

## Pedagogical Practice and Philosophy: The Case of Ethical Inquiry

Historically, philosophy has not played a significant role in the preparation of elementary and middle school teachers in the twentieth century. However, if philosophy could be organized and sequenced, that is reconstructed, in such a way that it could be taught to prospective teachers in the same way that they could present it to children, both teachers and students could come to cultivate:

- (a) reasoning skills (such as classification, detecting underlying assumptions)
- (b) logical skills (such as conversion and contradiction)
- (c) inquiry skills (such as description, explanation, problem and hypothesis formation)
- (d) concept formation skills (trying to identify what lies within and outside a concept such as justice or truth)
- (e) translation skills (practice with standardization)
- (f) social and interpersonal skills (such as building on one another's ideas).

Philosophy for Children is a six-stage curriculum that attempts to do the above. As the teachers and students read and discuss the philosophical novels and together do the exercises and discussion plans in the instructional manuals, they come to participate in what is known as a community of inquiry. Such a community is characterized by self-correction, care and commitment. It is conscious of its own life, its self-directed goals and self-created means for achieving those goals. Further, it is characterized by cooperation instead of competition, and respect for each other as a potential source of truth. The process of inquiry itself becomes a value to each of the participants. Further, as a community of inquiry, it has the autonomy to direct cooperative deeds in pursuit of further inquiry. As students and teachers participate in the classroom community, they come to respect and love it; they love being nourished by common experiences, memories, hopes and a commitment to the process of inquiry that promises to make life worthwhile.

Inquiry that concerns itself with questions of morality is ethical inquiry. Moral praxis is the goal of such inquiry. Not only are cognitive procedures necessary, but students must come to the realization that such cognitive procedures are to be cared for, in the same way that a craftsman cares for his tools that he uses and the methods and operations that he employs. The process of dialogue, indispensable to the strengthening of reasoning skills, is the instrument that most effectively brings about this commitment and care, care for the tools of procedure and care for one another as persons.

Since dialogue is the methodology of philosophy for children, students eventually come to learn to listen to one another, to speak respectfully to each other, and, in general, tend to become more reasonable and tolerant individuals. Both teacher and student in the program slowly learn the importance of giving reasons for their views and soliciting diverse reasons. Further, they expect others to do likewise. Consequently, both teacher and student become more self-

critical and, to the extent that this occurs, they are better able to exercise self-control. Their moral reflectiveness therefore has a practical and active dimension, for it reveals itself in moral practice as well as in moral reasoning.

There is a very thin line between authoritarianism and relativism. To stimulate children to think well, to improve their cognitive skills so that they can reason well, and to engage them in a disciplined dialogue with one another so that they can reason well together, to challenge them to think about important ethical and social concepts drawn from the philosophical tradition, and yet to develop their ability to think for themselves so that they may think autonomously when actually confronted with moral problems — all of these are the aims of the ethical inquiry program in Philosophy for Children. To the extent that these aims are achieved, the student moves toward objectivity rather than relativism, autonomy rather than authoritarianism.

Note that the community of inquiry does not entail individual students and teachers giving up their individuality and autonomy and melting into some kind of mass in which each participant thinks alike about all moral issues. Rather, because both students and teachers live in a pluralistically social world, the community is composed of a number of very diverse participants capable of public inquiry and coming to the point when they can think well and think for themselves. When one comes to such a classroom community, one does not come as a mere individual self. One comes, as Royce puts it, as an extended self, a self that anticipates the future, remembers the past and lives consciously in the present. As Dewey has remarked, making children partners in associated activity so that they feel its success as their success, its failure as their failure, is essential to all good education. As soon as students are possessed by the emotional attitude of the group, they will be alert to recognize the ends at which it aims and the appropriate means to use to insure its success. Their beliefs and ideas will remain their own, but they will be much more ready to seek for reasons for their ideas and to submit these ideas to public inquiry.<sup>1</sup>

But the formation of such communities just doesn't happen given a school building, an administration and some curriculum. Teachers have to be systematically prepared to foster imaginative philosophical dialogue in the classroom, with the end result that children will be eager to discuss matters of importance with each other in a rigorous manner. Ideally, this preparation ought to occur in the *undergraduate college formation* of such teachers, when they are young and have the time to internalize the process as well as do the essential reading. These readings draw from the philosophical tradition and shed light and alternative views on the myriad of concepts presented in the program, concepts that are inherently contestable but rich in meaning for children's daily experience. It takes time to learn the process of co-inquiry with regard to philosophical matters. It doesn't happen in one year. And it takes practice with one's peers. Further, if the preparation is complete, one would not only produce a good philosophy for children teacher, but a teacher who is capable of teaching all the elementary school disciplines in a reflective and philosophical manner, using the community of inquiry approach throughout the entire day.

It is this co-inquiry of teacher and students that would constitute an effective moral education for the future citizens of a democracy. Children would be given the tools that they need to think for themselves about concepts in such a way that they could understand them for themselves and begin the process of figuring out how these concepts and ideals, such as justice and truth, relate to the institutions of which they are a part. Further, they would begin the process of figuring out how these concepts relate to their living of the moral life. Again, it is Dewey that points out that, as the discussion process in cooperative groups promotes the discovery and development of cognitive skills, the school also comes to represent life through forms of life worth living for their own sake. Schools can and must become a form of community life in which children enter into proper relations with one another in a unity of work and thought. When this happens, the student experiences the best and deepest moral education that is possible.<sup>2</sup>

Moral education, then, within a democratic society is more than a course in the history of ethical thought. Children not only have to come to understand the logical metaphysical, social, aesthetical and epistemological aspects of the moral issues, but they need *practice* in discussing these moral issues within the framework of a community of inquiry. Such a community fosters practice in respecting and tolerating a diversity of views, committing oneself to logical procedures and respecting each other as rational reasoning persons.

This practice involves systematical exploration of moral issues that affect children's lives. It necessitates the internalization of dialogical procedures that are applicable to ethical situations. The mastering of these procedures of ethical inquiry involve the readiness to consider intentions and consequences, universalizing, taking everything into account, seeking for consistency and objectivity, trying to determine the truth of one's premises, recognizing overlapping categories, projecting an ideal self and world, analyzing means-ends and part-whole relationships, drawing inferences correctly where the case at hand might be subsumed under a general rule and distinguishing between differences of degree and differences of kind, especially as they relate to quality, standards and criteria.

In an attempt to illustrate the aforementioned skills that are fostered by engaging in philosophical dialogue within a classroom community of inquiry, let us now turn to one of the episodes in *Lisa*, the ethical inquiry component of the Philosophy for Children program.

## *Lisa*, Chapter 2

### Episode Three — *The Dating Game*

"Hey, Harry," Timmy called out, "how'd you like to come to a stamp club meeting with me?"

Harry was at the point of saying no, but it occurred to him that he had nothing particular to do, and besides, he didn't want to hurt Timmy's feelings, so he agreed to go along.

Not being a collector, Harry didn't find it too exciting. But he enjoyed watching Timmy.

One girl said, "I'll swap you this New Caledonia for that Luxembourg of yours."

"You've got to be kidding," Timmy replied. "The Luxembourg's worth twice what the New Caledonia is worth. How about throwing in the Albanian commemorative that you've got in the packet there?"

The girl agreed, and the two-for-one swap was concluded. "Fair exchange," Timmy commented.

After the meeting, Timmy and Harry drifted down the street, until they came to Corwin's Drug Store.

"Hey, how about stopping in here? I'd like a cone," Timmy suggested.

"Fine with me," Harry agreed.

"Wait a minute, though," said Timmy, with a worried look, while rummaging through his pockets. "I don't have a cent with me."

"S'okay," Harry assured him. "I did some baby-sitting at our neighbor's last night, so I'll pay for it."

"I'll pay you back!"

"S'okay," Harry replied, "next time you can buy me one."

"Fair enough," said Timmy. "Even swap."

As they started out the drugstore, they passed some boys they knew sitting in a booth sipping cokes. One boy put out his foot and Timmy tripped over it, although he didn't fall. He turned quickly and knocked the boy's books off the table, then raced from the store, with Harry not far behind him.

"I couldn't let him get away with it," Timmy remarked, when they saw that they were not being pursued, and could slow down to a walk. "He didn't *have* to stick his foot out." Then he added, "Of course, I didn't have to do what I did either."

Somehow, Harry thought, it isn't quite the same thing. But he couldn't figure out why.

"I dunno," he said finally to Timmy. "The purpose of your stamp club is to exchange stamps, so when you give someone stamps, you're supposed to get some back. Just like if someone lends me some money, I'm supposed to give it back. But if someone pulls a dirty trick on you, should you do the same thing to him? I'm not so sure."

"But I *had* to get even," Timmy protested. "I couldn't let them get away with — tripping me like that for no reason."

A bit later they met Lisa and Laura. Harry told the girls what had happened, and why he was puzzled.

"It reminds me," remarked Lisa, "of when we were trying to figure out how it was that some sentences would stay true when turned around while others would become false."

"Yeah," Harry agreed, "but there we found a rule. What's the rule here?"

Lisa tossed her long hair so that it hung over her right shoulder. "It looks like there are times when it's right to give back for what we got, and other times when it's wrong. But how do we tell which is which?"

After a moment in which no one had anything to say, Laura decided she'd better get on home, and with that the group broke up.

After dinner that evening, Laura returned to the bedroom which she shared with her sister Mary. She found Mary putting on make-up before the mirror.

"Going out tonight, Mary?"

"Yeah, got a date with Gene."

"Where's he taking you?"

"To a movie."

"He's cool."

"He's okay. I just wish he didn't have such a wonderful opinion of himself." The doorbell rang. Mary said, "Tell him I'll be right down, Laura."

"Sure, Mary," said Laura. But she brushed her hair carefully before she went to open the door and let Gene in.

It must have been midnight when Mary returned. Laura was sound asleep, but she awoke when Mary put the light on and slammed her handbag hard against the back of the chair.

"That you?" Laura asked sleepily.

"Who else?" Mary's voice was hard, and Laura could tell she was furious.

"What happened?"

"That Gene."

"But what?" Laura was still bewildered. "What'd he do?"

"It wasn't what he did. It was what he wanted. Just because he took me to a movie, he said he was entitled to something in return."

Laura brightened. "Oh," she laughed, "but you don't mind *that*, do you?"

"That's not the point!" Mary returned, her voice shaking. "It's what he thought he was *entitled* to! When you give something, you're not entitled to *anything* in return!"

"But people exchange gifts!"

"That's what *they* say — but I don't believe it! Just because he took me to a movie, I'm not obliged to give him affection. If I wanted to, that'd be something different — I'd give it to him whether he did anything for me or not. But one thing has nothing to do with the other!"

It was a long while before Laura got to sleep again that night. The next day she related the incident to Lisa and Harry. "It's funny," she observed. "It's just like what we were talking about. Harry was wondering whether it's right to do something bad to someone who does something *bad* to you. And then there was Mary telling me that if someone does something *nice* to you, he has no right to expect you to do something nice for him in return!"

"Harry," said Lisa, "you remember last year, when we were talking about relationships that could be reversed?"

"Sure," Harry replied, "like 'Timmy is the same height as Randy' stays true when reversed, but 'Luther is taller than Timmy' becomes false."

Lisa grinned. "Right, and remember, there was that third type, where nothing follows one way or another?"

Harry and Laura looked at each other. Laura said, "You should do nice things to people because you want to, and not because you want something from them in return?"

And Harry asked, "And when people do things that hurt you, you don't have to do the same things back to them?"

"I guess that's it," Lisa answered, her gray eyes twinkling. "Giving something in return is fine if you're stamp collecting or dealing with money. But there must be lots of times when it doesn't work that way."

Laura sighed. "Poor Gene. How was he to know? He probably didn't think of it as trying to buy my sister's affection. He was just trying to play the game."

"Maybe he could ask the theatre for a refund," Lisa suggested.

---

### EXERCISE: Reciprocity

---

Circle the answer with which you most nearly agree:

1. If someone takes you to the movies he/she (is, is not) entitled to some affection in return.
2. If someone takes you to the movies he/she (may, may not) be entitled to some other show of appreciation from you.
3. If someone takes you to the movies he/she (has, has not) the right to consider you his/her friend.
4. If someone asks you to accept a favor you (need, need not) consider what, if any, obligations on your part are taken for granted.
5. In accepting a favor you (do, do not) automatically accept certain obligations.

---

### DISCUSSION PLAN: Should everything be kept even?

---

Discuss the following situations:

1. Everett's aunt, whom he never paid much attention to before, gives him a Christmas gift of some money in an envelope. When she leaves, he gives her a big hug and a kiss, which he's never done before.
2. Everett trades Arthur two pocket knives for a David Bowie record. Each boy thinks he got a bargain.
3. The dentist gives Everett a bill for filling a cavity. Everett gives the dentist money.
4. Lucy and Hank, who are going steady, exchange kisses.
5. Everett is on his way to school. The front tire of his bicycle goes flat. Hank comes along helps Everett fix the flat. Everett has a dollar in his pocket. He wonders whether or not to offer it to Hank.
6. Everett goes to a party at which there's a lot of kissing going on. Everett wishes Betsy would kiss him, but she doesn't seem very interested. He has a dollar in his pocket. He wonders whether or not to offer it to Betsy.
7. Lucy throws a big party and invites Betsy. Betsy figures the least she can do in return is to throw a big party and invite Lucy.
8. Lucy doesn't invite Tania to her party because she figures that Tania is the favorite of Mr. Gleem, the English teacher.
9. Betsy once did Tania a big favor. Ever since then, Tania has refused to speak to Betsy.
10. The math teacher, Mrs. Crest, considers raising Arthur's grade from B to A so that as many boys will get A's as do girls.

---

### DISCUSSION PLAN: What is a person?

---

1. Can things like rocks and tables and saltshakers be **persons**?
2. Can animals (like goats and hyenas and yaks) be **persons**?
3. Are some machines like C-3PO or R2D2 or HAL **persons**?

4. Are **only** human beings **persons**?
5. Are **all** human beings **persons**?
6. Are sleeping human beings **persons**?
7. Are unconscious human beings **persons**?
8. Are dead human beings **persons**?
9. Can a family be considered a **person**?
10. Can a baseball team be considered a **person**?
11. Can a nation be considered a **person**?
12. Can the entire human race be considered a **person**?
13. Can there be **persons** who never have any feelings?
14. Can there be **persons** who never have any thoughts?
15. Can there be **persons** who have no senses?
16. Is it your personality that makes you a **person**?
17. Is it your personal, private experiences that make you a **person**?
18. Is it your differences from other people that make you a **person**?
19. Is it your similarities to other people that make you a **person**?
20. Is it possible to understand a **person** completely?
21. Is it possible that no person can fully understand another **person**?
22. Is it possible that **persons** can never fully understand themselves?

and the Craft of Moral Practice.” *Journal of Moral Education*. In Press

4. The excerpt is from *Lisa* by Matthew Lipman (New Jersey: First Mountain Foundation) second edition, 1983.
5. The exercises on reciprocity are from the Instructional Manual to accompany *Lisa*. *Ethical Inquiry* (University Press of America and IAPC, 1985.) by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp. The exercises on personhood are from the same source.

---

#### **DISCUSSION PLAN: Persons**

---

1. Can a stone be a person?
2. Can a stone sculpture of a person be a person?
3. Can a tree be a person?
4. Can a cat be a person?
5. If an animal has a body and a mind, is it a person?
6. If a book made of paper and leather contains a story, is it a person?
7. Can a country be a person?
8. Is the Tooth Fairy a person?
9. Must each person be different from every other person?
10. Can a creature from another world be a person?
11. Can something that is not a person become a person?
12. Can a person become something that is not a person?
13. Is it wrong to treat persons as if they were things?
14. Is it wrong to treat things as if they were persons?
15. If neither you nor anyone else knew who you were, would you be a non-person?

*Ann Margaret Sharp*

*This paper was delivered at the Colloque Interdisciplinaire de la Societe de Philosophie due Quebec, Novemer 23, 1986.*

#### *Footnotes*

1. John Dewey. *Democracy and Education*, New York: Free Press, 1966. p. 14.
2. John Dewey, “My Pedagogic Creed,” in *John Dewey on Education: Selected Readings*. Edited by R. D. Archambault. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974. p. 430-432.
3. I am indebted for some of the ideas in this paper to a ms. by Matthew Lipman entitled “Ethical Reasoning