What is a Philosophical Discussion with Young Children?

A brief summary of philosophical activities with children in Hamburg

I think that the international movement of doing philosophy with children consists of two main lines: the first line aims at elementary and secondary school philosophy and the second line aims at philosophy as an after-school enrichment. I'm mainly engaged in doing philosophy with children outside school.

In 1983, I formed a group of philosophical inquiry in Hamburg consisting of twelve children – all friends of my daughter Janique. The children are now between eight and eleven years old. We meet twice a month. Each session lasts about two hours – we have no strict limitation of time or space. The participation is strictly voluntary: some children make music, some children play sports, but the children of my group do philosophy. It is for them a normal activity. During the last four years, only two children dropped out, and that was for reasons of leaving Hamburg.

During our sessions, I try to get the children involved actively in the topics which either they or I choose. We deal with important questions of children's books, such as: Is Pippi Longstocking an unusual girl? Is it fair that Robin Hood attacks rich people to catch their goods for the poor? Why can Alice in wonderland become smaller and larger?

We also discuss philosophical problems arising in everyday life situations and leading to puzzlement and wonder, for example: Does heaven have limits? Can animals think? Have children the same rights as adults? What is a right? These are questions which almost every child deals with, but often they become frustrated because many parents or teachers don't know how to handle these difficult matters.

That's why some parents and teachers founded an "Association of Philosophical Talk with Children" in Hamburg in October 1986. Its main objective is popularizing philosophy as a spare time enrichment, but we also deal with school philosophy. We organized a second group of philosophical inquiry with six and seven year old children. We offer courses for adults (mainly parents) on several topics, for example: How we can encourage children to look for answers on such difficult questions as described above. We also discuss methods of doing philosophy with children, for instance: How can we develop better communication skills? How can we distinguish between good and bad reasons for beliefs? How can we find warrants and

backings for argumentations? Are concepts always clear to all people? In autumn we will start a course for adults twice a month: Doing philosophy and drawing. We will deal with important opposing philosophical concepts experienceable in various ways by all living beings, for example: fairness and unfairness, life and death, good and evil, pleasure and pain, and so on. We will make a conceptual analysis by means of visual thinking and, while drawing, we will discuss some aspects of these concepts. For clarification, we will deal with some texts of philosophers. At this point, you see one of our methods which I will deal with later: the plurality of philosophical forms. That means we are looking for a combination between playfulness and seriousness, between visual and language-oriented thinking. Our activities can't be reduced to linguistic expressions. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein observed, language is never mere language. It derives its importance from the "steam of life" in which it is embedded. Language is only one "form of life" and one form of doing philosophy.

At the end of my brief summary I'd like to add that I founded the small publishing firm "Verlag fur Kinder und Eltern" in 1986. Its main objective is to publish international novels and books for children encouraging them to philosophical adventures. I also publish some manuals for parents and teachers which contain didactic remarks on how to speak with children on philosophical matters. I plan with the hope to get some foundation funding to publish a German-speaking journal entitled "Doing philosophy" which will aim at an international cooperation between scientists (philosophers, psychologists) teachers, parents and children. All these groups receive the opportunity of expressing theoretical and practical experience by means of essays, stories, drawings, and so on.

Criteria for a philosophical discussion with children

What do we try to do when we are doing philosophy with children inside or outside school?

I think that the purposes of such an activity above all, include the building up a community of inquiry and the developing of the ability to take part in a discussion on philosophical matters. That's why we have to put children into an environment where they are encouraged to listen and to talk to each other. But listening and talking have also some relevance to all other kinds of discussions. For that reason, I have made up a list of criteria that I think important for a philosophical discussion with children.

a.   The first criterion of a philosophical discussion with children is a question not yet

answered or a problem not yet solved which evokes puzzlement and wonder, for example: Why must all people die? Does heaven lead to an end? Can I become another being? I call these difficult problems with reference to philosophical tradition *substantive matters.*

Substantive matters are problems which have an essential importance for *all* people in the world, not only for one man. That's why they are problems of a great generality which constitute a line throughout the history of philosophy.

The particular feature of these philosophical matters is that the teacher or leader of a group doesn't know the correct answer about these matters. It does not mean that the teacher hasn't an answer in his mind and that he might see some more implications of these essential problems than the children do. But he is also looking for a solution. He isn't able to say: "Okay, that, and only that is the right answer about these matters." But, if you are doing mathematics, it is necessary to decide what is right and what is wrong. Doing philosophy means looking for an answer through rational investigation. We are on the way to find out something.

b. The second criterion is a very important one: The philosophical matters, that means the questions not yet answered, should deal with the interests of the children. They should provide the starting point of a discussion. The best way is that the children themselves choose a topic which has to be recognized by the majority of them. Of course, it is also possible that the teacher or the leader of a group gives a subject – for example, a passage of a philosophical text book which is interesting to most children. In both cases, the given topic will not elicit the same degree of enthusiasm from all children. But, if the majority of a group rejects a given topic, the children don't want to talk to each other about the subject, then it should not be a topic of a discussion.

If the teacher or the leader of a group gives a topic, then he should put the philosophical problem in a direct context which children are able to deal with. If he asks, for example, a group of children, "What is fairness?", then it is difficult for them to look for an answer

because this problem is a very complex one. It is better to give a concrete situation which can be experienced by the children, for example: Three children have two sweets. How can we make a fair decision? This problem is a better starting point than an abstract question.

If the children have already progressed in doing philosophy, you can also start with a more complex question, for instance: Does fairness mean that you treat all people equally? I prefer the Socratic principle to start with a problem experienced by the children and leading them to a more abstract view of the matter.

c. As a third criterion, I want to state that a philosophical discussion should have some purpose beside the simple expression of opinion. It aims at philosophical matters as described above which are the subject of a special kind of thinking.

With reference to philosophical tradition, this special kind of thinking contains the *clarification of concepts* by which philosophers try to find out the nature of things. It focuses on a selection of important from unimportant qualities.
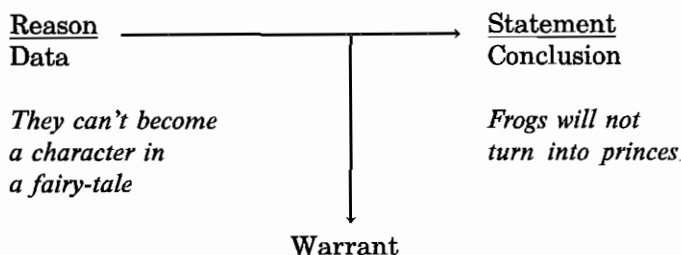
Clarifying concepts with children consist *of two main steps: describing and defining.* Young children often describe things in terms of physical characteristics, such as form, color or size, because their cognitive capacities mostly aim at perception. Doing philosophy should encourage them to use more abstract terms of description, such as *the function of a thing*, for example: A car has four wheels... we use it for driving. It is necessary that children learn how to describe exactly by selecting important from unimportant characteristics. So it isn't important for a car to have a *red* color – it can also be blue or green. That depends on the taste of a certain person. I think that children should describe things and situations first and then try to describe *mental activities* like feelings and thoughts. You can develop this capacity by means of language games (I will give you an example of language games later on).

If children have some practice in describing things, actions and mental activities, they must learn to look for a definition. Defining

means that *we actively influence the language use* by rules – the children know rules from their usual games. If we understand the word "to define" in the sense of the Latin verb "definire" – that means to set up borders – then we clarify concepts by examining the conditions under which we can use them, for example: Can we use the word "man" for a creature coming from another galaxy and looking like a man but being incapable of expressing feelings and telling jokes? (This example was given by the English philosopher John Wilson.) To define concepts includes the reasoning of how to use words in a certain context. You can also practice it by means of language games.

Beside the clarification of concepts, there is another feature of philosophical thinking: to give reasons for opinions and beliefs. Children must learn that it is not only important to express thoughts, but also to understand why a certain thought is important, for example: Frogs will not turn into princes *because* they cannot become a character in a fairy-tale. As teachers, we have to pay attention that children get some practice in giving reasons backing their statements. But doing philosophy includes also *the examination* of reasons in the sense: Are the reasons given *good* reasons for backing my statements? That's why we have to look for a criterion allowing us to distinguish good reasons from bad ones.

In the philosophical theory we call such a criterion *a warrant*. A warrant can serve as a reason for the reason, that means we back our statement by giving a new reason which explains the connection between a statement and the reason first given to back the statement:

Reason ⟶ Statement
Data   Conclusion

*They can't become   Frogs will not
a character in   turn into princes
a fairy-tale*

Warrant

Living beings, like animals, breathe and move

If children have already developed the ability to give a reason for the reason, you can discuss with them several possibilities or forms of reasons and warrants.

The American philosopher *Arthur Murphy* distinguishes the following main reasons:

1. *Facts:* Children mostly use facts to back their statements because factual circumstances are treated by them in everyday life: They can be experienced by everyone. In our example, the warrant includes the recognition of the factual circumstance that a living being breathes and moves.

2. We can back our statements also by *norms, rules or principles.* They have a more complex character than facts and include a generalization, in the sense: you have to do so *in all situations, in all discussions* and so on. Children know rules by their games and that's why it isn't very difficult for them to back an argument by a rule, for example:

D ⟶ C

*I helped her   Anja had fallen
to get out*   *into the water*

W

Help others in distress
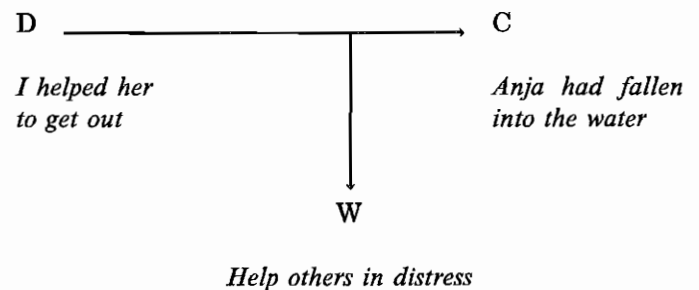
The warrant "Help others in distress" is a universal valid norm obliging everyone in all circumstances.

I think that reasons are publicly essential for a better understanding among men. That's why it is necessary that children learn to back their statements by several types of reasons and to distinguish in which argumentation they choose a rule or a fact, which rule is a good one and so on.

On the other side, we should not overestimate the role of reasons in the discussions with children: I think that it is important to develop a sensibility regarding which statement should be backed by a reason and in which situation it is, for example, better to express a feeling instead of a reason.

d. And, by that, we come to another criterion of doing philosophy with children which hasn't

been in the field of investigations till now: which role do the feelings play when we are discussing a philosophical problem with children? Are they, to some extent, relevant to our conversations? Shall we pay attention to them or do they disturb a rational discourse? To which extent can they serve as an active or passive instrument for uttering something? Should this question rather be a topic of psychology?

I think that emotions have always been in the field of philosophical investigation for centuries and we should not exclude them as a feature of doing philosophy with children.

I insist on the fact that children have desires and goals when they are taking part in a philosophical discussion: they want to find out something, to solve a problem, to answer a question. And these desires are not only connected with mind, they are also a modification of our body (my adrenaline level is very high now.) And, if a problem is too difficult, children will experience a sense of frustration. The philosopher Spinoza says if we aren't fitting into a situation, we will display our power or energy because all our goals call for an explanation. We will develop emotions like frustration, pain, fear, and so on. I think that these negative emotions can also stimulate us to look for a solution. And, that's why we should accept them as an aspect of our discussions which we should also talk about. For that reason, I reject that doing philosophy with children aims at a "feeling of progress" which will stimulate a discussion as Ronald Reed says. (Ronald Reed does philosophy with children in Texas; he is a professor at the Texas Wesleyan College). In my opinion, children must learn that doing philosophy sometimes is enjoyable but it may also be hard work, evoking frustration: we can't find an answer – we can't arrive at consensus, and so on. But, this frustration can stimulate us to new desires and goals.

On the other side, the positive "feeling of progress" may lead to a satisfaction which will not increase our appetite to know something more. That's why doing philosophy means to look for a harmony between positive and negative feelings. It is important to me that we speak with children about negative emotions like frustration and bodily states; they

can be described by children. This can help us to start again.

At this point, I want to say something about emotions arising between the members of a group of philosophical inquiry. Emotions are a natural state of men. And, it is also natural that we like or dislike some persons. But if we notice that, for example, one child is feeling sad because some other children dislike him, that means his manner of expressing thoughts or feelings, we should make this state a topic of discussion because I think that negative feelings can increase and lead to an isolation of one member of the group. And that's why it is also necessary to reach a harmony between members of a discussion, in the sense that each single child is accepted by all the others. And everyone has the right to show frustration, pleasure, pain, to speak loudly, quickly, and so on.

It is also important that children experience a certain development of their feelings, for example: half a year ago I became frustrated after some minutes because my opinion wasn't recognized by the others but now I'm more patient . . . I don't lose my appetite to find something out so quickly. We can compare this development of feelings with the "economy of effects" by the English philosopher Earl of Shaftesbury in the 18th century: We all have natural effects to the good of the private and to the good of the public. That means, in a philosophical discussion we should not only cultivate our own desires and interests, but also the goals and interests of the others. And, if we are able to set up a harmony between the interests, goals and feelings of our own minds and that of the others, we can build up a successful discussion.

I think that the connection of rationality and emotions can prevent young people from falling into mystical feelings which are the admirable touch of many spiritual communities in Germany. They promise the sense of the totality of things and so on, but in reality, they economically profit from an unreflected tendency to overestimate feelings and harmony.

In this way, doing philosophy with children has a practical relevance to me because children can learn by reasoning in which

situations it would be better to weep, in which situations it would be better to go away and in which situations we should speak together and give reasons.

e. And now I come to the last, but no less important, criterion of doing philosophy with children: the plurality of philosophical forms. What does it mean?

The tradition of Western philosophy is language-oriented. We tend to reduce it to linguistic functions. At the beginning of my lecture, I pointed out that Ludwig Wittgenstein has already criticized this reductionist view. It distorts other important uses of expressions.

If we discuss, for example, concepts like "pain" with children, then we use words but we also show bodily expressions as a form of articulation. Wittgenstein noticed that language is only "one form of life" and that's why we can't subordinate other forms of life to the language use. And, for that reason, I think that the cultivation of rationality cannot be limited to linguistic behavior: human beings are also intelligent in other ways. And, therefore, doing philosophy with children includes the development of linguistic forms which can be viewed as intelligible non-verbal statements. To them belong visual thinking and body language, for example in the sense of pantomime.

We find elements of visual thinking, that means of images, for instance, in Pre-socratic philosophy: Heraclitus defines the human soul by sparks of cosmic fire; Empedocles compares the universe with an egg and Plato explains his theory of forms through analogies with sun, lines and a cave. We see that philosophical tradition aims at concrete and abstract thinking, too. (Concrete thinking takes place in connection with practical work, with things, events, situations, and abstract thinking includes a generalization and, to some extent, an independent thinking from things and situations.)

If we are doing philosophy with children we can for example clarify concepts through drawings. They enable us to express important characteristics of a thing, a person or a mental state by signs. Anyway, using words or signs, – in both cases we have to reason which are the essential characteristics of a thing. We must select important from unimportant ones. However, that doesn't mean that children learn seeing or expressing like an artist. They should use their brains to reduce the dominant verbal analytic mode. If we are drawing concepts with children, there are two modes in analogy to verbal thinking: the concrete and the abstract mode of visual expression.

The concrete mode aims at the performance of important characteristics of concepts, thoughts and feelings in concrete persons, things, situations, for example: How do you imagine the world of tomorrow? What is important to be a man? Which quality of Pippi Longstocking do you like most? What is the funniest idea for you? The abstract mode of drawing aims at a discrimination among colors, forms and lines. The children are asked to produce pencil marks which can serve as an analog for concepts like time, pleasure, pain, peace and war, good and evil, and so on. They do it by arranging several lines, strong and weak ones, by different colors, proportions, lights and shadows, spaces and relationships between these mediums. This makes them sensitive to the world by means of an optical splendor. Concrete and abstract drawing contribute to a reduction of the dominating linguistic behavior. We must not forget that children tend to express thoughts by pencil marks in everyday-life.

I think that visual thinking is an enrichment of doing philosophy with children because it corresponds to children's behavior and enables them to think about philosophical matters in a nonlinguistic way.

Another way of conveying thoughts are manifestations of our body. I'd like to explain that by an example: A month ago the children of my group of philosophical inquiry took part in a TV-film entitled, "Fundamental Questions of Philosophy". The topic of our part was actions determined by reason and feelings. The children explained the nature of some feelings, for example, pleasure and pain, by a pantomime. They had to reason how to use the body to make understood the nature of these feelings, to demonstrate important characteristics.

In addition to that, I think that also *games* belong to a successful philosophical discussion.

Playing is called the main activity of children. And, if we are doing philosophy we should have some *practice*. Cognitive procedures are necessary, but children must come to a realization of such cognitive procedures: Why is it important to distinguish between good and bad reasons? Why shall I reflect about my actions? Why is this helpful?

If children are playing games in everyday life or while doing philosophy, they have to set up rules and that means they must explain rules by means of concepts and reasons. They have to convince their partners why some rules are better than others. They have to listen to other opinions and to recognize better statements and reasons, to show tolerance. And that's why I think that playing games is a good practice to use some tools like concepts and reasons which are appropriate to a philosophical discussion. Of course, the games should be connected with the topic of a discussion: It is not very helpful to discuss about fairness and to play speed-domino. Then it would be better to play monopoly or a scene of Robin Hood or just to stimulate a situation where we want to distribute some sweets. There must be a connection between the philosophical topic and the game played.

At the end of my remarks I'd like to point out that we should also *set up some rules of a philosophical discussion* which can change by time, for example:
- Who is the leader of a discussion? Is there anybody, beside the teacher, who regards how and when a member of the group may speak?
- Are the members allowed to speak whenever they want? Shall they give a sign by hand?
- What about limitations if somebody speaks very often and too long?
- Who decides when a discussion is over?
- Is it necessary that all members participate in a discussion?
- What about a child who doesn't want to take part? If somebody likes to draw a picture is he allowed to do so?

Before starting a discussion we should speak about such rules and modes of expressing thoughts. We must accept that these rules can change very often.

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