YOUNG CHILDREN AND ULTIMATE QUESTIONS:

Romancing at Day Care

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What follows is one piece of a series of conversations that I conducted with a small group of young children in a day care center where I was working in 1983. The children were between the ages of 3 and 6, and we had been together long enough to speak frankly and comfortably with each other. I used small group time to ask six questions, all of them about the ultimate issues — the origins, ends, and limits of things, death, dreams, soul, spirit, self, God, evil. Taken together, the conversations we had make for a transcript of 65 manuscript pages. The issues raised there are many, and provoke questions not only about how young children think, but about how adults influence them to think. The issue taken up below — the origins of things — was continued past this conversation, and its sequel will appear in the next issue of ***Analytic Teaching***. Although the text tends to speak for itself, a few comments on the pattern of the conversation follow the transcript. The ages of the children involved are as follows:

CHARLES: 6 years 4 months
NAT: 5 years 5 months
MICHAEL: 4 years 1 month
KEN: 5 years 8 months
KRISTEN: 5 years 8 months
JIM: 5 years 5 months
FRED: 5 years 8 months
FAITH: 4 years 6 months

D.K.: How did the world begin?
NAT: The dinosaurs . . . It's dinosaurs.
CHARLES: No, the world didn't begin with dinosaurs. . . I know something that happened before the dinosaurs, and it's gotta be happening on the earth. . . What just can't floatin the air . . . water and mud just can't float in the air.
D.K.: No, they can't. Like you couldn't just throw them up.
NAT: The sun makes them come up into the air and turn into a cloud! It does that to rainwater. . . Puddles.
CHARLES: Well . . . well . . . I know something that happened to the little fish. . . . And I got a fossil, that the fish got caught in my coat. . . . Well, Diane [a teacher] told me that happened before dinosaurs.
D.K.: Well, what was before that?
MICHAEL: Babies! The first baby was born!
CHARLES: Uh uh! People weren't back when dinosaurs were, and I'm saying this happened before dinosaurs.
D.K.: What was . . . you're saying that before dinosaurs there was the fish. Now what was before the fish?
KEN: Nothing.
KRISTEN: Indians.
JIM: Just Indians.
NAT: Just water!
D.K.: Just water?
NAT: Yeah, just water and rain and clouds.
CHARLES: Just the earth.
D.K.: Just the earth. . . .How was the earth made? What was before the earth?
KEN: God was the very first thing.
JIM: This was the very first thing — God . . . Jesus.
D.K.: Who was before God?
JIM: Nobody.
KEN: Nobody.
NAT: Nothing. . . .God is alive every time. God never, never dies.
D.K.: So God has always been, you mean?
JIM: God died.
NAT: God was alive when dinosaurs were down on the ground.
D.K.: O.K. So you are saying that he was first —
MICHAEL: He died because men came and killed him. That's what my Mom said.
D.K.: Oh, you mean Jesus.
JIM: My Mom said He died and came back alive.
D.K.: Yeah, but we're talking about —

JIM: He was nailed on the cross.
D.K.: Yeah, but we're talking about the very beginning of things. How far back can we go, to when things started? How did things start? How did they begin?
NAT: We don't know!
CHARLES: When it began all that there was just space. There weren't any stars, there weren't any planets, there wasn't any moon, there wasn't any sun . . . Space!
JIM: Just space.
KEN: Just the universe.
D.K.: Just the universe, Ken says.
CHARLES: That's space.
D.K.: That's space. And how far does space go?
NAT: Way to the dark clouds.
CHARLES: It's all around this earth.
KEN: It never does stop.
D.K.: Ken says it never stops.
CHARLES: That's right. There's no end of it.
D.K.: You mean if you could take a rocket ship and go straight out into space that you would go forever, you would never come to the end of anything?
CHARLES: That's right.
KEN: You'd keep on going through space.
MICHAEL: You would go up to heaven.
KRISTEN: No . . .
JIM: I have a spaceship story.
NAT: If you took a rocket you could only go the moon and the sun. . . . A airplane might could go to the sun.
D.K.: Well, but let's —
NAT: Airplane can go over the clouds.
D.K.: On top of the clouds, yeah. . . . So what you're saying: Charles says at the very beginning there was just space. There was no sun, no moon, no planets, no earth.
KEN: Yeah!
D.K.: How were the sun the moon the planets and the earth made?
FRED: God made them.
D.K.: How did he do that?
FRED: He was kind of magic.
KRISTEN: He used his spirit.
MICHAEL: I don't believe this.
FRED: Twinkle of an eye, and the earth was made!
D.K.: So you say it happened suddenly.
MICHAEL: I don't believe these people.
D.K.: Well how do you believe it started?
MICHAEL: I don't believe nothing.
D.K.: Oh, you don't believe anything?
MICHAEL: Do you?
D.K.: Do I?
MICHAEL: Do you believe what they're saying?
D.K.: Do I believe that God created the world?
MICHAEL: How did God . . .
D.K.: How he did it, you mean?
JIM: He had alot of power!
D.K.: Well, I'm asking you. O.K. You say he had alot of power. Fred said he was kind of magic. Charles, how do you think the world came into being?
CHARLES: I think . . . I think he just . . . God made the people, so I think he made one of them and when . . . and they got a baby and pretty soon —
MICHAEL: God made everything!
CHARLES: — they started growing up and pretty soon everybody started having babies so there were millions of people in the world.
D.K.: Oh, O.K. But I'm talking about before people.
JIM: Before people there was just space.
D.K.: O.K., but what was there before space?
KEN: God.
CHARLES: Nothing.
D.K.: But where was God then, if there was no space, and he had to make it?
NAT: He was dead.
D.K.: At the beginning?
KEN: No.
D.K.: No.
NAT: He had to make himself.
FAITH: David. . . . Do you know what first God made? God made a mudman first.
D.K.: A mudman? O.K., but I'm talking about . . . Charles said, in the beginning there was only space. I'm saying, who made the space, or how did the space come into being?
CHARLES: Just . . . space was already there.
D.K.: Was already there from when?
JIM: [After a long pause]. The wind was there before space.
CHARLES: Outer space was just there.
D.K.: Was just there: nobody made it.
CHARLES: Right.
KEN: Wrong.
FAITH: David . . . David . . . God made everything.
MICHAEL: I want to go outside now.

SECOND CONVERSATION

D.K.: We're gonna go back to question number three, which we did some talking about yesterday . .. O.K. Question number three is, "How did the world begin?"
JIM: There was all space.
D.K.: And you said, Charles said, somebody said there was all space. Nathaniel?
NAT: Just space.
D.K.: Just space. And I said, where did space come from?
JIM: Nobody.

NAT: Nobody.
NAT: Space is still there.
MICHAEL: It was already there. . . . It was the first thing . . . and God was the next thing.
KEN: Uh uh, God was the first thing, and He made the space and then He made the planets.
NAT: Yeah!
D.K.: That's right!
D.K.: Who made God?
KEN: Nobody. He just made Himself!
JIM: How did He?
MICHAEL: Maybe His wife, but how did His wife get herself?
JIM: I know.
D.K.: How?
JIM: Maybe because . . . the space had magic.
D.K.: The space had magic?
MICHAEL: Naah!
D.K.: Oh, you think the space made God or God made the space?
ALL: God made the space!
NAT: And the space made God.
KEN: No! God made God (laughs). God made space and the planets and us!
JIM: God made God.
NAT: He also made dinosaurs and things.
JIM: Jesus made Jesus.
MICHAEL: Yeah, Jesus made Pacman.
[Silly sounds]
D.K.: O.K. Good. Um . . .
FAITH: He said Jesus made Pacman.
D.K.: Yeah, well —

TAPE CUT

Piaget referred to the kind of thinking and talking which the children in this transcript are doing as "romancing," by which he seems to have meant what children are doing when they are not answering a question according to his criteria of seriousness and intelligibility. It produces, he said, "fallacies," because its "mythomania" and "suggestibility" lead to "an answer which he [the child] does not really believe."[1] Matthews is more encouraging. He finds that often the child's romancing answers are the most philosophically interesting, and "will not so much express the child's settled convictions as explore a conceptual connection or make a conceptual joke."[2] Matthews is suggesting which is demonstrated throughout these transcripts — that there is a fundamentally playful element in logic, and that often young children first discover the operations of logic through joking and playing with language.

Language play has a strong aesthetic element. When it is working, it works because it sounds right, the way music works. It is aesthetic elements — prosodic rhythms, which capitalize on phonological echoes and interplays, on pitch, juncture, and stress ("Nothing ... Indians ... Just Indians ... Just water! ... Just water? ... Yeah, just water and rain and clouds"), and syntactical and semantic repeating or reversible patterns ("God made the space ... And the space made God ...No! God made God") — which guide the emergence of meaning. On the other hand, the issues being talked about in these conversations are ones that are considered serious — when adults talk about them, they typically do not do so in a joking manner. They tend, in fact to present their opinions about the being-status of things such as the origins of the universe, the earth or God — whether in the church or in the classroom — with utter certainty. Hence the atmosphere of serious, even passionate negotiation going on in these conversations. But even this passionate negotiation is an aesthetic form, it is a way of singing together. This is what adults do too in these kinds of conversations, but they are taught to ignore the elements of play and song in the interests of the cognitive data, the truth claims and their implications. But it seems to me that the two systems — the aesthetic play of the argument and the series of logical moves — are symbiotic and mutually regulatory. Logic is grounded and expressed in the body, and the body is grounded and expressed in an interactive web of social relations. It is the musical "jamming" of the individual elements of this web which drives the argument, as much as it is driven by it.

Next, I would like to suggest that the conversation transcribed here has a structure, composed of certain essential characteristics which operate in the community of inquiry wherever we find it. First, there is the gathering of information at the beginning in response to a question — in this case fossils, babies, Indians, dinosaurs, rain, sun, and clouds. The initial framing of an answer to any question emerges, that is, from the knowledge and interests of the participants. Then there is the movement forward through the statement of generalities or principles, which are then challenged by concrete counterexamples (e.g.: "God is alive every time. God never, never dies ... God died"), followed in turn by an extended search for a resolution of contradictions through the making of connections ("God was alive when dinosaurs were down on the ground") and distinctions.

As always in the function of the community of inquiry, there is the taking of roles, the positioning of oneself within the conversation, a positioning determined by philosophical experience and authority structure (Michael's mother, for example, is quite consciously not a

Christian; Fred's family is very active in a fundamental, participatory, Christian group), by age and training (Charles, at age 6.4, is the oldest, and actually goes to Kindergarten in the mornings), and by personality (Nat is dramatic, zany, and poetic; Michael, at age 4.1 is the youngest, but also highly verbal, very bright, and very assertive). There is the matter of individual leadership which irrevocably determines the course of the conversation. So after Nat says "We don't know!" there is a slight pause. Then Charles, the eldest and most authoritative, introduces the space-as-receptacle theory (cf. *Timaeus*), which sets the course for the rest of the conversation.

There is the element of self-correction characteristic of the community of inquiry: a working backwards and forwards through the splitting (analysis) and the joining (synthesis) process of the dialectic, the continual reconstruction of the material according to the play (or is it the working?) of the collective mind which is this group of children. The **inter**play of individuals in the conversation is an **intra**play of the one mind which they represent together, and it is this shape of the whole which has the character of song.

Characteristic of the workings of the community of inquiry, there is the introduction of new explanatory concepts or principles, in response to the challenges posed by the argument as it progresses: so here the concept of "magic" as the function of God's "power." But when the notion of space as the receptacle, or first thing, coequal with God, emerges, then it is suggested that "maybe the space had magic." It is not far from there to introducing the notion of space **as** God which is in fact a position explored in early modern times by Henry More and his followers, for whom, as Koyre, in his history of cosmology, has described it, "the infinite extension must be truly and really, and not only metaphorically, attributed to the First Cause." [3] But that idea is rejected, and it is in this apparent deadlock with which this part of the conversation ends. This is in keeping with the movement — sometimes slow, sometimes fast — characteristic of the community of inquiry, towards the edge of a conceptual cliff, an *aporia* which requires an expansion or contraction of noetic horizons, either the recovering of ground already covered in search of another clue, or the leap into the unknown. In this case, the *aporia* has to do with the possibility of something coming from nothing, and the idea of the necessity of a first cause.



Laura Pettit, *pencil on paper,* 1991

As these children approach the cliff, they do not shrink from thinking the unthinkable: "God made himself," for example, or "Space was already there," or "What was there before space?" ... "Nothing." Then the *aporia*, discovered to be unsolvable, for the moment anyway, becomes the occasion for the explosion (indeed the real explosion, since it ended there) of the conversation in a round of joking, using as elements of the joke the very logical structures which have reached the end of their rope, and are spinning their wheels against the mystery of the real. So: "God made the space. ... And the space made God ... God

made God ... Jesus made Jesus ... Jesus made Pacman" ... at which point the whole thing collapsed in hilarious nonsense sounds, and soon after everyone went outside. The reductio ad absurdum is not just a way of breaking off, however, but also a way of summing up and expressing, if only as an absence, the distant goal for which the dialectic is striving: the ultimate synchronization of all the individual elements of the collective mind, the height of their mutual regulation. Garvey, in her discussion of language play, speaks of it in just these terms — as a "ritual," in which "each child controls very precisely the behavior of the other, and this regulation is in itself satisfying, a form of mastery play where what is mastered is the control of one's own and one's partner's actions."[4] This is the implicit telos of the dialectic, the truth which beckons on the horizon — the last horizon, which promises to justify the rigors and tortuous twists and turns of the conversation. Young children, being "aesthetes," have it already in play. Their reductio ad absurdum reveals, only incompletely and prophetically it is true, the goal which the dialectic of the community of inquiry promises. They demonstrate it to be a coordination of bodies — in rhythm, pitch, juncture, and gesture — as much of minds. They show us that the ideal communicative state which is implicit in any conversation (even the most frustrating), is somatic as well as noetic, that, indeed, the two are inseparable.

In this conversation, as in the operation of the community of inquiry in general, there are many opportunities for turns which are either missed or deliberately ignored. An example of the latter is the question about how God could die implicit in the phenomenon of Jesus, which I brushed past, anxious not to get entangled too soon in straight theology. There is the question of the first people; and there are some fairly sophisticated ideas about physics stated right at the beginning ("the sun makes them come up into the air and turn into a cloud! It does that to rainwater — puddles"). Each of these might have been a turn which led us on a better path than the one we took, or a worse one. There is no unambiguously best or worst turn in the conversation, except in hindsight.

Finally, the operation of the community of inquiry is a power struggle, in the sense that this group, like any group, is a complex of forces — personal, developmental, ideological, and even biological, locked in the *agon* of the dialectics of existence. The historical struggle between the belief systems of theism and atheism, a struggle deeply ingrained in late 20th century life, is already implicit in the conversation of these 4 to 6 year olds. In addition, the relations of power between children and adults are clearly marked here. I, the adult, act almost as an interrogator, holding everyone's feet to the fire of a question — the origins of everything — which these children may already have decided to be unanswerable, and not worth pursuing ("How did things start? How did they begin?" ... "We don't know!"). In addition, I am already framing the terms of the discourse with phrases like "What was before that?" which assumes that there has to be a first cause, some ultimate "beginning." And it seems inevitable to me that, although I do my best to suppress personal beliefs and ideas, my gestural and prosodic reactions, as well as my repetitions and restatements, discourage certain expressions of beliefs and ideas, and encourage others. In fact young children, because they are "aesthetes," often have a very sharp, if unconscious, sensitivity to gestural and prosodic cues. Michael's wavering between affirmation and denial of God (which emerges more clearly in the next conversation) is only partly because he has just turned four and is new to this kind of talk. It is also because he is attempting to read my ideas and beliefs, in order to compare them to those of the other authority figure in his life, his mother, and compare these with what his peers are saying. At one point he comes right out and asks me what I believe. My attempts to evade the question, although they are sincere, lead into an assumption of the argument he is questioning — that God is a necessary concept for positing a beginning of things. Now, apart from lack of training and/or inherent clumsiness, I might have been less likely to make this mistake if I myself were not a theist. So the grounding patterns of the conversation in the community of inquiry are often out of sight — large framework theories, or systems of belief which it is the function of the dialectic to uncover, so that they can encounter each other "in the light," so to

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speak, and thereby become interlocutive. We might say, then, that one of the goals of the community of inquiry is to clarify the ground of power relations, and thereby work for their ultimate resolution in an ideal community of intersubjective mutuality, that vanishing point at which personal and collective goals are harmonized.

In fact all decisive action within the community of inquiry is a tropism of one sort or another, or even more, an error (and each one, potentially, "the graceful error that corrects the cave"), in the sense that to move in any one direction is not to move in another, which might have been a better one. Inevitably the community of inquiry moves by taking positions, and by the clash and negotiation of realms of influence. We can only be consoled by the fact that the process is self-correcting, but certainly situations can be more or less tangled, and take longer or shorter times to self-correct. But you, dear reader, what would you have done? I welcome letters describing adult moves you saw as wrong or unperceptive, and moves you might have made.

NOTES

1. See Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World* (Totowa, NJ: Littlefield Adams, 1979 [Originally published 1929]), p. 16 ff.
2. Gareth Matthews, *Philosophy and the Young Child* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 39.
3. Alexandre Koyre, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957), p. 199.
4. Catherine Garvey, *Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 120. See Chapter 8, "Ritualized Play."

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