

## Book Review

### *Philosophy and Childhood: Critical Perspectives and Affirmative Practices*

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Review by Richard Morehouse

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*Philosophy and Childhood: Critical Perspectives and Affirmative Practices*

Walter Omar Kohan

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The first bit of context for this fascinating work is that it unfolds before the reader in a subtle and intimate manner. For example, the chapter headings do not foreshadow the depth of content or method of the book, as they often do in other works. On the other hand, after reading the entire book thoroughly and reflecting back, perhaps something of the books' extraordinary depth does begin to reveal itself in the way it's put together. Let's begin with the following quote.

Given the centrality of collaborative philosophizing in our project, our goal has been to organize an experience without pre-determined methods or curriculum material, and to approach pedagogical practice like an artist, who needs not only skill and practical sensibilities but also radical openness to the world (p. 89).

Read out of context the above quote may seem like an idea that has been stated many times before and so may be expected to have little, if any, genuine impact on the reader. Alternately, it might appear as an impossible dream of an armchair philosopher. However, read in context, that is, after the nearly 90 pages that precede and set up this passage, the statement is rife with meaning and significance for teachers and students alike. Rather than explain the quotation now, I will attempt to place it within the larger context of the work.

For now, let's get back to examining the book idea-by-idea, chapter-by-chapter. Even before the book begins, there is a Forward by Maughn Gregory that needs to be recognized. Dr. Gregory notes that the book is an intersection of childhood philosophy and education that will challenge the reader both singularly and at their intersection points. Maughn further states that the book is "idiosyncratic and universal"; something of no small order and no small accomplishment. This introduction prepares the reader for what is to come—a critique of P4C based on "[m]y own practice with children and educators" leading to a strong belief in the educational possibilities of the practice of philosophy with children and teachers along with "serious doubts (philosophical, educational, political) regarding the benefits of the application of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) model" (p. 3). One of Kohan's points is that there has been too much praise and condemnation and too little critique of the Lipman program. Kohan begins by recognizing three important elements of Lipman's approach to

philosophy: 1) philosophy is about questioning (critical, creative, and caring thinking), 2) distributive thinking, and 3) self-corrective questioning (logical and dialogical inquiry). However, Kohan calls Lipman to task for limiting the scope, conceptualization, and form within which philosophical questions are asked. Kohan argues that the power of philosophical questioning is in the ability or willingness to put “ourselves into the question” (p. 6). “Collective philosophical inquiry always expands the field of the problematic in us, to us, within us” (p. 6). To do anything less is to stop being philosophical. Kohan’s reading of Jaspers is that philosophy is informed by wonder, doubt and commotion to which he adds dissatisfaction. This is, in my view, not only a part of Kohan’s reading of the world, but also his reading of Paulo Freire. The presentation of the idea of dissatisfaction leads to a fuller examination of the relationship of philosophy, education and politics (section 1.3). There is more to the critique of Lipman’s P4C in this short chapter, but I leave it to the reader to discover the implications of this critique for themselves.

Chapter 2 is “The Celebration of 30 years of Philosophy for Children.” On a personal note, I was pleased to read that Kohan included his participation in an early conference of the North American Association for Community of Inquiry (NAACI) as formative in his education along with three visits to Mendham. For anyone who has not experienced an extended encounter at Mendham, Kohan provides some insight into its transformative powers, but in his spirit of critique which is the leitmotif of the work, he also includes his critique of Mendham –its disconnection with the issues of the larger world. It is his discussion of *Invented Memories: Childhood*, however, that, at least for me, struck home the most. The passage from Manoel Barros that Kohan cites “All that I do not invent is false” mirror and extend Piaget’s “To invent is to understand.”

Kohan’s discussion of Lipman and Sharp in his chapter “Goodbye to Matthew Lipman (and Ann Margret Sharp)” is personal and touching and provides a gentle transition to “The Politics of Formation: A Critique of Philosophy for Children.” Kohan’s critical voice here is to me reminiscent of Erich Fromm. Among my memories of reading Fromm for the first time so many years ago, is Fromm’s use of etymology as a teaching tool. Kohan continues this tradition with his presentation of “formation.” Drawing on Plato, Kohan discusses the equivocal meaning of formation.

In this text of the *Republic*, it is someone external – the educator, the philosopher, the politician, the legislator, the founder of the *pólis* – who will think and plant in each child the seed of what he or she should be in the future. Implicit here is the idea of education as giving form to another (p. 33).

The child is to fit into a given society, and, by implication, a given social order. “When philosophy is practiced to affirm a politics –or a morality, a pedagogy, a religion, or any other determinate order– it disables. Morals, pedagogy, politics, and religion are problems for philosophy, not arrival points” (p.41). Kohan goes on to suggest that what makes philosophy possible is the empty space within which we can interrogate politics, religion and morality. This ends the first section of the book –“Philosophy for Children: Critical Perspectives.”

The second part of the book is entitled “Philosophy in Children: Affirmative Practices.” The statement philosophy “in” children sets it off from both “for” and “with” children. What are the differences among the prepositions *for*, *with* and *in*? *For* implies doing something to someone,

*with* implies being together, and *in* is at least initially a bit of a puzzle. The chapters in this section provide a sense of what is meant by philosophy *in* children as each chapter contains classroom dialogue. Part of my understanding of how Kohan uses the preposition *in* here is exemplified by the phrase “in their own words.” Kohan writes about the development of “self-determined subjectivity.” This may be why the dialogues are so important in this section of the book—they give voice to the subjectivity of the children. Children’s subjectivity is often suppressed by the dominant voices of society. Therefore, children, especially those at the margins of the dominant society, “need the intellectual and affective supplies in order to think more complexly and thoroughly about their lives” (p. 52). The stated goal of the project in the “Philosophy at Public Schools of Brasilia, DF” is “to suggest a direction toward a collective construction, developed through philosophical inquiry” as a set of ideas that are “open, problematic, questioning contestable and subject to controversy” (p. 60).

“(Some) Reasons for Doing Philosophy with Children” is the title of the sixth chapter. The chapter is informed and shaped by the dialogue of the children taken from the details of the activities provided in chapter five. In the name of the students, Kohan make a case for radical educational reform. He argues that education should find its focus on transforming ourselves and our relationships, rather than transforming others, i.e., students; and “second, that our politics is fulfilled, not in the end, but in the beginning and in process – in the transformation of thinking that enables us to think philosophically together and to think *through* philosophy” (p. 66). The usual etymology of philosophy is “a friend of, or lover of knowledge.” Here the inversion of the etymology is suggested—friendship is both a condition and a beginning for thinking. It is both an old beginning and a new one; we do not think except in a friendly environment. While this understanding of philosophy may appear similar to how many who work in philosophy with children might talk about philosophy, I invite the reader to think again about what lies behind and beyond these words in light of the argument presented in this work, and argument for which I cannot, in this short review, do justice.

“*Philosophizing with Children at a Philosophy Camp*,” chapter seven, documents some of Kohan’s classroom work in Korea, and is riveting in terms of the depth of philosophy he managed to achieve engaging the students. As this chapter illustrates, Kohan is not afraid of bringing the ideas and words of political leaders and philosophers to students. The class opens with the students reading a short story “The Story of the Search” written by the Mexican Sub Marcos, one of the leaders of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation. The students also read Plato’s *Apology of Socrates* as well as a short piece from the beginning of Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*. What is so exciting about this Philosophy Camp is the depth of discussion achieved by the students and the skill of the facilitator at leading the discussion. While Kohan does not state it, to this reviewer he recreated a Mendham experience for these high school aged students. Quite an accomplishment!

I will now address the quotation that opened this review, which is arguably the core perspective at the heart of chapter eight entitled “Does Philosophy fit in Caxis? A Latin American Project” (Caxis is short for Duque de Caxis, a suburb of Rio de Janeiro).

Given the centrality of collaborative philosophizing in our project, our goal has been to organize an experience without pre-determined methods or curriculum material, and to approach pedagogical practice like an artist, who

needs not only skill and practical sensibilities but also radical openness to the world (Kohan, p.89).

This quote, coming as it does near the end of the book, struck me as a place to begin as it might shake the reader out of complacency while at the same time providing some enticement to engage with the ideas of this truly liberating work. To read this book is to enter into the world of radical philosophical educational theory and practice. To this reviewer it exemplifies Paulo Freire's definition of praxis, that is, a radial integration of theory and practice, woven together so tightly it ends up redefining the very meaning of education.

The final chapter is "Philosophy as Spiritual and Political Exercise in an Adult Literary Course." It continues the radical spirit of praxis that Walter Kohan advocates and models throughout the book, and leaves us with a vivid picture of how he has practiced philosophy with children.

Kohan's book is one that inspires its readers to accept the challenge that comes with being both teachers and students of philosophy. The book is a must read!

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