Using 'Peter Rabbit' as a Philosophical Text with Young Children

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Once upon a time there were four little Rabbits, and their names were — Flopsy, Mopsy, Cotton-tail, and Peter. They lived with their Mother in a sand-bank, underneath the root of a very big fir-tree.

"Now, my dears," said old Mrs. Rabbit one morning, "you may go into the fields or down the lane, but don't go into Mr. McGregor's garden: your Father had an accident there; he was put in a pie by Mrs. McGregor. Now run along, and don't get into mischief. I am going out."

Then old Mrs. Rabbit took a basket and her umbrella, and went through the wood to the baker's. She bought a loaf of brown bread and five currant buns.

Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail, who were good little bunnies, went down the lane to gather blackberries: but Peter, who was very naughty, ran straight away to Mr. McGregor's garden, and squeezed under the gate!

First he ate some lettuces and some French beans; and then he ate some radishes; and then, feeling rather sick, he went to look for some parsley. But round the end of a cucumber frame, whom should be meet but Mr. McGregor!

Mr. McGregor was on his hands and knees planting out young cabbages, but he jumped up and ran after Peter, waving a rake and calling out, "Stop thief!"

Peter was most dreadfully frightened; he rushed all over the garden, for he had forgotten the way back to the gate. He lost one of his shoes among the cabbages, and the other shoe amongst the potatoes. After losing them, he ran on four legs and went faster, so that I think he might have got away altogether if he had not unfortunately run into a gooseberry net, and got caught by the large buttons on his jacket. It was a blue jacket with brass buttons, quite new.

Peter gave himself up for lost, and shed big tears; but his sobs were overheard by some friendly sparrows, who flew to him in great excitement, and implored him to exert himself. Mr. McGregor came up with a sieve, which he intended to pop upon the top of Peter; but Peter wriggled out just in time, leaving his jacket behind him. And rushed into the toolshed, and jumped into a can. It would have been a beautiful thing to hide in, if it had not had so much water in it.

Mr. McGregor was quite sure that Peter was somewhere in the tool-shed, perhaps hidden underneath a flower-pot. He began to turn them over carefully, looking under each. Presently Peter sneezed — "Kertyschoo!" Mr. McGregor was after him in no time. And tried to put his foot upon Peter, who jumped out of a window, upsetting three plants. The window was too small for Mr. McGregor, and he was tired of running after Peter. He went back to his work.

Peter sat down to rest; he was out of breath and trembling with fright, and he had not the least idea which way to go. Also he was very damp with sitting in that can. After a time he began to wander about, going lippity — lippity — not very fast, and looking all round.

He found a door in a wall; but it was locked, and there was no room for a fat little rabbit to squeeze underneath. An old mouse was running in and out over the stone doorstep, carrying peas and beans to her family in the wood. Peter asked her the way to the gate, but she had such a large pea in her mouth that she could not answer. She only shook her head at him. Peter began to cry.

Then he tried to find his way straight across the garden, but he became more and more puzzled. Presently, he came to a pond where Mr. McGregor filled his water-cans. A white cat was staring at some gold-fish, she sat very, very still, but now and then the tip of her tail twitched as if it were alive. Peter thought it best to go away without speaking to her; he had heard about cats from his cousin, little Benjamin Bunny.

He went back towards the tool-shed, but suddenly, quite close to him, he heard the noise of a hoe — scr-r-ritch, scratch, scratch, scritch. Peter scuttered underneath the bushes. But presently, as nothing happened, he came out, and climbed upon a wheelbarrow and peeped over. The first thing he saw was Mr. McGregor hoeing onions. His back was turned towards Peter, and beyond him was the gate!

Peter got down very quietly off the wheelbarrow, and started running as fast as he could go, along a straight walk behind some black-currant bushes. Mr. McGregor caught sight of him at the corner, but Peter did not care. He slipped underneath the gate, and was safe at last in the wood outside the garden. Mr. McGregor hung up the little jacket and the shoes for a scare-crow to frighten the blackbirds.

Peter never stopped running or looked behind him till he got home to the big fir-tree. He was so tired that he flopped down upon the nice soft sand on the floor of the rabbit-hole and shut his eyes. His mother was busy cooking; she wondered what he had done with his clothes. It was the second little jacket and pair of shoes that Peter had lost in a fortnight!

I am sorry to say that Peter was not very well during the evening.

His mother put him to bed, and made some camomile tea; and she gave a dose of it to Peter! "One table-spoonful to be taken at bed-time." But Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cotton-tail had bread and milk and blackberries for supper.

Like most literary classics for young children, Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*[1] is rich in just those themes and subtexts which grip the early childhood imagination where the constructive search for meaning is most intense. The book tells a story which the young child recognizes intuitively as expressive of his or her deepest social and psychological preoccupations. Indeed, this is what good literature does for all ages. But is it philosophical? Not intentionally, the way a philosophical treatise, or a so-called philosophical dialogue, which is most often one mind ventriloquizing, or even the novels of the sort developed by Mathew Lipman for teaching philosophy to children, are. In good or great literature, the philosophical material typically operates as a subtext, either more or less explicit; it emerges involuntarily from the themes and narratives of the story, rather than the other way around. It seems reasonable to expect that in some great stories the philosophical material would be very accessible, and in others, more inchoate. One virtue of Lipman's pedagogical novels, in which the philosophical material is determinative of story rather than emerging from it, is that they train us — if in somewhat of an artificial literary situation — to look for, find, and articulate the philosophy in fictional narrative.

I want to offer some methodological reflections on how to use a children's classic as a philosophical text with children, using *Peter Rabbit* as an example. Although these reflections are almost certainly applicable to other books by Beatrix Potter, all of which explore, with dark, dreamlike, whimsical irony, the psychosocial cosmos of early childhood, it is less certain they can be applied more generally to all good children's literature. It would seem more realistic that each story would inspire a relatively unique approach to the philosophical preoccupations that characterize it, depending on the specific nature or type of those preoccupations, and on its own particular way of evoking them through fictional narrative.[2] But the analysis that follows may provide a heuristic that is more generally useful in attempting to make the connection between the methodology of Philosophy for Children and high quality children's literature.

NARRATIVE SUBTEXTS

The sense of depth under deceptive simplicity which is characteristic of *Peter Rabbit* is the result of the interplay of a number of subtexts, which interact in prolific and ambiguous ways with the surface narrative. Actually there are two surface narratives: the story and the illustrations. *Peter Rabbit* is typically read aloud to children, and the pictures and the written-word-read-aloud[3] combine to create a rich, multi-sensory textual space worthy of the young child's vivid sensorium, intense imaginative life, and keen sense of wonder. Within this textual space, at least three levels of subtextual narrative pattern can be identified. They provide a context for the identification of philosophical material in the text, and its thematization in discussion plans.

First, there is what I will call the **developmental** narrative. The major psychosocial themes of the story — the transgression of boundaries, conflict with powerful, authoritative adults, and being killed — are also key themes of the psychosocial crisis characteristic of the roughly 4 to 6 year old child, whom Erikson has described as preoccupied with finding a creative balance between individual initiative and the guilt and fear of annihilation which results from "going too far" and damaging objects or relationships.[4] The brilliantly energetic, often compulsive 5-year old recognizes him or herself in Peter, that "little animal" whose drive to become his own person through exploring and mastering the world is tragically hemmed round by both inner and outer laws of which he only becomes aware through breaking them. There are the laws of moderation, broken by Peter's gluttony, the laws of private property represented by Mr. McGregor and his garden, and the "law of the jungle" — here, with Potter's characteristically oblique irony, the law of the garden — represented by Peter's father's earlier "accident."

Another level of narrative patterning I will call the **social.** It includes economic, class, and gender narratives. Mr. McGregor's garden is a vivid, coherent analogue for the world beyond the young child's home: the world of huge, all-powerful, hostile, ambivalent or patronizing adults, and of the confusing laws of who can have what. It embodies perfectly the ordered chaos of the economics of scarcity, where potential allies — other little people — are, like the mouse, either too intent on their own survival needs to pull together, or, like the cat, would just as soon eat you too. Only the sparrows, symbolic of both solidarity and transcendence, urge Peter towards freedom.

Peter is told by his mother not to get into mischief, but it is this fundamentally mischievous world of "accidents" — of structural inequity, domination, transgression, and the ever-present possibility of being eliminated by a more powerful player — which he, as a male, must learn to manipulate to his ends. As a male, Peter must be "naughty" in order to survive, although through being naughty, like his father, he may be eaten. As it is, he escapes with losing his clothes, which are displayed by the oppressor as a deterrent to other challengers of the system.

Finally, there is the narrative level which I will call **mythic.** Although the developmental narrative is also mythic, its themes — transgression, guilt, the conflict beween the drive for individuation and authority — are specific to the psychosocial drama of initiative versus guilt. The larger mythic structure of *Peter Rabbit,* includes the narratives or parts of the narratives of the trial of the hero, the encounter with giants, and the individual's transgression of limits which leads to his downfall.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES

The four narrative levels of the story — the surface narrative of illustrated text, and the developmental, social, and mythic subtexts — provide a richly layered context of psychological and social meanings from which to draw philosophical themes, whether ontological, epistemological, or axiological, and to construct discussion plans based on them. For example the developmental subtext, which is about initiative and guilt, instructs us to pay attention to the 5-year old's particular approach to the idea of the "good" and the "bad." What is and what is not "naughty," and how do we know when something is "mischief" and when it isn't? Is the mouse carrying peas out of the garden doing mischief, or the cat contemplating the goldfish, or the birds, who are probably eating seeds? Did the McGregors do something "bad" when they killed and ate Peter's father? How would the McGregors themselves look at it? What are the criteria for calling something "good"? What, for example, is the difference between a "good" and a "bad" hammer? Ice cream cone? Person? Can there be too much of a good thing? Can good come out of a bad thing? Some things start out bad and come out good, and some things operate the other way around. Can something be both good and bad at the same time? All of these questions can be instantiated with examples from the lives of young children, and the stories they have to tell of their conflicts, their triumphs, their failures.

The philosophical issues associated with the word "accident" are also informed by the developmental subtext. This is a particularly sensitive theme for young children, who tend to see all behavior, even that of inanimate things, as intention-laden, and intuitively understand all nature

as "mindful" rather than mechanical.[5] Given this interpretive bias, "accident" and "on purpose" might have a slightly different twist. Was Peter's father's demise really an accident?[6] Was it an accident that Peter lost his coat and shoes? If he had been caught, killed, and eaten, would his mother have called it an "accident"? What kinds of things are "on purpose"? Does the sun shine on purpose? Do people get angry on purpose? Does the doctor hurt you with a needle on purpose? Issues of causality are not far behind. When two things happen together, when can we say that one causes the other?

As for the social subtext, the animals in *Peter Rabbit* — who comprise everyone except Mr. McGregor — are, like children, the "little people" in relation to the "adult" world of the garden. The young child's drive to be a person in her own right is always in the context of the more powerful, sometimes punitive world of adults. So the animals seem to depend on the human world, but only illegally, through stealing. This can lead to a discussion plan about what is stealing and what is not. Is the mouse stealing peas? Are you stealing if you taste a grape in a supermarket? Are you stealing if you or your family are starving and you take food from a supermarket? Are you stealing if a big company sends you something by mistake and you keep it? Mr. McGregor seems to feel that the garden "belongs to" him? What are the criteria for private ownership of something?

The dark side of the adult-child relationship is evoked with ominous power in the encounter between Peter and Mr. McGregor, and it raises questions about the authority relation between children and adults. Do you have to do what adults tell you to? What forms the basis of the authority relationship, and what rights do children have within it? Then there is the question of what is the same and what is different about adults and children. This question leads to questions about identity across transformations, and permanence and change. Young children are growing physically very fast, and will look very different in even three or four years. What stays the same about you and what changes as you grow? Will you be the same person when you are grown up? Adults also change their physical appearance as they get older, but in a different way. How do other things — animals, plants, and a variety of objects — change as they get older? How do they stay the same?

The peculiar, whimsical, and suggestive way in which animals are presented in *Peter Rabbit* — in fact they inhabit an anti-world to the human world, which yet interfaces the latter[7] — also raises interesting questions about the similarities and differences betweeen animals and humans, particularly in the areas of thought and language. I have found that children tend to apply a human thinking and talking model to animals until quite a late age, which makes for good conversations about the discrepencies which show up when you try to instantiate that. One might ask, for example, whether worms, ants, slugs or tadpoles think, plan and talk the way dogs, cats and rabbits do. If not, what are the differences? The question of how animals think and intend and communicate is related to the classification issue of living versus not living things. What are the criteria for calling something "alive"? Are the moon, the wind, the ocean, the coral plant or the dandelion seed, or a piece of your skin alive?

The dramatic difference in behavior between Peter and the "good little bunnies," Flopsy, Mopsy, and Cottontail, raises gender issues. Although it is never stated that Peter's siblings are girls, there are few readers who don't assume it, an impression encouraged by the fact that they dress like their mother, in red capes. four- to seven-year-olds are already keenly aware of the differences between girls and boys, and usually assume genetic causes, an assumption that can be probed through discussion. If girls and boys dressed and kept their hair in the same way, how, apart from the differences hidden by clothes, could you tell them apart? And the boy/girl issue is analoguous to the animal/human and the adult/child issues, in that all three involve contrastive pairs, in which the relationship between similarity and difference is clear in places and ambiguous in others. This makes for rich possibilities for discussion plans.

I have just identified only a handful among a number of possible philosophical thematizations. Discussion plans could also be built around rules and breaking rules, getting lost, danger, adventure, making mistakes, being afraid, and crying, to name just a few more. Exercises could be constructed around sentence patterns like the counterfactual "It would have been a beautiful thing to hide in, if it had not had so much water in it";

or the ambiguities of meaning in words like "sorry" in phrases like "I am sorry to say that . . . ," or "time" in "Mr. McGregor was after him in no time," or "care" in "Peter did not care."

INTEGRATING THE TEXT WITH PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN METHODS AND MATERIALS

Once themes have been identified, exercises and discussion plans may be taken from existing Philosophy for Children manuals and adapted for young children, or new ones may be developed. While the philosophical themes involved tend to emerge from the narrative patterns of the text, which thinking skills we choose to feature in our discussions will depend roughly on the ages and individual characteristics of the children involved. With a skilled facilitator, children 4-7 can work with excitement and rapidly growing skill at making distinctions and connections, classifying and categorizing, drawing inferences, predicting consequences, and formulating causal explanations. Although they are not used to the systematic way in which the community of inquiry practices formulating questions, giving reasons, defining terms, providing instances and illustrations, and identifying and using criteria, all of these moves are part of normal human language games, and so they have already done them at one point or another, either more or less explicitly. It is their new standardization in group discussion that takes practice.

Working with four- to seven-year-olds poses its own particular problems and opportunities. The young child's love of story and of repetition are advantages, in that a text like *Peter Rabbit* can be read a number of times, even before it is explored philosophically, to the point where it is nearly memorized by many children, thus making the strategy of returning to the text to check meaning a natural one. That same capacity to be immediately caught up in the mythic ambience of story makes it easier for young children to explore the text through acting it out, dramatizing it with puppets and musical instruments, or action figures, and drawing under its inspiration, which are ways of familiarizing themselves directly and non-discursively with the narrative patterns mentioned above. Doing philosophy with symbol systems or "intelligences" other than the linguistic, logical, and personal — i.e. spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic, musical[8] — is eminently suited to the young child's multi-sensorial approach to lived experience.

Teachers can tell and act out stories within stories to introduce or enliven discussions. For example, two teachers in circle might dramatize two "accidents," one of them due to recklessness, greed, or deviousness, and one not; or two puppets with no obvious sexual or gender characteristics might discuss their bewilderment as to whether they are boys or girls.[9] The young child's personalized, interactive epistemological style calls for all manner of concrete demonstration of concepts and relationships, for example examining real and present animals when discussing the differences between humans and animals, examining ambiguous photographs when talking about gender differences, coordinating a discussion of changing from a child to an adult with growing butterflies in the classroom, and bringing in photos from the family album, and so on. Finally, the young child's participation in the community of inquiry is first centered around personal narrative — around the child's grasp of his or her own life as a story which can be recounted, and which acts as a context for making judgments. So the five-year-old says, not "I think to be naughty means . . .," but rather, "One time, when I was home with my mother, and I wanted to play with a toy that my little brother had..." The teacher helps young children to articulate the higher levels of abstraction which are already present in the very choice of narrative content by the child, and in the language games already being used to interpret experience.

CONCLUSION

It would seem that at least two characteristics distinguish a philosophical novel of the sort developed by Lipman from a children's book which is rich in philosophical implications: the philosophical novel very consciously builds themes like appearance and reality, the one and the many, differences of kind and of degree, etc. into its narrative, as well as many pretexts for the making of generic, mediating, and culminating judgments.[10] In addition, its plot and characters

invariably model the operation and the development of the community of inquiry. As such they are special texts designed for a direct, pedagogical approach to the philosphical themes they contain. What they share with children's books like *Peter Rabbit* is that they both depend on fictional narrative, with the ambiguities and complexities created by its multiple subtexts, to communicate concepts. It is through working with the philosophy embedded at a very accessible level in the pedagogical novels that we learn to identify and to find a way of accessing the philosophy embedded at a deeper level in children's literature. The fact that the latter does not directly model the community of inquiry does not, in my view, disqualify it as, in some cases anyway, an appropriate pretext for philosophical discussion. In fact a very fruitful interaction between the two sorts of texts is possible, given the different approaches they offer to the philosophical material they carry.

NOTES

1. Beatrix Potter, *Peter Rabbit* (Frederick Warne, 1902).
2. This principle is also probably true, as in the case of Beatrix Potter, for each major author's work as a whole — whether Arnold Lobel, Maurice Sendak, William Steig, Hans Christian Andersen, Else Holmelund Minarik, etc.
3. The written word read aloud is different from both the written word read silently, and the spoken word of storytelling, or even the written word dramatized of the play. It is both a text and a speech act.
4. Characterizations of the "eight ages" of the life cycle are described in Erik H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (Norton, 1980 [1959]); and *Childhood and Society* (Norton, 1963).
5. For an interesting discussion of this phenomenon, see Susan Carey, *Conceptual Change in Childhood* (MIT Press, 1985).
6. "Your father had an accident there" is a good opportunity for an exercise on saying one thing and really meaning another, and other forms of euphemism and exaggeration.
7. The interface is indeed strange. In the illustrations, Peter is portrayed like a real rabbit, and he is treated that way by Mr. McGregor; on the other hand, McGregor hangs Peter's clothes on the scarecrow without a second thought. These sorts of ambiguities about the human and the animal world are present in many children's books, and offer interesting challenges for philosophical thematization.
8. For a discussion of the six "intelligences," see Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind* (Basic Books, 1983).
9. An excellent guide to presenting such skits, dramatizations, and "story problems" to young children, with a wealth of concrete examples, is found in Carolyn Pope Edwards, *Promoting Moral Development in Young Children: Creative Approaches for the Classroom* (Teachers College Press, 1986).
10. For a succinct and useful discussion of these three orders of judgment, see Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 164-173.

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