



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

(continued on next page)



(continued from previous page)

serve; that of stealing the Pigeon's eggs. This is the only way the Pigeon has to understand Alice's nature and, in fact, when Alice tries to contradict the Pigeon, the bird will have none of it.

So then it is definition that creates reality. By defining what a thing is, and what purpose it serves, causes the thing to be real. Likewise, by restricting the definition to the moment in which it is questioned also causes a state of reality. Or so it would seem. But are these really Carroll's definitions of reality, or just possibilities for reality? Because if these ideas are set in stone, then how does one explain Humpty Dumpty?

When Alice meets Humpty Dumpty, he tells her many that leave her confused and uncertain. However, the one that can enlighten us to Carroll's views on the previous questions is the defining of the word 'glory.'

*There's glory for you!*

*'I don't know what you mean by "glory,"' Alice said.*

*Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!"'*

*'But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument,"' Alice objected.*

*'Whenever I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.'*

*'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'<sup>13</sup>*

By Humpty Dumpty defining "glory" however he chooses to, the idea of reality being definition is called into question. If a person can define a word anyway they wish, if "a word can be made to mean just what we want it to mean,"<sup>14</sup> then a true definition can not exist. The same can be said about reality. If we can define reality anyway we wish, then how can we say definition is reality. How can we even define reality?

This questioning of a question is Carroll's unique way of looking at philosophy. It is almost as if he is refusing to set in stone any concrete ideas about philosophy. He certainly does this with his presentation of reality, but he also does this with other ideas. One of his most blatant is the issue of morality.

One of the most memorable of Alice's adventures as she goes through *Wonderland*, is the changing of her size. In the past, Alice's continual eating and drinking of everything seemed foolish to me. She never thought ahead as to whether it was a good idea to put into her mouth everything she came upon. She just went ahead and did it. However, this opinion changed when I realized that she is trying to find the Golden Mean.

At the end of Alice's encounter with the Caterpillar, he says to her, "One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter" (Carroll 46). Alice breaks off pieces of the mushroom that the Caterpillar is talking about, and then proceeds to spend the rest of the story eating from one or the other. These pieces of mushroom, one which Alice keeps in her right-hand pocket and the other she keeps in the left, can be seen as the extremes to which Alice goes. She samples from one extreme and then from the other, all the while trying to find the best combination.

This certainly seems to be Carroll's interpretation of Aristotle. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle says, "That is why people at the extremes lay claim to the intermediate area."<sup>15</sup> The foods that Alice keeps consuming are the extremes of her behavior. She keeps trying to find the middle by consuming little bits from each extreme. This is very reminiscent of Aristotle's views on the mean. One goes on a trip from one extreme to another, each time going a little less far, until they reach the middle.

Alice begins at the most extreme as well. When she first eats of the mushroom she grows very small. She then tries to counteract this by eating from the other side of the mushroom, but ends up growing very large. She continues this trip of going from one extreme to another, until she learns to control the use of the

mushroom. "Then she set to work nibbling at the mushroom (she had kept a piece of it in her pocket) till she was about a foot high."<sup>16</sup> Carroll uses the mushroom to illustrate Aristotle's idea of finding the mean.

Another of the famous scenes from *Wonderland* is the Queen of Hearts repetition of the phrase "Off with her head!" The Queen says it constantly, and for little real purpose. But it is the maxim in which she rules her life. The Queen of Hearts can be seen as an exploration by Carroll into the idea of living your life by a maxim.

"The Queen had only one way of dealing with difficulties, great or small. 'Off with his head!' she said, without even looking around."<sup>17</sup> The Queen lives her life by only one rule, with no flexibility within it. It is quite reminiscent of Kant's categorical imperative: "act only with accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law."<sup>18</sup> The Queen wants her command to be a universal law. She wants the world to run so that anyone that causes displeasure will be dispatched of. In some ways she can be seen as the maxim. She is the universal law of "Off with their heads."

While Carroll brings up this view, he seems to mostly want to show how ridiculous it is. The Queen commands death to those who have committed no crime, and those who have not even truly offended her. She applies her maxim indiscriminately, and Carroll pokes fun at this. He seems to be asking, how can one rule apply to every situation?

Carroll also doesn't seem to believe that this rule of ethics works. None of the executions that the Queen orders ever come true, and in fact, the King pardons everyone.

*'What fun!' said the Gryphon, half to itself, half to Alice.*

*'What is the fun?' said Alice.*

*'Why she,' said the Gryphon. 'It's all her fancy, that. They never executes nobody, you know.'<sup>19</sup>*

It would seem in this exchange that Carroll doesn't believe in the feasibility of just one rule to live your life by. It is too easy to pretend with just one maxim. The Queen and all those around her pretend that her maxim is universal, but no one ever follows through on it. It isn't feasible for her to live her life by just one law, and is really ridiculous for her to try.

The Duchess is another example of Carroll's views on an ethical system. He is presenting an idea that everything has a moral to it, and again showing the absurdity that can come.

*'Tis so,' said the Duchess: 'and the moral of it is—"Oh, 'tis love, 'tis love, that makes the world go round!"'*

*'Somebody said,' whispered Alice, 'that it's done by everybody minding their own business.'*

*Ah, well. It means much the same thing,' said the Duchess, 'and the moral of that is—"Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves."<sup>20</sup>*

*'How fond she is of finding morals in things,' Alice thought to herself.<sup>20</sup>*

Carroll certainly seems to be commenting on the idea of being able to find a moral in every action. The Duchess finds morals in everything, but none of them make any sense. She's just saying them to sound as if she is knowledgeable, and as if she has morality worked out. She doesn't really have anything worked out; she's just pretending.

Carroll doesn't seem too fond of ethical systems. In these passages, he's trying to show how useless ethical systems can be. They can just muck things up and cause people to sound pompous. Neither the Duchess nor the Queen have ethical systems that really work. But they're putting them across anyway, and trying to force others to buy into them. At this point Carroll seems to be insulting philosophy. He seems to be saying to philosophers, 'You think you have it right, but do you really?'



Probably the best answer to this is given at the Tea Party. This scene is one of the most nonsense filled in the book and yet it holds a lot of wisdom.

*'Really, now you ask me,' said Alice, very much confused, 'I don't think—' Then you shouldn't talk,' said the Hatter.<sup>21</sup>*

At this point, Carroll can almost be seen as insulting. He is suggesting that if you don't truly know what you are talking about then perhaps you shouldn't speak. All of these characters are just pretending to have morality figured out, but they don't.

One of the chief complaints that Carroll seems to have about these code of ethics is that everyone believes them to be exactly right. There is no room for disagreement. Carroll doesn't seem to buy into this. Alice tries to disagree with all of the aforementioned characters, but she isn't able to.

How is one to understand ethics if she is not allowed to sort it out on her own? Carroll seems to be railing against the idea that ethics must be simply accepted. He wants Alice to figure out what she believes to be right and wrong. For her to blindly accept what the other characters are telling her would be foolish. She must sort it all out on her own.

Carroll is also commenting on the rudeness that comes with people holding a belief. All of these characters refuse to hear differing points of views from their own. They can accept no morality to be true unless it subscribes to their beliefs and understandings. By doing this, Carroll points out that there is more than one viewpoint, and perhaps all viewpoints should be listened to. When you do not consider all codes, you achieve ideas that can quickly become ridiculous. All viewpoints should be considered before coming up with your own.

Through Carroll's investigations of reality and morals, he provides children with a compass to do their own investigating. He brings up questions which most children would not be faced with, and does so in a manner that invokes play. The situations that Alice and the other characters encounter seem like nonsense, and therefore, are non-threatening. Carroll, in fact, turns play into deep adventures to the inner recesses of philosophy.

## Notes

- |                 |                         |                  |
|-----------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| 1 Lively, xxvi. | 9 Lopez, 117.           | 16 Carroll, 65.  |
| 2 Carroll, 156. | 10 Carroll, 80.         | 17 Carroll, 73.  |
| 3 Carroll, 156. | 11 Carroll, 49.         | 18 Kant, 4:421.  |
| 4 Lopez, 113.   | 12 Matthews, 19.        | 19 Carroll, 79.  |
| 5 Carroll, 156. | 13 Carroll, 177-8.      | 20 Carroll 76-7. |
| 6 Carroll, 191. | 14 Matthews, 63.        | 21 Carroll, 64.  |
| 7 Carroll, 39.  | 15 Aristotle, 1107b 34. |                  |
| 8 Lopez, 117.   |                         |                  |

## References

- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Terence Irwin. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett. 1999.
- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*. London: Orion PG. 2001.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P. 1997.
- Lively, Penelope. "Introduction." *Alice's Adventure's in Wonderland and Through The Looking-Glass*. By Lewis Carroll. London: Orion PG., 2001. ix-xxvii.
- Lopez, Allan. "Deleuze with Carroll: Schizophrenia and Simulacrum and the Philosophy of Lewis Carroll's Nonsense." *Angelaki*. Dec. 2004. 101-20.
- Mathews, Gareth B. *Philosophy and the Young Child*. Cambridge: Harvard U.P. 1980.

## The High School Philosophy Seminar (continued from page 1)

Curricula for the program are planned and developed entirely by seminar leaders. In weekly meetings at the university, leaders brainstorm future seminar topics and assign responsibility for developing curricula. Topics are chosen based both on potential interest, relevance to the field of philosophy, and past success. Examples include: philosophy of race; the ethics of consumption; what is beauty?; existentialism; personal identity; religion; and others.

Seminar structure varies depending upon the personalities of participants at different high schools. Some seminars (and topics) require more up-front structure and leadership to begin a discussion. A discussion of Existentialism, for instance, needs an initial introduction to the basic theories in order to have an engaging and curious discussion. In some cases, discussions proceed successfully from an initial question, such as 'what is race?' All discussions, however, are focused on the virtues and pleasures of conversation and thought in learning. This is, by design, in contrast with the more conventional educational format to which most of the participants are accustomed.

Schools range from lower-achieving high schools in the DC public school system to more selective DC public charter schools and all the way up to a top ten US News and World Reports ranked high school in Northern Virginia. Despite the disparity in school resources, achievement, and preparedness, the High School Philosophy Seminar approach remains more or less the same: introduce high school students to a style of learning that emphasizes questioning, discussion, logical reasoning, and free thinking. While there can never be a replacement for rote memorization in certain subjects such as the sciences, the style of the High School Philosophy Seminar is a valuable compliment; the logical reasoning skills it teaches are not only enjoyable but are crucial to success in high school, on the SAT/ACT, and in college.

In its method, the High School Philosophy Seminar has achieved noticeable results. Students who have previously shown frustration with education return weekly to the seminar. What keeps them coming back? A simple approach to philosophy the seminar leaders like to call 'philosophical positivism.'

The term philosophical positivism is a playful reinvigoration of the name of a famous twentieth century school of thought called 'logical positivism.' Logical positivists, as they came to be known, used the word positivism to refer to a theory according to which sense perceptions are the only justified basis for knowledge. Philosophical positivism, on the other hand, uses positivism to mean 'the state of being positive.' This sort of positivism is based upon the thought that if we are to do philosophy then we should be positive about philosophy—all types of philosophy. Ideas are fascinating things!

This, of course, is not to draw a distinction with logical positivism. The name 'philosophical positivism' is simply a good-humoured use of a well-known philosophical term. There's absolutely nothing keeping logical positivists from also being philosophical positivists and vice versa.

Philosophical positivists don't discard any idea at first glance but take the time to see what the inner workings of the thought really are. This entails dissolving any convoluted philosophical language and bearing the purest form of the idea. Jargon shouldn't be required to understand what is most interesting about philosophical ideas; these ideas can be grasped by anyone.

If you do philosophy in high school, you're given an all-access hall pass to a world in which imagination can and should roam free. Through philosophical positivism, the High School Philosophy Seminar tries to draw the inner spirit of imaginative reasoning out of students who may not otherwise have the opportunity to discover these pleasures.

For those of us who feel frustrated by pedantry and have stopped wondering about how God manages to eat the most scalding of Mexican food, forget about labels, tradition, and complicated debate and remember how delightful it is to really talk about ideas.