PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN AND THE POLITICS OF DIALOGUE

A. DIALOGUE AND THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY:

One of the most striking features of the rhetoric of philosophy in the West has been its wide-scale employment of the dialogue form. The dialogues of Plato are normative not only in the sense Whitehead gave them, that they constitute the text of which our philosophical history is a series of footnotes. But they also provide the ideal of philosophical discourse. Philosophy ought to be public and spoken. I take it that this choice of dialogue is not some mere dramatic artifice, chosen for aesthetic reasons. Rather I think the medium here is part of the message and that dialogue says something about philosophy itself. That is, once we have learned to dialogue and to think dialogically, we have taken a philosophical position, in advance of whatever the dialogue may be said to contain. But otherwise, we are Platonists once we dialogue, whatever degree of adherence we may claim to his metaphysics or to his theory of knowledge.

The dialogue is Plato's contribution to the history of philosophical expression. But he is of course by no means its sole exponent. Dialogues are found explicitly and implicitly throughout our history, some of them considerably better (as dialogues) than some of Plato's are. In fact it must be said that the model of dialogue is to be found in the Socratic, or early Platonic dialogues, not in those of his maturity. This in itself is significant. Where Plato most faithfully represents Socrates (who wrote nothing) his dialogues are more authentic. As records of actual conversations, the dialogues are more appealing than as contrived and dogmatic expositions of Plato's considered system. Where the model is open-ended and inquiring and where the outcome is uncertain and frequently disappointing--here it is that we find dialogue at its best.

At any rate the form is a permanent legacy to Western thought. It appears explicitly, or in thinly disguised form in books as diverse as Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and Augustine's Confessions, a dialogue between Augustine, his soul and God. Augustine's example suggests the implicit dialogical nature of all or most philosophical discourse. Frequently, the prayer form, such as found in Anselm's Proslogion, is a fine philosophical dialogue. Certainly the great disputation model of medieval scholasticism is implicitly dialogical and the articles in Thomas Aquinas's Summa could easily be rewritten in dialogue form. Even the Meditations of Descartes bear recasting in this manner. As heir to the newly-developed essay form, they give the appearance initially of isolation and monkishness, especially when account is taken of the peculiarities of Descartes's position. But even the philosophical essay, the preferred form of modernism, with its egocentrism and conativeness, can, wherever account is taken of alternative positions and objections, be a genuinely dialogical piece of writing. A good philosophical exercise for the classroom is to take a piece of philosophical prose and rewrite it in a dialogue form. The results show the implicit nature of dialogue in all well-formed philosophical writing.

B. DIALOGUE AND THE PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN PROGRAM:

A cursory examination of the materials in Matthew Lipman's Philosophy for Children program acquaints us with its place in the tradition of philosophical dialogue. The seven novels in the series are all heavily conversational in nature and involve intense real-life discussion between children and other children, as well as between children and a rich diversity of adult populations, especially parents and teachers. Here too, the charge may be made that this is merely rhetorical artifice and that, if we wish to teach philosophy to children, some adaptation of traditional classroom procedures, lecture and drill, will be more effective. And here too, the counter will be that the form of the writings is the

main message. Read these dialogues, go and do likewise. The read dialogue is intended to be a springboard to a kind of mimesis (Aristotle includes the dialogue within his general poetics of imitation)[1] where the children will continue the dialogue in the classroom. The goal of the written dialogue form is its oral replication. Dialogue is itself a thinking skill, as Weinstein and Cannon have argued,[2] and its absence from many thinking skills programs is a major failing in those programs (if they weren't bad enough already!). Similarly unlike some Great Books programs (or at least the way they're taught) the book is not itself the aim of the program. The spoken word enjoys primacy here, not the written word. Both in form, then, and in intent, Philosophy for Children maintains the great tradition of Plato. Dialogue in some important sense defines philosophy; it is not accidentally or contingently related to it.

C. SOME GENERAL ASSUMPTIONS OF DIALOGUE:

Let us explore in greater depth two of the primary dimensions of dialogue, its oral nature and its public nature. The figure of Socrates is again instructive, since he wrote nothing and since he is spoken of as having brought philosophy out of the clouds and into the marketplace. But here we must credit the tradition out of which he emerged, the tradition of the Sophists. Socrates was a Sophist, however critical he may have been of some of their practices and underlying theories. The Sophists, some of whom, we should recall, designated their art philosophia,[3] were far more interested in the spoken word than in the written word. Political considerations, particularly those implied by the nature of Athenian democracy, are largely to account for this preference. Underlying educational considerations must constitute another motive. In turn, the Sophists emphasized the practical nature of their art, its usefulness in human affairs. Their logic was what we today would call "informal," a logic in close continuity with rhetoric and the art of persuasion. The art of the Sophist is certainly the more durable form of discourse in public affairs, and continues in very high-minded ways into our own age. The alliance of rhetoric and morality is a striking feature of its history. Quintilian insisted that the good citizen was the good man, skilled in speaking,[4] a position recovered by the civic humanist of the Renaissance and continued in public discourse down to our own time.

Socrates, as we know, criticized the rhetoric of the Sophists for its allied relativism and skepticism. But, his dialogue form is to be contrasted with the art of the Sophists on two additional counts: it throws the weight of discourse on to shared discourse, rather than on the set speech. Secondly, it introduces a more formal logic, one designed to discover the truth rather than simply to persuade the auditor. But this does not change the fundamental Socratic aim of philosophical discourse which he continues to share with the Sophistic tradition, the modification of human customs through political and educational action.

The dialogue is contrasted sharply with the speech, certainly with epideictic oratory (for which Socrates had a deep aversion, probably because of its preferred themes of praise and blame, rather than of understanding). It is also contrasted with forensic oratory (where Socrates himself produced a great monument, his Apology). The speech recommends passivity and reaction on the part of the auditors, not their active engagement in the argument. The auditors are to be persuaded, they are not to argue themselves. In Plato's hierarchy of degrees of knowledge, the best they can have is true opinion. The business of the orator, even the best of them, is the production of true opinion. The speech is related to the lecture and to the dissemination of knowledge, not to its discovery or increase. The speech is economical and compatible with a world where business has to be transacted quickly. The dialogue favors a less hurried and harried workday. It is striking how many of Plato's dialogues take place at moments of leisure. Even the Phaedo, with utmost irony, is a long and leisurely dialogue. Death itself should be approached unhurriedly. But then Socrates thought death an illusion.

Dialogue is also to be distinguished from debate, although Socrates the Sophist is not beyond the debater's tricks himself. But debate, although social in form, has victory rather than understanding as its goal. It is by nature polemical and "agonistic," to use Huizinga's word.[5] It stresses manipulation and power, and is generally skeptical of all truth claims. It is playful, particularly where institutionalized in a school setting, but the play element is more a kind of ritualized combat rather than the kind of play assumed in more leisurely activities such as the arts. We "play" the piano too and stage a "play," frequently with celebratory intentions. The play here is closer to the dialogue than to the debate.

D. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF DIALOGUE:

It must be said that Socrates represents our great ideal in discourse, but that the ideal is difficulty of attainment. I am lecturing you right now, making a speech. Plato himself was rarely faithful to the Socratic ideal, and the dialogues of his maturity are thinly-disguised monologues, mechanically punctuated by brainwashed toadies reciting their "Yes, Socrates," and "By no means, Socrates." Not surprisingly, this defilement of dialogue is accompanied by a pronounced preference for political aristocracy and a despair over democracy: "The many cannot be wise."[6] Philosophy, as we know it, emerges out of Plato, a Plato who had effectively deformed the dialogue, while preserving its outer shell. And this Plato is the Plato who has bequeathed to us the elitist preconceptions of what philosophy became, the discourse of supremely expert old men.[7]

In this regard, Philosophy for Children represents a major advance over classical dialogue practice, and in so doing, beyond the political and social underpinnings or implications of that practice. First of all, it introduces young people into the conversation. There are children in Plato's dialogues, most famously the slave boy in the Meno (I often wonder what this kid did after Socrates' little lesson in geometry.) But the presence of children as equal participants in the dialogue process is utterly foreign to his procedure. Much had to be discovered about the nature of childhood before this could take place. Rousseau is a major figure in this story. But the introduction of children into written philosophical dialogue and the implied mimetic recommendations are new. Along with this introduction of youth into the dialogue comes famously the introduction of the non-expert, of the amateur. Platonic dialogue contains learners, but their position in dialogue is usually passive. They are to be instructed. The youthful amateurs in Lipman's dialogues are as much teachers as they are learners. They teach each other and their adult relatives and teachers as well. Finally the dialogues in Philosophy for Children contain women as well as men. Philosophy has been exclusively a male preserve in its broad history, and, although Plato's Republic calls for equal education for women, and although there were apparently women actually enrolled in his academy,[8] the dialogue literature is male almost exclusively. Lipman's novels include women as active participants in the dialogue. Girls are often better philosophers than boys.[9] The scope of dialogue is enlarged and the rhetorical possibilities of interaction are multiplied. Carol Gilligan's complaint about theories of moral development as applied to girls finds itself irrelevant to a dialogue situation in which girls are equal participants with boys.[10]

What Lipman's dialogues preserve is the essential communitarianism of the dialogue form. This is in an important sense a recovery of Plato's central insight. Modern philosophy is intensely individualistic. The essay form, reinforced by Descartes' egocentrism and much modern social contract theory, has had powerful effects upon philosophical practice. When dialogue takes place, for instance in discussion periods following papers such as this one, the participants are expected to defend positions as if they were playing chess. That is to say, the individualistic essay form reinforces debate styles of dialogue practice. The growth of knowledge is played out on a polemical model, not a consensual one. The high adventure of dialogue is lost, since the outcome is assured

in advance. The participants in the polemical discussion critique each other, but rarely do they modify or change their positions. They "take account" of opposed arguments, that is, incorporate them within their own previously maintained positions.

The dialogue form suggests that the unit of philosophical study and learning is the group rather than the individual. Philosophers are not solitary heroes of the mind, where dialogue is done effectively. They are members of a community, let's call it a Republic, of inquiry. This is not to suggest that individuality is out of place. "Know thyself" is expressed in the singular, not in the plural, number. The Socratic figure in Plato's dialogues frequently is found alone at the dialogue's inception, or he recalls having recently been alone, especially in some natural setting. Furthermore, the somewhat paradoxical aim of dialogue is the production of a higher form of individual. But when this is said, it is still the case that the overwhelming message of the dialogue is that philosophy is a social experience, more than, or at least as much as, a private one. And the educational implications are that the dialogue participants instruct each other, not that one of them is teacher, the others are students. Again, the oracular Socrates is a bizarre deformation of dialogue as it should be. If Socrates had written essays, such a presentation would have been expected. Nietzsche's Zarathustra is the ultimate essayist. A Socrates on his model resembles the Socrates of Allan Bloom, not the Socrates of the early dialogues, and certainly none of the characters in the dialogues of Matthew Lipman. (This is not to deny a prophetic or mantic voice even to Socrates, upon occasion.)

Plato's notorious aversion to democracy has its paradoxical side. After all, the *Republic* itself is an essay in social deliberation. That is to say it is an example of aristocracy in action, the invention of an ideal state by a community of intelligent and benevolent men. In other words, if you wish an example of the Republic, read the *Republic*. What Plato could not imagine, was an aristocracy of all persons, a dialogue in which all persons participate, at least representatively. The dialogues of Lipman, however, are clearly examples of democracy in action. Everyone has a voice, including females and including the young. They correct the elitism superimposed upon classical dialogue form. And they encourage classroom behavior in conformity with this democracy. In the Philosophy for Children program, the teacher is encouraged to join the dialoguing circle of children, not to impose her beliefs or will, but to guide or facilitate (that maligned term) constructive dialogue. This is the maieutic Socrates at its best. The teacher is not to yield authority or somehow artifically to establish an untenable position of neutrality. Rather the issues are large enough to deny expertise to any given individual. The teacher then perforce must learn from others. If she can be led to see that these others include children, the democratic classroom is achieved. Again this is not to deny authority in some areas of study. But there is an element of *all* study that resists dogma. It is at this place that philosophy becomes relevant and indispensable. Teacher as philosopher is teacher as learner. She can present a model of careful and attentive learning, of listening well, of respect for dissent, which emerges out of the subject matter itself. If we wish our students to possess these skills in abundance, what better way than to present a teacher who has them as their model? But the short road to the acquisition of such skills is philosophical inquiry. Teachers should philosophize, then, and they should philosophize within their own classrooms, as well as at classes in their universities or colleges of education.

Dialogue has its counterfeits. One of them is the debate, with its metaphors of battle, victory, winners and losers. Debate reinforces skepticism. Dialogue reinforces criticism, where criticism has its original ameliorative connotations. But another counterfeit of dialogue is the discussion, the free exchange of opinion. In an interesting passage from his book *Liberalism and Social Action*, John Dewey argues that discussion, or the "comparison of ideas" carries with it a disguised Hegelianism, where the clash of opposed opinions will somehow work its way out in the synthetic moment.[11] Dialogue is not

merely the comparison of ideas. It has a logical core to it, and a teleological core as well, dominated by the problem set before us and its possible modes of solution. The ordered dialogue is more normative than the free or open discussion, but less arbitrary, despotic or manipulative than the monological speech or lecture.

E. PHILOSOPHY AND DEMOCRACY:

Philosophy for Children has no particular political program. But no educational program exists without some political assumptions. We can make a modest and somewhat vague claim, namely that Philosophy for Children has at least the overall aim of fostering some form of democracy. We may ask then what role philosophy has in a democratic political community. Here again the contrasting Sophistic and Socratic dimensions of education have interesting manifestations in our own intellectual history. We know that education enjoys no special privilege in our great founding documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. But we also know that Jefferson, among others, counted educational reform among his chief accomplishments and ambitions. Jefferson thought democracy needed a foundation in literacy, and argued for some universalization of the educational experience. His plans for higher education were considerably more elitist in nature, but some rudimentary literacy on the part of all people remained his goal. His argument was a simple one. We need to be able to read in order to evaluate the written arguments of our representatives. The argument is persuasive, even today, when the formation of public opinion is increasingly a function of media other than print media. And Jefferson's position enjoys the sanction of an ancient republican ideal of the synthesis of virtue and the word. But, we must correct him. Literacy of itself guarantees nothing by way of critical power. Reading, writing and speaking of themselves guarantee no effective citizenship. The well-read person can be as docile as the illiterate one. The Sophistic reading of the link between democracy and education needs a Socratic emendation. Philosophers with their suspicion of the written word have something to offer us. Philosophical instruction offers the critical edge to a program of literacy and ensures that the true opinion will have some warrant. The application to democracy seems clear. Unless every person enjoys a measure of critical ability, she will be unable to function adequately in the shared self-government that defines our system. There is a measurable lack of symmetry between our political and our educational institutions at this point. The United States began as a kind of oligarchy. Few enjoyed the right to vote; fewer exercised the option. Gradually the franchise was extended, first to blacks, then to women, then to young adults. But our educational institutions maintain in their general conception of curriculum, elitist preconceptions. Higher education is still education for the few, and the curriculum of the schools excludes the kind of education necessary to effective political participation. Where the program of studies follows its classic Platonic model, with literacy and numeracy the "basic" skills and philosophy following only after a long apprenticeship, we succeed in excluding a large number of our citizens from formal instruction in the discipline most likely to produce a critical frame of mind. Our voting citizens may be literate (although even this seems to be a receding goal), but they are by no means thereby guaranteed to be critical. If democracy requires a critical citizenry, then our educational system almost guarantees the opposite. Basic education, philosophically empty, produces a passive and docile people, hardly designed to govern themselves well, or to have a deep sense of public responsibility.

There are two ways of remedying this situation: one is to extend higher educational opportunities to more and more adults. Philosophical inquiry is found in most post-secondary schools, and at least the opportunity to develop a critical understanding is available at that level. We may applaud, then, efforts to universalize higher educational opportunities. Another, more radical, but for educational as well as political reasons, more attractive alternative, is to extend philosophical instruction downwards, into the

earliest levels of formal education. Then, whether or not our students continue on to universities, they will at least have had the basic introduction into the critical skills necessary to function in a democratic system. There are many reasons for enthusiasm over the Philosophy for Children program. Not the least of them is the promise it holds for developing characteristics of good judgment and sound reasoning such that the schools can maintain (or recover) their responsibility for the production of good citizens.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Aristotle, Poetics, I. 9.

[2] Cannon, D., & Weinstein, M. Reasoning skills: An overview. Thinking, VI(1), 29-33.

[3] For the contribution of the Sophists to educational theory, see Marrou, H. I. (1956). History of education in antiquity. New York. See especially Chapters V and VII.

[4] Quintilian, Institutio oratoria XII, 1. The phrase is attributed originally to Cato the Elder.

[5] Huizinga, J. (1950). Homo ludens. Boston. See especially Chapter IX, "Play-Forms in Philosophy."

[6] Republic VI, 494a.

[7] Mulvaney, R. Philosophy and the education of the community. Thinking, VI(2), 2-6.

[8] See Republic V, 453b ff. and Nussbaum, M. (1987, November 5). [Review of Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind]. The New York Review of Books, 20-26.

[9] Pritchard, M. (1987). Critical thinking: Problem-solving or problem-creating. Analytic Teaching, 8(1), 25-29.

[10] Gilligan, C. (1982). In a different voice. Cambridge, MA.

[11] Dewey, J. (1935). Liberalism and social action. New York, 70-71. I am indebted for this reference to an interesting article by Eddy, P. (1988). Kohlberg and Dewey. In Educational Theory, 38, 405-13.