

## Can Trees Be Happy?

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In the introductory course, “Philosophy and Children,” my students and I explore the concept of doing philosophy with children within the larger framework of educational questions such as what ought education to achieve? How can children best learn and what should they be learning? What kind of people do we want our children to be?

Many of the students are experienced elementary and secondary teachers; often they are parents too. The concept of philosophy is foreign to them and they come to this course suspicious that philosophy is equally inaccessible and mysterious to children as well. They are aware that children make interesting and at times puzzling comments but the image of children holding **philosophic** discussions eludes them. Consequently, this question of the legitimacy of children is philosophical query becomes an important issue to explore and test. They achieve this by holding a philosophical discussion with a group of children using a children’s book as a catalyst. The group can be as large as a whole classroom of 25 students or as small as several friends from the neighborhood. I warn them that children may not be familiar with talking about books in this way and that they will need to explain the nature of their discussion: questions will not focus on content nor psychological motives of the characters but rather on the ideas that puzzle the children or that appear problematical in some way. What does the story make us think about? We echo Pixie (from Lipman’s novel of the same name): we talk about what the “zoo trip” (or children’s story in our case) makes us think of.

One question lingers: how will we know that we are having a truly “philosophic” discussion? This points to the need to develop a “philosophic ear.” To help serve as a model of a first attempt at philosophic dialogue for teacher and student alike, Kevin and I offer the following discussion. Kevin is a band teacher, so this role was “out of character” for him. I have added “philosophical editorial comments” to highlight the issues, themes and argumentative process which the group undertakes. My comments are printed in bold. In some instances I re-iterate the philosophic theme being explored and perhaps situate it within other philosophic discussions; in others I suggest further paths, topics, to pursue.

Kevin recounts the discussion held in October 1995:

**Kevin:** As a band director, it was rather challenging for me to select a book to share with students and discuss philosophically. After speaking with several of my elementary colleagues, I decided to use *The Giving Tree*, by Shel Silverstein.

I borrowed a group of fourth graders, and read the book with them. Afterwards I posed the question, “Can trees be happy?” The children then began to examine the possibilities therein. I opened up the discussion by inquiring of the children what types of objects they thought could have feelings. Their responses were interesting. Inanimate objects, such as mountains, could not have feelings because they were lifeless. This was the general consensus among the group. Anything that was lifeless must lack spirit and feeling. On the subject of trees however, the group was more willing to entertain the notion of emotions.

**Here the reasoning runs thus: to have feelings, a thing must be alive as only living things have spirit and feeling. Inanimate things are not alive. Therefore, inanimate things do not have feelings. But, what are trees?**

Tim was the first to support his position by stating that trees could be happy because they are a living thing. He said that a tree in full bloom is bright and cheerful. In the fall, trees start to

lose their leaves because they're crying. He suggested that trees show their feelings by what they do.

**An epistemological question arises: how do we know whether something has feelings? Tim relies on behavior, the observable acts of a being which analogically serve to confirm the experience of feelings. Hence, trees in bloom are happy while trees which are losing their leaves are sad, are crying. Here metaphor functions as analogy to justify the train of reasoning.**

Another student immediately challenged Tim by asking if it was the tree that was happy or the people observing the tree that were happy. I asked the group if they could clarify that remark. Some students thought that both were happy. The tree was happy to be functioning, and people were happy to see it working. The group decided that happiness in this case could be defined as the plant's doing what it knows best: living. The group decided that a well nourished plant stands tall and proud, and could be happy. Some of the children even began to assess the tree's happiness by adding that a tree is happiest when it's providing something to someone else, like The Giving Tree. A tree that serves a function, such as a tree house, is truly happy.

**The challenge is a good one: are we justified in concluding that trees have feelings when we might just be projecting our feelings on them?**

**In other words, will analogical reasoning work here to allow us to draw the kind of conclusion that we wish to? The analogy is defended by expanding it to include the reference to entelchy. Aristotle defines happiness as the ultimate end of man. It is that for the sake of which we do all else. Happiness consists in acting in the essentially human way, which is to reason. All beings have a final cause, a purpose or function which they realize by attaining their nature. Therein lies their happiness.**

Another student then suggested that these articles could be covering up a tree's sadness. I asked the group if they were suggesting that trees could be depressed. "Yes," answered Mary, "these things make us happy, but what about the tree?"

Jakki added that people ought to be more sensitive to the needs of trees. She suggested that the trees in California felt unappreciated. The people in California cut down the trees to have a water view, and now the land is washing away. If the trees had been left to do their job, there might not have been as much erosion. Man doesn't always understand nature.

**Ethical focus: do humans have an obligation to help trees realize their being? But note the broader issue being broached here: the relationship between man and nature. What would it mean to "understand" nature in this context? We might want to explore this: understand in the sense of scientific knowledge or perhaps in the way that we "understand" persons?**

The children raised the point that we couldn't live without the tree's oxygen, but wondered if the trees could live without us. Some students believed that the tree does better when there are people around. Trees can grow in the forest, but won't always do very well because of where they're placed. A tree planted by a person will be carefully placed, and will be more likely to flourish. This tree will be nurtured more than a tree standing alone in the forest without anyone paying any attention to it.

For the first time, there was a point upon which the students really disagreed. Tom suggested that the plant's flourishing was a response to the stimulus of food and water, not a function of it's happiness. He claimed that plants could not have feelings because they did not have a brain. A plant, he felt, grew because it received sunlight and water.

**They return to the original topic with the introduction of a new criteria for the experience of feelings: the need for a brain to have feelings, hence ruling out plants.**

Another student, Cassie, then asked why plants do better when a person speaks to them. She recalled that her grandmother's geraniums used to flower all through the year. Her grandmother used to sing to the plants while she worked around and watered them.

**Cassie offers a counter-example. If a plant responds to what we say, does it understand us in some way? Here we could look at the role of communication in establishing the presence of feelings or consciousness.**

Tom felt again that just because the geraniums were healthy did not mean that they were happy. Cassie then argued that these same geraniums were not nearly as healthy when her mother took them home to care for them. Her mother did not sing to them as her grandmother had, so this must have something to do with it. To this, Tom suggested that perhaps Cassie's mother simply didn't have a green thumb.

**The discussion here tackles the problematic distinctions among definitions, signs and causes. Is being**

healthy the same as being happy? A sign of being happy? A cause of being happy? How is the cause of happiness not the same as the sign of happiness?

David felt that plants do, in fact, have feelings. He felt that when they feel good, they flourish. He commented that prayer plants respond to touch. When a person touches a leaf, it immediately closes. Tom responded to this, stating that the leaves closing is just a reflex reaction. He went on to describe the Venus flytrap's leaves, which also close when they sense an insect. He described this as a reflex response.

**Note David's reasoning: If a plant flourishes, it feels good (assumed, not stated), therefore if it feels good, it flourishes. But, his examples are provocative: how do we consider plants which seem to mimic animal behavior such as the Prayer Plant and the Venus Flytrap? Are they different from other types of plants, some middle ground between animal and plant? Tom offers an interpretation consistent with his theory that plants do not feel; such "behaviors" are only reflex actions.**

In response to this, Jessica asked how it could be a response without a feeling. Some of the group believed that these plant reactions were just reflexes, while others argued that they were feelings, because people reacted in similar ways. Could a tree feel? Was this just a fanciful idea? I posed to the group the question of whether or not we could compare human feelings and responses to those of plants.

**Kevin broadens the focus here: to what extent are living things structured in similar ways? Can we draw analogies between animal and plant behaviors? What do such analogies really tell us? Both science and philosophy have explored this puzzle.**

In response to this question, Michael drew some comparisons between plants and humans. He suggested that plants have veins and arteries that nourish the branches, just as ours nourish our extremities. He went on to equate this to our nervous system. He reasoned that if a plant has nerves, it must feel things. It may not have a brain to think about it, but it has feelings nevertheless. Timmy also added the observation that when a person carves their name into the bark of a tree, it bleeds. If a tree bleeds, he reasoned, it must be hurt.

**What connection is Timmy drawing between bleeding, being hurt and feeling pain? Why do we assume that "bleeding" implies pain? Has Michael answered Kevin's question?**

I asked the group if they felt that a tree would feel pain when someone carved into it. Tom felt that we would just call it pain, but that the tree wouldn't experience it. Jakki said that Tom just didn't want to admit that he had ever hurt a tree! Tom then went on to give an example of the human body getting injured. He said, for example, that you may not realize that you cut your leg, but it will still heal itself. You may not have even been aware that you were injured. Healing, he said, was just a natural function of your body. He suggested that the same was true of trees.

**Again, Tom voices the scientific position here: pain is a consciously experienced phenomenon, not an external significator.**

Richard then suggested that pain was a function of your mind. This is evidenced by the fact that somebody can be injured and not even feel it if they are concentrating really hard on something else. Bill said, "That's true. My aunt fractured her finger and was in a lot of pain. She then had to face an emergency, and forgot the whole thing while she was going through it. She noticed her finger throbbing again hours later. Pain is just mind over matter." In that case, you can have a nervous system but not feel pain because your brain isn't processing it.

**Bill offers an anecdotal example to illustrate his theory that pain is a function of mind. We also see an opportunity to discuss the common phrase "Mind over Matter" - the question of consciousness-body connection enters in.**

Jakki asked, "What about a child that cries when it is first born? The baby doesn't know what the doctor is doing when she slaps him, but the baby still cries right away. The baby must feel pain. The baby doesn't know where he is or what he's doing, so he can't be thinking of pain. He just feels it and cries."

**Do babies have minds? Can infants think? Jean Piaget has done much to revolutionize the way we view infant behavior as intentional and thoughtful. What do the children think here?**

Tom then said that he would like to believe that trees can feel happiness and sadness, but that it could not be proven. He said that he didn't think that wanting it to be true would make it so. I thought that this was a pretty insightful comment.

**Tom suggests that an examination of the criteria of truth would reveal it to be independent from intention or desire. What would it take to establish that trees indeed did feel happiness and sadness? How do**

we know what things other than ourselves experience? With such divergent thinkers as Descartes and Hume, we might agree that we do not know what others think and feel. We are revisiting the earlier question of epistemological grounds for knowledge claims.

Mary suggested that we might not really be able to get a good look at happiness or sadness because they are feelings. She said that they were a state of mind, or a way of thinking. She said we would have to observe the way things look to decide how they feel. If a person is unhappy, they look withered and down. If a person is happy, they stand tall and look fresh. She said the same was true of plants.

**Mary circles back to the original hypothesis of observation and reflection based on analogy.**

I then asked the students if they thought that trees could communicate feelings to each other as people do. They considered this for a short time. Jakki stated that when you really bend a tree, you hear a creaking sound. She felt that this was its way of speaking. Bill suggested that trees speak in ways that we cannot hear. He cited the many ways that animals communicate that we don't understand as examples. He felt that plants could have a system like that of the animals.

**We discover the nature of communication to be varied; what do they all share in common?**

Richard suggested that plants could speak to each other through the pollen that they spread. Jessica added that since pollen makes us sneeze, that maybe this was the tree's way of getting back at people for all their wrongdoing toward the plant world!

**Jessica offers us a bit of philosophical whimsy! Philosophy can indeed be playful.**

Mary then inquired, "How do we know that a plant doesn't have a brain?" She said that something must direct the plant. It always searches for water and sunlight, and will move to get access to these elements. James thought this was a good idea. He thought that without something to guide a plant its branches would grow in a haphazard way, and the plant would not do well. Chris agreed with this theory. He said, "That's right. Branches grow in certain places, but not others." He suggested that there was some function of the tree that said, "Okay, one branch here; another branch there."

**Here we find suggestions of formal causation such as Aristotle defines. How is it that seeds "know" what to become, carrots or trees?**

James added that while trees may have intelligence, they don't need to be nurtured as people do. If a child is born and receives no attention, it will not survive, even if all of its basic needs are met. A tree, he said, could function quite well without the nurturing of any people.

**What does James add to this discussion? Perhaps a return to the issue of the differences between humans and animals or trees? Are similarities enough to justify the extensive analogies that the children have been building?**

**Kevin:** Our discussion ended by returning to our original question: A tree can function without contact with people, but will it be happy? I think the group came from this discussion realizing that we had not reached a definite answer, but they seemed to feel all right about that. Several students asked me to provide a definitive answer, but I said that that I did not have a complete solution to our dilemma.

**Kevin offers an honest and fair response here. It might be helpful to the children at this point to review with them the progress of their discussion. They can then obtain a sense of the shape and progress that they did make in trying to explore the issue of trees and feelings.**

I think that our discussion left students thinking about plant life in a new way. I later noticed one of the group members staring out the window at the trees outside. He seemed to be considering our discussion. Could trees have feelings? Is a tree in Central Park, receiving nourishment and nutrients, happier than the haunted house tree which is neglected and sad? The philosophy of Taoism suggests that man and nature should function as one. Man didn't understand nature, and therefore neglected it. When we observe the deforestation in Africa and South America, we are forced to wonder. Is man trying to control things he cannot understand? Are trees trying to tell us things that we cannot hear? Environmental concerns have increased public awareness of the importance of the rain forest and the preservation of trees. Maybe the philosophical discussion I shared with these students could have a place in their future, and the future of their thoughts.

**My final comment is simply to note that Kevin has also participated by listening, questioning and**

supporting the children in their quest for solutions. His own sense of puzzlement has blossomed and he offers us some new and old ways, including a non-Western view, of looking at the nature of experience and the universe.

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