What is Philosophy for Children, What is Philosophy with Children—After Matthew Lipman?

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Philosophy for Children arose in the 1970s in the US as an educational programme. This programme, initiated by Matthew Lipman, was devoted to exploring the relationship between the notions ‘philosophy’ and ‘childhood’, with the implicit practical goal of establishing philosophy as a full-fledged ‘content area’ in public schools. Over 40 years, the programme has spread worldwide, and the theory and practice of doing philosophy for or with children and young people appears to be of growing interest in the field of education and, by implication, in society as a whole. This article focuses on this growing interest by offering a survey of the main arguments and ideas that have given shape to the idea of philosophy for children in recent decades. This aim is twofold: first, to make more familiar an actual educational practice that is not at all well known in the field of academic philosophy itself; and second, to invite a re-thinking of the relationship between philosophy and the child ‘after Lipman’.

Philosophy for Children arose in the 1970s in the US as an educational programme, initiated by Matthew Lipman (1922–2010), which was devoted to exploring the relationship between the notions ‘philosophy’ and ‘childhood’, with the implicit practical goal of establishing philosophy as a full-fledged ‘content area’ in US public schools—a goal that has, with time, become an increasingly distant one. This is not so much the case in the UK, Europe and Latin America, however, where the theory and practice of doing philosophy for or with school age children appears to be of growing both interest and concern in the field of education and, by implication, in society as a whole. Examples of this emergent interest can be found not only in the growing number of curriculum materials published in this area, but in the many workshops and teacher training courses devoted to practical philosophy that are organised for educational practitioners, managers and teacher trainers.

This special issue focuses on the emergence of this ‘philosophy/child’ relation, and more precisely, on the horizon against which it has been born and has taken shape. We attempt to locate the arguments that make it
reasonable to think through the relationship between philosophy and the child, and that clarify its significance for teaching and learning today. Our aim is twofold: first, to become familiar with an actual educational practice that is not at all well known in the field of academic philosophy itself; and second, to offer an invitation to rethink the relationship between philosophy and the child ‘after Lipman’. In this article, and as a means of contextualising the different contributions to this issue, we provide an introduction to some of the main arguments and ideas that have given shape to the idea of philosophy for children in recent decades. In doing so, we follow Ronald Reed and Tony Johnson (1999) in subdividing the history of the movement into a first and a second generation. Characteristic of the first generation was its emphasis on a strategic uniformity of approach, given its ambitions for a place in public schooling, while the second broke with this mode of thinking, and welcomed difference as a principle of growth. This in fact fits our own purposes, in that we are interested in envisaging philosophy for children not so much as a totality, but rather as an assemblage of moving elements that forms a particular horizon—and thus as ‘some-thing’ that is in movement and can turn toward thought (cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p. 38). Hence, in what follows we focus not on one particular author or on one ideological or methodological subgroup within the movement, but rather attempt, first, to map the epistemological and pedagogical discourses within which this set of discourses emerged.

ON PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN: A FIRST GENERATION

In Modelle und Perspektiven der Kinderphilosophie (1997) Stephan Englhart refers to three different horizons through which philosophy for children became a matter of educational interest in the 1970s. We begin with Matthew Lipman, whose arguments for the need for such a programme were based on a notion of critical thinking that was strongly influenced by the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey. Enabled by Lipman’s initiative, but migrating into a different but related discourse, Gareth Matthews approached the issue more from a philosopher’s than an educator’s point of view, and introduced a notion of philosophical dialogue with children that was grounded in the adult appreciation of a child’s inherent sense of wonder. Matthews (1980) emphasised the need to rethink the child, not as an ignorant being, but as a rational agent who already has the capacity to reason philosophically, and he thereby opened a space for the emergent field of what is now known as philosophy of childhood (Matthews, 1994; Kennedy, 1992). This moment of confluence was clearly marked by a symposium held at the Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in 1980, in which both Matthews and Lipman presented papers,2 which were addressed by three respondents. These were published in 1981 in a double issue of Lipman’s journal Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children (2, 3 and 4), accompanied by a rich literary compendium of childhood memoir, poetry,
and philosophical and psychoanalytic reflection. Finally, following on these two related approaches, another emerged that understood philosophy for children as a means for reconstructing relations of power and agency in the classroom, and for communicating and reflecting upon personal meanings, with a goal of facilitating the self-actualisation of conscious moral actors. In what follows we offer a brief overview of these different lines of argument.

P4C AS A MEANS OF DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN AN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The growing interest in critical thinking that emerged at the end of the 1970s was based on the conviction that an emphasis on reasoning was a necessary element of any deep-structural educational reform, and that the introduction of philosophy into the content of schooling represented the one best curricular and pedagogical hope for bringing that element forth in the culture and practice of schooling. The most important representative of this approach at this time was Matthew Lipman, who developed the philosophical novel *Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery* (1974), which, whatever its literary merits, established a new genre—the philosophical novel for children—with a single stroke. *Harry* represents the attempt to construct a pedagogical tool that functions as a model for critical thinking by describing ‘real life’ children engaged in critical dialogue about philosophical issues, with the goal of stimulating the same sort of dialogue among groups of students. At the same moment, several approaches—a revival of Leonard Nelson’s Socratic Method, in particular—emerged that shared Lipman’s assumption that the stimulation of communal critical thinking led to an improvement of thinking in the individual. Beyond that similarity, however, Nelson (1882–1927) and Lipman differed in their epistemic assumptions.

While Nelson’s ‘philosophical truth’ is located at the foundation of experience, Lipman adopted an evolutionary view of knowledge. Following Kant, Nelson believed that knowledge from observation presupposes the application of categories that are not to be found through empirical inquiry but are already present in the person and determine experience itself. Thinking, in other words, is not derived purely from our experience; rather, our experience is structured and made possible by thinking. Nelson followed Kant in holding to the categories of *a priori* thinking but differed in his claim that these *a priori* categories cannot be proven. It is substance and causality not just in the external world that are knowable by induction, but in the inner world as well. For Nelson, knowledge of the truth is internal, is traceable in and through the conceptual presuppositions of everyday experience, and is gained by regressive abstraction from those experiences. As such, truth can be brought to light by a ‘psychological factum’ (Nelson, [1975] 1994), which entails introspection and the painstaking dissection of one’s own experience. The search for a common order of things is no longer
undertaken on the level of human nature, but is based on the connections that materialise in the experience of the individual person. It is as if the truth is present in everyone but needs to be made transparent through the method of regressive abstraction. Here we are dealing with a specific methodology that shows step-by-step how a person can achieve objective knowledge concerning her own thinking.

In his interpretation of the Socratic method Lipman turned not to Kant but to pragmatism. Although the trunk and branches of Lipman’s programme can be identified with G. H. Mead, Lev Vygotsky, C. S. Pierce and Justus Buchler, its roots are clearly in the philosophical writings of Dewey (Lipman, 1996, pp. xi-xv). Lipman began with Dewey’s idea that there is no distinction between the mind and the external world and, as a consequence, between philosophical truth and scientific truth (cf. Daniel, 1992; McCall, 2009, p. 102). Influenced by Darwin, Dewey had developed an evolutionary view of knowledge, which implies an ongoing adaptive human response to a changing environment. As a consequence, and in line with Dewey, knowledge for Lipman is not static, but the emergent product of a ceaseless interaction with the environment. Dewey used the word ‘experience’ to explain this interaction, and understood thinking as reflection on the consequences of this interaction, and thereby on the possibilities of further experience. Dewey wrote: ‘Reflection involves not simply a sequence of ideas, but a consequence—a consecutive ordering in such a way that each determines the next as its proper outcome, while each outcome in turn leans back on, or refers to, its predecessors’ (Dewey, 1933, p. 4).

What this means is that thinking enables persons to become aware of the consequences of their actions and thereby to reconstruct those habits from which actions follow. This does not imply that success is guaranteed; but because we have nothing at our disposal that offers us more certainty than the outcome of reflection, it is incumbent upon us to strengthen the reflective quality of our feelings and our actions, however counterintuitive that may appear to ‘common sense’. While Dewey connected this effort to the ongoing reconstruction of habit through experience, Lipman went further and emphasised the efficacy of formal logic in the formation of judgments and the growth of ‘reasonableness’ (see Daniel, 1992). This is not merely about mapping diverse possibilities that may be realised but about the search for possible incorrect presuppositions in the activity of thinking. Accordingly, for Lipman, critical thinking means being able to determine the facts or issues (including ideas, concepts and theories) that cause a problem in order to make hypotheses about how to solve it. Moreover, the logic of the development of knowledge in a given environment and the application of knowledge for the improvement of the quality of living became the horizon against which Lipman’s Philosophy for Children programme took shape. Accordingly, the aim of P4C for Lipman ‘is not to turn children into philosophers or decision makers, but to help them become more thoughtful, more reflective, more considerate, and more reasonable individuals. Children who have been helped to become more judicious not only have a better sense of when to act but also
of when not to act’ (Lipman et al., 1980, p. 15). Against this background, philosophy is no longer regarded as a theoretical activity separated from the world, but rather as a potential that has to (and can) be developed in order to get a grip on one’s interactions with one’s environment, and to influence change.

PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN AS A MEANS OF CLOSING THE GAP BETWEEN THE ADULT AND THE CHILD

A second line of argument that entered the discourse on philosophy for children at the end of the 1970s focuses on the emergent topos of the philosophy of childhood. In these approaches, which are often described as Romantic, the notion of childhood as merely a prelude to adulthood is problematised. These studies, amongst which the work of Gareth Matthews is particularly prominent, criticise traditional education for limiting its focus to the transfer of knowledge and, thus, underrating the voice of the child. ‘Children can help us adults investigate and reflect on interesting and important questions and . . . the children’s contributions may be quite as valuable as any we adults have to offer’ (Matthews, 1984, p. 3). Matthews explicitly strives for a symmetrical relation between the adult and the child, and approaches the child as an equal companion in thought. Therefore he does not speak about philosophy for or with children, but rather ‘dialogues with children’, and argues that children ask the same questions as philosophers do, although differently formulated.

In his book Philosophy and the Young Child (1984), Matthews launched a philosophical critique of Piaget’s claim that young children are ‘pre-logical’ and incapable of what Piaget called ‘formal operations’. In so doing, he was in effect questioning the foundational genetic epistemology of the American educational establishment, whose teachers were (and are) socialised from the start into a naive version of developmental, Piagetian discrete stage theory, which itself has been the object of criticism among cognitive scientists for decades (see Brainerd, 1978). Matthews argued that Piaget’s theory displayed an ‘evolutionary bias’ in assuming that the goal of development is maturity, and that each stage of development represents an advance (Matthews, 1994, p. 17). This does not hold for the development of philosophical intelligence, Matthews suggests, and in fact the opposite may be the case: children are likely to ask more interesting questions than adults. ‘The standard response’, he writes, ‘is, in general an unthinking and un-thought-out product of socialisation, whereas the nonconforming response is much more likely to be the fruit of honest reflection. Yet Piaget would have the nonconforming response discounted and eliminated on methodological grounds’ (Matthews, 1980, p. 38).³

Correlatively, Matthews argues that the central mission of the school should be to create spaces in which children can articulate and explore their own interpretations of the world and bring these into dialogue with others. Critical thinking means not so much instrumental problem-solving as the capacity and the disposition to fantasise and to wonder, to entertain.
profound ideas about the world and to confront problems concerning individual well-being. Logical thinking skills are not emphasised in this approach, or even the discovery of inconsistencies or contradictions in ideas, but rather philosophy as a form of desire—of the opportunity for children to explore and articulate what they have not said or even thought before. As such, philosophy’s boundaries shift under the influence of childhood, and it opens itself to the expression even of what can not be said, thus intersecting in its practice with art, psychotherapy and what Pierre Hadot called *askesis*, or ‘spiritual exercise’ (Hadot, 1995). Thus, the experience of interacting philosophically with children results in a profound critique of the normative adult view of the child and of its expression in the ‘science as usual’ of developmental psychology, which becomes exposed as a sort of epistemic ideology immersed in a discourse that is unaware of its own philosophical assumptions (see Polakow, 1982). In fact this critique finds its justification in developmental psychology with the arrival in the West, contemporary with Lipman’s pioneering innovation, of Vygotskian learning theory, which represents a challenge to Piagetian stage theory that has not yet been internalised by institutionalised education, not surprisingly perhaps, given its structural asymmetry with traditional educational assumptions and practices.

P4C AS A STRATEGY TO RECONSTRUCT MECHANISMS OF POWER AND TO COMMUNICATE AND REFLECT UPON PERSONAL MEANINGS

Although clearly related to the previous lines of reasoning, a third (Englhart, 1997, p. 138) is to be found in the attempt to strive for a more human world—that is, a world that is free from any preordained orientation to what constitutes human thinking and action. Here philosophy appears as a form of communal deliberation that stimulates critical reflection on existing power relations, these being envisaged as historical constructions that are or should be open to reconstruction. An exploration of these constructs is expected to bring into the light the invisible relationships of power that inform them, thereby neutralising their force. This project calls for a form of education whose fundamental discursive engine is dialogue, which privileges inquiry over instruction and the multilogical rather over the monological. Dialogue as a form of speech inherently resists the reification of ideas or practices and trades instead on clarifying essences, postponing judgements, working with ambiguities and interrogating assumptions, these being achieved through dyadic or group deliberation. Its discursive goal is the installation of a Habermasian ‘ideal speech situation’, a free space in which all persons involved in the inquiry have an equal chance to bring their arguments forward in the interest of an emergent, rationally founded consensus. Ekkehard Martens (1999), one of the proponents of this approach, writes that children need to learn that there are different orientations possible, that no orientation can be claimed as the only one, and that the practice of