

Doing Philosophy

Thinking Stories 3: Philosophical Inquiry for Children

Philip Cam

Sydney Hale and Ironmonger, 1997, pp88

Thinking Stories 3: Teacher Resource/Activity Book

Sydney Hale and Ironmonger, 1997, pp64

reviewed by Eric Boos

When asked by peers what daunting philosophical task I was pursuing this academic year, I responded that I was reviewing the Philosophy for Children Series by Philip Cam. My response triggered an array of reactions ranging from outright jeers and laughter to sincere amazement. Granted this task seemed a step or two removed from the erudite nature of my last project, which was an analysis of the relationship of the intellect and the will in Thomistic psychology, I was still put off by the pretentiousness of my «philosopher friends.» Sadly enough, I admit that I shared my peers general skepticism for such a project. Upon completion of this review, I see now, more than ever before, the absolute need for philosophy for children and that I, too, was a pretentious fool.

What I learned from Philip Cam's endeavor to make philosophy «come alive» for children, is that many of us so-called philosophers do, in fact, treat it as though it were «dead.» That is to say, that for whatever reason, philosophers end up spending much of their energy in an apologetic attempt to explain just what it is they do and what philosophy is. In so doing, we end up presenting a historical account of the Western Tradition of philosophy while failing to engage our students on a philosophic level. One of Cam's foundational principles is that philosophers need not spend time defining what philosophy is. On the contrary, we should just jump in and do it. This is a point I too have ignored rather consistently in my approach to teaching philosophy. Suffice to say, that what I learned about teaching philosophy to children from Cam, I now use in my college classes. By exploring Cam's approach, I have become a better teacher of philosophy and have had a much more positive experience with all my students.

There has been a rather ostentatious aura surrounding philosophy - at least in the circles I find myself in - as evidenced by the reaction of my peers when told I would be reviewing stories by which children would explore philosophical issues. The contempt others have shown for this endeavor bespeaks an insecurity among some philosophers that if children can do philosophy, then there is nothing special about us. Some of the reactions I witnessed reflected an attitude of doubt regarding the capacity of intelligent undergraduates to handle philosophy let alone school children. My response, especially after having seen the wonderful results of Cam's approach, is that in many ways, children are more suited to do philosophy than adults.

When asked to review Cam's work I wanted to do more than just evaluate the literature from a philosophical perspective. Without question, the stories and discussion questions he provides and the methods of evaluation he outlines for the teachers are very philosophically rooted. In fact, his approach is truly systematic in the sense that it develops significant ethical questions along consistent metaphysical and epistemological lines. The stories tend to generate viable multi-cultural distinctions crucial to the development of mature worldviews. Similarly, the stories expose ethical dilemmas which most people will inevitably face in the rapidly evolving technological advances of our day.

By way of example, one of Cam's stories subtly challenges the relationship between violence and video games while simultaneously introducing specific racial and cultural stereotypes worthy of examination. In that same story, deep and abiding questions concerning the nature of aggressive behavior are brought to the fore in a dialectic process which undoubtedly will challenge some value structures.

Aside from the philosophical analysis of Cam's work, I endeavored to learn whether or not his method was practically constructive. Thus, I structured a work group of school children and implemented the process according to the proposed methodology. I found Cam's stories to be not only excellent at raising important ethical, metaphysical and epistemological issues, but pedagogically sound in their ability to facilitate a dialectic process; the outcome of which manifest an atmosphere of superior dialogue. Because most true learning occurs in dialogue, Cam's method proved excellent for enabling students to analyze their own behaviors in light of ethical standards held by their peers. On this account, Cam's approach fulfilled the view of Piaget's learning model which claims that students often learn more from each other than from adult authority. When the students I worked with began to experience the views and values of their peers a transformation began. The project was a huge success and the students wanted to continue the group after the proposed deadline. How rare is it for students of any age to ask for more of a learning experience?

The students I worked with accomplished every one of Cam's learning objectives, as did their teacher. Without exception, the students and their teacher experienced a rise in self-esteem, confidence and communication skills. They learned the art of creating a dialectic process and became quite adept at respectfully challenging the shallower views of others. They came away with a heightened appreciation for treating others with dignity. They experienced a new level of competence at promoting dialogue. They mastered the process of defining and applying abstract concepts such as justice, fairness and integrity. But most of all, they had fun doing philosophy.

Cam's proposed method for facilitating dialogue through a dialectic process is particularly beneficial. How one arrives at ethical decisions is far more important than the decisions themselves. One thing that Cam's approach fosters is critical thinking. A simple presupposition of his method might be that all ethical thinking is, in fact, critical thinking when approached from the dialectic. This method tends to engage students fully in the whole decision making process without putting undue emphasis on the outcome, while instead concentrating on bringing the various views of others to light in the situa-

tion. This, of course, develops a sense of the importance of equal participation on the part of all those involved. The process is only complete when all views have been articulated and given equal concern.

Cam's method provides important information for the facilitators on what to do when various comments are «off the mark.» Similarly, Cam gives important suggestions on how much material to tackle at any given time. I found many of his pedagogical recommendations sound advice for not only school children, but undergraduates as well. Down to the minutest details such as what classroom materials are important, Cam reveals a genuine concern for constructing a learning-centered and friendly environment. Particularly useful was his recommendation that the stories be digested in small segments. As Cam rightly indicates, there is no pressing need to devour the complete story before allowing the discussion to begin. Also, reading the stories together and aloud proved very valuable.

The international flair of Cam's stories made for some very interesting multi-cultural analyses and discussions. One aspect of his stories that made them so valuable was his ability to touch on the common nature and common concerns of children around the world.

A final benefit of Cam's approach to philosophy for children is his remarkable sense of allowing students to participate in the structuring of their own learning through the stories as well as in his proposed method. Practicing his method has forced me to alter my own style to the benefit of those in my charge. It would be difficult while using Cam's method to lapse into the pitfall of «content-centered» teaching. His approach provides the teacher a much deeper glimpse into the minds of the students, but only if the teacher is willing to relinquish a bit of control. Once the teacher begins to experience the inner-workings of the students' minds through Cam's method two things become apparent: 1) that students are quite capable of approaching excellence in critical thinking in the absence of overly dogmatic pedagogy; 2) Surrendering control of various aspects of facilitating discussions only serves to enhance the level of respect in the learning environment.

By participating in Cam's philosophy for children, I have become aware of my own propensity to supplant students' values with my own. Much to my chagrin, I am now aware that my previous tendency to «take the moral high ground,» under the assumption that young minds are underdeveloped and incapable of serious philosophical discussion, was precisely that attitude which killed the dialogue in my classes and forced me to «teach philosophy» to them instead of «do philosophy» with them. My regards and my gratitude to Mr. Cam.

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