arises: whether it be better to be loved than feared or feared than loved? It may be answered that one should wish to be both, but, because it is difficult to unite them in one person, is much safer to be feared than loved, when, of the two, either must be dispensed with.*

He goes on to explain that people obey a beloved leader because they feel obliged to.

However, an obligation requires no bravery to break. Fear requires courage to stand against, especially the fear of violence. Anyone can break faith with someone, but there are few who can overcome the primal terror of violence.

In modern society, someone held at gunpoint and commanded to surrender his money will in all likelihood acquiesce, but then another person asked by a



filthy, ragged homeless person will perhaps give a few dollars and nothing more. The threatened man, though shaken considerably, will probably not suffer too greatly for the loss of a couple hundred dollars. The other man could do the same, but he feels little empathy for a stranger. It is violence that truly makes a mark on society. When a brutal murder is committed, it is shown that night on national television. But a surgeon who saves someone's life may not be recognized by her colleagues and that person's family, but recognition is not given on the same scale. An example is the D.C. sniper. The actions of two men terrified an entire city and the neighboring counties. Almost everyone was afraid that they would be the next victim. So it was also with Jack the Ripper. Serial killers are well-known to us, because it is them that we fear, and it is their kind we want to avoid. We know Osama Bin Laden and the al-Qaida. And yet their counterparts remain unmarked. A doctor might save a thousand lives in his lifetime, but the world doesn't head of it. It is expected of him; it's his job. People are supposed to be kind and helpful and to do "good" things, and consequently they make little impact on anyone's life except those they come directly in contact with. It is the violent people we know of; it is they who alter the way we live.

false. By Alice being only a figment of the Red King's dreaming, it calls to light our understanding of reality and by doing so, gives us an avenue for discussing it.

By bringing up the subject of dreams, Carroll can bring up the subject of reality. He is allowing for a questioning of reality by posing reality as dreams. So our dreams are not real, but is our reality just a dream. Alice is faced with the frightening idea that everything she believes to be real is just a dream. The only reply Alice has to this is to cry "I am real!"<sup>3</sup> Allan Lopez interprets this passage such that "To the extent, in other words, that her tears are registered as experience . . . they are 'proof' of her existence outside the space of mere 'thought'."<sup>4</sup> But even this is challenged by Tweedledee saying, "You won't make yourself a bit realer by crying."<sup>5</sup> How then, is Alice to prove she is real when the only defense she has is her ability to cry?

Perhaps the Unicorn gives the best answer to Alice's dilemma. "Well, now that we *have* seen each other," said the Unicorn [to Alice], "if you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you. Is that a bargain?"<sup>6</sup> So then, in Carroll's world it is belief that creates reality. Proof is not necessary, just belief. Anything you believe can be real, even if it is just a dream.

Along with Alice's questioning of reality, is Alice's questioning of herself. Throughout *Wonderland*, Alice questions who she is, and she spends most of the book trying to remember the answer to that question. She is challenged over, and over again to define herself by almost every character she meets.

## The Use of Philosophy in Children's Literature: Alice and Her Adventures

Cynthia Kepler

Most readers of Lewis Carroll's writings become familiar with the feeling that there is something other than the expected going on in them. Beyond just the simple narrative involved, Carroll (the penname of logician Charles Dodgson) was also spinning out playful episodes that include some truly vexing philosophical problems. However, because these puzzles are wrapped up in the midst of engaging adventures, these puzzles and the complexity of Carroll's work can be overlooked. In the following I suggest a number of different readings of Carroll's Alice books that would be useful to those attempting to integrate philosophy into an existing curriculum. Obviously, as readers become more advanced in ages the discussion of the elements can become more complicated. High school students thus might be rewarded by reading Carroll in contrast to (perhaps simplified) versions of the ethical readings included below. Younger students might just enjoy a discussion about language itself.

Both of Lewis Carroll's masterpieces, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, are centered on the concept of dreaming. "In *Wonderland* Alice falls down the rabbit-hole and straight into a dream sequence."<sup>1</sup> So too does Alice enter a dream world when she climbs into Looking-Glass world. While Alice is in both worlds she does not realize she is dreaming, so then what is a dream?

*'He's dreaming now,' said Tweedledee: 'and what do you think he's dreaming about?'*

*Alice said 'Nobody can guess that.'*

*'Why, about you!' Tweedledee exclaimed, clapping his hands triumphantly. 'And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you'd be?'*

*'Where I am now of course,' said Alice.*

*'Not you!' Tweedledee retorted contemptuously. 'You'd be nowhere. Why, you're only a sort of thing in his dream!'*<sup>2</sup>

By using Alice's encounter with the slumbering Red King, Carroll is able to bring to light the confusion inherent in dreaming. Dreams appear real to us while we are in them; it is only after that we believe them to be false. But how do we know that they are false? Perhaps our dreams are what is real, and our reality is what is

*'Who are you?' said the Caterpillar.*

*'I—I hardly know, sir, just at present—at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.'*

*'What do you mean by that?' said the Caterpillar sternly. 'Explain yourself!'*

*'I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, sir,' said Alice, 'because I'm not myself, you see.'*<sup>7</sup>

In Alice's encounters with the Caterpillar, and later with the Pigeon, "is that philosophical question 'Who are you?'"<sup>8</sup> Alice is trying to answer that, and she cannot. She can no longer figure out the boundaries that define her. "To the extent that the Caterpillar 'sees' Alice, he sees her as empty and hollow . . . [he] never conceives Alice as more than a repetition of that iterative—though empty—'I'."<sup>9</sup>

Because Alice cannot define herself, she is empty. She can only say what she was, not what she is, and that is not good enough. This is further echoed by the Mock Turtle. "'Once,' said the Mock Turtle at last, with a deep sigh, 'I was a real Turtle.'"<sup>10</sup> Since the Mock Turtle can only define himself by what he was, not what he is, he is no longer real. Carroll seems to suggest that a person must define themselves in the moment. Who you were doesn't matter, but who you are in the moment in which you answer the question is what's important.

Alice's encounter with the pigeon further elucidates the reader on Carroll's ideas about identity. Again, Alice is asked to define herself, and again she can not.

*'But I'm not a serpent, I tell you!' said Alice. 'I'm a—I'm a—'*

*'Well! What are you?' said the Pigeon. 'I can see you're trying to invent something!'*

*'I—I'm a little girl,' said Alice, rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through, that day.*

*'A likely story indeed! No, no! You're a serpent; and there's no use denying it. I suppose you'll be telling me next that you never tasted an egg!'*

*'I have tasted eggs, certainly,' said Alice, who was a very truthful child; 'but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know.'*

*'I don't believe it,' said the Pigeon; 'but if they do, why then they're a kind of serpent, that's all I can say.'*<sup>11</sup>

To the Pigeon, it is Alice's purpose that defines her. "There is a natural tendency . . . to understand the nature of a thing by reference to a purpose it serves or might serve."<sup>12</sup> The Pigeon understands Alice's identity by a purpose she might

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