

Philosophy in Service

A Philosophy for Children Workshop

Jennifer Hockenbery

Four years ago, the president of our philosophy club at Mount Mary College said that she was starting a group for her 9 year old son and his friends called Popcorn and Philosophy. Her idea was to have her son invite several friends over one night a week to sit around a bowl of popcorn and discuss some philosophical question that she proposed. Her child, who was at this particular philosophy club meeting, was excited. The other philosophy students were excited as well. And the idea of holding a philosophy for children workshop was conceived.

The next spring, several of our majors and I worked together to create the first workshop. We invited children of faculty, staff, and students, as well as inviting 20 children from a local boys and girls club. In all we had about 35 children spend a Saturday morning doing *why* with us. The next year we held mother small Saturday workshop. But the students wanted to invite a bigger group, perhaps invite an entire grade level from a local school. The American Philosophical Association with American Association of Philosophy Teachers was offering money to professors who proposed service learning plans in philosophy. I applied - asking only for \$3 00 to invite 60-100 fourth graders to our campus. The APA/AAPT was enthusiastic and gave us \$800. So the plans began. I began contacting principals of local schools to look for students.

We had several goals for the event, which we shared with the school administrators. We wanted to introduce Milwaukee Public School children to our campus and give them a feel for the college experience. More specifically, we wanted to introduce children to philosophical thinking and inspire an interest in philosophy. And for the college's part, I wanted to give my students a chance to teach philosophy. As most of us have found as we became professors, the greatest understanding is achieved while presenting an idea to others. Moreover, I wanted to give my students an opportunity to reflect on the importance of teaching philosophy in the community.

My view of philosophy is that it is essential to good human living. All humans desire to know as Aristotle claimed. All humans have a sense of wonder. Not an ivory tower discipline, philosophy is about tapping into these fundamental desires and exercising them. Moreover, philosophical thinking is not just exercise in idle curiosity. Like Socrates, I believe that asking fundamental questions about justice, good-

ness, beauty, and character help us evaluate and re-evaluate the ways we live and act in order that we might live and act better. Thus, academic philosophy needs to break free of its chains that make it seem an esoteric discipline. This is not only for the health of the discipline itself, which is threatened when it has no popular support. Philosophy needs to be used in service to people, because philosophy is about the love of wisdom that is necessary and useful for living life. Thus, the workshop had a dual goal of giving philosophical questions to children who could benefit from doing philosophy and showing college philosophy students how philosophy can and should be used in helping others live well.

The workshop was an enormous success. The college students learned a great deal about the inherent interest in philosophy that people, and particularly children, have. They were surprised and pleased by the earnestness of the children to learn about these topics. And they were equally impressed by the insights of the children. For their part, the children were excited to be on a college campus. They eagerly participated in the philosophical activities. The thank you letters showed that they had learned some basic ideas about philosophy, but more importantly, had gained a true excitement about the philosophical enterprise as well as an interest in pursuing higher education in general.

What follows are two descriptions of activities done at the workshop by philosophy majors. Packets of activities done at the workshop as well as workbooks created for the children to take back code, they struggled with the possibility of saving to school are available.

THE RING OF GYGES

Christine Honkavaara

In discussing ethics with fourth graders, I began by asking them what goodness is. At first the expected answers were voiced, such as: «Follow the law», «Don't tell a lie», «Listen to your mother», etc. The children's responses were exactly what they have been taught by family and society.

Next, the story *The Ring of Gyges* was read. This tale was told in Plato's *Republic* and tells of a shepherd who finds a ring which makes him invisible. The shepherd uses the ring to kill the King and take power. This can be quite a jarring tale for youths to hear; it is against the moral code they grew into and voiced earlier in the session. However, the kids did identify with it. Some remembered the book *The Hobbit*, some saw the movies of *Lord of the Rings*, both of which speak of the same scenario of the shepherd. Now the kids are more capable of really asking themselves, if invisible and thus outside of society's restraints, what actions they would choose.

To further the reality of the project, and the excitement and engagement of the children, rings were passed out to them and «real life» scenarios were given to them. Some kids were asked: «What would you, as invisible, do if a truck full of money from a bank tipped over and money was everywhere?» Some children wanted to buy clothes with the money and some wanted to buy a candy bar, while some wanted to follow society's rules and not take any money. However, when pushed, both camps' minds expanded. The children began to think outside of their own aesthetic realms, to the world where disease, malnutrition, and war wages. The children asked themselves what action they might take, given the state of the larger world, if facing an open truck with money.

This is a difficult area for young minds to ponder. It requires thinking in a largely foreign box; and given their limited life experience and frame of reference, it forced their minds to stretch. This was my goal and the goal of education. The children left struggling; they left struggling with their own material and satiating needs, they struggled with the universal moral code, they struggle with the possibility of saving people by breaking that moral code, and they pondered what they would and should do.

IF THIS PERSON WERE A ... WHAT WOULD THEY BE?

Shannon Sloan-Spice

I led two workshops in which we played a theatre game I learned when I was an acting student in Oxford. Whenever I teach theatre workshops this always comes up as a favorite, with adults, teens, or kids. But what does have to do with philosophy? Theatre came philosophers, Euripides, for one, and has continued to be a philosopher's medium on stage of Sartre or Camus or on the screen of Lucas or Spielberg. In a play or movie, we as an audience and as actors explore the nature of our humanity through the playing and viewing of different characters.

Character is defined as the figures in stories but, also, as moral excellence. This game helps actors and philosophers think about both definitions. The game is an exercise in describing the character of the players. We ask of one person, who has secretly chosen someone in the group to describe, «If this person were an (X), what would they be?»

Sitting in a circle, we each ask this question on the first round, repeat the answer given to us on the second round, and take a guess who we think the leader has chosen to describe on the third. The question can't be a yes or no question; it has to be asked in proper form. «If this person were a (n) animal, kitchen utensil, country, period in time, piece of furniture, subject in school, kind of weather, car, type of clothing, shoe, etc, what would they be?» By each person asking a different question we get a composite of who the mystery person is in the group. On the third round, the players all say who they think the person is, even if they think it is themselves. When the answer is given, I ask all the students why they answered the way they did, and if they guessed right, what gave the mystery person away. This is usually the most telling part of the process, especially if someone recognizes themselves as the mystery person. It is interesting to see how others perceive one, and how they concur on associations such as whisk, comfy chair, India, or windy.

These two groups of fourth graders were the youngest with whom I have ever played this game. And some interesting observations came of it. For instance, in most rounds in which the question was «If this person were a car, what car would they be,» the answer always was either «Ferrari» or «Lamborghini,» except once when the leader, a girl, rejected the question because she didn't know cars well enough to answer it. Something about these cars was intriguing; they always described a male mystery person, usually asked by a male player, and answered by a male leader.

I found, also, that it was very rare for kids to conceive of themselves or their classmates as any other country than America or any other time but the present. Only once did a girl give the answer that her mystery player was «from the 1920's Titanic time.» Further, these fourth graders tended to be less metaphorical than older players. For instance, «if this person were a piece of jewelry...» was answered «earring» because the mystery player was wearing one. The same type of answer happened with «piece of clothing» when the

answer was «long-sleeve shirt» because the mystery player was wearing one. Another observation was that if best friends were in the group, one friend picked the other to describe, and almost everyone knew it all along. The questions and answers were more tangible, especially from the boys, and were taken from the way the mystery person was dressed, or from the sport the mystery person played.

This wasn't always the case, however. I love playing this game because some of the answers are always really interesting. But it is my experience that the older the players, the more imaginative they are in their questions and answers. Yet, this seems contrary to my knowledge of adults, children, and our imaginations. Perhaps it is because adults have had more of a world to experience than the children have. Or, perhaps we are not teaching our children enough of other times and places outside of the American experience. Perhaps we isolate our children from a wider world very early on, tell our boys that the fastest and most expensive cars are the best, and tell our girls that they are only as interesting as the brand of clothing they wear. My suspicions are aroused, but without further research I can only speculate.

I do know that as long as one child answers «tie-dye» for «if this person were a color, « we are not entirely lost. For as long as we can conceive of a person being many things at once, we can continue our search in fording out what it means to have character from a very early age, and in so doing, discover our own virtue.

Address correspondence to:

Jennifer Hockenbery
Asst Professor of Philosophy
Mount Mary College
2900 N Menomonee River Pkwy
Milwaukee WI 53222
e-mail: hockenj@mtmary.edu

Back to current electronic table of contents