PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN:
The Continuation of Dewey's Democratic Project

MARIE-FRANCE DANIEL, MICHAEL SCHLEIFER, PIERRE LEOUIS

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Matthew Lipman is an American philosopher who conceived, in the 1970s, a method to help children think in an autonomous, critical and reasonable way. This method is a global approach which aims to develop the personal as well as the intellectual, the moral and the social aspects of the person; it is an educative project in the broad sense of the term. This holistic project takes the form of a program of philosophy for students from five to fifteen years old. The philosophical content is adapted to the children's interests and needs and is presented in the form of novels which relate semantic, logic, esthetic and ethic experiences of daily life.

The methodology of the Philosophy for Children program involves three steps. First, there is the reading, where each student reads a sentence or paragraph of a chapter of a novel. After the reading, children are invited to ask questions which concern them and on which they would like to reflect. The gathering of questions represents the second step of the methodology. The discussion among peers which follows is the third step. This discussion is more a philosophical dialogue than a mere exchange of ideas; its role is to lead children to form what Matthew Lipman calls a "community of inquiry".

We can say the essence of the community of inquiry is at the same time moral and social. Moral and social because, on the one hand, it encourages the child to reflect on the meaning of some of the concepts relative to ethics and to politics such as: respect, liberty, negotiation, judgment, cooperation, equality, justice. On the other hand, it gives the child the opportunity to put these concepts in practice, that is to get the habit of thinking by himself or herself, to respect peers, to cooperate with them, to look for compromises, justice and equality. Indeed, because the Lipmanian approach has its foundations in a philosophical methodology, it encourages children to consider different alternatives, to justify their opinions, to reappraise their beliefs, to revise the criteria of their values, to look for coherence, impartiality and objectivity.

For Lipman, a community of inquiry is called as such solely when it is composed of persons who desire to genuinely contribute to the reconstruction of the social and individual experience. This reconstruction comes about by means of their intelligence, of their feelings and of their consciousness. We can add that if these caring
persons constitute the foundations of the community of inquiry, they also are its product. Indeed, the philosophical community of inquiry not only improves children's thinking but, in most cases, has an influence on the whole of their behavior. The community of inquiry, a social microcosm, leads the participants' efforts towards cooperative values and its dialectical method engages the self in a process of self-knowledge and of open-mindedness to others. In short, the community of inquiry is an education to life; an education to ethical and political life.

Although we will systematically present the program of Philosophy for Children, we do not want to open a debate about the program itself. The objective of this conference is to put the emphasis on its theoretical foundations, namely to throw new light on the relationship between the philosophy of education of Lipman and John Dewey. Another precision: we could place this parallel (between Lipman and Dewey) at the same time on the moral and the social levels, because ethics and politics are constantly overlapping. But we believe it is essential to present them separately so that the philosophy of the Lipmamian program and its relation to Dewey's theory appear more clearly. Since the theme of this 16th AME Colloquium emphasizes the notion of democracy, we will limit our comparative study to the level of democratic values. So we will first expose the philosophy inherent in the Philosophy for Children program; and second, we will present some fundamental elements of John Dewey's political theory; and finally, we will elaborate a parallel between the two theories, to claim the influence of Dewey on Lipman.

But let us look at Matthew Lipman's definition of a democratic society:

It is a reflective, participatory community engaged in self-correcting inquiry with regard to its problems and its options. In a society so constituted, individuals are encouraged to inquire and to reason together, to contribute to the work of the society, to influence its government and to share in the enjoyment of its benefits. A democratic society cultivates the power of judgment of each and every citizen, with the result that their appraisals of the institutions comprising that society are continuous, objective and efficacious. Such a society likewise sees to it that these constituent institutions — of which the schools are surely among the most important — are accountable to all whom they affect in the exercise of their institutional authority and power.

From that passage we can see that, for Matthew Lipman, democracy contains four characteristics, each one of these implying an intellectual and a social aspect. First, each and every member of this community is an essential part of the decisional process and all of them must put in common their personal capacities to reach their ends. Second, the democratic society is not static; on the contrary, with the collaboration of its members, it questions, criticizes and constantly corrects its institutions, its values and its criteria. The third point is the corollary of the first two, in that autonomous and critical judgment, and reasonable behaviour constitute the necessary preconditions for democracy. Fourth comes the consequence of the corollary, that is, society's responsibility to offer a reflexive and altruistic education to its members.

We clearly see here that education and democracy represent two interrelated activities. And if the quality of democracy is dependent upon the quality of education society gives its young generations, Lipman adds that it is also within democracy that education acquires its meaning. Indeed, a democratic society formulates its educative mandate in terms of thinking rather than in terms of instruction; it treats children as active and creative subjects rather than as passive listeners; it respects their inclination to research and to question instead of considering curiosity as an instinct to tame. And doing so, the school becomes a positive political paradigm for

THE PHILOSOPHICAL COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY: AN INITIATION TO DEMOCRATIC VALUES

We all know that by the concept of democracy we mean co-existence and autonomous, critical and reasonable judgment (and behavior). Yet, these features are not innate; these are latent capacities or dispositions of the persons; these must be cultivated. In other words, it is essential to initiate people to these democratic values. And the quicker, the better.
children. It transmits to them a sound reason to believe: to believe there exist positive experiences of communication within which there is mutual respect, compromise, collaboration, justice and liberty.\(^4\)

According to Lipman, the two tasks of the school (within a democratic context) are, first of all, to teach children about their society's essence and structure and, then, to help them reflect together on these data by the means of philosophical dialogue which takes place in a community of inquiry.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

But what is the role of philosophy? Why is philosophical inquiry a fundamental tool? It is because, says Lipman, before one gets to understand the social aims and ends, one must, logically, have the opportunity to discuss these aims and ends with others and to understand the fundamental concepts they imply. Just as the moral problem constitutes a sub-class of the human problem, the social fact forms a category of the human fact. And, in this perspective, the philosophical inquiry seems to be the essential condition for social understanding.

There is little point to teaching students how institutions operate, if we do not at the same time help them understand the goals and objectives which must be brought to bear on such institutions. Without a clear understanding of such concepts as freedom, justice, equality, personhood and democracy, how are students to be able to tell whether elected officials or operative institutions are performing well or badly?\(^6\) We can teach students the laws of the society, but unless they have some grasp of the constitutional issues that underlie the laws, and some grasp of the philosophical issues that underlie the constitutional ones, their attitudes towards the laws will be contaminated by nagging doubts and misconceptions.\(^5\)

Besides, explains Lipman, our first evaluation of facts often appears false. It often shows unreflective interests or thoughtless beliefs or unconsidered criteria. So, for him, "genuine values are therefore the product of value inquiry in somewhat the same sense that educated persons are the product of education."\(^6\) In other words, the habit of reflection and of inquiry with others represents the orientation education should choose to guide the young generations towards judgment and behavior which are more and more in relationship with the high values of democracy.

Since the 1970s, much research has demonstrated that the results of the process of philosophical inquiry are positive in regard to the development of autonomous and critical thinking.\(^7\) And, as society is the product of education or, in other words, as the quality of democracy reflects the quality of the educative process, Lipman reaches the following conclusion: an education which promotes philosophical research among children is the guarantee of an adult society which is genuinely democratic.

In short, philosophical inquiry represents an essential dimension of the community because it develops the intellectual aspect of the person, which is a fundamental element in democratic practice.

But it is not all. The personal and social dimensions of the person are also implied. Indeed, if philosophical dialogue is such an effective educative tool, it is because it develops in a community of inquiry.

The community of inquiry of Philosophy for Children is a democratic institution which is at the intersection of families and of society. It helps the young take their place within the world. It nurtures good habits and strengthens character; it integrates the personal good and the common good; it models while serving itself as a paradigm; in short, the community of inquiry represents a positive socialisation of the child.\(^8\) Here, it is the political aspect of democracy which obviously prevails over the intellectual aspect.

If we analyze the course of the Philosophy for Children's community of inquiry, we might see more clearly how it holistically (politically and intellectually) engages the child, how it initiates him to democratic values. As we have said before, the first step consists in the reading of a philosophical novel, which means the experience of sharing a whole among peers, each one reading aloud a paragraph. Perhaps a child will have difficulty reading and try to elude his turn. Or perhaps another child will be tempted to read two
or three paragraphs, because he finds it rewarding. Both will have to make an effort. And this is good, because personal efforts towards the common good (versus towards egocentric satisfactions) lead to the development of cooperative values. In this sense, we believe the first step of the Lipmanian methodology represents an initiation to dialogue, an education to democracy.

Moreover, the reading experience throws light on the necessity of collaboration: between the author and the reader; between the writing and the reading; between one person and another. Thus, the first step the members of the Philosophy for Children’s community of inquiry experience is tinged with social life, with compromises, with mutual respect and reciprocal liberty.

The second step is called the gathering of questions. After the reading of a chapter of a philosophical novel, children question ideas, words and situations; they raise problems, ambiguities and doubts. Because some degree of understanding is at the basis of all questioning, this second step presupposes awareness of the meaning of the words and of the problems implied and, at the same time, a will to go into others’ comprehension, into others’ meaning. Looking for meaning is the foundation of interpersonal communication and implies the motivation to know the other and the will to be transformed by this other. In this way, gathering questions appears as a process of initiation to democratic life.

Finally, the community of inquiry of Philosophy for Children proceeds to the philosophical dialogue, that is a guided discussion, which aims at the development of autonomous, critical and reasonable thinking. This form of higher thinking appears to be essential to communication (to dialogue) among peers. Indeed, it is solely when children have the opportunity to clearly expose what they feel or what they believe that they become free: free in their own thoughts and in their own ideas and thus, free to become what they are. It is also only when children have the opportunity to question hypotheses, to ask for justifications, to look for accuracy that they free themselves from others, that they free themselves from prejudices and from beliefs. Moreover, it is only when children find themselves in a concrete situation which requires coherence between ideas and words, between thinking and action, or between actions themselves that they become responsible and that their individual self grows within a system of significant social relationships. Thus, it is when experiencing the last step of the community of inquiry, that is, the philosophical dialogue, that children engage in the apprenticeship of essential conditions to a democratic experience, namely liberty, responsibility and equality.

Let us say that the philosophical community of inquiry of the Philosophy for Children program commits the young to a reflexive educative
practice, that is, to a context of inquiry where he is encouraged to share intelligently his points of view and to listen to others with respect and tolerance. In doing so, the community of inquiry that reflects democracy and initiation to the principles and values of this paradigm, engages young generations in a process of individual and political growth. And we believe that if children exercise in school their freedom of thought and of action and if they respect their peers' thinking and acting, democracy will probably become their way of living, their way of being when they become active adults within their society.

We can infer three series of objectives related to the Philosophy for Children's democratic dimension. First, there are short term objectives, comprised of the intellectual development of students, their initiation to the democratic experience and also their discovery of the meaning of social values. Secondly, there is the medium term objective, which is the result of the first one and which consists in the formation of responsible and useful citizens. Finally, the long term objective is the corollary of the first two and concerns the evolution of democracy.

To summarize, let us say that for Lipman, democratic education — or education for democracy — is only possible within the context of a common philosophical praxis. Parallel to this, we know that the concept of community and the political dimension of education occupy an important place in John Dewey's theory. Thus, to compare the latter with the philosophy of the Philosophy for Children program, we will raise in the following pages some of the elements of Dewey's representation of democracy and of community which appear central to us.

JOHN DEWEY'S CONCEPTION OF COMMUNITY

Dewey's social thesis is that individual and social growth are indissociable; that the psychological and the sociological dimensions of a person form an indivisible whole. Indeed, on the one hand, one cannot analyse the concept of person without referring to one's own social context and, on the other hand, social reality cannot exist without reference to its members.

The commitment to a community of inquiry thus becomes essential to the evolution of the self and to the evolution of society. From this point of view, education represents a process of growth which is possible only when the individual enters in relationship with his peers, that is, only when he becomes a part of a group and sees himself through others.

Yet, human beings do not form a society only because they live together or because they share the same interests and the same objectives: there exist some groups where people's interrelations are marked by domination and competition instead of by respect and collaboration. For a group to become a community, Dewey explains, there must be a part of caring and of sharing. Every member should know what his or her peers are working at and, reciprocally, he or she should have the possibility to inform others about his own aims and progress. To give and to receive; to talk and to listen; in short, to communicate.

As an individual and social phenomenon, communication helps the development of the self. For Dewey, to communicate supposes the enrichment and the transformation of the individual experience because (a) listening means receiving and involves the participation of the self in other's thinking and feeling and because (b) while talking, that is, sharing and giving, one understands better his own experience, analyzes it more objectively and appreciates its meanings.

Communication also contributes to the development of society and the quality of the community is proportional to the degree of involvement of its members. This means that it is only when each member genuinely participates in social projects, that he or she collaborates with others and shares his or her knowledge and his or her gifts that the community will emerge from dogma and will evolve in the democratic meaning of the term.

Dewey's representation of community leads us to his social and political philosophy.

JOHN DEWEY'S CONCEPTION OF DEMOCRACY

The Deweyan conception of a better society is found in the democratic society which is based on two criteria. The first one concerns the reciprocity of exchanges. It implies the largest number of common interests (material, intellectual, esthetical) freely and consciously shared and communicated. According to this first criteria, all members of society must have the opportuni-
ty to give and to receive — not only with words and concepts, but also with feelings and interests. All must have the opportunity to arouse interests and to awaken curiosity; on the other hand, they should feel called upon, solicited and feel interested by the calling — not to conform to it, but to mutually share the same motivations and feelings. The consequences of this conscious and free communication is intellectual stimulation (the new and the different being stimulations of thinking) and the evolution of the democratic society.13

The second criterion noted by Dewey refers to interactions with external groups. According to his theory, isolation provokes rigidity and formal institutionalisation of ways of living, of ideas, of aims.14 Society thus becomes democratic insofar as it opens to change, to plurality and to diversity.

These two criteria, that is, the importance of mutual interests in the conduct of social life and the open-mindedness to continuous reconstruction, imply that democracy does not merely mean a form of government. This supposes that democracy is a human and political philosophy, a way of being and of living, generated by the sharing and the communicating of individual experiences.15

In addition, Dewey mentions that to learn to become human (to become conscious of one’s difference, uniqueness and usefulness) is a process; a growth process which is acquired and developed by the means of mutual exchanges.16 From the Deweyan definition of democracy emerge the two following principles: each person (adult and child) possesses an intrinsic individual value and, as such, each person is an end in themselves and each institution, a means subordinated to this end.17 In this democratic point of view, the role of schools is to promote autonomous thinking (thinking for oneself) and to foster individual differences.

Once again, we are back to the double-track way of sharing, to the fundamental principle of interaction. To give and to receive constitute the cornerstone of democracy. Yet, we know that for Dewey, the human qualities for democracy do not represent natural dispositions. Thus, to exist, democracy needs education or, more precisely, democratic education. We reach now the intersection of the Deweyan concept of school as a social microcosm and the Lipmanian notion of philosophical community of inquiry.

In the educative perspective, Dewey already determines, in the second article of “My Pedagogic Creed,” the characteristics of authentic education. He writes that education is a process of living, not a preparation for it.18 In the same article, he adds that school life must gradually grow out of familial environment and that it must be in continuity with social life.19 He completes his thesis saying, in the fifth article of the same text, that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform.20 In short, the social reconstruction project is drawn up from the concept of school as social microcosm. According to Dewey, democratic education represents the means of this reconstruction and the democratic state, its end.

But what is the nature of the method he advocates? On the one hand, Dewey talks, in “My Pedagogic Creed,” about a method of learning which is constantly in relationship with social life.21 On the other hand, we know that for him the best society wears democratic characteristics, namely justice, freedom, communication and the will to share with others. The method of democratic education should thus be “experimental.”

Here, “experimental” does not mean “scientific” in the narrow meaning of the term, that is, inaccessible to the mass. On the contrary, we know that, for Dewey, the process of logical inquiry concerns each and every one — each one applying it to his own level and to his own experience.22 So, the educative method Dewey is advocating is experimental in the sense that it supposes that no information is gratuitously acquired by students and, consequently, that each school activity constitutes an hypothesis to verify, to transform, to ameliorate; that each subject matter represents a project — a personal and social project.23 Whenever school is not satisfied with the mere transmission of data and, instead, becomes a place to experiment with ideas, then children stop being passive agents or mere performers to become active subjects of their educative and existential experience, to become essential subjects to the elaboration of democracy. Autonomy and free will are the preconditions of an authentic education.

Yet, since democracy not being defined solely by the concept of freedom in thinking but also by the notion of living in common,24 Dewey considers it necessary for schools to develop and to
cultivate some other human characteristics such as justice and equality. In the same way as oil is necessary to avoid friction, the development of attitudes and of behaviors such as adaptation and mutual accommodation are part of the educative process.25 We know the Deweyan political theory is more complex than this, but the central elements have been addressed so far. Let us proceed now to the comparative study between Lipman and Dewey.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: LIPMAN AND DEWEY

First of all, let us say that the dialogical activity takes on the same meaning for Dewey as for Lipman and his research team, that is, plurality of experiences, affirmation of individuality, autonomous and objective thinking, openness to others and understanding of different points of view. Also, the aims of Dewey’s and Lipman’s theories are similar, regarding individual and social development. A third similarity: whether we stand in the Deweyan philosophy or in the Philosophy for Children program, the principles of continuity and of interaction are respected and the two thesis are unanimous: it is by the means of dialogue that experience becomes meaningful and that one becomes what he is. Indeed Lipman, like Dewey, considers human personality a dimension which can be best acquired and developed by communication among peers. Another major resemblance is the importance both philosophers grant to daily experience.

In short, we can say that the concept of community is at the heart of Lipman’s and Dewey’s (social and educational) philosophy. Yet, its nature seems to be distinct, the former being scientific and the latter, philosophical.

Philosophy for Children’s aim is to help children to think in what Lipman calls “different languages.” Not only the language of memorising facts and dates of history, but the language of thinking in a historic way; not merely to know the rules of formal logic, but to think and to act logically; not solely to master the grammar rules, but to use them to think better; and so on with each subject matter. To reach this objective, Lipman believes philosophy appears the most appropriate subject matter.

 [...] philosophy does not motivate us to think, but it makes us think better by strengthening our reasoning, inquiry, and concept-formation skills, once we have them. 26

 [...] Philosophy goes for the problematic as a moth is drawn to a flame or as a combatant is drawn to his opponent’s jugular; indeed, it is not unusual to observe philosophers seeking their own jugulars at times. The significance of this quest for the problematic is that it generates thinking. 27

Philosophy prepares and generates thinking (scientific, religious and other). Philosophy is the source where all disciplines come to drink to progress: it is a filter which thinking goes through to reach a final product. 28 In this sense, philosophy is fundamental.

Since the skills needed to think in the other disciplines must be perfected before the other disciplines themselves are encountered, we see why philosophy had to cease being exclusively a college or university subject and become as well an elementary school subject — the discipline whose task it is to prepare students to think in the other disciplines. 29

For Dewey, science is the method “par excellence.” Indeed, it protects against routine, it prevents empirical intellectual habits and it contributes to the formation of positive intellectual habits, such as the capacity to avoid mistakes, the ability to deal with new alternatives, a greater motivation towards novelty and progress and the possibility to dominate instincts. 30 In short, for Dewey, science is what gives human beings the opportunity to emancipate themselves from constraints of contingency and of routine, and gives to society the opportunity to free itself from social misery and from natural penuries. Because of its rigorous analysis and the safety of its method, it delivers humans from their beliefs and their illusions, giving them the means to access a more objective truth, and a better quality of life. 31

Let us note that science, for Dewey, is a method of inquiry beginning with doubt and continu-
ing through Peirce’s steps of reflection, culminating in proof. This conception of science is closer to the modern notion of philosophy than to empirical science in the strict sense. Indeed, for Dewey, science is not only constituted in laws, with abstract theories or with skillful research. Science is, in its larger conception, in continuous interrelation with the situations and facts of daily life. It implies some degree of knowledge, but it aims at resolving common problems (versus simply arriving at pure knowledge). It helps in understanding the individual as well as social progress like, for instance, the railroad, electricity, telephones, automobiles, and so on. Dewey calls it the “inquiry of the common sense.”

In our understanding, we find that although science and philosophy are different in regard to their nature (for instance, one is conceptual and the other is factual), yet both science and philosophy aim at similar objectives, namely the development of autonomous and critical thinking on the one hand, and at a better quality of living and more meaningful experience on the other hand.

Therefore, regarding the community of inquiry, we have similarities about the dialogical method and about the individual and social aims; the difference arises when we look at the nature of this community, one being scientific and the other, philosophical.

There might also be another notable difference when we talk about the members who form this community, because even though Dewey advocates the inquiry of common sense, science remains the last step within the school curriculum, while Lipman believes that very young children, even kindergarteners, can get involved in the philosophical community of inquiry.

Concerning the concept of democracy itself, we can see the parallel between the Deweyan philosophy and the Lipmanian one. First, both of them define democracy according to the same criteria, namely the power of individuals to establish laws and their obligation to respect them. This definition from Lipman and Dewey supposes two key notions they both adhere to: responsibility and equality. On the one hand, each individual is responsible for the evolution of the common good and, on the other hand, each individual, in the process of decision making, is equal to the other despite the arbitrary differences related to their social status, their sex, their race, and so on.

Both Lipman and Dewey are willing to maintain that if democracy is the highest governmental form, laws which are its products do not always carry the same positive value. In other words, the members of the democratic community must pay a price for their liberty, which is a continuous vigilance and a regular revision of the norms and of the goals.
According to this point of view, Lipman and Dewey advocate reciprocal responsibilities which are, on the one hand, that each member of the community becomes aware of his or her acts and of his or her choices and that he or she assumes the consequences related to it. And, on the other hand, that educational institutions help children to explore their own potentials and gifts.

So, according to both philosophers, democracy needs educated people. Yet, the nature of this requirement stands more at a qualitative level than at a quantitative one. Nowhere does Lipman or Dewey ever talk about a precise level of knowledge to acquire; they instead talk about the development of critical thinking and about the capacity to think and to evaluate. Indeed, the main goal is that each member contributes, with what he is, to solve the largest amount of problems he encounters in his daily life, and which the common existence implies.

According to Lipman and Dewey, the necessity of good judgment appeals to another essential characteristic, which is collaboration. Indeed, in the democratic context, to think means to think in common. To collaborate, to share, to negotiate, to make compromises are parts of the community of inquiry, whether it is philosophical or scientific. Thus, for Lipman and Dewey, democracy does not only represent a kind of government, but is a state of being which animates each member of the community.

In short, we realize there are many similarities between the two philosophers. It is probably because both social theories have their foundations in the notion of community of inquiry and stem from the individual daily experience.

Yet, we can make a distinction. Dewey's efforts to promote democracy are limited to the American context. In our view, his travelling in different countries did not directly influence the promotion of his social philosophy. Lipman, on the other hand, makes real and concrete efforts to reach the whole planet. Indeed, the Philosophy for Children's curriculum has been implemented in many countries of Latin America, and efforts are now being made in many countries of East Europe.

In fact, Lipman is now working on an international curriculum, in which children are invited to think about questions such as: "In what kind of world do I want to live?", "What kind of person do I want to become?", "Should we look out for our own interests or should we look together for the common good?", and so on.

Just as Dewey did, Lipman realizes how quick society industrializes and modifies. He worries about the future of the planet and about the few alternatives people possess to adequately react. In that sense, he believes it is time for education to help children become aware not only of the problems and of the proposed solutions, but also of the arguments and the related controversies and consequences of solutions. The community of inquiry of Philosophy for Children is now transcending the limits of school and society to reach universal dialogue.

In summary, let us say that if John Dewey's notions of community and democracy appear as a major influence in the Philosophy for Children program, we must consider them only as a springboard Lipman uses to reach his own conception of individual and social evolution.

NOTES:

1. Let us add that children's personal reflection, following the three former mentioned steps, is an integral (although implicit) part of the philosophical methodology.
6. Ibid., p. 56.


11. Ibid., p. 20.

12. Here “interests” should not be understood in the narrow meaning of “liking,” but in the sense of inter-actions and co-operations.


14. Ibid., p. 112.

15. Ibid., p. 113.


19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., p. 93.

21. Ibid., p. 89.