

Children, Philosophy and Experience

*The following article is a written response to **Children, Philosophy and Democracy** edited by John Portelli and Ronald Reed. This article was originally a panel presentation at the Learned's Congress held at Brock University in Ontario in June of 1996.*

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I begin a response to *Children, Philosophy and Democracy*, by providing several assumptions about learning and experience, some of which are supported and strengthened by the dialogue between Portelli and Church (75-117). I assume that:

1. reasonableness is a component part of thinking; there are other components to thinking as well, such as sensing, listening, remembering, organizing, observing, planning and problem-'solving', all of which depend for their usefulness to us on philosophical experience found in a pedagogy of growth;
2. thinking is ambiguous: a. it may refer to receiving and interacting with sense perceptions so that reflection always moves back to perceptions of phenomena; on this view, growth in thinking means changes in consciousness/self-consciousness (i.e., *conscientia*); this is the sense of thinking that is of concern in this paper; b. it may also refer to thinking about thinking, i.e., pure thought, which presupposes at least some one's experience (perception) in the first sense but is not dependent on (sense) experience (perception) in the same way;
3. the reasonableness we want to encourage in children must be present for them to observe in whole patterns that are accessible to them;
4. children need to experience these patterns; to practice them and identify and extract elements from them; they need to practice these elements; and then to configure the elements in novel ways in order for education to be effective and to become an education of their own consciousness;
5. thinking (development of consciousness) ultimately must enable configuring praxis: i.e., reflection/action based on the selecting and placing together of components of previous experience in novel or authentic patterns of the learners' own making;
6. thinking as configuring praxis is social and requires development in the capacity for observing, perspective-taking, for example, as well as other abilities related to reasonableness and democracy;
7. configuring praxis, as a model for thinking, is necessary for a number of reasons having to do with modern life, namely, the glut of data, the diversity of views in the public sphere, the changefulness of experience due primarily to the current and quick succession of technological inventions, as well as the important demands of democracy.

Children, Philosophy and Democracy addresses the issue of teaching philosophy to children in such a way that learners are enabled to identify and situate themselves within, and then participate with, a community of inquiry through practising the philosophy of democracy. In addition, the authors demonstrate that children can be

philosophical and already are to some degree; and the authors propose that schooling should enable the development of philosophical capacities in all learners so that elements of democratic, public life will find voice in the young. In making the claim that children are able philosophers, in the sense of the ability to be 'reasonable', (Portelli, 22) the authors take what Michael Pritchard refers to as a 'hopist' stance. The 'hopist' is one who resists both facile optimism and pessimism, and "clings to the hope that children *can* be reasonable and sets about seeing what can be done to help bring this possibility into reality." (Portelli, 17) Pritchard makes his case by noting two parameters for hopism, first to the pessimists, that the idea of educating reasonable adults is threatened if we do not pay attention to those aspects of childhood which found the reasonable adult, and then to the optimists, that there are degrees of reasonableness and childhood tendencies need to be understood as unfinished and incomplete attempts, that is, as "seeds" of reasonableness that need to be tended. Children need to find their own voice within a philosophical discourse in which they participate and which they must learn.

What happens if we do not trust that children can be reasonable? As Sharp notes: "The abandonment of trust in the efficacy of reasonable inquiry can be accompanied by a loss of hope and a sense of resignation, [which encourages] a nihilist position that there is nothing to be done in making the world more reasonable because nothing can be done." (Portelli, 141) The authors are not assuming that children can be as reasonable as mature adults can be; children need a rich philosophical environment that encourages them to raise and pursue their own questions, and, while they are seen as capable of doing philosophical inquiry, they need nurture. (Portelli, 79). But there are limits to what children can do and these limits must be respected. Lipman notes that "children can construct small arguments such as a conclusion supported by a reason;" but he warns that if teachers "attempt to employ *force majeure*, such as an enthymeme or a chain of syllogisms, the child will see that he or she is outmatched and will withdraw into a resentful silence." (Portelli, 125) Humiliating the child in this way frustrates the development of a capacity for inquiry. Effective teachers cite their own experience, appeal to children's experience and let children experience model arguments which are attempts to persuade children of something important to them in a reasonable way which draws the young into authentic dialogue with their elders. (Portelli, 124-126) In addition, professional philosophers can "collect examples of

philosophical thinking in young children and link those childish thoughts to our philosophical tradition, to help parents and teachers recognize philosophy in their children" so as to respect, participate in and encourage reasonableness when it appears (Portelli, 71).

If we ask about the possibility of children doing philosophy, we must come to understand the nature of experience that teachers are to have themselves and share with students. What sort of philosophical experience do the authors recommend? The text makes it clear that philosophy for children is not a course about the history of philosophy, although I think it is important to notice when children might be ready, as an example, for Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World*. Rather than learning about it, philosophy for children helps the young to do philosophy and begins by taking seriously the philosophy that they are already doing. Yet we can still ask, what sort of philosophical experience are children encouraged to have? They could be taught to practice formal logic, but this is not the tack taken in this book. Rather, philosophy for children, following Dewey (who was influenced by Hegel), could be said to focus on what might be called philosophy of self-consciousness.¹ Whereas Frege was concerned to write formal logic to describe fundamental mathematical concepts, Dewey's interest was in psychology, biology, social philosophy, education, ethics, and aesthetics, and certainly in democracy and seems not to have been acquainted with Frege's approach. (Burke, 3-5) Dewey's logic emerged from "trying to understand the reciprocal relations between learning and experience, knowledge and action, and other disparate features of human nature which are ordinarily not considered to be part of the subject matter of [formal] logic" (Burke, 4). We might call Dewey's, the logic of the growth of consciousness. In order to follow him, and understand philosophy in this sense, we need to see what Hegel's philosophy of experience implies for learning.

To Hegel, "philosophy contemplates what is present, in its presence" (Heidegger, 27). To make this description clear, think for a moment of the difference between two types of conversation. In the first, we are speaking with those who do not look at us, do not seem to hear anything we say, categorize us in ways we find objectionable, and generally mis-interpret who we are, even though we are standing before them, trying to let them see us as we are. In this type of conversation we are mis-recognized: others neither see us nor hear what we are saying, so that they cannot sense what we are in our uniqueness. In the second type of conversation, we are engrossed with those who

really look at us, without making us uncomfortable, who hear what we are saying and sense what we are doing even when we cannot be articulate about the complex feelings we have; as we converse, one or the other is able to put into words what we recognize as that which we really are, so that through conversation we see our selves in a new way. Experience, as a philosophy of consciousness, is something like this second type of conversation: it is a dialogue within ourselves and with others. A philosophy for the growth of consciousness is realized through a dialogue within consciousness itself between what Hegel calls natural consciousness and real knowledge.

Natural consciousness provides us with knowledge that shows up to us without any effort on our part. We might say that natural consciousness is our taken-for-granted idea of the way things are; it is effortless and there is no work involved in our gaze because we assume we already know the other in advance of really looking. By real knowledge, Hegel means the real being of the phenomena that consciousness is concerned to explore. Real knowledge lives behind the back of the taken-for-grantedness of our ordinary experience; real knowledge refers to the way phenomena essentially and really are as they exist apart from our incomplete or unfinished opinion of them. Experience is the dialogue between natural knowledge and real knowledge with the consequence that natural knowledge shows up as incomplete or unfinished. The dialogue is made possible through *skepsis*: the seeing, watching, scrutinizing to see what and how beings are as beings. (Heidegger, 65) There is a constant tension within consciousness between natural knowledge and real knowledge and this tension is natural consciousness' resistance to real knowledge and to *skepsis*. Real knowledge makes natural knowledge uncomfortable. Hegel says that there is even a kind of violence between the two ways of viewing phenomena in which natural knowledge tries to refuse real knowledge and the shape-shifting that Hegel thinks characterizes the growth of consciousness. Both real and natural knowledge play an important and enduring role in the dialogue but natural knowledge must let go of its certainty, e.g., of its taken-for-grantedness.

Hegel's concept of experience of consciousness is grounded on the idea of *conscientia* which "refers to the gathering into presence of the kind in which that is present which is represented" (Heidegger, 56). In terms of the two types of conversation mentioned above, consciousness literally means being conscious of, and intentionally conscious of, what presents itself to

us, i.e., the phenomena that we experience. For Hegel, experience has three senses: first, experience refers to receiving raw sensory material; second, it refers to receiving sensory material that undergoes some conceptual processing, i.e., experience here goes beyond mere sense perception; and third, experience refers to a process and a product in which our intimate engagement, our attentiveness to phenomena, results in a sublation of consciousness so that we move forward in our consciousness of the phenomena in a way which is closer to their actual being — i.e., the way they really are. This third sense refers to the tension and the dialogue between natural knowledge, through *skepsis* to real knowledge. The movement of consciousness that results requires that some of what we understood about an image or idea will die and some of what we understood takes a new shape (which is implied in the term *sublate*, as Hegel uses it). In the process or growth of consciousness, the new shape annihilates the old shape but, to Hegel, the new bears a necessary relationship to the old. (Inwood, 96)

Experience that makes the growth of consciousness possible is distinct from abstract philosophical thought (or pure thought), since the growth of consciousness is always grounded on experience in the first sense in which I used the term, i.e., on raw sensory data. In experience we catch sight of something, a person or a thing, for example, the way that someone's mouth is turned up at the corners, and in our experience of that object, our sight of it brings that phenomenon into view. In being conscious of and fully attentive to the turning up of this particular person's mouth, we do not just see the person, we see 'what the person really is', or at least more of what that person is, in a new way. Importantly, it is the other (object, person) that directs our sighting of the phenomena, not our own thoughts or notions about the phenomena because our contribution to the process of self-consciousness' examination of the phenomenon is precisely, not to contribute our notions and thoughts about the phenomenon but to let the other person's mouth speak for itself.

On Hegel's view, experience differs from doubt as understood by Descartes. In doubt we have a thought X (my friend is worthy of my trust) and in our activity of doubting we fully consider not X (my friend is not worthy of my trust) to be the case. After we reflect on not X, we doubt our doubt (we mistrust our mistrust of our friend) and return to X (my friend is worthy of my trust). That is, when doubt ends, things are much the same as they were in the beginning. In experience, as conceived by Hegel, as we entertain X, we

become attentive to X in such a way that our consciousness of X shifts and changes shape; the new shape of X annihilates the old shape of X so that the old X dies for us and a new shape takes its place. We now have a new shape for consciousness to consider. It may be that our first awareness of the process of shape shifting is the recognition that the old concept has died;² this realization can cause us pain. As an example, I may think my friend is trustworthy because she always meets me at the precise time we agree upon. I trust her because she never fails to show up. Trust rests on never having been let down. If she does not come one day, I may become attentive to her not coming and to the relationship between the conceptual shape I have for trust and her being. In dialogue I may come to see that she has a complex life and so do I and that trusting her does not mean never being let down; it means something more, with more hope than certainty in it. But I risk pain and loss in the process and I cannot look forward to a comfortable place to which I may return. I cannot go home to my old concept but neither is the new one entirely strange and without any relationship to the old one.

Experience is a process of reaching forth, reaching and arriving somewhere new; experience is not knowledge but a mode of being present (Heidegger, 119). The shape shifting of consciousness that Hegel lays out for us, is both an ongoing process and a product, i.e., the new shape. He proposes that consciousness goes forward in a necessary and progressive way which the real nature of what is present to us makes possible. On this view of experience, being reasonable implies a developing willingness and ability for the social and personal growth of consciousness as opposed to dogmatic attachment to a settled shape for ideas that we hold to be important. Growth of self-consciousness is social, as far as Hegel is concerned, because consciousness has three notable features: a. it proceeds through increasingly adequate stages, i.e., it grows; b. it is essentially interpersonal and requires the reciprocal recognition of self-conscious beings (an I that is a we; a we that is an I); c. it is practical and cognitive: self-consciousness exists in a world of alien others and finds itself in those others; this implies the establishment and operation of social institutions as well as scientific and philosophical inquiry. (Inwood, 62-63)

How does this view of experience relate to philosophy for children? At this point I only want to raise some questions. How does learning to be reasonable in the social and changeful way that the authors propose include the sort of relation between experience and learning laid out above?

There is a delicate balance to be maintained between the skepsis of experience that brings on growth and the need to constitute children in an identity that lets them show us (and themselves) who they are and what they are good at doing. That is, children who eventually become good philosophers as adults must not grow up merely confused about their concepts. Skepsis is essentially a way of observing phenomena in which we suspend our own thoughts and opinions about what we are observing in order that the thing itself can show up to us — on its own, as it really is. This is a profoundly important capacity to develop. How do we teach children to observe in this way without persuading them that there something bad or inadequate about their views? A careful reading of Rousseau's *Emile* may help. Both for Rousseau and Dewey, experience and careful observation of phenomena ground experience in a most constructive way. Will reading a text in a group develop the skill of observation required by skepsis and practised by *Emile*? Is reading the same as observing for the child? While I have questions, I appreciate the project that philosophy for children promotes. I think it is necessary. I, too, am hopeful about the capacity children have to be reasonable.

NOTES

1. I am not suggesting that the authors themselves make this claim.
2. This may happen at the personal level and the societal level such as pronouncements that God is dead or that man is dead.

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