Xperiment

Xperiment is an introduction to philosophy for intellectually adventurous children. As the fourth volume in the Royal Fireworks philosophy curriculum, it is designed to be suitable for children in third grade. Because philosophy is so richly layered, however, this volume could be of interest to children who have advanced beyond the third grade—perhaps significantly so. Although it presupposes no prior familiarity with philosophy, it is loosely linked to the fifth volume in Royal Fireworks’ philosophy curriculum.

Xperiment is less of a textbook and more of a chapter book, with mind-opening ideas and activities conveyed through concepts and events working together. Its thirteen chapters aim to demonstrate the central philosophical skills of **selective rule-breaking, thought-experimenting, and proposing alternative theories**. Great thinkers throughout history have used these skills to challenge the status quo and envision new possibilities for humankind.

Xperiment explores the question **What is justice?** Justice has always been controversial among philosophers because it is the glue that holds society together. Society needs leaders and laws. But what justifies one person telling other people what to do? This is a vivid question for children dealing with bullies, teachers, and parents, as well as for adults who vote in political elections. In this guidebook, we’ll look at several of the most important and influential political theories ever written, which are reflected in the story about X and his schoolmates.

This companion book is called a “Guidebook” instead of a “Teacher Manual” in recognition of the fact that the material within its pages may be of interest to especially motivated children or to older children who want to delve more deeply into the content. Of course, the story can be enjoyed without the Guidebook, but the Guidebook will help to bring home the philosophical content. It provides for each chapter a summary of the plot developments, a philosophical basis for the key concepts of the chapter, discussion questions based on Bloom’s Taxonomy, and for some chapters, web links to videos for further exploration of the content.
Chapter One: Selective Rule-Breaking

Summary
Xalden “X” Fujimoto is upset at recess because Mrs. Phatears yelled at him. Trying to get as far away from the school playground as possible, he discovers a hole in the fence that leads to a junkyard. He decides to sneak through.

Philosophical Basis
There is no point in trying to hide it: philosophers are rule-breakers. From Socrates to John Rawls, every philosopher who ever made it big broke the rules—and got in trouble for it, too. Each philosopher breaks the rules in his or her own way, but what they all have in common is refusing to go along with the crowd.

Why does our culture admire philosophers so much? Because sometimes rules need to be broken. Philosophers do not break rules at random, just for kicks. They break rules when they realize that the rules are wrong. This is selective rule-breaking. Philosophers are the ones who remind us that if we stick to the same rules forever, society will never improve. In the past, for example, girls were not allowed to go to school. Someone had to break that rule in order to get to where we are today.

Socrates is known as the founder of Western philosophy because he started the tradition of breaking rules that needed to be broken. In particular, he liked to question authority, asking important people, such as teachers, if they knew what they were doing. He said, “Above all, I should like to spend my time…examining and searching people’s minds, to find out who is really wise among them, and who only thinks that he is wise.” He encouraged young people to do the same. However, many of his fellow citizens did not appreciate that. Moreover, two of Socrates’s prominent former students acted in ways that were seen as treasonous. As a result, Socrates was tried and convicted of corrupting the minds of young people and was banished from Athens. That punishment was unacceptable to him, and he chose to end his life instead.

Discussion Questions
1. Remembering
   Why does Mrs. Phatears blow her whistle at X?

2. Understanding
   Why does X want to get as far away from the playground as possible?

3. Applying
   Have you ever gotten in trouble when you didn’t think you had done anything wrong? How did it make you feel?
4. **Analyzing**
   X feels self-conscious when Vida calls attention to the fact that he is not Caucasian. Why do you think he feels that way? Is there a way Vida could have made her observation that wouldn’t have made X feel self-conscious?

5. **Evaluating**
   Do you think it is wrong of X to slip through the wooden fence? Why or why not?

6. **Creating**
   If you were X, would you have gone through the hole in the fence, and if so, what would you expect to happen as a result?

**For Further Exploration**

Watch the video “Who Was Socrates?” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJUuOnsRcvc).
Chapter Three: Plato’s Answer to Thrasymachus

Summary

X joins Vida’s team in the camper. Vida names herself leader and assigns jobs to the other members. Though X feels that everyone should be allowed to do his or her own thing, he agrees to be a guardian of the camper.

Philosophical Basis

In his Republic, Plato wrote about a teacher named Thrasymachus who promoted the political theory that “might makes right.” This means that whoever is biggest and strongest gets to be in charge. Whatever that person wants becomes the law of the land.

Plato disagreed. He argued that the wisest should be in charge, and the wisest are the philosophers. He wrote, “There will be no end to the troubles of cities, or of humanity itself, until philosophers become kings in this world, or until those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers, and political power and philosophy thus come into the same hands.”

The philosophers are the wisest, in Plato’s view, because they have a plan for organizing the people of the city, the citizens. According to the plan Plato presented in the Republic, there should be three groups. The Producers are the farmers, the builders, and the business managers. They provide all the material goods for the society. The Guardians are the soldiers, the police, the doctors, the lawyers, and anyone whose job it is to protect others. Finally, the Rulers, who should be philosopher-kings, assign the groups and make the laws.

Discussion Questions

1. Remembering
   What job does Vida assign to X?

2. Understanding
   Why does X have a bad feeling about Vida’s plan?

3. Applying
   If you were on Vida’s team, which job would you want, and why?

4. Analyzing
   Compare and contrast the characters Thrash and Carol. How would you describe each? Give evidence for your descriptions from the story.

5. Evaluating
   Vida says that being older, taller, and stronger doesn’t matter for being a leader. “What matters is having a plan.” Do you agree? What do you think matters for being a leader?

6. Creating
   Jeanie says they don’t really need the camper. Vida says they do. What if there was a better option? Think of something you might find at a junkyard or recycling center that would make a better clubhouse than a camper.
Chapter Four: Plato and the Noble Lie

Summary
Team Trailblazer starts to bicker because the kids all want to do their own things, not what Vida tells them to do. Carol even lies to X in order to get some items that the others won’t get for her. Vida tells them they have to do what she says because she has the strongest mind. Thrash calls this a lie.

Philosophical Basis
Plato realized that the citizens of his ideal city might not want to follow his plan. The biggest problem would be that they might want to interfere with one another’s jobs—for example, the Rulers might try to tell the Guardians how to defend the city, and the Producers might try to tell the Rulers how to rule. That would lead to disorder.

To prevent that, Plato argued that the philosopher-kings should tell the citizens the following myth: The nature of each human being is determined by which kind of metal runs through his or her veins:

- People with bronze in their veins have strong bodies, making them good at physical labor.
- People with silver in their veins have strong spirits, making them good at fighting for others.
- People with gold in their veins have strong minds, making them good at ruling.

According to this myth, interfering with others’ jobs is wrong because it contradicts nature. Children should be tested to determine which metal is running through their veins. They should then be trained in a matching profession, whether they like it or not.

Plato knew that people don’t really have gold, silver, or bronze running through their veins. The myth was a lie. But he famously called it a noble lie. He wrote, “The rulers of the city are the only people who ought to have the privilege of lying, either at home or abroad; they may be allowed to lie for the good of the city.” This is an extremely controversial claim! It has been both widely practiced and widely criticized throughout history.

Discussion Questions
1. **Remembering**
   Why does Carol leave the camper?

2. **Understanding**
   Why do you think Carol whispers her idea to X?

3. **Applying**
   What are the signs that someone is lying? Why do you think these things are signs of lying?

4. **Analyzing**
   Carol suggests that they dress up as witches to scare away intruders. Do you think this plan would work? Why or why not?
Chapter Ten: David Hume's Rejection of the State of Nature

Summary

The Stargazers head to the tire-fort to rebuild it as their clubhouse. Doing a thought experiment without the TV, Vida considers what it would be like to be Thrash. She argues that sympathy is the key to peace and successful government.

Philosophical Basis

As we have seen, the state of nature thought experiment inspired three different thinkers to come up with three very different political theories. Each one influenced governments around the world in different ways. But which one is best? The eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume argued that they all forgot about something.

Human beings would not be able to make a contract in the state of nature if they didn’t already have morality. Morality is knowing the difference between right and wrong. Where does this knowledge come from? Hume argued that we know something is wrong when we feel bad for someone. We imagine what it is like to be that person, and we experience the same pain. No one wants to experience pain. Therefore, we don’t want others to experience pain either. This is the natural feeling of sympathy.

Hume believed that even animals show signs of sympathy for one another, but humans have the strongest sympathy of all. He wrote, “No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to, our own.” We sympathize with people we don’t know, and even with people we don’t like. Since sympathy creates the bond necessary for peace, it is the key to a successful government.

Discussion Questions

1. **Remembering**
   What might have made Thrash mad, according to Vida?

2. **Understanding**
   How does Jeanie’s anger prove Vida’s point?

3. **Applying**
   If you were among the kids, would you be able to sympathize with Thrash? Why or why not?

4. **Analyzing**
   X points out that only Thrash got mad when Vida said she was the smartest. Why do you think it didn’t bother the others?

5. **Evaluating**
   Do you agree with Carol that Vida should tell Thrash she’s sorry? Explain your view.

6. **Creating**
   Vida says that the kids need to be able to feel what it’s like to be somebody else. John says that’s impossible. Devise a situation in which you would be able to know what it’s like to be somebody else.