

# Folktales and Philosophy for Children

---

Marc Bobro

---

“You know,” Socrates says, “that the beginning of any kind of work is its most important part, especially when it deals with young and tender things during the period when they are most easily formed” (Plato, 1873, p. 377ab). This seems right. Socrates continues, “Then should we be so careless as to allow children to hear just any story made up by anyone who comes along, taking ideas into their minds that are the exact opposite of the ones they should have when they grow up?” Perhaps, but which stories are the ones children shouldn’t have? The false stories? Even Socrates admits, “[W]e begin by telling stories to children that are mostly false but contain a grain of truth” (Plato, 1873, p. 377b).

Perhaps there are “bad” stories. If so, either we must write the stories ourselves or, as Socrates recommends, “we must first supervise the storytellers, accepting what is good and rejecting what is bad” (Plato, 1873, p. 377a). The presumption here that children cannot themselves philosophize and thus cannot discriminate between “good” and “bad” stories has recently been challenged. Indeed, today’s Philosophy for Children (P4C) movement turns on genuine optimism about children’s thinking. Yet there is something of merit in what Socrates says. Not only can very young children not be expected to discriminate between “good” and “bad” stories, but even the philosophizing of older children can be helped with a bit of direction.

Socrates certainly doesn’t want to write the stories himself: “Now I quite acknowledge that these allegories are very nice, but he is not to be envied who has to invent them; much labor and ingenuity will be required of him; and when he has once begun, he must go on and rehabilitate Centaurs and Chimeras dire” (Plato, 1952, p. 229b). Socrates has a point—writing philosophical stories for the “young and tender” can be frustrating. For how does one write a story that isn’t boring and uninspiring, yet has some philosophical import? How does one write a story with a compelling point or question but that doesn’t sound contrived?<sup>1</sup> Additionally, for most of us, even the “supervision” of storytellers is not the most practical solution, since few of us know any storytellers willing to be supervised. It can be argued that in the United States at least, much of the most ubiquitous story telling is done by mass media, including Disney.

There is a time-honored solution, however, for those of us looking for enjoyable, inspiring

philosophical stories appropriate for children. I have had success introducing philosophy to children through the discussion of folktales, stories handed down from generation to generation. In this paper, I will describe and defend the use of folktales in a children's philosophy class.

### Folktales in Practice

The following Turkish tale about a man and his donkey was told in one of my philosophy classes for children (ages 10-14) in New England:

One day Nasreddin Khoja and a group of his neighbors were going somewhere together. They all rode upon their donkeys. When they came to a hill, Khoja noticed that his donkey was sweating. He got down from its back and whispered into its ear, "I am sorry that you are working so hard that you are sweating." His neighbors noticed Khoja get down from his donkey's back and whisper into its ear, and they were curious about this. "Khoja, what did you whisper to your donkey?" one of them asked. "I told my donkey I was sorry he had to work so hard that he sweated," answered Khoja. All of his neighbors laughed, and one of them said, "Why did you do that? Donkeys do not understand human speech. They are not at all human." Khoja replied, "What I have to do is what concerns me. I did what is expected of a human being, and I do not care whether or not he understood what I said." (Walker & Uysal, p. 235)

The children identified with both parties, Khoja as well as his neighbors: the neighbors, since it is not normal to apologize to a labor animal or livestock, because of the widely accepted idea that such animals are inferior to humans and are here only for our purposes; and Khoja, because he is doing what he thinks is right even though it contradicts common belief and practice.

The children also recognized that the donkey might have feelings, even though it is neither human nor understands human speech. Based on their experience with pets and livestock, some thought that even a donkey might appreciate a kind, consoling tone of voice. Often, they pointed out, it is the tone, body language, pitch, and volume that comfort us, not really the words themselves. One child thought of babies and compared Khoja's whispering to his donkey to the way we speak to infants and children who do not understand speech. We could whisper in a soft, loving voice, "Oh, aren't you just so ugly and stupid" to an infant and it would still sense comfort, not hostility.

But whether or not the donkey understands or has feelings at all, the children noticed that Khoja would have done the same thing, for Khoja says, "I do not care whether or not he understood what I said." So why exactly does Khoja do what he did? Does Khoja apologize to the donkey because the donkey deserves an apology? Or, as one child noted, perhaps Khoja didn't really apologize to the donkey. Rather, he apologized to himself. Hunters have been known to apologize to their kill. (Remember this was in New England.)

This report is typical of my classes that use folktales to do philosophy. A story or riddle gives content and direction to philosophical discussion. Rarely is there reference to the philosophers such as Plato, Descartes, and Nietzsche. Oskar Kokoschka, the expressionist painter: "...did not, like traditional art students, go for ideas and inspiration to what he called die Grossen, "the greats" (the German word also means "grown-ups") whose works hung in the Museum of Art History. Instead he went across the

way to the Museum of Natural History, there to study the primitive art in the rich Ethnographic Collection” (Schorske, p. 328). Traditional philosophy students, too, are told to read die Grossen. Inspiration comes from the classics, and at the advanced stages of learning, the Complete Works and the Festschriften. I propose that we take something from Kokoschka and take a more ethnographic approach to philosophy with children. What follows is a defense of this approach.

### Why Folktales?

Due in large part to the work and research of scholars such as Matthew Lipman of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) and Gareth Matthews of Cornell University, it is common practice to engage children in philosophical discussion by introducing original philosophical stories as the point of departure. Classes usually begin with students reading aloud or acting out part of a story. The teacher, in trying to promote and encourage an environment where students initiate discussion and exchange ideas instead of merely responding to the teacher, then asks the students, provoked by the story, to suggest ideas that they would like to discuss together. The express goal of a philosophy for children class is a “community of inquiry.” The curriculum consists of 80-page original, philosophical novels for students and manuals for teachers. The manuals contain hundreds of exercises and activities to stimulate philosophical thinking and so help to advance inquiry (Pritchard).

I like the basic idea of P4C’s approach—let’s call it the story approach. While it is unrealistic and counterproductive, for instance, to demand that young students read “great” philosophy from the likes of Plato and Descartes—for not only are these texts not written for children, but also children do not have the necessary skills to comprehend these texts—I have great confidence in the ability of children to engage in philosophical thought. While Richard Fox is probably right to suggest that “one cannot expect much genuinely philosophical progress in P4C groups” (Fox, p. 36), this doesn’t mean that children cannot philosophize or learn something from the activity. Gareth Matthews, for one, has demonstrated that children can and do (Matthews), and my experience confirms this.

Let me use an example to help us understand part of the motivation behind P4C and its story approach. Teaching beginning fencing in the United States can be difficult. Fencing is totally foreign to American students. They usually don’t play with swords in recess. No, most commonly they play basketball and dodge ball, or if younger, ride tricycles, or play with toy cars. So it’s understandable that prospective fencers come in totally raw. We can’t expect them to come in knowing what parry tierce is, for example. This was not the case in Europe in the 1700s; we could expect that (male) students were used to the sword. So, just as it greatly helps to explain fencing in terms that the students already know—comparing lateral parries to the motion of windshield wipers, for example—it is reasonable to make philosophy less exotic and intimidating by using stories.

Akin to P4C’s story approach, using folktales is a way to engender class discussion and so a “community of inquiry” without the reading of classical texts. But, specifically, why folktales?

*Educational function.* First, folktales, and other kinds of lore, serve a variety of functions. The drudgery of a soldier’s life becomes a bit more bearable with marching songs. Fairy tales, jokes, and risqué stories afford an enjoyable escape from reality. Folklore even offers a legitimate way to exercise social control and to gain favor in one’s community. Proverbs, for example, are commonly used in

African court trials by all involved parties. Folklore promotes a group's feelings of solidarity and purpose, which makes it a natural means for social protest, as was evidenced by people's lore in the now-defunct Soviet Union. Also—and this is the particular function that is relevant to our purpose here—folktales aid in the education of both young and old, by sharpening the wits and disseminating the wisdom of past generations (Bascom, 1980, p. 293).

Consider the following folktale (actually a “dilemma tale”) from the Anyi tribe in Africa:

A man told God that he wanted to be king, and God told him that he must learn what it means to dispense true justice. The man claimed that he would know how to dispense justice. God looked at the man who wanted to be a king, smiled, and told him that he must travel the world and think about dispensing justice. During his travels, the man saw animals and men dispensing justice, and he learned that against a lion, a monkey is always wrong, against an elephant, an insect is always wrong, and against a man, a monkey is always wrong. He learned a lot about life and justice, but he still wanted to be king, though not as much as before.

Finally, he saw some troubles between the monkeys of the town (humans) and the monkeys of the country (chimpanzees) and ran to tell God. God asked him what decision had been reached, but he did not know because he had left the discussion too soon. God said, “Go back, bring me the answer and you will be king.” The man never returned because there was no verdict. But what would you have decided? The man who knows the answer will be king. (Bascom, 1975, pp. 123-124)<sup>2</sup>

This folktale raises an interesting puzzle regarding the nature of justice. The reader is challenged to think about how justice should be “dispensed” in situations where both parties are equal in strength.

Now consider a piece of lore that passes on the wisdom of past generations by expressing how virtue and vices are developed:

A Cherokee elder was teaching his grandchildren about life. He said to them, “A fight is going on inside me... it is a terrible fight between two wolves. One wolf represents fear, anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride and superiority. The other stands for joy, peace, love, hope, sharing, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, friendship, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. This same fight is going on inside you, and inside every other person, too.” They thought about it for a minute and then one child asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?” The old man simply replied, “The one you feed.” (Reported by student)

The Cherokee elder makes a point similar to that made by Aristotle—that character traits are acquired through our actions—but in a more imaginative fashion.

*Diversity.* A second reason for the use of folklore is the wonderful diversity that we find in folklore, both content-wise and culturally. We find realistic stories of humans interacting with animals, sages considering discrepancies in nature, and families resisting temptation. We also find fantastic stories involving heroes and their terrible enemies, impossible quests, transformations from human to

beast to bird, immortality in all kinds of forms, and “happily-ever-after” endings. We sometimes find thought experiments that involve physically impossible phenomena. But as long as such stories and examples are in and of themselves coherent—that is, they represent logically possible descriptions of the ways things might be—they can evoke a reaction, elicit an intuition, or even impart a moral. Children respond eagerly and creatively to thought experiments. An important part of childhood is asking “what if?” and using the imagination to ponder various ideas and scenarios. Ultimately, the wisdom of folklore is concerned not with particular facts but with cultural assumptions. Yet, I would argue that some lore transcends cultural boundaries and represents an attempt at expressing universal truths.

Consider the following expressions of two distinct cultures sharing a similar message. The first is from the Republic of Georgia:

During a great storm at sea, a learned man heard the skipper giving his orders, but could not understand a word. When the danger was past, he asked the skipper in what language he had spoken. The sailor replied: “In my mother tongue, of course!” The scholar expressed his regret that a man should have wasted half his life without learning to speak grammatically and intelligibly. A few hours later the storm arose again, and this time the ship sprang a leak and began to founder. Then the skipper went to the scholar and asked if he could swim. The man of books replied that he had never learned. “I am sorry, sir, for you will lose your whole life. The ship will go to the bottom in a minute, and my crew and I shall swim ashore. You would have done well if you had spent a little of your time in learning to swim.” (Wardrop, pp. 167-168)

The following is an excerpt from a 17<sup>th</sup> century letter by a Native American elder explaining to the local “authorities” why young native tribesmen were ignoring scholarships offered to them by American universities.

[B]ut you, who are wise, must know that different Nations have different conceptions of things; and you will therefore not take it amiss, if our Ideas of this kind of Education happen not to be the same with yours. We have had some Experience of it. Several of our young People were formerly brought up at the Colleges of the Northern Provinces; they were instructed in all your Sciences; but, when they came back to us, they were bad Runners ignorant of every means of living in the woods, unable to bear either Cold or Hunger, knew neither how to build a Cabin, take a deer, or kill an Enemy, spoke our Language imperfectly, were therefore neither fit for Hunters, Warriors, nor Counsellors, they were totally good for nothing.... We will take Care of their Education, instruct them in all we know, and make Men of them. (Drake, p. 77)

Both passages—one fictional, and one not—express not only the idea that wisdom or true education is useful, but also that what’s useful in one culture or environment may not be useful in another. What is the purpose of “higher education” if one can’t do the simplest things needed to survive in one’s circumstances? It is also interesting to consider the following question: Yes, the former passage is clearly more imaginative than the latter, but is it also more philosophical?

*Provenance.* A third reason to use folktales in a children’s philosophy class is that these are stories

that are not the invention of a philosopher or any individual, but rather the expression of a community of persons or a culture. In fact, there is no author as such; these stories are homegrown, without an historical beginning, and certainly without a name. We have as little chance of linking any one of them to a specific source, than we have of linking a story or riddle to an individual. They are intimately connected with tradition, as invented stories often are not. Specifically speaking of fairy tales, Stanislaw Lem writes: “The worlds of myth and fairy tale deviate from the real world, but individual authors do not invent the ways in which they do so: in writing a fairy tale you must accept certain axioms you haven’t invented, or you won’t write a fairy tale” (Lem, p. 34). The imagination is fettered. But this can be a good thing, for then folktales come with a kind of built-in provenance. It has been argued, “In the folktale the physical and metaphysical worlds are linked through symbolism, and man’s actions to, and his thoughts and feelings about, his environment are given external form.... It presents a summary of archetypal situations, experiences, actions, feelings and insights which have remained relevant throughout millennia” (Wosier, p. 149). But none of this is to maintain that folklore must be mainstream, intellectually benign, or uncritically pro-cultural. To speak of culture is contrary to culture (Adorno and Horkheimer). It seems part of many folk traditions to criticize the establishment, or the so-called “sages,” or even the local culture.

Consider “The Hermit Philosopher” from the Republic of Georgia.

There was once a wise man who loved solitude, and dwelt far away from other men, meditating on the vanities of the world. One day as he wandered among the greenery of his garden, the sage stopped before a large walnut tree covered with ripening nuts, and said, “Why is there such disharmony in nature? Here, for instance, is a walnut tree a hundred years old, and yet how small is its fruit: indeed it grows from year to year, but its fruit is always of the same size! On the other hand, there grow great pumpkins and melons on very small creeping plants. It would be much more fitting if the pumpkins grew on the walnut trees and the walnuts on the pumpkin beds. Why this lack of orderliness?” The sage thought deeply on the subject, and walked in the garden for a long time, till at last he felt sleepy. He lay down under the shady walnut tree, and was soon sleeping peacefully. In a short time, he felt a slight blow on the face, then a second, and then a third. As he opened his eyes, a ripe walnut fell on his nose. The sage leaped to his feet, and said: “Now I understand the secret of nature. If this tree had borne melons or pumpkins, my head would have been broken. From this moment forward let no one presume to find fault with Providence!” (Wardrop, pp. 172-173)

Many, especially philosophers, will easily recognize what is behind this tale—the so-called argument from design, probably the oldest and most famous of the many arguments for God’s existence. It goes like this: (1) nature everywhere exhibits orderly structures and processes; (2) orderly structures and processes are always the work of an intelligent personality; therefore, (3) nature is the work of an intelligent personality, that is, of God.

At first, this tale seems contrived and its moral obvious: it is intended as support for the argument from design. But is this right? Let’s look a bit deeper. Is it not the height of absurdity to infer from the fact that the fruit of the walnut tree is small enough so as not to injure a human that the secret of nature is understood? Or, perhaps the height of arrogance since the “sage” assumes that nature is made for humans? I believe that this tale is a parody of the argument of design and the sage the object of

ridicule. As such, there is nothing contrived or obvious about this folktale.<sup>3</sup>

*Ambiguity of meaning.* A fourth reason to engender a “community of inquiry” with philosophical folktales is their ambiguity of meaning. There are many tales that can be legitimately interpreted in at least two different ways. Let’s go back the little donkey tale that started us off. We can take Khoja’s apology to his sweating donkey as a sincere expression of moral duty, which is more than can be said for his neighbors’ lack of compassion for pack animals. On the other hand, we can question Khoja’s motives. Perhaps he’s evading his real moral responsibility. Instead of actually helping the donkey by offering the donkey water or rubbing the donkey down, he just apologized to it, as “we might refuse to give alms to a beggar but still express our sympathies and best wishes. What good does that do? The beggar can’t feed himself with it. It does make our stinginess less offensive to ourselves however. As long as we can live with ourselves, why not?” (Student).

*Self-interest.* A fifth reason for using folktales is that of self-interest. As a teacher of philosophy, folktales are generally much more interesting to me than either stories that I create myself or that others have written specifically with a philosophy class in mind. This makes sense since it seems that only stories that naturally hold interest for both the teller and the listener would be passed down orally from generation to generation. Even short folktales hold my interest. Consider again what Khoja says to his neighbors when they ask why he apologized to his donkey. Khoja replies: “I did what is expected of a human being.” He doesn’t claim that he is doing anything special, or even anything especially praiseworthy. I find this very interesting and am reminded of Philip Hallie’s writings about the people of the French village, Le Chambon, who saved 6,000 Jews from the Nazis at great danger to their own lives. Hallie reports: “[T]he people of the village did not think of themselves as ‘successful,’ let alone as ‘good.’ From their point of view, they did not do anything that required elaborate explanation. When I asked them why they helped these dangerous guests, they invariably answered, ‘What do you mean, “Why”? Where else could they go? How could you turn them away? What is so special about being ready to help (prête à servir)? There was nothing else to do” (Hallie, p. 13).

There is a parallel between the tale of Khoja and his donkey and Hallie’s report on the people of Le Chambon: Whether another person, animal—or while we are it, ecosystem—is capable of comprehending what we do to it, treating he, she, or it in a dreadful manner is an affront to the idea of humanity. Understanding is not a requisite for compassion—just as beauty is not a necessity for love as exemplified in the famous fairy tale, “The Beauty and the Beast.” I am reminded of one of the “great” philosophers here. Montaigne describes in his essay “Of Cannibals” the chasm of misunderstanding between a colonizing force and a colonized people. Lack of understanding became a way for the conquerors to rationalize their barbarism. But Montaigne shows their rationalizations for what they were—illogical—and their actions for what they were—barbaric.

So although I feel that folklore should not be analyzed as a philosopher would analyze, say, Aristotle’s ethics, even philosophers can gain something from the study of folklore. But that is a topic better saved for another time.

## Conclusion

Introducing philosophy to children is an important task, but it need not require us to be story-

tellers in our own right nor to “supervise the storytellers.” With the help of time-tested folklore it can be done with little contrivance, all the while presenting children with stories that are enjoyable, inspiring, and often rich in meaning. For many folktales represent an attempt to distill wisdom, a summation of ideas and insights that have remained relevant over time. Also, by exploring the ideas of different cultures, children are exposed to a variety of traditions. We learn as well: “By as much as I’m the eldest, I’ll in that degree most eagerly learn with the young,” Lysimachus said to Socrates (Plato, 1996, p. 201b).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Such charges have been leveled at Matthew Lipman’s novels for children. See, for example, Jespersen, 1993. I will neither discuss this debate nor identify myself as a partisan of this debate.

<sup>2</sup> For a longer version of this tale, see Dadié, 1987, pp. 132-138. Actually, in order to clarify Bascom’s version, I have made some additions.

<sup>3</sup> A referee points out that, unlike many other folktales, the foolish person does not get his comeuppance, except for his bruised head of course.

<sup>4</sup> I thank Virginia Bobro, Maurice Hamington, and two anonymous referees for this journal for their excellent comments. I also thank the participants of the Philosophy with Children: Transdisciplinary Perspectives Conference in Oxford, England, 2004, where an abbreviated version of this paper was presented. Comments by Maughn Gregory, Jones Irwin, Megan Laverty, and Thomas Wartenberg were particularly helpful.

## REFERENCES

- Adorno, Theodor & Horkheimer, Max. (1972). (John Cummins, Trans.). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Bascom, William. (1975). *African Dilemma Tales*. Chicago: Mouton Press.
- Bascom, William. (1980). Four Functions of Folklore. In Dundes, Alan. *Interpreting Folklore*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. 279-98.
- Cassirer, Ernst. (1944). *An Essay on Man*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Dadié, Bernard Binlin. (1987). (Karen C. Hatch, Trans.). *The Black Cloth: A Collection of African Folktales*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Drake, Samuel G. (Ed.). (1834) *Biography and History of the Indians of North America*. Boston.
- Dundes, Alan (Ed.). (1965). *The Study of Folklore*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Fox, Richard. (2003). Thinkers or doers? *The Philosopher’s Magazine*. 35-7.
- Hallie, Philip. (2004). From Cruelty to Goodness. Reprinted in C. Sommers & F. Sommers, *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life*. Wadsworth. 4-15.
- Jespersen, Per. (1993). Problems with Philosophy for Children. *Analytic Teaching*.
- Lem, Stanislaw. (1986). *Microworlds*. Harvest Books.
- Matthews, Gareth. “Philosophy of Childhood,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved July 20, 2004 from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2003/entries/childhood/>
- Müller, Max. (1871-2). On the Philosophy of Mythology. *Contemporary Review* 19. 97-119.
- Plato. (1873). (Benjamin Jowett, Trans.). *Republic*. Boston: Scribner, Armstrong, and Company.
- Plato. (1952). (R. Hackforth, Trans.). *Plato’s Phaedrus*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Plato. (1996). *Dialogues of Plato 3*. (R. E. Allen, Trans.). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

- Pritchard, Michael. Philosophy for Children. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Retrieved July 20, 2004*  
from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2003/entries/children/>
- Schorske, Carl. (1980). *Fin-De-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture*. Vintage.
- Walker, Warren S. & Uysal, Ahmet E. (1966). *Tales Alive in Turkey*. Cambridge, MA.
- Wardrop, Marjory (Tr.). (1894). *Georgian Folk Tales*. London: David Nutt in the Strand.
- Williams, Robert C. (1976). Afro-American Folklore as Philosophical Source." *Proceedings of the West Virginia Philosophical Society*. 1-6.
- Wosier, Maria-Gabriele. (1969). *The Russian Folktale*. Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner.

---

Address correspondence to:

**Marc Bobro**  
**University of Southern Indiana**  
**800 University Boulevard**  
**Evansville, IN 47712**  
**e-mail: [mebobro@usi.edu](mailto:mebobro@usi.edu)**

**[Back to current electronic table of contents](#)**