

How Has Involvement with Philosophy for Children Changed How I/We Understand Philosophy?

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This paper is written as an invitation to readers to reflect on, and then to discuss together, the impact of our involvement with Philosophy for Children upon our understanding and practice of philosophy. While it most directly draws upon my personal experience and reflections, I believe those experiences and reflections have aspects sufficiently similar to those of others with comparable experience in Philosophy for Children that my comments will find recognition.

The impact of Philosophy for Children upon my conception of philosophy has been significant. It has altered my conception of philosophy as an activity, my conception of philosophical method (including much of my pedagogical practice), my conception of the nature of philosophical reasoning, and my conception of the content of philosophy. There is a distinctive paradigm of philosophy implicit in Philosophy for Children (I have more in mind the practice of Philosophy for Children than the specific ideas in the curriculum materials devised by Mat Lipman or whomever) which portends interesting ramifications for philosophy at other levels and in other contexts. My point is that we would do well to clarify that paradigm and be more conscious of it - to begin with, by discussing it together.

I speak as a professional philosopher whose prior conception of philosophy was forged in the context of professional graduate education. My attitude toward the paradigm of graduate level professional philosophy had never been one of complete identification. In that respect, I suppose one might say that I was «ripe» for conversion to a different paradigm, one more friendly to non-professionals. I suspect that many if not most all professional philosophers who have come to be intensively and enthusiastically involved in Philosophy for Children have had a similar uneasiness (not necessarily articulate) with the paradigm implicit in late 20th century professional philosophy, which may account for their being drawn to Philosophy for Children in contrast to other professional philosophers who have not been so drawn. There are certainly plenty of professional philosophers who, upon superficial exposure to Philosophy for Children, have not only not «caught the bug» but have not hesitated to say it isn't real philosophy.

A BRIEF SKETCH OF MY OWN INVOLVEMENT IN P4C

I have been involved with Philosophy for Children since 1981, when Ann Sharp and Fred Oscanyan put on a workshop near Portland, Oregon, sponsored by the Oregon Commission for the Humanities. The following February I attended an intensive two week workshop under Mat Lipman in New Jersey. That year I established Philosophy for Children Northwest as a regional center for training, gained some experience directly working with middle-school children, and began offering workshops in the Pacific Northwest. The following year I began offering annually a Philosophy for Children workshop as a regular part of my in-load teaching at Western Oregon University (then Western Oregon State College) - primarily for pre-service teachers, but also for returning teachers, other interested persons, and philosophy minors and majors. It was and is the one place in our curriculum where we teach hands-on skill in leading and facilitating philosophical discussion.

In addition to offering workshops off campus and on campus, I became involved in speaking with many different groups of persons, mostly non-academic, often educators, about Philosophy for Children, about what philosophy as found in Philosophy for Children consisted in, and about what philosophy in that sense had to do with children. These occasions forced me to put into words the changing sensibility about philosophy that I was experiencing through involvement in it - and what there was about it that was of value for ordinary folks and their children.

Prior to 1981, I knew virtually nothing about Philosophy for Children, had no conception whatsoever of the relevance of my interest and training in philosophy to children (below, say, 11th grade), and had little hope that interest in philosophy could be kindled in ordinary folks outside of colleges and universities. That first year really stretched my imagination for what was possible and began the transformation in my thinking that is the subject of this paper. This was still at the beginning of the burgeoning of interest and work in the movements that have come to be called Applied Philosophy and Informal Logic, with which Philosophy for Children is allied in important respects. In any case, my graduate training in philosophy (1965-68 at Duke University) was prior to this whole development.

HOW P4C HAS IMPACTED MY CONCEPTION OF PHILOSOPHY

To understand how my exposure to Philosophy for Children has impacted my understanding of philosophy, it is useful to have some sense of the understanding of philosophy I held prior to this exposure. Authentic philosophy, I had been habituated to think, was an activity of professional specialists in conceptual analysis and logical argumentation. To such analysis and argumentation, there were and are, of course, different styles and approaches, different traditions of thought and practice. Nevertheless, fully understanding and appreciating it required the development of considerable conceptual and logical acumen, a working knowledge of the relevant contemporary journal articles and books, fluency in a specialized professional vocabulary, and, in good measure but depending on the topic, an in-depth familiarity with the literature of the philosophic classics. As such, it certainly is not something that is likely to be of interest, if at all, to ordinary laypersons - though conceivably (as viewed by the specialist) it might have some indirect bearing on their concerns. To clarify the relevance of philosophy thus conceived to the layperson and to convey an

elementary understanding and appreciation of it requires popularization and simplification, a watering-down for the non-specialist. And this is what writing introductory undergraduate textbooks and teaching introductory philosophy is perhaps most often conceived to be - not really or not quite philosophy, but preparatory to it. Thus, real and authentic philosophical inquiry is the prerogative and responsibility of professional philosophical specialists. They do it for the rest of the world, i.e., for the non-philosophers. Accordingly, authentic philosophical dialogue is the hardball critical exchange that takes place between specialist and specialist on the cutting edge of current controversy among specialists. The layperson and even the lowly entering undergraduate can at most play at, or pretend to do, philosophical inquiry. Even less can children hope to participate. Their «philosophical» inquiries never get to be the real stuff until graduate level (perhaps only at the «better» graduate schools) or beyond. In short, real philosophy thus conceived is an abstruse, esoteric, elitist preoccupation of professional specialists. It is not something that takes place or belongs in the everyday, workaday world of ordinary folks.

Assessed in terms of this paradigm, communal inquiries of the sort that Philosophy for Children facilitates among children cannot hope to be real philosophy. So what are they? It's not clear - given this paradigm. Perhaps simply imitation or «play» philosophy. Nor is it clear that they could possibly be of serious interest to professional philosophy (thus conceived) to encourage and support.

But what if it is assumed, to the contrary, that the sort of inquiry going on in a well-formed Philosophy for Children community of inquiry really is philosophy - indeed, that it might be paradigmatic of philosophy? That thought experiment is the principal impetus that has led me to rethink philosophy: what it is, what its method is, what its place is in human life, what it is I do (and might differently do) when teaching philosophy at the university level, and what it is that professional philosophers do. As a result, I have come to conclude that philosophy or philosophical inquiry may be characterized in the following ways.

First of all, philosophy is an activity in which anybody might be engaged in relation to any area of life - specifically, *whenever persons, younger or older, endeavor to think about and ponder ideas and assumptions that otherwise might be taken for granted* - specifically, ideas and assumptions taken for granted while thinking about (usually other) things (as the conceptual tools used to think about these things), or taken for granted while carrying on activities in that area of life (e.g., the paradigms we use to pattern our conduct after, the criteria we use to judge with, or the categories we use to differentiate things).

Philosophy in this sense requires no special knowledge (though, depending on the area, special knowledge might be helpful), no special competence (though, again, facility in conceptual analysis and familiarity with the range of possible lines of thought can be useful), and no special accreditation by professional experts in order to be authentic philosophy.

It typically is an activity of thinking together with others in a manner that involves temporary disengagement from other activities, especially those in which the ideas and assumptions being investigated are otherwise taken for granted. Thus disengaged, it is free, temporarily, from utilitarian considerations, such as getting something done, producing a certain outcome, establishing a certain result, or

scoring a point. It is a kind of play, a kind of serious intellectual play. But it is genuinely itself, real philosophy, nonetheless. It seeks an understanding of things simply for the sake of understanding then.

Its objective is the progressive clarification and understanding of a topic that will be realized by those participating - i.e., putting them more reflectively in charge of their own thinking about it and in finding that way of thinking about it that makes the most sense or is wiser vis-a-vis alternative ways of thinking about it.

It need not locate itself in terms of the latest level of discussion in the professional journals and books - though on occasion this could prove to be useful. It need not be aware of, or have to take in, the many possible connections with the thoughts of great philosophers on the subject - though, again, on occasion this too could be useful. Philosophy in this sense is not something written - at least it need not be written. Nor need it be cumulative in an objective sense beyond the persons directly involved - unless those involved choose (as do professional philosophers) to take *their* community of inquiry to be constituted by the ongoing community of specialists beyond themselves working on a particular set of issues. In that respect, the success of a philosophical inquiry is in an important sense relative to the progressive clarification and understanding jointly experienced by those participating.

Second, philosophy is a method, a method of open-ended *communal* inquiry. It is fundamentally located within a community of inquiry.

The members of such a community of inquiry each bring a uniquely distinct perspective to bear on a topic of common interest and concern, out of the conviction that circumspectly taking into account each relevant perspective, question, and contribution represented in the group will move the communal inquiry closer to a sounder and philosophically more satisfying understanding of the issue in question. Any given topic is indefinitely multifaceted, potentially at least, and the more different perspectives that relevantly bear on the topic that can be taken into account, the better - resulting in a rounder, more objective comprehension of the topic.

Note the distinction between the perspective and/or contribution of each member on the one hand and what it is that is the focus of inquiry on the other. No one's opinion (even the opinions of all the participants taken together) will ever be simply identified with the understanding that is sought; that opinion will always be a participant's attempt to articulate and represent that understanding, or some part of it, from her or his peculiar perspective onto it, and will itself be subject to ongoing examination and response.

Not all members of a community of inquiry need be present at any one time, for, once the community of inquiry is fully formed, any one person in important respects will carry the others, as it were, in her or his thoughts. In any case, each contribution to the ongoing discussion is ideally responsive and responsible to the contributions of every other member of the community.

The inquiry itself is an ongoing process of *dialectical* reasoning, where differing perspectives are simultaneously brought to bear on the topic. Consequently, the process is almost never linear and the outcome never clearly foreseen, being ever subject to surprising turns of thought. In phi-

losophy, answers are never determined in advance; they are always to be determined through weighing of reasons, which never comes to an absolute terminus - but only «as well as we can determine at present.»

Crucial to the method of genuine philosophical inquiry is *an attitude of expectant discovery* - discovery of matters that can only emerge through the process of communal reasoned inquiry - *as well as faith that insight and deeper understanding are out there, as it were, waiting to be discovered* through that process. This is important to keep in mind especially when the discussion turns to consider matters about which members may have strongly held or favored opinions. Matters being investigated philosophically have a certain objectivity about them - which is to say, a certain standing independent of my or anyone's opinion about them - even when they may be the implications or assumptions of the ideas I might happen to hold. Le., I can be misled, confused, or just plain wrong about the ideas I happen to hold - e.g., thinking two of my ideas are fully consistent when upon examination they turn out to be contradictory. Thus genuine philosophical inquiry calls for a humbling concession, as it were, that what is being investigated may well surpass or transcend the understanding I may have of it at any point, requiring a genuine openness on my part, and that of each other participant, to the prospect that the process of inquiry more than likely will have something to teach me. This attitude of expectant discovery is to be contrasted with the hoped-for vindication, or fear of defeat, that attends philosophical prejudice, identifying truth with an answer already in hand rather than with discoveries emerging through the process.

There is, of course, a place - nay, a need - for penultimate, heuristic commitments to philosophical hunches that anticipate what will emerge through the process of discovery as well as to perspectives that afford a significantly different but relevant angle of approach to the topic. Similarly, there is often a need for penultimate, heuristic skeptical doubt to counter presumption, premature jumping to conclusions, testing the justifiability of apparent answers, and the like. On the other hand, the sort of skeptical doubt that derails the process or brings it to a halt from disbelief that there is anything of significance to be discovered through the process or from consideration of some different but potentially relevant point of view is for that reason contrary to philosophical method - as contrary as is ideological commitment and closed minded philosophical prejudice.

Third, philosophy involves a specific kind of reasoning that is different in important respects from other sorts of reasoning, though related to them. From having to explain to educators the multiple sorts of reasoning skills involved in the Philosophy for Children program vis-a-vis other programs advertised as developing reasoning skills and finding none of the better known taxonomies of reasoning skills suited to the job that is needed, with some assistance from Mark Weinstein I have developed a taxonomy of *four dimensions of reasoning* or of reasoning skills: formal, informal, interpersonal, and philosophical.

I speak of four dimensions rather than four categories or types of reasoning for two reasons. First, any one instance of reasoning may simultaneously involve more than one dimension of reasoning, but not necessarily. Second, one may be aware of and concentrate on an instance of

reasoning in one dimension while ignoring and even being oblivious of the other dimensions of reasoning that may be involved.

Formal reasoning is reasoning in accordance with formal logic, traditionally conceived (encompassing all of its forms, including mathematics). It need not be formalized in terms of some symbolic notation. But it is found wherever inference proceeds according to strict rules, precise definitions, and exact premises that are context-independent (i.e., that do not vary with the context and whose use does not require a practical acquaintance with the concrete context that is being reasoned about).

Informal reasoning encompasses all that has come to be known as informal logic and more. It is found wherever inference is not, and possibly cannot be, formalized in a manner independent of the concrete context that it concerns. I.e., it is not governed by strict rules and is more an art than a science. It is involved as soon as one attempts to apply strict rules to a concrete context: which rule is appropriate and how should it be applied? Note that the use of strict rules in a concrete context of operation involves both formal and informal reasoning. Other sorts of informal reasoning include problem solving, interpretation of texts, judging or evaluating, deliberating, overcoming kinesthetic obstacles, etc.

Interpersonal reasoning comes into play whenever more than one viewpoint or frame of reference comes into play at the same time, and thus a dialectical element is present. What is at stake cannot be encompassed simply in terms of one or another of the frames of reference present. Some common ground must be found, some sense in common must be forged, that will somehow answer to and be responsible to each of the viewpoints involved - if only to define where each may be standing or coming from in relation to the other(s). Importantly, a kind of etiquette of good reasoning comes into play here, what it means to be a reasonable person, and how one should respond to reason with reason. This involves skills quite outside those typically dealt with in conventional treatments of formal and informal logic. But they are no less a part of good reasoning considered in the interpersonal dimension. This of course is brought to light with great clarity in relation to the central place given to formation of communities of inquiry in Philosophy for Children, and it is one of the distinctive strengths of Philosophy for Children in relation to competing reasoning skill development programs.

Philosophical reasoning occurs whenever thoughtful reasoned inquiry turns back upon itself reflectively and inquires into the nature and justification of the basic ideas and assumptions which are otherwise taken for granted in thinking, judging, doing, etc. - including the principles of sound formal, informal, and interpersonal reasoning about things. It is in that respect a kind of meta-reasoning, in which the persons involved are seeking to become more, reflectively in charge of themselves and not so beholden to others' ideas and assumptions in an unreflective and unexamined manner. It is not just seeking to come up with one's own ideas simply but moreso to come up with that set of ideas that makes the most sense to oneself on reflection vis-a-vis alternatives. It is the place where (or the activity within which) reasoning becomes self-conscious, clarified to itself, and in charge of itself.

Any given instance of philosophical reasoning may involve aspects of formal, informal, and interpersonal reasoning as well, reasoning in all four dimensions may thus be simultaneously present. But even when present they don't have to be all consciously in mind. On the other hand, instances of formal reasoning, informal reasoning, interpersonal reasoning, and any combination thereof can occur without philosophical reasoning being specifically involved.

Fourth, philosophy has a **distinctive content**, a peculiar and unique content, that makes it different from other sorts of inquiry. The *content* of philosophical inquiry is of a very peculiar and unique sort, about which it is not easy to get clear. What is it that philosophy inquires into and seeks to discover? Some clues to an answer have already been adumbrated in the foregoing. What sort of thing is a philosophical truth or a philosophical insight that emerges from philosophical inquiry? Specifically where on our metaphysical/ontological maps are they to be located? Not, to be sure, in the ordinary empirical world of space and time.

We commonly say that philosophical questions are different from questions that have factual answers - whether presently known or not yet known. We distinguish them from, say, scientific questions, and the procedures of answering them from scientific procedures.

The ancient philosophers (in contrast with the ancient sophists) believed that philosophy investigated and brought to light ultimate eternal truths, aspects of what is ultimately real beyond appearances - and thus certainly beyond our individual selves. But between the ancients and ourselves there lies a considerable gulf - a gulf known as the rise of nominalism, that first took hold in Western thought in the 14th century. Most of us (though not all) are inclined to consider that attitude of the ancient philosophers naive (1, for one, do not). Nominalism contended that the universals that were the object of classical philosophical investigation were not features *of* reality, whether in some transcendent realm of the forms or within particular observable things, but were instead features *of* the thinking of persons about reality. Nominalists held that universals were concepts (some extreme nominalists held that they were mere words, linguistic tokens, simply used in a certain way) and the relationships between concepts - which meant that there must be alternative possible concepts, not a single unique set which philosophers were supposed to determine. In consequence, philosophical inquiry into the structure of reality became conceptual (if not linguistic) analysis.

Later, the conflict between the Rationalists and Empiricists brought out more and more clearly that the rational truths which philosophy investigates are a priori, not a posteriori - even the truths that empiricist philosophers sought to establish [or believed they had established]. Score one for the rationalists. i.e., philosophical truths and insights pertain not to what can be empirically observed. They pertain to the categories and thought forms we rely on to identify, comprehend, and manipulate things that can be empirically observed (and, of course, things that cannot be empirically observed as well). Kant, in this respect, was right: philosophy concerns the conceptual a priori. However, he seems to have been wrong in supposing there is a unique set of a priori universals necessarily governing rational thought (although there may well be a unique set for the scientific understanding of the world at any one time - as with Newtonian physics, for example). So, philosophy concerns the mental or conceptual tools we think with. (The question remains as to the «fit» between these tools and the realities we use them to think about. So at least the question behind the ancient philosophical belief in a legitimating basis in objective reality for our fundamental categories of thought hasn't completely dropped out of the picture.)

A curious insight I have begun to realize in observing young people and my university students inquire year after year into the same questions and come up with the same or very similar answers as those in previous generations- even previous centuries - is that there is indeed an objective territory out

there that philosophical inquiry explores - sometimes systematically, sometimes very haphazardly. But it isn't reality as we normally think of it. It certainly isn't the empirical reality of space and time. For it includes not only all of the sound and valid insights that philosophy comes up with, but just as well the dead ends of thought, the contradictions and incoherencies that philosophical investigation brings to light. These too have a certain objectivity and perennality about them. If a certain line of thinking happens to be confused, good philosophical inquiry can bring to light that and how it is confused - i.e., that it is objectively confused - not just in Descartes' day but also in our own day. If it was confused then it is confused now too. The same, or at least very similar, alternative paths of thought remain from one generation to the next. What are we to make of this?

People who engage in philosophical inquiry, in short, are exploring a peculiar terrain or territory made up of ideas and their relationships. To inquire philosophically is to explore that territory. The territory exists - or rather, we recognize that it exists - in virtue of its apparent objectivity vis-a-vis our efforts at analysis and in virtue of the perennial recurrence of similar results through philosophical inquiry at different times and places. Sometimes we (e.g., the students we observe in our classes, the children in a Philosophy for Children session) simply rediscover what was previously discovered and mapped out. At other times we notice aspects of a given path of thought that were missed by previous explorations. At still other times wholly new trails of thought are blazed which no one, to our knowledge, has previously explored.

This, by the way, is one of the important reasons why Mat Lipman has (to my mind rightfully) insisted that teacher training in Philosophy for Children be conducted by philosophers and not just other teachers who are already trained. Professional philosophers who are also committed to the paradigm of philosophy in Philosophy for Children not only have a practical knowledge of how effectively to inquire philosophically. They also have a working acquaintance with the peculiar terrain that philosophy explores - where the dead ends and pitfalls lie, which are the more fruitful lines of inquiry, etc. And that is what makes the notes, discussion plans, and exercises in the manual (at their best) so valuable: they point the way for the communal inquiry not only to form effectively but to move forward toward insight and understanding.

HOW WIDESPREAD ARE THESE THOUGHTS ABOUT PHILOSOPHY AMONG PHILOSOPHERS IN P4C?

Such is the understanding of philosophy that I have come to largely as a result of taking Philosophy for Children (when functioning at its best) as the paradigm of what philosophy is all about. The question naturally arises: how widespread is roughly this understanding of philosophy shared among teacher trainers and teachers who work with Philosophy for Children? I certainly do not know for sure, but the clues I pick up from talking with other teacher trainers, teachers, and children, reading articles in *Thinking* and *Analytic Teaching*, and participating in the Philosophy for Children email list seem to reinforce - indeed, they have helped to shape - my understanding.

So, one question for us to explore is to what extent does the understanding of philosophy that you have come to have, in part at least, through participating in Philosophy for Children agree with, disagree with, or complement the understanding that I have articulated in this essay?

POSSIBLE RAMIFICATIONS FOR THE DISCIPLINE (CONVENTIONAL PHILOSOPHY)?

Still other questions for discussion prompt themselves. More particularly, if the understanding of philosophy I have articulated does more or less adequately articulate what philosophy is in Philosophy for Children, and if it can be taken to constitute the paradigm of what philosophy is in general - or a truer one than that which still characterizes much of professional philosophy in America (and elsewhere?) today - then what implications might that understanding have for the discipline of philosophy? I.e., what if a paradigm shift to this understanding of philosophy were to take place?

For example, what might it imply for how undergraduate students might differently be introduced and initiated into philosophy? What difference would it make to have undergraduate courses in philosophy have the formation of a community of inquiry at their core?

What might it imply for how graduate students are initiated into and pursue professional philosophical inquiry?

What might it imply for the typical way that philosophical prejudice is allowed to hold sway in so much of professional philosophy in America - both in graduate schools and in professional societies?

What might it imply for the way philosophical research is conducted, evaluated, and published? Finally, what might it imply for the way professional conferences are organized and conducted? Is this NAACI conference an example of what it might imply?

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