Philosophical Adventures With Children

Michael S. Pritchard
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155pp.

A better written introduction to what the Philosophy for Children Program is meant to be like in sustained practice is not likely to be found than this book. There have been transcripts published of good philosophical discussions by children accompanied with insightful commentary in *Analytic Teaching* and *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children*. Yet before this book, there has not been a comprehensive sampling of such discussions with a commentary that pulls it all together. What makes it even more attractive is that it is written so that the primary focus is placed where it should be — namely, on the children's philosophical inquiries as something worthy of the reader's attention for their own sake, rather than on some extrinsic concern such as a theory about children's thinking, a discussion of the Philosophy for Children Program, or a set of philosophical theses that the children just happen to have been exploring.

The Philosophy for Children materials and methodology are there, nevertheless, exactly where they should be: serving as a springboard for thoughtful, productive discussion of philosophical themes that interest young people. What I mean to say is that this book provides an ideal complement in written form to an experience of apprenticeship to a master teacher of the Philosophy for Children program. Not in any way to call attention to himself — which, again, is just as it should be — Michael Pritchard has afforded his reader an excellent model for adults of how it is possible, inconspiciously, to initiate, monitor, and assist cooperative philosophical discussions among children that really get somewhere. In the discussions reproduced here, the children are given virtually complete control of the discussion agenda once it is begun — demonstrating clearly how vitally interested children can become in pursuing such discussions, how thoughtful and reasonable children's philosophical reflections can be as they build upon one another in such a context, and how well, given the right circumstances, children can come to embody the ideal of a rational community of inquiry.

The potential of the book for a kind of extended apprenticeship does not rest alone on Pritchard's model role as facilitator of these discussions. If rests just as much on the commentary he offers: neither so much that the reader loses sight of the children's individual contributions, nor so little that he is given no sense as to what is happening philosophically in the discussion, but enough to awaken sensitivity in the reader to the philosophical significance and potential of the remarks, hesitations, and musings of the participants that would otherwise be overlooked. He leaves us wondering along with the children, wanting to carry on the discussion further with Carlen and Penny, Jurt and Jeff, curious as to where the inquiry would have gone if they had spent more time following up Emily's suggestion that dogs seem to have a built in capacity for understanding certain gestures that humans make or Rick's question: "... who thinks of these questions? They've always got a two-way answer to them."

For example, at the end of a transcript of a discussion of animals, mammals, and peole that started with the question, "What if all animals were cats?" Pritchard begins a two and one half page commentary:

> This dialogue clearly is a philosophical gold mine. As I read and re-read these transcripts I continue to see things I did not see before, and their philosophical potential still facinates me. One thing that impresses me a great deal is the remarkable consistency and persistency of many of the students throughout the dialogue. Chip is intent on articulating a classificatory scheme that will settle things once and for all. Jeff, quite aware of the implications of such a scheme, resists to the very end of the first session. He sticks to his belief that there is something special and distinctive about being a person; and he has an able and consistent ally in Mike. Just when Chip thinks Jeff has nothing more to offer ("Just tell me, what are people? You can't answer that, can you?", Jeff digs a little deeper ("A person ... a living somebody.").

Pritchard also inserts brief commentary from time to time in the midst of transcripts to highlight the significance of some new twist to the discussion, as in this instance of a discussion of what it means to 'get even.'

> Larry: ... Sometimes you do need to get even. Well, actually, there's no such thing as even, because then he[the other person]'ll get even.
> Pritchard: So, what does it mean when we say, "I had to get even"? Does it really make any sense?
> Larry: He didn't have to. He wanted to, but he didn't have to.
>
> I had not expected Larry's answer. I thought he might say a bit more about his view that "there's no trying to even the score." But Larry made a new, and equally important, point. He made a distinction between what one *has* to do and what one *wants* to do. By challenging the claim that one must try to get even, Larry was suggesting that one cannot avoid responsibility for one's actions. Chip went on to present one reason why some people might think it so important to get even — peer pressure.

The appetite for philosophical inquiry of the children Pritchard worked with is remarkable. In addition to the ones I have already mentioned, topics explored in these transcripts range widely from what is fairness to whether and how dreams can be controlled, from the relation between mind and brain to what is good evidence for believing an explanation of why something has happened. Discussion on any one general topic move rapidly back and forth between issues in logic, theory of knowledge, metaphysics, and ethics, yet all with surprising continuity and coherency. From time to time Pritchard raises a new question or consideration or returns the group to an earlier point to keep the inquiry reasonably on track, but that direction is almost always subordinate to a focus of inquiry already set by the children. Even when launching an entirely new discussion, Pritchard

allows and encourages them to take it where their curiousity and interest leads, as when a discussion of whether computers can think moved into a focus on what it would be like to be a cat. In another, where Pritchard started them off with, "What would it be like to live in a world where all the animals are cats?" the focus of the discussion immediately digressed to the issue of whether human beings were animals. The inquiries documented here are clearly the children's own, not something set by some well meaning adult.

In this regard, one of the things I learned for this book is the wisdom Pritchard exhibits in allowing the children themselves — for the most part, anyway — to find their own way out of the conceptual muddles any philosophically untutored person so readily falls into in discussing ideas like these. My professional instinct would be to manage the discussion somewhat more tightly in drawing out of the children and consolidating a recognition of some of the alternative ways there are to think about these matters and how some alternative are more reasonable than others. Though I think that the latter strategy with someone who knows what he is doing is often appropriate and usually effective, given its purpose, it does have the liability of centering the discussion around the teacher's questioning strategies for drawing out ahd clarifying the implications of student ideas. This tends to remove control of the discussion agenda from the students, and at least until they have had sufficient experience of such Socratic examinations, leaves the students often puzzled as to what is happening and what is the point of the teacher's persistence in asking certain questions. By way of contrast, Pritchard allows the children to explore these muddles together pretty much on their own. It pleasantly surprised me at how well the children were able to avoid getting bogged down in unfruitful discussion and find their way out of and beyond the muddles, as Pritchard himself notes:

> . . . frequently the very points which the teacher wants to make suddenly emerge in the give-and-take among the students. Ironically, sometimes the determination to make sure that certain points are made simply kills discussion, and the points which are so carefully articulated by the teacher are deadened as well.

A continuing theme which Pritchard helpfully returns to again and again, and one which the children explicitly raise from time to time, is how to deal with anxiety over questions that appear to have "no answers" or none but "mere opinions" concerning which one can do nothing but "argue" interminably and never reach agreement. Early on he addresses it in this manner:

> . . . Somehow it should be possible to convince children that discussion slike the one my students participated in can be valuable and important learning experiences. I suspect that what this requries, with both children and adults, is self-reflective discussion of the problem itself. If people are not convinced that one can learn through reflective disagreement, then perhaps what is called for is some discussion of what learning involves and why it is important to explore our disagreements as well as our agreements . . .

Later, he returns to the theme when the children became quite explicit about how they neve seemed to agree about anything, yet they "love" to "argue" and "tell their opinion."

> . . . Although they could fairly say that they were expressing their "opinions," they cheerfully accepted the challenge to examine their ideas critically. Perhaps it is too much to expect consensus on many issues of philosophical significance. But this does not mean that the examination of philosophical issues leaves "opinions" unchanged. Our ideas can be more or less thoughtfully held. We can be more or less aware of their implications and interconnections. We can be more or less aware of the assumptions we make when holding these ideas. And dialogue can result in change — if not in the ideas themselves, perhaps in the reasons we have for holding them. Finally, we can embrace our ideas more or less dogmatically, and philosophical dialogue can result in a greater appreciation of the fact that there are times when reasonable disagreement is possible.

Still, later, at the end of a lengthy effort to clarity the relation between the mind and the brain, one of the children turned to Pritchard and asked:

> Mr. Pritchard, do you know what the answer is? . . . What's the real anwer? Tell us what the real answer is!

Of course Pritchard didn't supply the "real answer;" but he did clearly sympathize with the child's frustration:

> . . . Not giving him a definitive answer might encourage him to conclude that discussions like ours never get anywhere and are simply occasions for everyone to express opinions (none of which have much to be said for — or against — them) . . . On the other hand, giving him a definitive answer could be damaging as well. Not only would it fail to encourage Jeff's thinking for himself, it could reinforce resistance to open-ended inquiry.
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> I have no confident solution to this problem. In the present instance I explained to Jeff that people who have thought long and hard about the relationship between the mind and the brain do not all agree, although they do try to support their views with the best reasons they can. . . .

Pritchard goes on to conclude,

> Despite some student's doubts about whether one could ever get beyond mere opinion, they continued eagerly to participate in discussions — and vigorously to offer reasons in support of their views. Wisely or not, I have concluded that one should not duck the relativism issue if it arises. And one should not underestimate the ability of children to handle it themselves. So, I encouraged them to discuss it when it occasionally came up. [Pritchard gives the transcript of one occasion on which they handled it quite well.] But, most important, it seems to me, is to reinforce the idea that one should try to support one's ideas with the best reasons one can come up with — and to be responsive to the contrary reasons that might be of-

> fered by others. Fortunately, this was never a serious problem with this group of fifth graders [the ones he has just been discussing]. The students consistently addressed their remarks to one another and, in fact, would not settle for the unsupported assertion of opinion. They set very high standards for one another, even at the price of often having to acknowledge that an issue had not been finally resolved.

Just in case a potential reader of *Philosophical Adventures With Children* is wondering what children who participated in these discussions made of their philosophizing at length together, Pritchard has included a brief transcript of a discussion, monitored by a 5th and 6th grade teacher with whom he has worked, of the value of "thinking about thinking" in response to a statement in *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, "When we think about thinking we seem to understand ourselves better."

> Mary: Well thinking is — well, maybe the way you might understand yourself is because thinking is a kind of part of you, in a way.
> Tammy: You get to thinking about yourself and trying to become mature; and you get to know more things about your life.
> Hilary: If you think about yourself — like, if you think about how you think, you might find out what kind of personality you have by your thoughts — how you think.
> Jeff: Like Hilary said, if you think about what you think, and if you think you did it wrong and you can think of other ways, and if you think you have a bad personality, then you can change it.
> Mary: [Thinking about thinking] just makes you think I guess, and it's like you think out in every direction; and you just don't think . . . at one angle.

I don't think adults, even adult philosophers, could say it any better.

All things considered, this is a well written, engaging, delightful, and important book, a wonderful resource for anyone wishing to encourage philosophical thinking in young people or desiring to persuade sceptics as to the potential of children for philosophical thinking.

Dale Cannon