Challenges in Front of 'Philosophy for Children'

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Abstract

'Philosophy for Children' program that Mathew Lipman and hid colleagues have developed is now known in our society and has led to thinking and research in this regard. Thus, to consider the challenges that are in front of this program can lead to the richness of these researches. Three challenges are in front of this program: philosophical, psychological, and educational. The philosophical challenge is due to the point that philosophy is mainly dependent on the history of philosophy and thoughts of preceding philosophers. This dependence should of course be along with critique, but this dependence cannot be denied anyway. Hence, philosophizing cannot be reduced to the methods of thinking. Psychological challenge is rooted in the

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approaches of developmental psychology that emphasize on phases in human thinking. Accordingly, abstract methods of philosophizing cannot be used in the period of childhood. Educational challenge is related to basic cultural values that might be shaken in the process of philosophical interrogations. The philosophical challenge requires that teaching philosophy to children emphasize on an amalgamation of method and content. The psychological challenge makes us cautious as to looking for more investigations on the periodical characteristic of thinking. And finally, the educational challenge requires that criticizing cultural values, being necessary in active education, is not started from foundational issues of culture. The period of childhood can only be fitted to interrogation of low level cultural issues and values and leave the foundational cultural issues to philosophizing in higher ages.

Introduction

It is about one decade that Lipman's Philosophy for Children program (e.g. Lipman et al. 1980 ; Lipman 1985) has been known in Iran (Cam. 1993a, 1993b tr. Ehsaneh Bagheri 1379) and different research centers have decided to extensively use the idea of philosophy for children and enter philosophizing into the intellectual realm of children.

Given the fact that this program is taking an important position in our society, it seems necessary to think about the challenges that this idea, or any other idea of this kind, should meet. To become aware of these challenges is required to make the idea richer as they help us to recognize its strengths and weaknesses. It seems that three kinds of challenge are in front of Lipman's program and the idea of philosophy for children. These are philosophical, psychological, and educational challenges and we will explain them below respectively.

Philosophical Challenge

In order to point to the philosophical challenge, we should notice the place of history of philosophy in philosophical thought. In this case, first of all, Hegel's famous sentence comes to the mind that philosophy is the history of philosophy. In other words, contrary to what is the case in some sciences, history (of philosophy) is not a

redundant introduction to philosophy. Accordingly, while it is quite possible to become a physician without knowing ancient physicians, it is not at all possible to become a sophisticated philosopher, or even a usual one, without knowing Socrates and philosophers before and after him. Undoubtedly, Hegel's view is a bit too strong in emphasizing history due to his view on actualization of the absolute mind in history, hence, according to him, history is extension of the absolute mind that moves dialectically and that is why without recognizing the past of this dialectical process, it is not possible to know the present and the future. However, even if we reduce the strength of this view to some extent, still the importance of history of philosophy for philosophy can be defended.

Why history of philosophy and the views of preceding philosophers are so important in philosophical thinking? It seems that it is not only because of the perennial philosophical questions that antecedent philosophers posed, but also is somehow dependent on their answers to these questions. As for the first part, namely the philosophical questions, they are the questions of our era even though they are referred to in different terms. Gadamer (1998) addresses this point when he says that whoever looks for fixed questions in the unfixed historical life, should evidently hold that the same problems repeat over and over again. He mentions the problem of freedom as an example.

In this regard, philosophical questions are to some extent different form scientific questions in, for instance, physics and biology. Today, biological questions are quite different form those of centuries ago. However, if Plato confronted with the problem of general concepts (like human and horse) and whether they are mere names or refer to real entities, this is not a problem that we can avoid from dealing with. That is why, Rorty (1979, p. 149) says that the whole history of philosophical thought has include moves between the two poles of particularism or nominalism and universalism or belief in general entities.

In addition to the perennial questions, the answers that philosophers gave to them are also important. The importance of these answers can be seen from two angles. As Leitter (2004, p. 8) puts it, the history of philosophy and the thoughts that it includes have either immanent or instrumental value. As for the former, the answers of great philosophers are true and, hence, have immanent value and should be taken into account. Annas (2004, pp. 38-39) holds that by perceiving the thoughts of ancient philosophers, our understanding in regard to philosophical issues will profoundly develop. He refers, for instance, to philosophy of ethics. According to him, investigators of ancient philosophy had for a long time believed that Aristotle meant by 'eudaimonia' egoism; however, further investigations showed that he and other ancient philosophers

meant by it an extensive and profound meaning as virtue. Annas holds that understanding their philosophy of ethic can develop the modern moral philosophies in terms of utility or obligation towards thoughts in terms of virtues. In this way, Annas regards an immanent value for ancient philosophical thoughts. Whitehead had also a similar view when he said that all the philosophers after Plato have been the expositors of his thoughts.

In the second state, the ancient philosophical answers have instrumental value. In other words, it is held that they were not true; nevertheless, they have instrumental value in that, at least, we avoid repeating them, and, at most, they can be useful or necessary for finding true answers out.

The minimal stance is taken by Wittgenstein (1953) among others. During his second period of thought, he held that philosophers were not confronted with real problems that needed to be solved; rather they turned pseudo-problems to problems and started to challenge each other on them. Thus, he believed that what philosophers should do is to dissolve the pseudo-problems, rather than solving them because they are not real problems. One way for dissolving these pseudo-problems is to read the history to find out how they were raised. As Dreben puts this Wittgensteinian view, philosophy is nonsense, but the history of philosophy is wisdom (Leitter 2004, p. 2)

As for the maximal stance, it is held that even though the ancient philosophers were not quite right, there were not totally wrong either. Hegel considered preceding thoughts as necessary backgrounds for reaching truth when he stated that philosophy is the history of philosophy. Gadamer shows a more moderate stance than that of Hegel. By inviting us to a Kantian sphere, Gadamer gives to the question of 'how is understanding possible?' an answer to the effect that by being present in the context of an intellectual 'tradition'. In other words, one cannot philosophize in vacuum; rather by rooting in a certain tradition, one becomes able to philosophize in its terms: "The conceptual world in which philosophizing develops has already captivated us in the same way that the language in which we live conditions us." (Gadamer 1989, p. xxv)

Gadamer moderate position is that our philosophizing today is at the same time continuous and distanced compared to classical views: "Despite its connection with its historical origin, philosophy today is well aware of the historical distance between it and its classical models." (ibid, xxiv)

In a similar vein, Foucault also takes a historical stance in response to the Kantian question. Foucault's emphasis on 'episteme' is quite similar to Gadamer's 'conceptual world' in providing the conditions of thinking and understanding. Both Gadamer and Foucault, unlike Kant himself, tried to answer the Kantian question with a historical

trend. That is why Foucault regards Kant more attractive when he takes a more historical view. Contrary to others that did not regard Kant's 'What is Enlightenment?', Foucault admires it because, according to him, it shows how a philosopher might be deeply interested in a historical event like French revolution (Dreyfus and Robinow 1982).

The importance of history of thoughts for philosophizing indicates that one cannot ignore the answers of precedent philosophers whether reaffirm, reject, or reconstruct them. Even when a person rejects a philosophical view, this shows that he or she considers it so important that without rejecting it, he or she cannot enter into philosophizing.

Heidegger, for instance, holds that the most distortion in philosophy was introduced by the founder of philosophy, Plato, on the ground that he turned the question of existence to the question about existing beings; a distortion that, according to Heidegger, lasted even to our time. Still, he cannot ignore Plato in finding out his desired way of philosophizing; rather he should criticize Plato in order to pave the ground for himself. This reminds us of Aristotle's famous sentence as to if one should read philosophy, then one should read it, and if one should not philosophy, then again one should read it. Following Hegel, Heidegger also holds that philosophy is the history of philosophy, but he holds that a new philosopher finds his

or her position in philosophy by criticizing preceding philosophies. Thus, he believes that reconstruction of preceding philosophies always involves deconstructing them, one way or another (Heidegger 1954/1975). Accordingly, identifying philosophizing with history of philosophy is not to equate it with reading and restating thoughts of preceding philosophers, but the point is that philosophizing is not possible without dealing with preceding thoughts.

To conclude so far, history of philosophy is profoundly involved in philosophizing, whether in regard to the perennial questions or the answers that great philosophers gave to them, and in the latter case, whether minimally or maximally.

To accept that history of philosophy has a vital importance in philosophizing, a challenge appears in front of philosophy for children. This is because in philosophy for children program, there is avoidance from teaching preceding philosophical views and limiting philosophizing to the so called philosophical thinking. However, by accepting that history of philosophy is involved in philosophizing, it appears as a real question as to what it means to limit philosophizing to philosophical thinking.

It is, of course, evident in Lipman's program that he has taken the perennial philosophical questions into account and that he has tried to provide the questions to be discussed in this program from reviewing the history of philosophy. However, he does not include

in this program the answers that preceding philosophers gave to these questions. It is also clear that his intention in avoiding the answers is to provide a free space for children's thinking. However, to the extent that philosophizing is not possible without paying attention to the great philosophers' thoughts, the following question can reasonably be raised: How can we say that children are learning philosophy merely by dealing with philosophical questions and discussing their spontaneous answers? Isn't it the case that avoiding a firm answer to these questions will lead to naïve discussions on the spontaneous answers?

For instance if we take Plato's question on general concepts mentioned above as the subject of discussion for children without providing his certain answer, will be there any serious point to be involved in? What remain in such a climate are only children's spontaneous answers; the answers that are not structured before the discussion and will naturally be naïve and unstable, particularly because teachers who lead the discussion out do not know adequate amount of philosophy to drive the discussion toward a reasonable track.

The result is that children, in this way, merely exercise to guess the answers and challenge each other. This ability is undoubtedly invaluable and can be regarded, in its turn, as a necessary condition for philosophizing. However, it is by no means equal to philosophical

thinking because this kind of thinking cannot process without the involvement of firm answers of great philosophers.

We do not mean by raising this challenge that philosophical inquiry should be organized as the ordered history of philosophical thoughts. This option carries the risk of weakening philosophizing by the heaviness of extensive thoughts. However, there might be a middle way that is neither mainly methodological, as Lipman's program, nor merely substantive, as is the case in that of Garder (tr. Safavi 1375). Rather, according to our suggestion, it should be an amalgamation of method and content. A possible way for doing this is to present some answers of great philosophers, not in order for being read and accepted, but mainly as a subject for discussion. In the meantime, if necessary, some critiques of other philosophers can also be presented in order to consider a reasonable challenge that can provide, in its turn, a background for raising similar challenges.

Psychological Challenge

The second challenge that philosophy for children should meet is psychological. This challenge has been raised by psychological theories, like that of Piaget, that regard phases for children's mental development. According to Piaget, capacity for abstract discussions is not available in the early childhood and, thus, children's thinking takes a concrete form; that is to say, they can only think about

things with direct reference and observation of them. Inhelder and Piaget (1958) regarded formal operations similar to the operations in scientific reasoning and, hence, in order to explain how formal operations develop, they studied about the development of scientific capabilities like taking all possible variables into account, organizing controlled experiments by changing only one variable each time, inductive reasoning to reach generalizations through available data, and deductive reasoning for going from hypotheses toward experiment. According to them, such capabilities are not available to children and they can only emerge at the early adolescence.

The investigations that conducted after Piaget and provided results different from what he had founded were interesting for philosophy for children program and were regarded as responses to the mentioned challenge. Such investigations showed that the characteristic of adulthood thinking is not formal thinking as Piaget supposed. Formal operations are content-independent and domain-general. Some researches (e.g. Evans 1982) have shown that adulthood thinking is not formal, in this sense, rather is content-dependent and domain-specific. Accordingly, adulthood reasoning is informal, dependent upon certain contents, and at the exposure of biases, limitations, and mistakes that are dependent upon the person's acquaintance with the study subject. This indicates that thinking remains always dependent on situation and it is not the case that in

its mature state to deal only with formal operations. Accordingly, it is controversial to characterize childhood thinking with situation-dependence and that of the adulthood with situation-independence. Rather, we can say that thinking is always constructive in relation to the preceding state, and, to that extent, is dependent on it (Wellman 1992, p. 146).

Therefore, in replying to the psychological challenge, philosophy for children program appeals to the approaches that deny qualitative differences among the so called phases of development. This program is in full agreement with Bruner's (1960) famous hypothesis that "any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development." His epistemological stance is that knowledge can be expressed in different forms. In other words, it is possible to translate any knowledge to the language of any stage of development.

Nonetheless, to overcome the psychological challenge, we need to look for more investigations to make the issue of qualitative difference among stages clearer. In the mean time, we should be cautious about the possibility of translatability of knowledge to different languages or intellectual frames without any remainder. Always something might be lost during the translation and that the knowledge concerned is not transferred properly and significantly. If there exit such qualitative differences, then always a transformational

translation occur according to the child's mental apparatus; that is to say, always something is being lost. Take this Piagetian example: When we try to explain the concepts of 'purity' and 'filthiness' to children, they understand them in terms of transformational translation as 'cleanliness' and 'uncleanness'.

Educational Challenge

The third challenge with philosophy for children program is educational. A part of this program deals with concepts that relates to value and culture; concepts like individual and social rights, or such beliefs as pray for rain (Cam 1993c). This challenge is due to the fact that philosophical discussion might pose these values and cultural beliefs at the exposure of doubt and leads to reactions from the culture's side.

The program, of course, is to some extent secure of this challenge because, according to its strategy, there is no final or exact response to questions that children discuss about. But anyway this challenge is still there because the same strategy can provide responses that might shake cultural bases.

Rorty's (1989) view is worth mentioning here. He holds that teaching in the childhood is and ought to be a kind of socialization during which absorption of values, rather than criticizing them, is at stake. In other words, critique is not the starting point; rather it

requires a preceding point as the subject for critique. According to him, no society can interrogate its 'final vocabulary' and to build schools in which people try to destroy its cultural foundations. Thus, he regards childhood and even adolescence as a period for absorption of cultural values and reserves critique to university.

However, Rorty's view is not defensible on the ground that it looks for a clear-cut border for starting critique. It is not possible to consider a determinate point for absorption to be stopped and for critique to be started. Critique has not the characteristic of spontaneous generation, rather it gradually grows and becomes increasingly stronger.

A suggestion is that philosophy for children should not include foundational cultural values because this might lead to what Rorty referred to as interrogating the final vocabulary. The teacher's impartiality is not the solution either as it is presupposed in the program because it can lead to a kind of perplexity in children about the foundational values.

On the other hand, it does not seem reasonable think, as Rorty held, that critique goes to holiday in childhood. What we need is to take a slight slope towards critique; that is to say, to put low level cultural values into discussion and insist that children step into critique. Parallel to increase in age and grade, deeper values can be the subject of discussion. In the final point that appears in

tertiary studies, the most foundational values can be expected to be challenged.

Conclusion

We hope that introducing the three challenges to philosophy for children program can provide a background for rethinking about it. This is by no means to undermine the program that Lipman and his colleagues are conducting, rather it is meant to provide a philosophical encounter with this program and to reconstruct it to be more stable and defensible.

The philosophical challenge requires that the program and any similar endeavor provide an integrated body of methodological and substantial strands not merely relying on methods of philosophizing or contents of philosophical thoughts. The psychological challenge requires us to be cautious about the periodical characteristics of thinking and look for further investigations. Finally, the educational challenge makes it necessary to classify cultural values in terms of their depth and put them at the exposure of critique in terms of a slight slope parallel to the increase of critical capabilities in children and adolescents.

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