GOOD REASONING: A RECONSIDERATION DRAWN FROM EXPERIENCE WITH PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN

Six years as a trainer of teachers in the Philosophy for Children Program has affected my thinking in a number of ways. One major way, which I choose to dwell upon here, pertains to my thinking about what it is that makes up good reasoning in practice and how that might best be learned. I wish to argue that good reasoning is best understood not as a set of isolatable skills, attained and possessed by an individual, but as a social practice, specifically: a virtue or set of virtues, learned and practiced in community with others.

But first I wish to make what may seem an odd, but to my mind, significant observation about how I have been led to this view. This conception of what makes up good reasoning has not derived from any theoretical statement made by Matthew Lipman, the IAPC, or any other writer. Rather, I believe it has come rather directly from reflecting on the practice of reasoning that emerges in the context of a Philosophy for Children workshop or a Philosophy for Children classroom – which, when operating well, grants to the group in question autonomy in discovering what it is that makes up good reasoning in practice. I believe that good reasoning in this sense can be – and ordinarily is – recognized, learned and practiced quite apart from the practitioner being able to supply a theoretical account of what it is. It is a **practice** learned tacitly, gropingly, uncertainly, in the effort to make good sense in common with others. It is recognized to be **good** reasoning precisely to the extent that it succeeds in eliciting common recognition that good sense is being made. In consequence, theory about it (to the extent that it exists) is more an effort to understand and improve a more or less autonomously emerging and functioning practice; the practice is not itself theory-governed in any ordinary sense – least of all, ideologically. Instead, it is governed by the community of persons in question who hold each other responsible to reason in ways that merit the respect of each involved.

Thus understood, the Philosophy for Children Program is the intention and effort to create a social context where what makes up good reasoning may be discovered and learned by way of practice and reflection (together with peers) on that practice.

Here lies one of the key differences between Philosophy for Children and other programs for reasoning skill development. Other programs take for granted (a conception of) what constitutes good reasoning and place all authority for deciding such matters squarely in the hands of the teacher (and behind the teacher in the hands of the program developers). As a result, acquiring proficiency in good reasoning under these programs is a matter of acquiring mastery of pre-established techniques – within a frame of reference whose basic assumptions are never opened to question and, thus, never **owned** by the students learning them. The students learn to think, perhaps even to think well (according to some external criterion), but not to think for themselves. On the contrary, it is only when students acquire principles of good reasoning out of a concern to clarify for themselves what makes up good reasoning and to improve their own practice of reasoning that they genuinely come to own and assimilate them. To give priority to a focus upon clarifying and improving the tools with which one thinks and reasons about other things is to place philosophical thinking at the heart of reasoning skill development, for that is precisely what philosophical thinking is. Philosophical thinking is this effort to obtain a more satisfying version of one's own thinking or of the thinking practiced in a given subject area: a version that is more thoughtful and sensible, more fully examined and clear, more comprehensive, more impartial, freer from presumption, wiser. That is why philosophy traditionally has been the monitor of good reasoning – not because philosophers are the one's who know, but because the effort to improve ones reasoning is already philosophy.

Yet, because good reasoning within the Philosophy for Children Program is a social phenomenon, a practice before and between one's peers, it is not a mere intellectual exercise. Nor is it something private (which so much schoolwork is, even when it appears to the teacher). It is a matter of exploring and practicing a certain social identity; it has implications regarding who I am for myself and others. (That, by the way, is why not a few teachers find teacher training at first so intimidating!) How I reason and how well I reason in such a context manifests my character. Good reasoning in such a context is a trait of character to be practiced and developed.

To speak this way is to run at least somewhat counter to much of what has recently been said about reasoning, critical thinking, and so-called higher level thinking. For the most part, reasoning is identified as a set of skills, each supposedly identifiable independently from others, which an individual student is supposed to master and demonstrate. It is moreover presumed that 'good reasoning' is relative to specific

skills, such that one may be good, say, at syllogistic inference and perhaps poor at being able to identify an implicit argument structure. But little or no attention is given (as a matter of teaching **reasoning**) to being reasonable, conscientious, and fair in discussion and argumentation – i.e., to good reasoning as a comprehensive feat of interpersonal behavior, which would give subordinate skills meaning, purpose and a moral dimension. In order to place due emphasis upon good reasoning as a global, comprehensive activity, I am proposing that we depart from identifying reasoning as a skill or set of skills and, instead, begin to identify it more closely with virtue, with a trait of a person's moral character that merits our deep respect. This is what we have in mind when we speak of someone **being** a reasonable person, open to reason, thoughtful and of responsible judgment. In this regard I am consciously seeking to rehabilitate an old way of talking that goes back to Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher of common sense, who spoke of the intellectual virtues, virtues of our capacity to reason.

You may recall that it was Aristotle who defined the human being as a rational animal. (He also defined humans as political animals in another context.) What he meant by that was not that all human beings are equally proficient reasoners or that all have the capacity to be. Rather, he meant that what distinguishes human life is the capacity to order our activity in accordance with reason. All activity, as Aristotle conceived it, is the actualization of an inherent potential or essential nature. What distinguishes human activity is **our capacity to choose by way of thoughtful deliberation what actions will best realize our inherent nature and bring us into an intelligent, knowing relation to the situation in which we find ourselves.** What merits our deep respect in another person is the full realization in an excellent way of her/his inner potential as the human being she/he is. That is what we identify as virtue. Virtue is not so much the right choice as it is **the disposition to choose and pursue what is best** among alternatives, fulfilling one's unique capacity as an intelligent, human being. There are different virtues corresponding to different types of situation: courage in facing death, temperance in experiencing pleasure, liberality in the giving of gifts, etc., most cases involving a mean lying between vices of excess and defect. But, in every case, each of the virtues has a rational component: **a thoughtful evaluation of alternative possibilities of action.** Of course, because we are rational **animals**, we also have irrational aspects to ourselves as well. The consequence is that most of the virtues also have a non-rational component: we must be habituated or trained to **act** and to **want to act** in accordance with what reason judges to be best. This is what is called **practical virtue**. What is called **intellectual virtue**, on the other hand, corresponds to excellence in the functioning of the rational side of our nature: the disposition to deliberate rightly and truly, to render wise and appropriate judgments, ranging from purely practical considerations to sheerly theoretical matters.

Now you may not yet be in a place to see that rational deliberation among alternatives for the sake of determining what is best, right, true and/or justified is involved in **all** aspects of (good) reasoning. So let us take a look at a few different kinds of reasoning that one might not at first suppose to involve deliberation.

Consider first classification: whether one is identifying colors, quantities, or kinds of evergreen trees, one is faced with the task of choosing which name or classification (e.g., red, 12, or sitka spruce), among those possibly relevant, most appropriately corresponds to the object being identified in light of the purpose or principle of classification. Even vague or borderline cases and ambiguous terms involve deliberation among ways of best resolving an uncertainty. When we speak of someone being able to classify things well, we are not merely referring to their proficiency at coming up with the right terms for the right objects, but also to the respect to which their classification manifests good judgment, makes good sense, and is comprehensively appropriate as to subject matter, situation, and time.

Consider deductive inference, perhaps the most rule circumscribed activity of reasoning there is. Say everyone in the classroom is an American. And Joe is in the classroom. Does it follow that Joe is an American? Determining whether it does follow or not is a matter of seeing to what extent the preceding two sentences can be true without Joe being an American. If they cannot, then it must necessarily follow: Joe is an American. Again, we have a deliberation between alternatives – in this case between only two: what validly follows and what does not validly follow. More generally, when we speak of persons being able to size up a situation astutely, appreciate what is going on, and recognize what are and what are not possibilities, given certain initial information, we have in mind not merely their proficiency at deductive inference, but also how that fits into the making of good judgments, ones that make good sense to us on reflection as well as to the persons making the judgments. The concern is not with an isolated skill but with a global expression of wise judgment, within which the particular skill has its meaning and point.

Consider serial ordering, say, of items of increasing length. Determining whether a given item belongs between items c and d, b and c, or d and f, is again a matter of deliberating between alternatives: where

does the item most appropriately fit, given the principle of increasing length. So also, a person who is able to rank things well, a judge or a connoisseur we sometimes say, is thought of not only as a person proficient at serial ordering in relation to some standard or principle, but one disposed to do so in a wise and sensible manner. The concern in real life is with a global performance that manifests not so much proficiency as wisdom.

Other activities of reasoning, such as devising explanations, assessing interpretations, identifying and solving problems, evaluating arguments, formulating and supporting a position, etc., more obviously involve rational deliberation among alternatives.

In general, then, reasoning involves and calls for reflection or reflective deliberation on the part of the reasoner **and** on the part of the person with whom s/he reasons: it asks each to step back from his or her present activity to determine whether and to what extent a particular choice (or claim or course of action) among alternatives is right, whether it has sound reasons to support it (even though these may not be fully articulated), whether it is well-founded – in short, **whether** in view of whatever relevant considerations can be brought to bear in the circumstances **it is justified**. A person may reason with another person and s/he may reason with her/himself. In either case a person's reasoning as **reasoning** appeals to the reflective capacity of the person with whom s/he is reasoning **to see for her/himself that there are good reasons for accepting the choice being proposed**, adequate and appropriate grounds **independent of her/his own immediate inclination** to accept the choice or reject it. This independence of rational justification from one's own immediate inclination is what constitutes the objectivity of a justified choice. Reasoning presupposes that persons are capable of transcending their immediate inclinations sufficiently to see for themselves what has, or does not have, independent justification – independent, even, of the inclination to please the teacher. Note that this is not just a matter of skill or proficiency in technique. It is a matter of being disposed to reflect and examine for oneself the soundness and relevance of reasons in support of a choice or claim. It is a disposition to ascertain what makes good sense on reflection. That is what makes it good reasoning and that, according to Aristotle at least, is what makes us human. How well we exercise our capacity to reason is a mark not merely of our proficiency; it is a mark of what we have become of ourselves as human beings.

That is why reasoning, or good reasoning, is best thought of, and taught, as a virtue rather than a skill – even though subordinate skills be involved. Patiently to build up expectations of student reasoning as virtue will generally bring the necessary skills into play. But to attempt to teach reasoning as a matter of skill primarily or skill only is to invite sophistry of the worst sort: the use of increasing proficiency at reasoning to manipulate and dominate others less proficient. To teach reasoning as virtue is to aim at producing reasonable persons, persons responsive to and responsible to the reasoning capacity of other persons, persons disposed to act and think on the basis of good reasons, persons free from being manipulated by the sophistry of others (whose manipulations depend on persons who act on immediate inclination rather than on the basis of good reasons), and persons free from acting presumptively in relation to others less proficient.

I do not think I need to stress in this context that this is what Philosophy for Children attempts to do. However, it may help to have made it more explicit.

But, if good reasoning is a virtue, then surely the old question, "Can virtue be taught?" is newly relevant.

Socrates – according to Plato's account at least – contended, in opposition to prevailing opinion, that virtue could **not** be taught, and that we should not fool ourselves by acting as if we know very well who has virtue and who does not, presuming that it can be handed across, more or less passively, from those who have it (the 'teachers') to those who do not or do not yet have it (the 'students'). Genuine virtue – as opposed to its counterfeit – is not something that can be conveyed at second-hand at all, he argued. (I am well aware that I run the risk here of misrepresenting Socrates. For he definitely did not go around proclaiming this doctrine – if doctrine it is – and denouncing contrary views. Instead, he went around to those persons who believed, proclaimed, and acted as if virtue could readily be taught, and sought to help them discover the latent contradictions in their views and that things were not quite as they supposed – a dangerous business, to be sure!)

Socrates went on to suggest, however, that, while virtue cannot be **taught**, it can, perhaps, be **caught** – under certain favorable conditions: namely, at first-hand in the company of persons who have come to know they are but "lovers", not "possessors," of true virtue or wisdom and who hold each other responsible for reasoning well. Socrates called such lovers of wisdom "philosophers," for that is what the parts of the word philosophy mean: **philia**: love + **sophia**: wisdom. Following Pythagoras, he employed the word "philosopher" as a way of distinguishing himself, and others who inquired as he did, from the so-called "sophists." The word sophist means one who possesses (or presumes to possess) wisdom, one who has 'the answers,' and who therefore is in a position to teach it in the conventional sense.

The philosopher, by way of contrast, is the person who knows he does not **possess** wisdom – i.e., knows that he is in no position to **presume to possess** wisdom – and has the humility to admit that he does not, but he strives nevertheless after it, desires it, longs for it. His aim is not to 'teach' virtue but to try, so far as possible, to discover it – especially to seek it out and draw it out of others, to encourage and nurture it. The philosopher, thus, is the one who has not 'the answer,' but the question behind the answer, one who has the spirit of questioning, the disposition of questing for an answer – and, like a midwife, one who is able to help candidates for an answer be brought to birth and examined as to their soundness and authenticity.

Moreover, the philosopher is the one who respects the reasoning capacity of his fellows too much to treat them either as 'yes-men' to his answers (were he to have some) or as potential sources of answers which he might be able to take over at second-hand. On the contrary, the importance of each person examining for her/himself the adequacy of any answer requires that each person be treated as a fellow searcher after wisdom, a fellow philosopher, and listened to seriously as such – even before s/he views her/himself accordingly – and that, as far as their inquiry is concerned, there be no 'ready-made answers,' ready to be taken over at second-hand without serious thought. In other words, a philosopher-teacher's expectation is that no one is allowed to avoid thinking things through for her/himself and making up her/his own mind, no one is allowed to offer opinions without reasons to back them up, and each should be persuaded only by good reasons and sound argument. In this context, 'catching onto' virtue, as opposed to being 'taught' it, is a matter of catching onto the spirit of the inquiry – which is itself the virtue of good reasoning. It is a matter of becoming part of an ongoing community of inquiry in a way that, over time, shapes one's self-identity and establishes deepseated dispositions of good reasoning.

'Catching onto' and 'being caught up in' the virtue of good reasoning in this way involves as well coming to have one's thinking appear before others – become public, as it were – and in consequence seem different even to oneself than it did before. It now stands in need of a justification and backing, if not a revision, that it did not appear to require before. To withstand the glare of public scrutiny (even in one's own eyes) my thinking and my opinions need something more than merely to be **my** thinking or **my** opinions; they need to have reasons, good reasons, even to merit respect if not to elicit assent. Then, when it does prove (so far as we have been able to examine it) to be well thought out and solidly backed, there is a sense of fulfillment and well being, confirmed in the recognition of my fellows, that is second to none. And to the extent that my contributions have helped another's thinking to attain that quality of integrity and soundness, I share in her/his fulfillment as well. What is remarkable is that this rarely needs to be explicitly pointed out by a teacher, if at all. It becomes obvious to anyone who participates in such a community over time. Again, it is something more 'caught' than taught. Thus good reasoning understood as virtue has an essential public dimension.

And, particularly when multiple points of view must be addressed and given answer to, it would seem then that good reasoning thus understood is already public or civic virtue. I suggest that it should be regarded as such and should be explicitly connected with other movements in our culture – e.g., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life,* by Robert Bellah et al. – that seek the renewed cultivation of civic virtue.

So, then, can the virtue of good reasoning be taught? Were it something one could receive, more or less passively at second-hand from another person, I suppose so – though it would not be the virtue of good reasoning that I have been describing. On the contrary, I suggest, along with Socrates, that the virtue of good reasoning is something one must catch on to for oneself, something one can catch on to only in the company of others, persons who regard themselves not as possessors of it but as lovers of it, avid pursuers of it, who sometimes in one another's company come to embody and share in it for a while.

Again, following Socrates, it is worthy to note that, considered as virtue, good reasoning in a person is not only gained from without, through one's upbringing, training, experience, and education. It is also, if not more so, the development of a native talent, a fundamental inborn capacity. No human being, insofar as s/he is human, wholly lacks reason. Of course that doesn't imply that s/he reasons well.

It is this fundamental capacity in a person to reason to which education in the root meaning of the word – to educe or draw out – is addressed. It is absolutely essential to human learning in any significant sense. But it must be evoked, engaged, and – above all – listened to and taken seriously, for learning to be more than behavioral conditioning – that is, for learning to be humanly meaningful. Teaching good reasoning is not like giving a student something s/he does not already possess, such as a body of information or set of rules to follow. No, to teach good reasoning is to influence the practice of a native capacity that has been already, however awkwardly, engaged. Like any of the virtues, the virtue of good reasoning, of reasoning better, cannot, strictly speaking be taught; it must be caught. One has to catch on to it in one's own person – and be given room to fumble a bit without shame in the

process of catching on and opportunity to gain perspective on the adequacy of one's 'catch' – in order for it truly to be good reasoning and not mere replication of teacher's dictum.

To learn good reasoning is to discover and pursue what thoughtfulness and considered judgment involve and require. To practice good reasoning is to **be** a certain kind of person: a person of thoughtful and independent judgment, one whose judgment merits her/his own respect and the respect of others.

A final word: I said in the beginning of this paper that my remarks were to be understood as an interpretation of what I have found emerging **de facto** in the context of Philosophy for Children workshops and classrooms. The conception of good reasoning I have described is not a mere ideal; it is a living praxis. It is a great and good fortune to be a teacher or teacher trainer of Philosophy for Children, for it is to be involved in what Marx thought impossible for philosophy: changing the world as well as interpreting it – and without the liability of ideological fixation. May the enterprise continue to go well!

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