The Philosophy Foundation
THINKING CHANGES

THE PERFECT SCHOOL

Focus

With eyes shut try to imagine the perfect school. Ask the following questions:

- ✔ How would the pupils behave?
- ✔ How would the teachers take the lessons?
- ✔ How would the pupils feel at the end of the school day?
- ✔ How would the teachers feel at the end of the school day?

STIMULUS

This piece of paper is a letter from the Prime Minister. He has written this letter to tell the school that he has had a report written about the pupils here and he has been told that there are a few very good pupils, many quite good pupils and a few naughty pupils in the school. He thinks that there is room for improvement and wants the overall level of goodness in the school to be raised. In order to achieve this goal, he has decided that from the beginning of next term all normal lessons will stop. So there will be no more geography, history, maths, English etc. on the timetable. Instead there will be lessons on how to increase the amount of goodness in the pupils of the school. He would like the pupils in the school to think of and suggest ways in which this improvement might be achieved.

Task Question 1:

- ✔ What subjects would the school teach if we were learning to be good?

Nested Questions

- ✔ What is being good?
- ✔ How would we teach these virtues?
- ✔ Can we teach them?

At a suitable point in the discussion present the idea that we learn some skills by repetition and practice, for example, how to play a musical instrument. Ask the group if we could learn to be kind (or patient, generous, tolerant, brave etc) in a similar way?

STIMULUS

Imagine that two people are afraid of spiders and they are asked to remove a spider from the bathroom: Jane is absolutely terrified of spiders but psyches herself up and goes into the bathroom and removes the spider in spite of her very real and intense fear. Susan who initially had the same fear of spiders but has practised getting closer and closer to them gradually over a lengthy period of time so that now she can remove the spider from the bathroom with hardly any fear at all.

Task Question 2:

- ✔ Who is the braver of the two, Susan or Jane?

Nested Questions

- ✔ What is bravery?
- ✔ Do you have to be fearful to be brave?
- ✔ If you are not fearful are you still brave?

THE PHILOSOPHY

If relevant introduce Aristotle and virtue ethics: the notion that virtue is acquired in a similar way to the acquisition of a skill like learning how to play a musical instrument.

Aristotle, Ethics, Book 2, Chapter 1: VIRTUE, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name (ethike) is one that is formed

by a slight variation from the word ethos (habit). From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature. For instance the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times; nor can fire be habituated to move downwards, nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave in another. Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.

Again, of all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity (this is plain in the case of the senses; for it was not by often seeing or often hearing that we got these senses, but on the contrary we had them before we used them, and did not come to have them by using them); but the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyreplayers by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. This is confirmed by what happens in states; for legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator, and those who do not effect it miss their mark, and it is in this that a good constitution differs from a bad one. Again, it is from the same causes and by the same means that every virtue is both produced and destroyed, and similarly every art; for it is from playing the lyre that both good and bad lyre-players are produced. And the corresponding statement is true of builders and of all the rest; men will be good or bad builders as a result of building well or badly. For if this were not so, there would have been no need of a teacher, but all men would have been born good or bad at their craft. This, then, is the case with the virtues also; by doing the acts that we do in our transactions with other men we become just or unjust, and by doing the acts that we do in the presence of danger, and being habituated to feel fear or confidence, we become brave or cowardly. The same is true of appetites and feelings of anger; some men become temperate and good-tempered, others self-indulgent and irascible, by behaving in one way or the other in the appropriate circumstances. Thus, in one word, states of character arise out of like activities. This is why the activities we exhibit must be of a certain kind; it is because the states of character correspond to the differences between these. It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference.

Session originally conceived by Oliver Leech