

## **PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN AND THE REDEFINITION OF PHILOSOPHY: TOTAL IMMERSION AT MENDHAM**

Philosophy, like the IAPC Mendham seminar itself, is a place apart. I don't mean by this that philosophy is a realm of timeless ideas, or a dream time, or a place of the ancestors where all the seminal ideas are, although it may very well be that; what I mean is that when we do philosophy, everything stops. Everything stops, I think, because if, as we are flowing along in life and language, we encounter a problem, and we don't smooth it over or push it to the side and go on, we discover that it actually represents a question. And if we allow the question to ask itself, it often turns out that: 1) it seems to be a very important question about meaning; 2) it doesn't have an answer, although it may promise one; and 3) it tends to raise even other such questions.

Thus philosophy is a way of deliberately coming to the end of one's rope; a place where the questions, the puzzlements, the million-and-one unquestioned assumptions which dream and lurk about in our ordinary language suddenly come out, and flip from background to foreground. In this way it is also rather like theatre, or the play-world of young children, in that it involves the translation into another realm of meaning, a place removed from ordinary life, a Wonderland where nothing always quite ever means what it might, and the apparently infinite succession of statements and counter-statements, sudden, dazzling transformations and involuntary plunges into incoherence pull us breathlessly, and in rapt fascination, sometimes exultant and sometimes in pain, along wherever the Argument leads us.

This can lead to madness. Why? Well, for one thing, it's ridiculous in a way--a useless passion, like gambling, or attempting to salt the tails of birds. The Argument, like the jackpot or the bird, always gets away. For another, look at the people who do it full time: academic philosophy departments tend to bristle with combative, supercilious, or sardonic heavies, intellectual gunslingers, for whom the life of the mind has become either a combat zone or a constant, Wittgenstein-Therapeutik. The standard philosopher's cliché of the necessity of separating persons and their ideas is simply disproved on the face of it walking down the hall, sitting in on a seminar, or a faculty meeting. Everything about it is intensely personal/ideological, from the predictable internecine gigantomachy of Hegelians, Derrideans, Heideggerians, analytics, phenomenologists, pragmatists, etc., to the classroom atmosphere, to colleague relationships, to departmental politics. What would happen to Alice if she wandered in here?

The madness of philosophy also lurked in the background at the IAPC intensive retreat at Mendham. If it did not, I'm not sure we would have been doing philosophy. And the holism was there too. But at Mendham two different conditions prevail: in the Mendham Temporary Department of Philosophy, convened for three sheer weeks, there are no attached labels allowed. We avoid naming philosophers, not only because we are interested in learning to talk philosophy with children, who have never heard of those people, but also because it tends to raise impossible further complications in a situation already complicated enough. So in this respect we are in a museum-without-walls: Hegel is only as good as how one of his ideas might be of use in the attempt to follow the Argument where it leads (is that goal, in fact, in itself "Hegelian"? So what!)

Second, we cannot, the way people in philosophy departments can, leave the place and go home, in spite of our occasional (or frequent, as the case may be), longings to do so. If for no other reason, it costs a poor philosopher too much to change a plane ticket. We are stuck here at Mendham, in a place where time has stopped--a huge, three-storied retreat house from the turn of the century, where electricity--not enough to allow a fan in every stifling August room--was added at some point by stringing the wires through the still functional gas-light system; where only Mets games and stale sitcoms straggle in, like

messages from a world of the distant past, on the half-functioning black and white portable; where the Divine Child and the Mother, or the Man Suspended Between Heaven and Earth, stare at us from every room; where a ping-pong ball dropped in the first floor solarium can be heard all over the huge, Victorian house. We are stuck here! Condemned to inquire together for three weeks around the same table about the "ageless concepts" as Lipman calls them. Not only that, but to eat together and have companionship together--we're all there is! So we talk, then we eat, then we talk, etc. At night, inquiry continues, as if by momentum, in our relationships: we are revealed to each other in spite of ourselves. All of our existence has come to a point in this situation which is inherently problematic. Nothing is philosophy anymore because everything has become philosophy, so what is there to distinguish it from? Our lives have become questions put to us, as we put questions around the table. We are also questions put to each other, questions which are not just personal but gendered, cultural, historical, political, spiritual, even characterological--for which final answers are an ever unreachable horizon. Everything has stopped. We have come to the end of our rope.

But there is a one final, and most important difference between the Mendham Temporary and other departments of philosophy: it is we--not he, she or I, or even you and I--who are doing philosophy. I am even tempted to say: it is not even we, but rather philosophy itself which is doing among us. As we interact with the PFC texts, philosophy is emerging among us. We are not being taught philosophy, philosophy is teaching itself to us! And, like children, we are so happy and proud about this! It is very grand and exciting that this is happening.

In fact I am convinced that what PFC promises to do, and that among children and adults (how, after all, can adults bring it about among children unless they have experienced it themselves?) is not only to reclaim philosophy, or to bring philosophy back to life (pun intended); not only to deliver it from the strangleholds of the various traditions, and from the violent, agonistic use to which it is put in so many departments. That, certainly, would be enough. But beyond that, it is to demonstrate the words of those prophets of dialogue of our century like Gadamer or Royce, who have understood that "truth cannot be won by one interpreter."<sup>1</sup> As such, it delivers philosophy from the positivistic individualism of the propositional ideal--from the idea of philosophy as discrete collections of private, non-communal meanings, substantive "versions" of how things are, intuited and argued for by individuals against other individuals, one of whom will be right in the end. The operation of the community of inquiry redefines philosophy as an interactive, communal, emergent activity, or even-structure. This is of tremendous significance, especially if it is done in schools, and begins working its way into the American grain. It promises, not only profound curricular reform in schools, but a renaissance in American philosophy as well--a renaissance, not insignificantly, inspired by children.

The experience at Mendham, in all the inchoate logic and intensity of its cumulative, thematically building sessions, redefined philosophy for me in a powerful way. I am not yet aware of everything I learned there. Will I ever be? (How can you have learned something you are not aware of?) But I do expect that the experience will build and seep into my practice over the next year or so, and perhaps surprise me with messages. This much I feel I can now formulate:

Philosophy is relational. All our interpretations, from logic to metaphysics, are made for an other, come completely to life in an other, and are transformed, not only in their very communication, but in the understanding of the other who hears and responds. In fact they gather as a response in the other even as they are heard. Nor do we ever hear just what the other said; if we did, conversation would stop, for we would be transfixed, impaled, by another's thought. Philosophy is communal and interpersonal through and through.

Philosophy is dialectical and dialogical. The movement of the Argument in the community of inquiry proceeds by a series of moves, none of which are completely predictable, but which demonstrate patterns. One such smaller, pivotal pattern within the larger pattern of the (undeterminable) whole is what Gadamer, after Hegel, calls the "moment of negativity." Through contradiction, counter-example, or some other challenge, my position, which is complete as I say it, is revealed in the response of my interlocutor(s) as lacking something, i.e. as not complete. This is a moment of self-loss for me, but a necessary moment: it leads to the regrouping of my argument on a higher level, as I take the perspective of my interlocutor into account.

What is humbling about the community of inquiry is that this higher regrouping or synthesis that takes place as a result of contradiction is not necessarily, in fact should not, be mine: another member of the community builds it into a wider proposition (or a narrower but better-focused one), which in turn draws a dialectical response, or an amplification, which in turn draws a dialectical response, & etc. It is also significant that involvement in the community of inquiry teaches us that the horizon of truth/certainty, the place where the dialectic ceases and comes to rest, is infinitely receding. We have the promise of final symmetry, but the journey of continual self-correction is infinite (is this a contradiction? So what?). The question unfolds infinitely, through infinite vicissitudes. A part of the argument may become, through focusing, the whole, expanding into something else; the argument may suddenly be seen to be part of a larger whole. Through infinite kinds of paths--from quagmire-prone brambled footpaths to four-lane interstates (watch out for those!); delivered by someone's decisive, skillful, inspired, or lucky move from sloth, superficiality, violence, literalism, psycho/ or sociologism; or halted and moved back by stubborn or suspicious scouts to where it last made sense--the Argument leads. After the third or fourth day at Mendham, it occurs to me that it is really just one conversation. There are two sets of themes: there are the "ageless concepts," which emerge insistently, like the shadows of the invisible, and there is each individual life/self/history. The latter also emerge insistently, and intersect both with each other and with the concepts. This leads me to another discovery about philosophy.

Philosophy is personal, social, and moral. Doing philosophy in the community of inquiry is an intense interpersonal and communal activity which is directly related to action, feeling, belief, lifestyle, fundamental root-attitudes towards life, death, beauty, the other, others, and the Other. Philosophy is dangerous; it opens up more than ideas, for under ideas are whole patterns of belief, and these are what are being probed, sometimes to our pain and distress. The philosophical summer community at Mendham could not go on forever--in fact three weeks stretched many of us almost too far. But I am glad that happened because it shows me the personal joy and the terror that sleeps in the promise of a philosophical community. In a very real sense it shows us the spiritual. As we experience the moment of negativity in the library around the table, in the realm of the dialectic of ideas, so there is the moment of negativity before the other and others in our communal Menham-situation. As on the level of ideas, so on the personal level, we experience self-loss, cast as we are among already-intimate strangers; and out of the loss of self, a higher (if never final) synthesis emerges, a more inclusive sense, a more firmly grounded self, and above all a self grounded more in others. This is very personal and also very philosophical. It requires what Corrington, following Royce, refers to as "loyalty," a loyalty to the Argument and to each other as members of the community of inquiry. It awakens us to what he further refers to as "the ethical core of dialogue," the "drive toward the unconditional source of value," which is synonymous with the "drive toward healthy social life."<sup>2</sup> As such, it is a process which is potentially either cathartic or destructive--depending, I suppose, on the stiffness of our necks.

Philosophy is emergent. Philosophy emerges among us, through our discourse, as a result of our attention and our self-discipline, our ability to listen, our respect for

persons, and our sensitivity to the often tortuous, elusive, even illusive, self-correcting pathfinding (where there is no path) of the Argument.

What emerges? Fundamental issues, for one: How can we know anything? What is the relationship between logic and reality? What is the nature of persons? Is there a nature of persons? What is nature? What is the relationship between language and the world? Roles emerge, as in a play that is writing itself: the realist, the idealist, the skeptic, the language analyst, the pragmatist, the logician, the phenomenologist, the naturalist, the mystic, the ascetic of ideas, the deconstructionist. Even those who come with those roles already defined through their exploration of the tradition must cast themselves into the pathmaking Argument's flow, and risk them continually, only reappropriating them dialectically. Giftedness emerges, and a new level of thoughtfulness. A way of working, a characteristic actional form of this particular community of inquiry emerges: a way, to use Lipman's triad, of moving with the Moves, of dwelling in the Procedures, of returning to certain Concepts again and again. Tension emerges, and the possibility (always at risk) of its resolution in a harmony higher than the one which that tension threatens. A certain road-weariness emerges, and cycles of fatigue and refreshment, second and even third winds. And that is only a partial list of what emerges.

Philosophy is cultural, and historical, and political. Philosophy is carried along, and has part of its identity within cultural matrices. This is what makes cross-cultural philosophical events interesting, for in the interaction, the essentiality of the cultural matrices are revealed. At Mendham, good old North American culture and philosophy found itself in dialogue with Latin America. I am increasingly convinced that much that we as a community of inquiry are struggling for, Hispanics already have in their tradition; but only in the tradition because it is in the culture. The relational philosophy of Eduardo Nicol ("Ante 'el otro', el projimo por excelenda, adopto automaticamente la relacion de co-participacion en el ser, que es el dialogo." Thanks, Marcela) is congruent with the relational emphasis of Hispanic culture, which was clearly an influential part of the social-personal (which is philosophical!) balance at Mendham. Les Quebecois, as representatives of Francophone culture, taught us that cultures and their language traditions can actually honor the philosophical impulse, that critical thinking is brave and passionate and caring, and determined not to shrink back. Then there is the culture of the Far East, and its increasingly subtle, powerful effects in the Western philosophical imagination; and though they were brought by individuals who, as individuals (only one each!), transcended them, warm and complex cultural messages from Holland and the British Isles. Not to speak of the (mostly) joyous cacophony created by the cultures of Vancouver, Brooklyn, Long Island, Miami, New England, Ohio, and California; or the cultures of youth and middle age, or Jewish culture, or the culture of the Sixties (era of the "terminal degree"), or the culture of the academy. Or the culture of childhood, which has seized all of our imaginations, which is why we are there; or the culture of Christianity, among whose artifacts we are placed as if to remind us that there are ultimate stakes.

And history? We are all placed in a network of histories, with which each of our personal histories intersects, and which together inform our sense that we are making history. We need mention only the history of the public school in America, the history of the Deweyan idea of social reform through the public schools; the history of philosophy; the history of childhood. And politics? The politics of liberation, awakened in Latin America, still slumbering fitfully in the North American imagination. The politics of gender; the politics of childhood; the politics of the PFC movement, and its role in the politics of the group process at Mendham; the politics of the public school; the politics--no matter how gentle and enlightened the BBC--of the media. Elsewhere, we can separate philosophy and history, culture and politics, if only through relegating them to a

philosophy of culture, history, or politics. At Mendham, everything counts.

Philosophy is playful. As Gadamer has shown us, play is an ontological structure, and a way of access to meaning. It is in the free play of the dialectic that meaning emerges in the community of inquiry. We see happening what Gadamer has called "the transformation into the true." What he means, I think, is that the players, to the extent that they give themselves to the play of art or philosophy, tend to disappear, move in the direction of becoming transparent carriers of the meanings they are handling. In Truth and Method he says, "The world which appears in the play of representation [in this case, philosophy's representation of the world] does not stand like a copy next to the real world, but is the latter in the heightened truth of its being."<sup>3</sup> As players caught up in the game Philosophy, we are involved in the self-representation of the world, and we ourselves behold in wonder the emergence of a meaning from beyond each of us, yet which is generated through our interplay. As in art, in the play of the community of inquiry we are participants in and witnesses to the "raising up of reality into its truth." What is particularly interesting about this is that this leads, not to depersonalization, or the sense of being a mere cipher of the truth, but to an enhanced sense of self. We find ourselves in our involuntary identification with something beyond us (Dylan: "You gotta serve somebody.") In play we meet the limits of our own personal energies, and discover a larger energy, in whose back and forth movement we disappear, only to reappear more ourselves. This is analogous to the dynamic movement of the dialectic. It means that we are in dialogue, not just with each other, or with the group, but with meaning in general.

Philosophy has limitations. As Mendham-philosophers, we soon realize that we are asking unanswerable questions. Not only that, but we begin to recognize that we can only take our bearings accurately, and recognize where we are, when we have run up against a wall. And even if we don't run up against a specific wall, we soon understand through experience that even the most satisfying passage of the conversation, when the Argument appears to have broken through the defenses, and is headed for the goal, finds that goal to be infinitely receding. I believe that philosophy can ultimately only point to something beyond itself, something it cannot, by its very nature, understand except vaguely, like an ancient language of the heart, remembered only in fragments. It is merely intellectual pride to assume that what is most important about the world can be known cognitively in any completeness at all, or that the form of knowledge which phrases like "critical thinking" or "thinking for yourself" describe has any but a propedeutic, therapeutic, and exploratory role in the search for meaning. Indeed, what, I am guessing, the IAPC Institute demonstrates to its participants again and again and again is the ultimate failure of rationality before the tangled complexities, before the intimations of relational chaos, before the vertiginous capacity for good or evil, self-discipline for the sake of others or self-indulgence, humility or arrogance, self-deceit or integrity, service or self-servingness, etc. of the human community. The conversion to philosophy which we experience there is soon demonstrated to point to the necessity for another conversion, which has its origin in a realm of meaning beyond the giving of reasons, which encompasses philosophy but is not encompassed by it.

Philosophy is indebted to Matthew Lipman. At Mendham, we soon come to recognize that we are all gifted--it is part of the human condition. I could characterize each gift there, each in a sense radical and indissoluble. But in certain ones we recognize a heightened quality of giftedness. It is not really personal, in that it has nothing obvious to do with personality, or even with wisdom necessarily, in the sense of more understanding than the rest of us. But it does, I think, have to do at least with responsibility, in its root sense of response. The man of the powerful gift, the gift which brings other people together, is seen, in retrospect, to have responded to the exigencies of his time: he allowed himself to be moved, to be formulated as a response to the question put to him by the epochal moment. We recognize that without him, this thing would not

have emerged. How do we explain this? This man's feet, like ours, are clay. How did it happen? Here is the opportunity for an etymological definition of genius as the generativity of nature in all its strength, as a power that arises from dwelling in full obedience in one's situatedness, a giving of self to calling with an integrity which produces fruit almost involuntarily. We recognize that the reason this is relatively rare is because the cost is high. We recognize that this man has paid the cost, and so when he talks, we listen with some extra care. We sense the possibility that what he has begun will reach far beyond him. In a certain sense we are mystified, even scandalized. After all, isn't our shibboleth "Think for yourself"? Yet this man's thought has brought us together. So we are uneasy with the rare gift, the founding gift, and yet it is undeniable. We can only be in wonder.

Why is it so difficult to talk about children in the context of Mendham? Even the educationalist's cliché, "what it's really about is the kids--that's what's important, nothing else matters so much," etc., fell a little flat the few times it was invoked there. Difficult to talk about, but not to think about. Because, it occurs to me, we experienced being children at Mendham; our lived experience there returned us to childhood in the generic sense of that term--radically dependent beings (remember complaining about the food, and about the various "adults"?), caught in a developmental passage which, compared to adults, has the intensity of a hurricane; beings born for, but not yet quite capable of the ideal of discourse represented by the community of inquiry, not quite yet ourselves, caught up in that striving for identity in this new context of a world which is both strange and familiar to us; beings, for the time being anyway, less bound by conventions and rules of habit than the adults (remember how frustrated the kitchen staff was with us for our loitering over meals, and our sloppy cups and ashtrays?) around us; beings alternatively wildly brilliant and stupid; beings caught up in the excitement of being, of the adventure, the camaraderie of the community of inquiry.

Of course those elements are always there. "Child" and "adult" are mutually necessary terms. As Dieter Misgeld has said,

... rather than locating children and adults as being at differing stages in a developmental sequence, with a fixed end point as an immutable standard available for the appraisal of the sequence, a properly self-reflective orientation calls into question the definitely locatable identities of adults and children. It is a questioning in which the community of adult and child, their belonging together, is brought forth. This only comes about in recognizing that as an adult, one is not beyond the movement back to the child, and from there forward to the point where one began the movement. Having been a child is still a possibility one lives, something one has to return to in order to establish oneself as an adult. One generates in reflection a community of adults and children in which principles and rules are at issue on both sides, in which being bound to convention as an adult may be questioned by reference to children as more principled than adults.

Given this understanding of the adult-child relation within ourselves as well as within the world, Mendham can be seen as an extraordinarily effective way to prepare for working with philosophy and children: what better way than to re-encounter the child in yourself? It also clarifies the importance of children, and of a philosophy of childhood among adults, to an understanding of the community of inquiry. Children represent as significant an epistemological voice in turn-of-the-century philosophy as do women, or other non-white male groups--perhaps more so, in that childhood is common to all humans, and as such, carries more universal insight. In philosophy departments like the Mendham Temporary, that insight begins to emerge.



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**ENDNOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> Corrington, R. S. (1987). The community of interpreters. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 11.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid, 44.
- <sup>3</sup> Gadamer, H. G. (1975). Truth and method. New York: Crossroad.
- <sup>4</sup> Misgeld, D. (1985). Self-reflection and adult maturity: Adult and child in Hermeneutical and Critical Reflection. Phenomenology and Pedagogy, 3(3), 199.

