

Philosophy for Children Under Postmodern Conditions

FOUR REMARKS IN RESPONSE TO LARDNER

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In the first issue of the renewed *Analytic Teaching*, A.T. Lardner opens a debate on how to react to postmodern and multi-culturalist positions and their critique on *Philosophy for Children*. Lardner concludes:

This paper has not been set out to disagree with either the postmodern (anti-foundationalist) or multi-culturalist (anti-imperialist) positions. Indeed, it accepts most of the claims made. It has attempted to show that the critique from these quarters of the work of Philosophy for Children in settings outside the USA is based on a misunderstanding of what we do. It has suggested how those working in the program might answer such critiques along with suggesting caution in how we describe our goals and methods. Finally, it has suggested an uncomfortable parallel between the extreme postmodern and multi-culturalist position about educational work based on critical, reflective inquiry, and previous, elitist notions which the same people are sure to reject.

I'd like to comment on some of Lardner's theses.

Lardner speaks in defense of the *Philosophy for Children* program against postmodern thought

without any proper analysis of postmodern thought itself. Instead, he reacts to theses which only superficially reflect the modernist-postmodernist debate. In my opinion, Lardner combines two kinds of critiques which are not so closely connected as he would have us believe. The postmodern position differs from the multi-culturalist (or neo-marxist) in orientation and attitude. My analysis of the postmodern position will concentrate on Lyotard's work, one of the major contributions in the debate, especially concerning both the notions of "justice" and of the "subject." Lyotard's position differs in orientation and depth from the multi-culturalist position and supports what Lardner calls "educational work based on critical, reflective inquiry."

In general I agree with Lardner's critique of the multi-culturalist position, and will not respond to that part of the article.

As supporters of doing philosophy at school, however, we need a rather different line of response to postmodern criticism of the program than Lardner is presenting. We can't take the views of so-called postmodernist supporters as a standard. Rather, an analysis of postmodern thought should be based on texts representing a postmodern position. When we do so, we will find postmodernism has a lot to offer for philosophy in the classroom. The coming generation can best be provided with insights embedded in today's thought. In relation to philosophy this means: presenting actual questions about eternal subjects in such ways that kids can approach these questions in their own way. As Jerome Bruner often said: each subject can enter the classroom in both a powerful and honest present-

tation. Of course it may sometimes be very difficult to find a proper form as might be the case for the postmodern turn in political philosophy.

LYOTARD ON DOING PHILOSOPHY AND THE YOUNG

The postmodern position is frequently presented by Lardner as one which rules out the possibility of critical reflection in the classroom. We will examine if this is a correct presentation of that position. In his *Lecture on a course in philosophy*,¹ Lyotard describes philosophizing (without its negative meaning) as specifically "autodidactic." As a qualification of doing philosophy this does not mean that in philosophy we do not learn from others, but that we learn from others only on condition that these others are themselves learning to dislearn. Doing philosophy is not something like spreading knowledge. Lyotard distinguishes between reading a text and reading a text in a philosophical way. One can read philosophical texts without philosophizing and, on the other hand, one can start philosophizing from texts written by artists, scientists and politicians. But reading is only philosophical when it is autodidactic reading: when it is an instance of "being baffled in connection with the text," — an exercise in patience. "One is never finished with reading, one is always at the beginning, one did not read what one read."

So, Lyotard's approach to teaching philosophy neither lacks, nor rejects engagement with critical, reflective inquiry inside the classroom. On the contrary, he tries to elucidate what it means for the teacher to develop a philosophical attitude among his students.

Lyotard once organized a philosophical exhibition — *Les Immatériaux* in Paris, 1985 — meant to evoke a sensibility for actual forms in art, technoscience, and lifestyles. Its aim was not to explain the questions underlying the exhibition, but to stimulate public curiosity. The exhibition was organized in such a way that the young could get in touch with contemporary ideas.²

THE IAPC PROGRAM: A SMALL BUT POWERFUL BEGINNING

When Lardner discusses Philosophy for Children, he is taking the IAPC program for granted.

In my opinion, we should rather take this program as a beginning, not as the final answer to philosophy in the classroom. As such it shows all the shortcomings one might expect a completely new educational endeavor to have. The IAPC program is a fine start, but it needs amelioration on the level of (educational) theory, philosophical content and implementation. Whoever thinks of the program as final is simply not fit to bring philosophy to the classroom. Constant critical reflection is necessary if the program is to succeed.

Flaws in the Philosophy for Children curriculum were unavoidable from the start because the program was mainly created by one person whose interests and opinions gave a particular twist to the curriculum. In the future, Philosophy for Children could benefit from contributions from different angles. If various interests, opinions and views on the nature of philosophy would be incorporated in the program, this would make it less susceptible to the justified reproach of cultural bias from the multi-culturalist position. At this moment we are only at the start of such a development.

NO MISSIONARIES INSIDE THE PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN MOVEMENT?

Is Philosophy for Children an educational reform movement? According to Lardner it is presented as such. (1991, p. 20) Is it? In some aspects it is, in others it isn't.

The notion of educational reform seems to imply a definite direction or goal, a recasting of education in a mold which shows outlines which seem to us more desirable than the present ones. Only on the basis of a common overall educational, political and cultural philosophy can this direction be established.

Such a common view of education and society is most certainly lacking in the philosophy for children movement. Maybe we do not find the whole spectrum of political and social attitudes inside the Philosophy for Children practice, but we most definitely do find most of them. Philosophy for Children is practised by romantics rediscovering the innocent mind of the child, by old-fashioned political idealists, by Zen-Buddhists, by opportunists who pick up every fashion in education, by intellectual dropouts who see it as

the last straw to rescue education, by missionaries spreading the IAPC creed, etc. This variety of attitudes is exactly what makes the debate fascinating and the outcome uncertain. (I look forward to contributions from Taiwan on this non-Zen postmodern issue!).

I want to elaborate on one of the points mentioned before. According to Lardner, "there are no missionaries (inside the Philosophy for Children movement) extolling the virtues of philosophical inquiry, with the power of God behind them." No, there probably are not. But that is no surprise considering the nature of philosophy. But as soon as we substitute the word "reason" for "god," we find plenty of missionaries inside the movement. The partisanship for reason and rationality observed in the Philosophy for Children movement is exactly the enlightenment rationality criticized by postmodernism. Some of the practitioners of Philosophy for Children still seem to cling to the view of a rational being and an education for rationality once defended by Kant.

A somewhat disconcerting instance of missionary thinking in the Philosophy for Children movement occurred in the October 1990 issue of *Metaphilosophy*. In this issue Richard Kitchener argues against the possibility of doing philosophy with children from a Piagetian point of view.³ Although Kitchener's conception of philosophy is somewhat narrow-minded, his paper is a serious and welcome critique and asks for a well-founded response. (I do recommend the article to everyone who is enthusiastic about the idea of doing Philosophy for Children. It sharpens your thinking on developmental psychology and the like.) In the same issue, Matthew Lipman responds quite succinctly to Kitchener, but without taking up the gauntlet and going into Kitchener's one-sided conception of philosophy, attached mainly to the analytical tradition. Instead, he behaves like a prophet to whom the future is clear:

In the not too distant future we will look back to arguments like those of Professor Kitchener in favor of preserving philosophy for adults in the way we now look back to pre-World War I celebrations of the excellence of the vanishing Victorian world. It is also my suspicion that, in the years to come, philosophy will have an

increasingly heavy responsibility to bring together and make comfortable with one another the diversity of perspectives of those of different nationalities, genders and age levels, a diversity presently so rampant and robust as to make communication difficult and misunderstandings inevitable. With the help of shared philosophical inquiry, we can now reach across the table to one another and convert our precarious associations into well-founded communities. Our job now is to prepare for that time to come, and not to fancy ourselves the Major Leagues of philosophy, with everyone else sitting around on the sidelines watching, and enjoying the game, if at all.

I'd like to comment on this specimen of Lipman prose. The style seems to be derived from socialist literature announcing the victory of the proletariat. As an ex-Trotskyist (named after Trotsky!), I immediately recognize the style and vocabulary, designed not to convince the doubting mind, but to fill the mind of the believer. Comparable demagogical phrases abound in the long history of socialism and marxism. Exchange the word "philosophy" for "socialism" in the above quotation and see what happens. I remember phrases like "If you don't understand the character of the socialist revolution, you will finish on the dunghill of history" all too well. Paradise dawns on the horizon, but only if we work hard. Otherwise we will finish in barbarism. Thanks, I've had my pie.

This style is completely in accordance with the lack of awareness that things could turn out to be different. The author speaks from an unshakable belief (and no distinction, Elfie, between ethics and metaphysics). It is exactly this kind of thinking which Lyotard is fighting when he discusses ways of thinking we used to call modern.⁴ Ways of thinking that can lead to terror (the terror to be always rational, and for Lyotard the end of rationalism is "Auschwitz" and not some kind of peaceful society).

We can no longer afford not to show the inner core of our city when we organize a sightseeing tour. Doing philosophy in school can be a great advantage to the kids, to the educational environment, to the sense of reality of the teachers,

etc. But only if we are always aware that we have to dislearn to get in touch with the world conception of children, especially the younger ones. As soon as we are convinced that we have found the one right way, we will be blinded by our own blinkers. A new philosophical question enters the classroom, and before we can find an answer, we need room for fantasy. In this room nonsensical suggestions cannot be rejected immediately. We have to consider them carefully, because we don't know yet in which direction the answer will lie. We have to investigate crazy possibilities to enhance the chance of finding better answers — better according to the standards developed by the group doing the investigation. As a result, the community of inquiry might reach a local consensus expressed in the specific idiom the community has built up during the investigation. The problem of our world today is probably that although we can reach local consensus again and again, this will never guarantee we will be able to make the giant leap to general consensus.⁵ That kind of giant step seems no longer available at the end of this century. The greater complexity in our position forces us to be more modest in our aspirations (and that is something different than saying that everything is relative).

As I see it, the missionaries are, and probably always will be, among us. Beware! It was only ten years ago that punks were singing "No more heroes." It cannot be repeated too often. While no slogan adequately covers postmodern thought, "No more heroes" is more apt than "Everybody his own truth."

WHICH SUBJECT IS ALIVE?

As I understand the modernist-postmodernist debate under consideration, two issues are of vital importance in the discussion begun by Lardner:

1. the notion of justice.
2. the notion of the subject.

In general, the hodge-podge of arguments and criticisms Lardner presents in the first part of his article bears no resemblance to any particular postmodern position inside the postmodernist-modernist debate. Therefore, I will restrict my reaction to the role these two notions play in the debate and to their mutual relationship. Speaking about postmodernism, it makes sense to be-

gin by looking to Lyotard. He opened the politico-philosophical debate on postmodernism (apart from discussions going on in other disciplines like literature and architecture) and he still offers a very stimulating position worth examining. His main contribution to the question "What is postmodernism?" is entitled *The Differend*.⁶ Among other things, it is an effort to think and to write without the notion of a subject. Quoting Bennington:

Lyotard thinks that neither the notion of a subject nor that of an experience is necessary to the analysis of knowledge, and that both cause unnecessary trouble. A subject is tied to the pronoun 'I' (I think therefore I am): but 'I' is a diectic and no more stable than a 'this' or a 'now' — even supposing that 'I think therefore I am' is true every time I 'proffer it or conceive it in my mind', as Descartes says, the identity of that 'I' from occurrence to occurrence of the sentence cannot be presupposed and can in fact only be asserted on the basis of a name to link those occurrences. But names are given, the reality of the supposed subject is established prior to that subject's proffering any sentence at all. Reality is therefore not a result of experience, and subjectivity is not therefore a ground for knowledge. If I do set out to doubt I can't stop so soon.⁷

Lyotard's tries to write without using an a priori notion of a subject and at the same time to create a linguistic picture of the way our knowledge might be organized. What has this notion of the subject to do with our educational activities inside the school? Well, of several expressions quite popular in Philosophy for Children circles — as Lardner's "the autonomy of individual idea" — the meaning can be questioned. Do we refer to autonomous ideas, or do we refer to individuals expressing these autonomous ideas? Are the individuals or the ideas autonomous? How individual, by the way, is a personal idea? And how important is it to believe in the individuality of ideas? Of course, we have to develop our own ideas and thoughts about as many subjects as possible. Are ideas a kind of thought? And if so,

can we possess our thoughts?

Let us for a moment consider how Lyotard interprets Wittgenstein (regardless whether his interpretation is correct) when he wants turn the issue upside down:

I guess Wittgenstein had a thought [a cloud?] like that in his mind when he elaborated the idea of language games, which are in no sense played by people using specific languages as instruments. Quite the opposite, for Wittgenstein explains that the rules regulating games are unknown to the players and that no one learns to use language by acquiring a knowledge of its grammatical or lexical aspects as such. Rather everyone learns by groping around in the stream of phrases like children do. If necessary Wittgenstein concedes thoughts or, even better, phrases, allow themselves to be distributed into families. Being granted a family is nothing other than belonging to a set of elements which is focused on one element from among all those in the infinite network or texture of what the English language accurately calls 'relatives'. Accordingly, thoughts are not our own. We fly to enter into them and to belong to them. What we call the mind is the exertion of thinking thoughts.⁸

The most fascinating (and disturbing) element of this fragment is the idea that thoughts are not our own. What does this mean for our practice in a community of inquiry willing to confront such a position? That is one of the questions postmodern thought raises for people doing philosophy with children.

Consider the practice observed in many dialogues when children refer to one another in phrases like: "I agree with Matthew and I disagree with ...".⁹ In using such expressions we concede that thoughts are the thoughts of definite persons. Instead of encouraging such a practice, we might accustom the children to quite another practice when expressing their thoughts in the community. It seems important to distinguish between the person as the source of knowledge and thoughts that contain the knowledge that is under consideration. We might discuss thoughts

without referring to the person expressing the thought. That might do justice to the representation of "an idea as a thought" entering the community "using" a person. Such an attitude might result in a quite different style of inquiry inside the classroom. I do not propose to exchange one style for another. I'd like to stress the differences that might result from modern versus postmodern stances when doing philosophical inquiry in class. Is it possible to have children experience both styles of discussion? If the answer is positive, can the same person lead both types of discussion?

Whatever the answer, both styles are the expression of a philosophical position. The behavior of the teacher during the inquiry is part of an introduction to a philosophical position. This position is not expressed but it is **shown**. What is shown can never be said. Again and again we have to question ourselves: what have we been saying and what have we been showing? The one is never the other.

In his effort to get rid of the seemingly unavoidable notion of the subject, at the same time Lyotard wants to keep alive a notion of justice in such a form that it can only be thought of as an idea. The political practices by means of which modernist thought dealt with justice are no longer defensible nor welcome. They have become suspicious. Why? Well, today it hardly needs to be stated. An evaluation of the political mistakes of mankind this century is too long to present in these lines.

In his postmodernist thinking Lyotard tries to keep alive a notion of justice as an idea, as a spirit, as a form of complexity worth striving for. But one can only do this while at the same time remembering the failures encountered in the history of this century. We need to be watchful. There remain no great stories to be believed. No general consensus will be within reach from now on, only local consensus.¹⁰

It would be worthwhile to have a discussion of how Philosophy for Children as an educational practice might create forms of justice inside the classroom. Claims to justice can no longer be generalized so easily, nor directly connected to the democratic slogans Lardner quotes. Doing so would suggest a kind of general consensus which is becoming particularly questionable. "General consensus," "authentic democracy," — this is the language of the great words we had better leave to missionaries.

Under postmodern conditions it seems more appropriate to eliminate the term "autonomous" from the vocabulary expressing relations of persons to their environment, as well as of relations of persons related to other persons and of thoughts to the context that elicits them. The idea of autonomy is tied to an ontological concept of the individual. Precisely the existence of such a concept as a necessary tool is severely questioned today.

What does it mean to see ourselves as elements in the networks we are part of? We, people, as knots in worldwide networks? Is it possible to think about it before rejecting the question? Lyotard tries to eliminate this particular notion of a subject, and with it disappears the idea of autonomy intimately connected with it. What is left is the idea of justice. We can and must fight for justice as a goal, as an outcome of our culture up to now. What Enlightenment has bequeathed to us is the idea for justice as something worth striving for. Not in reality, but as idea.

What does it mean when we don't know any longer but when language knows?

NOTES

1. Lyotard, Jean François (1986), *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* (Paris: Editions Galilée), no English translation available, as far as I know.
2. Lyotard, Jean François (1985), *Les Immatériaux*, *Art and Text*, April pp. 47-57.
3. Kitchenér, Richard. *Do children think philosophically?* *Metaphilosophy* XXI (1991): 4, 416-431.
4. See Lyotard, Jean François (1988), *Peregrinations, Law, Form, Event*, the Afterword: A memorial of Marxism (New York: Columbia University Press) and Lyotard, Jean François (1988), *The Differend: phrases in dispute*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, (vert. G. Van Den Abbeele), pp. 218-264.
5. Compare the small step for a man and the great leap for mankind Neil Armstrong made on the moon
6. Compare footnote 4.
7. Bennington, Geoffrey (1988), Lyotard, *Lyotard, writing the event* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 123.
8. Lyotard, Jean François (1988), *Peregrinations, Law, Form, Event*, New York: Columbia University Press) p. 5-6.
9. See: BBC special *The Transformers 3: Socrates for six-year-olds*. The discussion led by Catherine MacGill is an excellent example of this practice. At

the same time, it is one of the best parts of this documentary that it is hardly about Philosophy for Children, but more on educational matters.

10. Lyotard, Jean François (1985) *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), chapter 11.

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