

You Are Embarked

How a Philosophy Curriculum Took Shape and Took Off



BY DIANA SENECHAL

Outdoors, the wind blew and the rain fell. Indoors, 10th-graders wrestled with Blaise Pascal’s Wager—his argument that one has everything to gain and little to lose by choosing to believe in God. “Yes, but you must wager,” he writes. “It is not optional. You are embarked.”¹ He then uses an early version of mathematical probability to demonstrate that one is better off believing.

I looked at the students poring over the text—underlining passages, raising their hands, commenting to their peers—and I saw that they themselves were embarked, although in a different way. They had chosen to take the philosophy course seriously. A few years ago, when I began teaching at Columbia Secondary School for Math, Science, and Engineering, I could not take this for granted.

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Some students took enthusiastically to my courses; others chatted in class or complained that I didn’t give them enough fun things to do. Now, the vast majority showed interest in class and turned in their work; many contributed to the school’s philosophy journal and took part in philosophy roundtables. In addition, students now in college have commented that the philosophy courses have helped them with all of their work by introducing them to seminal ideas, modes of argument, and an intellectual way of life.

If someone had told me five years ago that I would be a high school philosophy teacher, I would have been astounded and thrilled. At age 12, I began taking Latin and Greek at school; soon after, I read ancient philosophers in the original and in translation. In college, I studied Russian literature and took electives in European intellectual history, African American intellectual history, Renaissance thought, and other topics involving philosophy; in graduate school, I dug into Russian philosophy, theology, linguistics, and mythology for my dissertation and other work. Later, teaching English as a second language in middle school in Brooklyn, New York, I introduced my students to Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine; my book, *Republic of Noise: The Loss of Solitude in Schools and Culture*, devotes much atten-

tion to philosophical ideas and texts.* Yet until 2011, I did not know that it was possible to teach philosophy in a public school.

A Brief History

Columbia Secondary School's philosophy program dates to the school's beginnings in 2009. The founding principal, José Maldonado-Rivera, envisioned a philosophy curriculum throughout the grades (6–12). In the school's initial years, the scholar and educator Paul Thomson spearheaded the program and brought a lively dialogical spirit to the classes; teachers, graduate students, researchers, and others took part in the work. Thomson left the school in 2011 and died in 2013; the first issue of our philosophy journal, *CONTRARIWISE*, is dedicated to his memory.

The philosophy program is intended to enrich students' overall education by introducing them to argument, questioning, and rich philosophical works. In addition, philosophy serves to connect sciences with humanities and foster dialogue within the school's diverse community. Columbia Secondary School is a selective public school in New York City with a highly diverse student body. Approximately 46 percent of the students identify as Hispanic, 21 percent as African American, 18 percent as white, and 13 percent as Asian; the students come from numerous nationalities and speak a range of languages at home. Approximately 56 percent qualify for free or reduced-price meals. The school has a partnership with Columbia University, through which qualified students may take Columbia and Barnard courses.

After its promising beginnings, the school suffered tragedy and turmoil: a student drowned on a field trip to a beach, the principal was eventually removed, and there was much staff and student turnover. In September 2011, Miriam Nightengale came on board as the new principal; she hired me as a part-time curriculum adviser. (Miriam is a staunch supporter of strong curricula and has an unusually rich background in humanities and mathematics.) The philosophy program was in flux; the original philosophy staff had departed or was soon to depart, and courses were left without clear direction. Part of my job was to address this. Given the instability of the department at the time, I soon realized that the best approach would be to write a curriculum myself.

To start out, I designed and cotaught a unit on the "Good Life" (with readings from Plato, Seneca, Tolstoy, and Chesterton); seeing how well the students responded, I offered to write and teach the entire high school philosophy curriculum. I designed a series of courses: Rhetoric and Logic (grade 9), Ethics and Aesthetics (grade 10), and Political Philosophy (grade 11). In 2012–2013, I taught them all; in subsequent years, I handed two of the courses over to other teachers. Once we had a 12th grade, my colleague Ari Rubin taught Literature of Existentialism, which he developed from a course by the acclaimed educator Ruthie Stern. The middle school teachers worked out their own philosophy curriculum, which was integrated with English or social studies. By the fall of 2013, we had philosophy courses throughout the grades, in fulfillment of the original vision.

This dream position was not always pleasant. In 2012–2013, I had 260 students in all (and was still on a part-time schedule). I took piles of assignments home to grade and, like many dedicated

teachers, put in far more unpaid than paid hours. Students, too, had to adjust to the new workload; I was asking them to read and write about challenging works. Students were not willfully disruptive, but they were unused to the kind of focus required. Those who chatted during class made it difficult for others to pay attention. There were days when I could not bring quiet to the room and went home in tears.

As the months passed, I saw something remarkable taking shape. In the students' discussion and writing, I saw eloquence, struggle, wit, and dedication. Some students discovered a new interest in philosophy; others developed their interest further. Sometimes their writing was so funny and surprising that I roared with laughter; at other times, their errors helped me improve my

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lessons. In short, I had to trust in the good that was happening and strive to build on it. Yet to do so, I had to resist many pedagogical trends.

Teaching Philosophy

There is currently great prejudice against so-called traditional teaching. Many characterize such teaching as routine and retrograde: the students sit passively and take notes, while the teacher tells them what to think and say. To counteract such passivity, classroom evaluation rubrics (for teachers and schools) favor group work, student activity, and student talk.

The problem is that to teach something substantial, you need to make room for thinking about it. Thinking is by no means passive; a student listening to a teacher may have questions, counterpoints, realizations, and much more. It is true that if the teacher talks the entire time, students may fall into passivity—but it is possible, within a so-called traditional framework, to ask the students to listen, engage in dialogue, and think on their own. In some ways, such a framework creates more room for thought than a setup where everyone works in groups and the room is filled with talk. I chose a traditional approach with many variations.

In addition, I had to resist pressure to hold frequent debates. At the outset, many of my students asked why we didn't "just have a debate." I responded that debates had a place but should not replace the careful consideration of an idea. Too often, debaters focus on out-arguing (sometimes even out-shouting) the other side instead of seeking truth. Debate carries great benefits—it can bring out the students' logic and ingenuity—but if the students do not have a foundation of knowledge, it can quickly become reductive.

*For more on this book, see "The Cult of Success" in the Winter 2011–2012 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/winter2011-2012/senechal.

So I told the students that I would gladly have debates but that they would not be our primary mode of discussion. Instead, I wanted students to take part in sustained dialogue about the texts and ideas.

One day, when I was introducing students to Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, I took them to the passage where he discusses suicide. A student asked, "Can't we debate suicide?" I explained that if we actually considered what Kant was saying, we would have a basis for discussing the topic. Kant maintains that, when contemplating an action, one should consider whether one would want the *maxim* behind it to become universal moral law. Thus, if one is contemplating suicide because one feels miserable, one should ask: "Could the following maxim serve as universal moral law: that a person who feels profoundly miserable should, out of self-love, end his or her life?" Kant saw such a principle as self-contradictory; self-love, which by essence seeks to promote



life, cannot also seek to bring life to an end. Students may disagree with Kant—but only after grappling with his argument. The argument goes far beyond the assertion that "suicide is immoral" or "suicide should not be allowed"; it involves a method for evaluating such a question. (Kant's argument has flaws, of course—and I welcomed discussion of those.)²

A few students continued to press for a debate on suicide, and I continued to push back. One day, a student asked, yet again, "Why can't we just debate this?" Exasperated, I replied: "In a debate, there are two sides—and I want you to go beyond thinking in terms of two sides. I want you to see what's actually in this text, and to consider how it influences your own ideas. We could go back and forth for days about whether suicide is ever justified—but here Kant is offering a way of thinking about the issue. If we have a debate now, it will be opinion versus opinion—but if we consider Kant first, then we'll have something to debate at another level. My responsibility is to help you reach that new level. I will not do otherwise." Students looked up in surprise. A student near the front muttered, "Never argue with your philosophy teacher." (He meant this as a joke, as he was one of the liveliest arguers.)

It was probably then that I realized we were embarked, that there

was something worth sustaining and building. I was not giving the students exactly what they wanted—and here some educators might criticize me—but I was also listening carefully to them. My point was not to ignore their interests but rather to help give them shape. I insisted that if students could consider a philosophical text or idea in depth, they would be in a better position to pursue creative projects of their choosing.

A year and a half later, in February 2014, my students' philosophy journal, *CONTRARIWISE*, arrived from the printer in big boxes. The name, inspired by the words of Tweedledee in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, connotes both playfulness and argumentation. The idea for an annual journal came about in September 2013, when I was reading my students' continuations of Book VIII of Plato's *Republic*, in which they imagined what would follow after tyranny. Their writing was so imaginative and insightful that I thought it should be preserved. I asked by email whether they would prefer a booklet or a journal; the responses were so enthusiastic that I knew this had to happen. (One student, who soon afterward became one of the two editors in chief, wrote, "Journal! Totally journal!") The work took off from there.

Five months after the journal's beginnings, the editors in chief opened the first box and took the beautiful books in their hands. The excitement spread quickly throughout the school. The students could now see the results of their writing, editing, editorial decisions, artistic work, last-minute inspiration, and much more. It was no ordinary journal; in addition to the lively selection of essays, stories, poems, dialogues, and letters, it had an "Infrequently Asked Questions" page, a "Cast & Crew" page, a fake mathematical proof, an absurd index, and many other touches. Through the journal, the students had taken philosophy into their hands and shown themselves and others what was possible. The second issue, published in early March 2015, features an international writing contest.*

Challenging Texts

How does one go about teaching philosophy at the high school level? I will try to answer this question by describing the curriculum and reflecting on the program as a whole. I do not claim to have the last word on the subject; other teachers of high school philosophy may have markedly different approaches. All I offer here is some insight into what has gone well.

When I first began drafting ideas in the spring of 2012, someone asked me why I chose to have students read philosophical texts. After all, many textbooks and workbooks had summaries of philosophers' views; wasn't that sufficient for students at this age? I replied, "But the texts are interesting and beautiful." It hadn't occurred to me that anyone would consider them too cumbersome for teens.

Without reading the original text, how could students ever come to appreciate Thrasymachus's great challenge to Socrates in Book I of Plato's *Republic*? How could they understand Socrates's response (which arguably fills the remainder of the work)? When would they have a chance to read beautiful passages like this (from Saint Augustine's *Confessions*)?³

*For the *CONTRARIWISE* international contest, students around the world were invited to imagine their favorite cultural dish as its own nation and then describe its struggle with a philosophical problem. The winning entries and honorable mentions (who hail from the United States, Italy, China, Turkey, and the United Kingdom) were published in the second issue of *CONTRARIWISE*.

And what is the object of my love? I asked the earth and it said: 'It is not I.' I asked all that is in it; they made the same confession (Job 28: 12f.). I asked the sea, the deeps, the living creatures that creep, and they responded: 'We are not your God, look beyond us.' I asked the breezes which blow and the entire air with its inhabitants said: 'Anaximenes was mistaken; I am not God.' I asked heaven, sun, moon and stars; they said: 'Nor are we the God whom you seek.' And I said to all these things in my external environment: 'Tell me of my God who you are not, tell me something about him.' And with a great voice they cried out: 'He made us' (Ps. 99: 3). My question was the attention I gave to them, and their response was their beauty.

It is not only the beauty that makes these texts worth reading, but the sustained thought, surprising insights, and implied way of life. These philosophers are dedicated to probing and reflection—not simply sitting around and thinking, but following a question as far as possible, even when it means recognizing their own errors. The texts contain wit, poetry, logic, paradox, vivid examples, and dialogue; how could a curriculum exclude them without impoverishing itself? It is true that they may be a bit too complex for young children, but many high school students are ready for this level of challenge.

They are also ready for texts that offer an alternative to snap judgments and group opinions. To be a philosopher is to be dedicated to ongoing questions that offer no easy solutions. Such questions can be tackled, but this takes patience, perception, and solitude. In a culture that values confidence, certainty, and group thinking—where students and others are under pressure to present well, answer questions swiftly, and arrive at group solutions—philosophical texts show ways of slowing down, honoring uncertainty, and being with one's own thoughts.

I chose to make texts a major part of the philosophy courses. Yet the goal was to have students not only learn the arguments and ideas, but respond to them. This was no easy undertaking. To respond to a text, one must be clear about what is in it; muddy interpretations lead to sloppy retorts. It would be easier to focus on the content alone, or on the students' ideas alone; bringing the two together is an ongoing challenge, and a worthy one. For me, it means rereading the texts over and over; each time that I have taught the courses, I have presented the materials somewhat differently. I have learned to clarify common points of confusion and to highlight key passages that will help students see the train of argument.

Each of the courses (for grades 9–11) consists of four long units. Each course meets twice a week; students must read and write in preparation for every class session. (There are about 90–100 students in each grade and up to 34 in a section.) The sequence allows students to draw on their previous learning; the Ethics and Aesthetics course makes frequent reference to rhetoric and logic; the Political Philosophy course, to rhetoric, logic, and ethics. In addition, there are many connections to be drawn between philosophy and other subjects; students find themselves applying ethics to global history, or political philosophy to works such as *The Crucible*. Some students have even found ways to relate political philosophy to mathematics; for instance, they have drawn analogies—and identified differences—between philosophical arguments and mathematical proofs.

The ninth-grade course, which focuses on rhetoric and logic, consists of the units "Introduction to Rhetoric"; "Arrangement and Style"; "Speeches and Declamation"; and "Formal and Informal Logic." Texts for the course include Plato's *Apology*, Pericles's funeral oration, Mark Antony's speech in *Julius Caesar*, *The Federalist*, No. 10 (by James Madison), and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," among other speeches, essays, and poems. Students work with rhetorical techniques, analyze the style and structure of the texts, write and deliver speeches, and solve logic problems. The course has changed somewhat as other teachers have begun teaching it; last year, some teachers brought additional texts and techniques into the course, and this year the teacher focuses as much on the texts' substance as on their rhetoric. I view all of these changes as enriching; the course has taken on its own life and momentum.

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The 10th-grade Ethics and Aesthetics course consists of the units "The Quest for an Ethical Principle"; "Virtue and the Golden Mean"; "Free Will and Responsibility"; and "Aesthetics." Students read the Book of Job, Pascal's Wager, an excerpt from Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, Saul Bellow's novella *Seize the Day*, Desiderius Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, the second book of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and Nikolai Gogol's story "The Nose," among other works. During the year, they write many compositions, including an essay on two of the works read in class (or, for honors students, an essay on an ethical topic of their own choosing).

The junior year Political Philosophy course begins with the question: How are various forms of government—in theory and practice—based on assumptions about human nature? Students explore the relation between conceptions of human nature and political theories and systems. Throughout the year, they read Thomas Hobbes, Niccolò Machiavelli, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Thomas More, Virginia Woolf, Eugène Ionesco, Jonathan Swift, George Orwell, Hannah Arendt, and others. In addition to writing analytical and argumentative essays, they write a dialogue in the style of Plato's *Republic*, a detailed description of a utopia or dystopia of their own creation, and a satirical piece.

This is the basic layout of the philosophy curriculum. I have not included the 12th grade existentialism course, since it is the creation of one of my colleagues, but it follows beautifully on what the students have studied. What astounds me is not how

well the courses have gone, but how they have given rise to philosophy-related activities such as the school's philosophy roundtables and journal.

Philosophy for All

It has been a longstanding dream of mine to bring people together—of many ages and walks of life—to discuss works of literature and philosophy. Once the philosophy courses were underway, I thought of doing something like that for parents at my school. In particular, I would invite them to take part in philosophy roundtables, where we would discuss some of the texts that students were reading in class. The first two roundtables (which focused on Buber's *I and Thou* and Mill's *On Liberty*, respectively) drew only a few people, but the discussion was deep and lively. Then the principal suggested a student-led roundtable. At first I worried: How could students lead a discussion on texts that take a long time to sink in, texts that they had only recently read for the first time? I decided that they could do it with support.

The first student-led philosophy roundtable took place on a Thursday evening in June 2013. It focused on the question: How does one preserve independent thought in a society that largely discourages it? Texts included Orwell's *1984*, Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, E. B. White's essay "Freedom," and Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*. I structured the preparation as an honors project; the 15 students who chose to take part were exceptionally interested in philosophy and had brought insight and dedication to the course all year long. I assigned different texts and portions of the discussion to different students—yet I encouraged them to think about the overall topic and to take part in the discussion as a whole.

More than 30 students, parents, staff members, and outside guests participated; the ages ranged from 11 to 67. Despite the immensity of the topic, the discussion flowed naturally and intensely, with hands in the air, many thought-provoking and witty comments, and much building on what had already been said. The time went by too quickly; when we had only a few minutes left, one of the students burst out, "We can't let the evening go by without a tribute to folly!" The room resounded with laughter; the students then explained why, in Erasmus's work and beyond, folly was so important, and how it related to the topic of the evening. It seemed that we could have continued for another hour—but the dean signaled to me, and I to student Khadijah

McCarthy, the lead moderator, who made eloquent concluding remarks and thanked everyone for coming.

For months afterward, people were commenting on this event. It showed that it was possible for a school community to come together to discuss philosophical ideas. The adults were astounded by the thoughtfulness and insight of the students, who were likewise surprised at how well this had gone. We decided to have the final roundtable of each year be student-led; roundtables during the year would be led by me, but with the help of students.



By the second year, the roundtables already had the feel of a tradition; by the third, people were asking why we didn't hold them more often (this year, we are holding five). Topics have included time, humor, wisdom, and error.

Publishing Student Work

If the philosophy roundtables lit a torch of possibility, the philosophy journal played with the rays and cast them far. In the introduction to the first issue, the editors in chief, Ron Gunczler and Nicholas Pape, defined the journal yet deftly avoided definition: "Here at *CONTRARIWISE*, we love philosophy. We love arguing, pointless banter, and utter nonsense that somehow comes together. We yearn to understand morality and the intricate workings of the universe. ... We hope this journal will be a platform for philosophical thought, understanding, and play. Especially play."⁴

The playfulness is evident: the journal opens with a letter from Folly⁵ (the narrator of Erasmus's essay) and ends with a transcript of a lighthearted yet profound Internet chat. In between, there are many forms and topics: a "Roundtable on the Distribution of Health Care Resources"; a description of two opposite utopias joined by a bridge ("Following and Thinking"); a parody of Plato's *Republic* that somehow addresses political transformation, time travel, and world hunger ("Two Dialogues: One Ancient, One Modern"); a letter from Jiminy Cricket to Pinocchio on the ethics of lying; an essay on Machiavelli and football coaching; and more. Then there are pieces of a more solemn nature: for instance, a speech on wisdom, a reflec-



CONTRARIWISE, a philosophy journal published by students at Columbia Secondary School for Math, Science, and Engineering, was recognized in a national contest of student literary journals organized by the National Council of Teachers of English. To learn more about the journal, see www.contrariwisejournal.com. To learn more about the contest, see www.bit.ly/1Blpo2e.

tion on John Locke's view of marriage, and an inquiry into the nature of time.

The students barely had the first issue in their hands when a review appeared on the blog of Cynthia Haven, a Stanford scholar and literary critic.⁶ I had sent her a copy of the journal, thinking she might find it interesting—but I have never met her and had no way of knowing whether she'd pick it up. She drew attention to the students' interest in humanities and mentioned five pieces she had found intriguing (in addition to quoting from the editors' introduction). The students saw that faraway strangers could take an interest

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in the journal. This was no fluke; in the spring, the editors in chief and two contributors participated in an interview with the communications director of PLATO (Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization). At this point, they spoke with a sense of command and purpose.⁷ They understood how *CONTRARIWISE* differed from other philosophy journals (and student publications) and where it could go from here.

In May 2014, the students held a celebration at a local bookstore. Like the journal itself, the event was full of meaning and nonsense, solemnity and play—all of it coming together in a delightful sequence of reading, philosophical improvisation, questions and answers, and humorous awards (such as the Godot award, which was presented to a late arriver, and a Gogol award to the “one who knows”). The audience listened, laughed, and sang; by the end, they and the participants were joined in amazement over what had taken place.

This is all interesting, some might say. But how does it apply elsewhere? Clearly, you are at an unusual school and have an atypical background; what suggestions do you have for schools that lack these resources? Is philosophy appropriate for all students, or should it be reserved for the most advanced and motivated?

Not all schools have the resources to make philosophy a required course, but there is value in doing so. Many students discover along the way that they are interested in philosophy; if it were an elective, only those with an initial interest would sign up. Making it an honors course would also be problematic; the students who do well in philosophy are not always high achievers across the board. I have seen students thrive in philosophy—students who might not have taken it had it not been required.

That said, it is possible to include philosophical works and ideas in an English, history, or science curriculum—whether by integrating them in the regular courses or offering philosophy electives.

Although many teachers are already overwhelmed with heavy workloads, those with strong interest and a way of finding the time can turn to organizations such as PLATO for resources and support. They can then develop philosophy courses and hold faculty workshops on philosophical topics. As more schools follow suit, philosophy might gain recognition as a subject in its own right.

Schools can also become involved in philosophy organizations, initiatives, contests, and so forth—and keep students informed of opportunities. Some students will respond eagerly and may choose to form a philosophy club, “Ethics Bowl” team, or other group. Such experiences could inspire students to study philosophy in college, read on their own, or investigate a problem that interests them.

In addition, teachers can study and practice philosophy; their work will affect their teaching in subtle and overt ways. Good questioning is an essential component of teaching—and where is good questioning found, if not in philosophy? The teacher who reads Plato, Pascal, Spinoza, Frege, and others will find new ways of thinking about all subjects. Moreover, she will see how to encourage such thought in students.

Back to the windy, rainy day: Pascal used probability to argue that one is better off believing in God. If one stakes one's life (a finite entity, according to Pascal) on faith in God's existence, one has infinity to gain and only a finite mortal life to lose. By contrast, according to Pascal, not believing in God results in a finite gain (if even that) or an infinite loss. When we were discussing his argument, one student raised her hand. “Pascal is wrong,” she said. “He's assuming that the values in his argument are fixed. But if God doesn't exist, that changes the entire picture. Human life then becomes immensely valuable. It becomes all we have.” Indeed—not only had she found a serious flaw in his argument, but had called his very axioms into question. That was part of the point of reading Pascal's Wager in the first place: not to debate God's existence (this was a course in ethics, not religion), but to examine Pascal's argument.

As I continue to build the philosophy curriculum, I keep in mind that it may change considerably. Teachers come and go, priorities change, and students bring new ideas to the table. Yet for everyone involved, there is no turning back. We are not the same as we were before we undertook this project. Each text, roundtable, and *CONTRARIWISE* piece has propelled us along. Wherever we go from here, we will carry this with us and will be carried by it. We are embarked. □

Endnotes

1. This passage, commonly known as Pascal's Wager, is found in Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*. This quotation appears in Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. William Finlayson Trotter (New York: Dutton, 1958), 66.
2. Some educators would hold that suicide is far too sensitive a subject for the classroom; others would argue that it is precisely the kind of topic that should be discussed, since students contend with it in one way or another. I believe that it can be discussed effectively and sensitively through the lens of a philosophical method or work.
3. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 183.
4. Ron Gunczler and Nicholas Pape, foreword to *CONTRARIWISE*, vol. 1 (2014): vi–vii.
5. Folly is the self-praising narrator of Desiderius Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*; the *CONTRARIWISE* piece consists of a letter from this very Folly to the Russian author Nikolai Gogol.
6. Cynthia Haven, “NYC Techie Kids Buck Trend, Take On Humanities,” *The Book Haven* (blog), March 11, 2014, <http://bookhaven.stanford.edu/2014/03/nyc-techie-kids-buck-trend-take-on-humanities>.
7. Mark Balawender, “CONTRARIWISE: Pious and Especially Playful Learning in the Creation of a Journal,” PLATO, accessed January 6, 2015, www.plato-philosophy.org/contrariwise-pious-and-especially-playful-learning-in-the-creation-of-a-journal.