Human Agency: Its Pedagogical Implications

Susan T. Gardner

Capilano University

ABSTRACT: Let us suppose that we accept that humans can be correctly characterized as agents (and hence held responsible for their actions). Let us further presume that this capacity contrasts with most non-human animals. Thus, since agency is what uniquely constitutes what it is to be human, it must be of supreme importance. If these claims have any merit, it would seem to follow that, if agency can be nurtured through education, then it is an overarching moral imperative that educational initiatives be undertaken to do that. In this paper, it will be argued that agency can indeed be enhanced, and that the worldwide educational initiative called *Philosophy for Children* (*P4C*), and others like it, are in a unique position to do just that, and, therefore, that P4C deserves our praise and support; while denigrations of such efforts for not being "real philosophy" ought to be thoroughly renounced.

KEYWORDS: agency, teaching agency, philosophy for children

INTRODUCTION

Let us suppose that we accept that humans can—at least to some degree—be correctly characterized as agents (and hence held responsible for their actions). Let us further presume that this capacity contrasts with non-human animals, most of whom we presume cannot be so characterized. And finally, let us suppose that this capacity that uniquely constitutes what it is to be human—in contrast to, say, the local cow—must therefore be recognized as supremely important to all agents. If we take these three claims together, then it would seem to follow that, if agency can be nurtured through education, then it is an overarching moral imperative that educational initiatives be undertaken to do just that.

In what is to follow, it will be argued that agency can indeed be enhanced, and that the worldwide educational initiative called *Philosophy for Children*,[1] and others like it, are in a unique position to do just that, and, therefore, deserve our praise and support; while denigrations of such efforts for not being "real philosophy" ought to be soundly renounced.

AGENCY

What Is an Agent?

At its most basic, agency can be characterized as the capacity to control one's own actions. Non-self-conscious animals have no such control; their behaviour is entirely determined by the stimuli in the environment. Self-conscious entities, on the other hand, since they have the capacity to envision themselves in the future, and hence can imagine the outcome of various possible actions, can be described as agents—or at least potentially so.

Self-consciousness, then, is a necessary condition of agency; hence a deeper understanding of the former is required for a deeper understanding the latter. For this, let us turn to George Herbert Mead's[2] depiction of emerging self-consciousness as described by Gardner in her article "Taking Selves Seriously."[3]

> Mead describes this emerging self-consciousness as an emerging awareness that there is a correlation between the changing affect (or response) of the other and particular units of one's own behaviour. A young child, in other words, becomes aware of her actions *through the fact* that a change in the behaviour, verbal response, and/or attitude of the other sends the message that her actions are positively or negatively valued by that other. Thus, according to Mead, self-consciousness, rather than being some mysterious metaphysical exudate of the brain, is rather an awareness of one's behaviour through the fact that it is valued either positively or negatively by others.
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> What Mead is saying [then] . . . is that self-consciousness *as such* quite literally develops because of, and only because of, social interaction. Without interaction, in other words, there would be no self-consciousness—a theory, by the way, that is empirically supported by experiment carried out by Gallup[4] who showed that the self-consciousness evident in chimps as measured by mirror-related activities is absent in chimps that are raised in isolation.

Extrapolating from Mead's characterization of self-consciousness, and going still further, let us characterize an agent as one who (A) is aware of his/her own actions and that they are potentially subject to self-implicating evaluation, and let us add (B) is able to linguistically dialogue, in actuality or in imagination, with real or imagined others, with regard to the "fit" between how the agent herself evaluates what s/he thinks, says, and does, in juxtaposition to the evaluations of others (again, both real and imagined).

In his book, *Human Agency and Language*, Charles Taylor suggests a congruence with the addition when he says that "to be a full human agent, to be a person or a self in the ordinary meaning, is to exist in a space defined by distinctions of worth"[5] and that "the community is also constitutive of the individual, in the sense that the self-interpretations which define him are drawn from the interchange which the community carries on."[6]

If we accept these two characterizations of agency, i.e.,

1) that agent knows that, in acting, s/he creates a magnet for predicates;

2) that the agent be sufficiently linguistically and cognitively sophisticated that s/he can be a robust participant in the negotiating process that will determine which self-predicates stick;

then it follows that agency must be a matter of degree on two counts as a function of the two conditions mentioned above.

AGENCY AS A FUNCTION OF DEGREE

In order to investigate the pedagogical implications of agency, let as now look more closely at the two functions of agency that can vary as a matter of degree. Specifically, agency can be characterized as a matter of degree in the following two ways.

1) To the degree that an agent is relatively blind or unaware of the fact that an action or a given set of actions attract value predicates, i.e., s/he thinks they are no big deal or that her actions are "invisibilized" by crowding, her agency is, to that extent, compromised. Existentialists would call this "bad faith." In this context, let us refer to this as a "diminution of agency." Put another way, agents can be more or less prone to "gathering up" all that s/he thinks, says and does in an attempt to weave together an integrated coherent "value narrative" with regard to the person s/he is creating. This propensity to be alert to the fact that what one does actually "matters"—i.e., this propensity to appropriate one's actions as one's own—can be referred to as the intensity of an agent's "gathering glance."

2) Agency can also be viewed as a matter of degree as a function of the degree to which agents are more or less adept in robustly participating in the negotiation process that ultimately determines which evaluative self-predicates stick. In this regard, it would seem to follow that being a robust participant is determined primarily by degree to which an agent is able to rise above her own biases, as well as those of others, and ensure that the predicates that are introjected into the continuing process of self-renewal have "impersonal," "objective," or what Darwell[7] calls "second-personal" standing. This is so, or at least it will be argued here, because ultimately it is the glue of *reason* that most stabilizes the self-structure and hence facilitates keeping the agent "in charge" going forward; it is the glue of reason that adjudicates in any battle between self and other with regard to which predicates most accurately reflect who one is.

With regard to the pedagogical implications of human agency, therefore, we can now explore what sort of educational initiatives might enhance both the "gathering glance" and "second-personal self-predicate glue."

AN EDUCATION FOR AGENCY

Education For Enhancing a "Gathering Glance"

What is covered in traditional education—starting with the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, and moving on to biology, chemistry, history, sociology,

psychology, etc.—is clearly vital for a well-rounded and efficacious approach to one's life. However, what is of note is the absolute absence of any sort of pedagogical strategy that might enhance what we are referring here to the "gathering glace," i.e., the awareness that one's own actions actually matter in creating who one is. That is, the focus of traditional education is almost entirely focused on events "outside" the agent, rather than being self-referential in the sense of encouraging students to become vividly aware that they are *agents*, and, as such, are responsible for the actions that define who it is that they are becoming. As Gardner and Anderson point out in their paper "Authenticity: It can and Should Be Nurtured,"[8] many people, but particularly the young, see themselves as victims of circumstance, more as "objects" bounced around by life events, rather than agents who are responsible for how they respond to circumstance. And they point out that

> If one is not lucky enough to be in a highly benevolent environment, then viewing oneself as an object like other objects can do double damage. Not only can it extinguish the exhilaration that comes with a robust sense of self-determination, it can solidify injuries into stable predicates. Thus, for instance, if Johnny views himself as he views other ordinary objects, it follows that he believes that, if he is subjected to harsh destructive external forces, like other objects, he can rightly view himself as damaged goods.[9]

And Gardner and Anderson go on to point out that what is missing in such a situation "is that Johnny does not understand that he is being called into account; that regardless of external stimuli, Johnny is nonetheless *responsible* for the evaluative predicates that stick to him as a result of actions that are within his control."[10]

The multi-million-dollar question is: how can education do this? How can education create an environment in which students are nudged into seeing that how they act in potentially *any* circumstance ultimately defines who they are? How can we get students to see that it *matters* what and how much they buy, what they ingest, who they sleep with, how they interact with social media, what they say and don't say, what they do and don't do, etc.

The answer would seem to be relatively simple, namely that the sort of education that can do this is the sort of education that focuses on precisely the sorts of situations that students do, in fact, find themselves in, and in which they will, in fact, have to make self-defining decisions. It is imperative, in other words, that at least some of the educational experiences in which students find themselves are truly *relevant*.

This need not be done directly, though it can be (see Gardner's critical thinking text[11]). This can also be done indirectly, as is common in the worldwide pedagogical initiative call *Philosophy for Children* (P4C).[12] Thus, for example, a class of elementary school youngsters might read together "Dragons and Giants" from *Frog and Toad Together* and then discuss such questions as whether frog and toad were brave even though they jumped away, or whether they should have jumped away, or if toad was brave even though he was shaking with fear.[13] Thereafter, in the ensuing Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI), youngsters can reflect together on whether there was a time when any of them ran away when maybe

they shouldn't have, or whether there was a time when they were shaking with fear but nonetheless stood their ground. It is thus precisely through such communal inquiry into events that are directly connected to these youngsters lives that they come to discover that, as with frog and toad, predicates such as "brave" or "cowardly" actually stick to agents as a function of what they do; that what they do matters!

Philosophy for Children, as a movement, by no means focuses exclusively, or even primarily, on topics relevant to agency. As with its parent discipline, it also focuses on aesthetics, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of language, logic, and so. Given the paucity of educational effort that is focused on energizing agency, this shotgun focus could be considered a failing. On the other hand, P4C's claim to fame is the advancement of critical thinking per se, so it would be unfair to criticize the movement for not focusing its energies entirely, or even primarily, on agency-enhancement.

Education For "Second-Personal Self-Predicate Glue"

In his book *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, And Accountability*, Stephan Darwell argues that only by adopting what he refers to as a "second-personal" stance can one presume that one's claims have any legitimacy outside of one's own idiosyncratic view of the world. A second-personal stance requires that we *address* one another against the background assumption that the authority of all claims derive their legitimacy from an impersonal source, potentially recognized by all.[14] This contrasts with what might be described as a first-person stance, e.g., "you should do what I say because I want you do to it." Relationships built on such first-person claims can be described as relations of power. Let us deal with the latter first.

Interchanges Ruled By Power

In a physical conflict, quite literally "might makes right." In a dog fight, a Yorkie has no chance against a Rottweiler. What is particularly *interesting* but *disturbing* about this sort of interchange is that it can be mirrored in the linguistic arena. In logic, this is referred to as an *argumentum ad baculum*, a move characterized as using a threat of force or coercion in place of a reason in an attempt to justify a conclusion.

This move is *interesting* because we rarely think of linguistic interactions as mirroring physical brawls (note the parental dictum that children ought to use "their big words" rather than fists). This move is *disturbing* because the nature of its force is so often invisible. Thus, if Veronica tells Betty that she shouldn't hang out with Archie because he has yucky pimples, Betty may acquiesce to Veronica's request believing that she is responding to the call of reason rather than, in actuality, responding to the invisible threat of being ostracized from the "cool" group.[15] This invisible force can be characterized as disturbing on four counts

1) Since the offer of reasons from another is a sign of respect (you assume the other views you as an equal member in the game of reasoning) while the threat of force is the opposite (you assume the other views you as a

subordinate), misperceiving Veronica's tactic as the former rather than the latter will illegitimately enhance, rather than diminish, Betty's view of Veronica.

2) Misperceiving Veronica's tactic will also set Betty up for disastrous future interchanges, as she will erroneously believe that Veronica is open to reason, though Veronica's sole goal is acquiescence to whatever whims float her way.

3) Third, since Betty thinks that she adopted Veronica's counsel because of reason rather than coercion, it will infiltrate her reasoning matrix. It will become part of who Betty is: a hater of pimply-faced people.

4) Lastly, this linguistic bullying has disastrous consequences for agency all around. The agency-consequence for Betty is the most obvious. By being an "other-needer," Betty forfeits her agency potential completely, and simply buckles to the invisible coercion of another. The agency-consequence for Veronica is also negative, though not so obvious. She is conforming to the role an unimpeded bully whose narcissistic self-predication will maintain life only so long as she can avoid confrontation by her "Inez" (a character in Sartre's play *No Exit* who debunked the hero's view of himself).

Given the pitfalls of being either a "narcissistic self-predicator," or an "other-needer," a.k.a. conformist, some may view that the best alternative is to adopt the fallacy of the golden mean, i.e., try to maintain a constant exhausting battle between both one's own voice and the voice of the other. The difficulty with this option is that, since there is no method to adjudicate between the two (or more) conflicting perspectives, one may be tempted to adopt one viewpoint in any given moment solely in order to avoid what appears to be the more nefarious opposite. Thus, one might be tempted to relinquish one's own point of view simply in order not to be perceived as a narcissist, or one might disagree with others simply to avoid being viewed as a conformist, or a weakling (a strategy often adopted by teens in interaction with authority figures). And finally, one might try to avoid both routes, thus leaving one's self-definition in limbo, and hence vulnerable to any life event that is overwhelmingly self-defining.

There is a third way, however. That is, rather than engaging in, or opting out of a power struggle with regard to who gets to define oneself or the other, one can rather (in a clearly Hegelian fashion), turn one's energies and focus to the arena of interchanges ruled by reason. It is to these sorts of interchanges that we will now turn.

Interchanges Ruled By Reason

Darwell argues that, in contrast to relationships of power, genuine interpersonal reasoning, or what he calls second-personal interaction, requires the assumption on the part of all participants that the win is a function of the relative strength of reason-offerings and not a function of the desired outcome on the part of any one participant. Quoting Fichte, Darwell argues that we need to make a clear distinction between legitimate and illegitimate *forms of address* with the former

being characterized "summoning" the other's will, as opposed to "impermissible ways of simply causing wanted behaviour,"[16] i.e., that second-personal address is reason-giving in its nature. It differs fundamentally from coercion in that it seeks to direct a person through her own free choice and in a way that recognizes her status as a free and rational agent. It is, as it were, an attempt to guide rather than goad.[17]

What is particularly interesting about the notion of the second-personal stance is that, it follows that the process of "self-creation through predication" cannot, if the glue is to be second-personal, be a solitary activity, i.e., I cannot just decide for myself who I am. This is so because I cannot be sure that the reason that glues, or eludes, a particular self-predicate is a reason that indeed has legitimacy beyond my own rationalization except by vetting it in a public forum (real or imagined).

Adopting a form of address, i.e., a summoning of the other, that results in an interchange which one might very well lose, no doubt, may seem perilous to many. Why should one engage in such an interchange when the result might require that one accept that one's actions were "selfish" or "cowardly"? Why not instead defend the very opposite characterizations by ruse and irrelevancy? This is precisely the question that Jean Paul Sartre offers us in his play *No Exit*,[18] in which Garcin (portrayed as inhabiting a post-death room with two others—Estelle and Inez) attempts to secure a description of his act of leaving the battlefield as one that was "not cowardly" because, after all, he is, or rather was, a journalist and a pacifist and thus his fleeing the front was justified as he hoped to get to Mexico so that he could write against the war. What is particularly interesting about the play is that, though Estelle is prepared to support Garcin's evaluation of his actions, he cannot find solace there because Estelle doesn't care one way or another how his actions are characterized, and so her support for his self-definition is non-existent. Inez, on the contrary, is portrayed as being brave enough to call a spade a spade, even in the evaluation of her own actions, so Garcin comes to the conclusion that, even if given the opportunity to leave hell, he must stay to engage on this issue with Inez.

The message here seems to be that ruse and irrelevancies are ultimately not very good gluing agents for self-predication. The message is that ultimately it is to Garcin's advantage to end his interminable rationalizing, and finally come to see what his actions say of him. The message seems to be that life works better if one has the solid ground of truth from which to launch into the future, even if one must carry the authentic baggage of one's less-than-perfect past. The message seems to be that a "solid self" is the greatest gift that we self-predicators have to give to ourselves and to others.

Intersubjective Reasoning About Self-Predicates

If this is true, i.e., if a "solid self" is the greatest gift that we self-predicators have to give to ourselves and to others, and if, in turn, having a solid self is a function of the degree to which an agent is able to effectively and continuously engage in second-personal reasoning, i.e., verbal interchanges that are ruled by reason rather than power (even verbal power), then the question arises as to what sort of educational initiative could offer the sort of practice that might enhance this

capacity. Here again, we can look to the *Philosophy for Children* (and similar initiatives) for a way to do just that. That is, not only does P4C offer up the possibility of analyzing issues that are relevant to students lives, since this analysis takes place within the "Community of Philosophical Inquiry" (CPI) which is guided by a facilitator whose job it is to ensure that "reason rules," participants actually get practice in hearing the voice of other, and in reasoning beyond their own biases.

Much has been written with regard to the efficacy of "communities of inquiry" to improve both thinking skill and collaborative efforts, both in and outside the field of P4C (e.g., Garrison[19]). What is of particular interest here, though, is that if one *combines relevancy with the second-personal thinking boost that is possible through experience in CPIs*, then the payoff is that participants may very well become more adept not just in thinking per se, but in the very risky but vitally important practice of thinking about, and hence solidifying, the self. Such experience, in other words, may very well enhance human agency.

CONCLUSION

Heretofore, I have argued not only for the importance of educational relevance for enhancing agency, but also for the importance of engaging youngsters in the process of second-personal reasoning with regard to self-predication. I have also argued that *Philosophy for Children* is uniquely capable of offering this to youngsters.

It ought to be mentioned before closing that Philosophy for Children is not without its critics. It has been argued, for instance, by those in its parent discipline, that what happens in the P4C classroom is not "real philosophy"[20] (Camden). This is understandable. After all, such questions as "whether frog and toad were brave even though they jumped away" or "if toad was brave even though he was shaking with fear," have very little resemblance to the sort of questions that are tackled in university-level philosophy classrooms.

Before attempting to evaluate such criticism, let us briefly try to investigate what professional philosophers might consider "real philosophy." On the assumption that articles in the recent journals reflect the issues that are of genuine philosophical concern, let us take a look at the title of a few from prestigious journals of philosophy, including *The Journal of Philosophy*, *Mind*, *Philosophical Studies*, *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *The British Journal of Philosophy of Science*, and T*he Australian Journal of Philosophy*. The following are titles from each of these journals respectively: "Placement Permissivism and Logics of Location," "Infinite Decisions and Rationally Negligible Probabilities," "Priority Monism and Essentiality of Fundamentality," "Higher-Order Free Logic and the Prior-Kaplan Paradox," "On Three Measures of Explanatory Power with Axiomatic Representations," and "Two Types of Quidditism."

If these titles indeed reflect what "real philosophy" is all about, then criticism of P4C may be well-founded. If, on the other hand, philosophy, as its name connotes, is a love of wisdom, and if, in turn, wisdom can be accurately characterized as that unique ability of humans to direct their own behaviour in ways that might be considered better than others, then it would appear legitimate to turn

the mirror around and to at least question in what sense the issues dealt with in the articles above are "real philosophy."

My purpose here, though, is not to engage in any kind of tit-for-tat mudslinging. My purpose, rather, is only to point out that the sort of inquiry that the above titles represent can have little or nothing to do with enhancing agency. This should be startling because if philosophers—or lovers of wisdom—are, by and large, utterly disinterested in enhancing agency, then are we not justified in being utterly pessimistic with regard to having any kind of confidence that any kind of educational efforts will ultimately be utilized to enhance the very essence of who we are?

My answer, as may be evident by now, is "no." To the degree that *Philosophy for Children* (along with other "relevant" educational initiatives) follows Socrates' lead, and confidently explores issues that are genuinely relevant to the lives of those in their charge (while bravely ignoring the dismissive disparagement from others in the parent discipline), and to the degree that they do so within the confines of Communities of Philosophical Inquiry that are deftly run by exceptionally trained, philosophically-sensitive facilitators, to that degree, we can be confident that there is a distinct possibility that human agency will thereby be enhanced; and to that degree these brave educators deserve our applause.

ENDNOTES

1. *Philosophy for Children* is an educational initiative founded by philosopher/logician Matthew Lipmn, to whom this paper is dedicated.

2. G. H. Mead, *On Social Psychology*, ed. A. Strauss (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1965).

3. Susan Gardner, "Taking *Selves* Seriously," in *Cultural Politics and Identity*, ed. B. Weber, H Karfriedrich, E. Marsal, T. Dobashi, and P. Schweitzer (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2011), 81.

4. Gordon G. Gallup, "Self-Recognition in Primates: A Comparative Approach to the Bidirectional Properties of Consciousness," *American Psychologist* 32 (May 1977): 329–38.

5. Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 3.

6. Ibid., 8.

7. Stephan Darwell, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

8. Susan Gardner and Anderson, Daniel, "Authenticity: It Can and Should Be Nurtured," *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 22.4 (Oct. 2015): 392–401.

9. Ibid., 399.

10. Ibid.

11. Susan Gardner, *Thinking Your Way to Freedom: A Guide to Owning Your Own Practical Reasoning* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).

12. http://www.montclair.edu/cehs/academics/centers-and-institutes/iapc/.

13. Thomas Wartenberg, http://www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org/BookModule/BookModule.

14. Darwell, *The Second-Person Standpoint*, 4.

15. Susan Gardner, "Selling the Reason Game," *Teaching Ethics* 15.1 (Spring 2015): 129–36.

16. Darwell, *The Second-Person Standpoint*, 21.

17. Ibid., 49.

18. Jean Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage, 1989).

19. Randy D. Garrison, *Thinking Collaboratively: Learning in a Community of Inquiry* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

20. Billy Camden, "EEF Hands Out £1m For Second Pilot of Controversial Philosophy Programme," http://schoolsweek.co.uk/eef-re-grants-controversial-philosophy-trial/.