

# Philosophy: A Potential Gender Blender

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## A VISION: RELATING THROUGH FAIRNESS

**I**n March of 1996, I was asked to present a paper to a group who call themselves *The – Women speak Institution*. The contact person explained that the group was discouraged about the possibility of people ever changing sufficiently so that the genders would be able to relate to one another in a truly productive and mutually beneficial way. Having heard of the program *Philosophy for Children*, she posed the following question: Is it possible that *Philosophy for Children* might have the answer? Is it possible that if children learned to be “fair-minded” through philosophy at a very young age, they might be able to avoid the pitfalls that hitherto have seemed to be an inherent part of gender interaction?

It took only a matter of minutes before we both realised that *Womenspeak* and *Philosophy for Children* could be perceived as working on the same problem from different directions. *Womenspeak* hopes to bridge the gender gap by enlightening and empowering adults. *Philosophy for Children* can be seen as attempting to bridge the gender gap by short-circuiting the development of such “dysfunctional thinking” as bigotry, sexism, prejudice, intergender miscommunication, self-centredness and, perhaps most importantly, “fuzzy” thinking. The excitement of our discussion gave rise to the following request: Could I explain, with sufficient precision and persuasion, how a philosophical education can short-circuit what I refer to as dysfunctional thinking so as to rekindle the hope that the gender gap - along with other dysfunction human interactions - may yet be educated away. The following is the result of that challenge.

In what is to follow, I am going to argue that *Philosophy for Children* promotes “fair-mindedness,” or what might also be described as “wisdom,” because it promotes *philosophical thought* as a result of the process that it utilises, and because of the subject matter on which it focuses, i.e., *philosophical topics*. I will begin by clarifying what is meant by *philosophical thought* and *philosophical topics*, and suggest that an examination of the definitions alone will reveal that thinking philosophically on philosophical issues will ensure that it is at least possible for individuals to become fair-minded (by short circuiting such dysfunctional thinking, as prejudice, self-centredness, fuzzy-thinking, etc.). I will go on to make a more detailed case for why philosophical thinking on philosophical topics positively promotes the development of fair-mindedness, as well as why they are both so difficult (and hence by implication, why an exerted and formal effort must be made to promote fair-mindedness if we are serious about that goal). Lastly, I will show how *Philosophy for Children* promotes philosophical thinking on philosophical topics and hence why, if we are serious about aspiring to the goal of a world populated with fair-minded individuals, we ought to embrace this program, or at least a program like it, with a corresponding seriousness in enthusiasm.

## FAIR-NIINDEDNESS THROUGH PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT AND PHILOSOPHICAL TOPICS (Definitions)

Four substantial criteria characterise philosophical, or wise, thinking:

- i- the **extent of evidence** considered;
- ii- the **degree of precision** employed in scrutinising the evidence;

- iii- the **degree of objectivity** used in evaluating of the evidence;
- iv- the degree to which an individual is prepared to follow the evidence where it leads, i.e., towards **truth**, rather than trying to manipulate the evidence so as to fit preconceived notions.

A person can be said *think philosophically* when s/he effectively, (i.e., with maximum precision) looks at as much evidence as possible (both in length and breadth<sup>1</sup>) and makes a judgement with regard to the truth of an issue without bias (without being swayed by the pressure of immediate gratification). The characteristic that differentiates *philosophical thinking* from merely “clever,” “skilled,” or what might be labelled by some as “critical thinking” is that a person who thinks philosophically is passionate about discovering truth rather than merely being passionate about seeming to be espousing truth.

*Philosophical topics* - of which numerous examples will be given shortly- can best be described as issues that *can only be resolved through thought* (as opposed to topics whose investigation requires research of empirical facts<sup>2</sup>). A critically important subset of questions that can only be resolved through thought are issues that relate to ends, e.g., what kind of a person do I want to be; what kind of relationships do I want to form; what kind of community do I want to live in; what counts as a good life?<sup>3</sup>

An examination of the above definitions will immediately reveal that the absence of philosophical thought on philosophical topics will render the development of fair-mindedness virtually impossible. If an individual rarely or never seriously examines philosophical questions (how does this action impact on the kind of person I want to be?) and/or if that individual rarely or never employs philosophical thinking, e.g., examines only immediately available evidence always from a biased point of view, or just as bad, perhaps worse,<sup>4</sup> tries to be fair but is unable to “think straight,” that individual clearly will be incapable of being fair-minded.

## PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT

### i. Why is Philosophical Thought Important?

One obvious reason why employing philosophical thought is so important if we want to change the world, is that truth is a prime mover. If I convince you that it is true that there is a fire next door, that the person beside you has a highly contagious disease, or that there is a child near by in desperate need of help, you will react to those truth claims. In response to this assertion, a sceptic might argue that action is not spurred by *truth per se*, but rather what people *believe* to be true. There is a sense in which this response is accurate: it is the belief in truth, regardless of its actual truth value, that immediately fuels actions. But there is a crucial “but” here: it is *truth*, not the mere *belief in truth*, that determines the success of an act. Regardless of the strength of one’s conviction that one can fly, the actual truth of the matter - not what one believes to be true - will determine how one lands. It is *truth*, not the mere *belief in truth*, that carries survival value. And this survival value holds regardless of whether or not the individual in question is human. A bear who does not know that it is true that certain berries are poisonous will not last long. And though it is *belief in truth* that is the immediate prime mover, evolutionary restrictions demand that, at least up until now, it can only be because a large proportion of an individual’s beliefs were *in fact true* that beliefs in truth came to have such power.

The survival value of truth with regard to physical matters may be obvious. However, in realms that are unique to self-conscious entities, such as the psychological, the social, and the political, the vital importance of truth may not be so clear. This blindness to truth’s importance may be a function of the fact that the penalties for ignorance in these areas are not so conspicuous or immediate. However, once we reflect upon the sort of questions asked uniquely by persons, the importance of accessing truth in these matters as well, becomes immediately manifest. It is clear that we need to know, for example, whether babies need to be cuddled; whether unlimited material accumulation and consumption is a worthwhile human goal; whether democracy maximises the possibility of justice; whether some groups are superior to others as is often claimed; whether relationships are more important than careers; whether being fair is important if one hopes to establish a healthy and mutually nurturing relationship with another; and so on.

*Believing that something is true* moves individuals. *That something is true* maximises the possibility that actions which are founded on those beliefs will contribute to that individual’s well-being. Learning to think philosophically can thus be characterised as important because philosophical thought maximises the possibility

of finding truth and truth, in turn, maximises the possibility of achieving success in any realm in which a reasoning being functions.

## ii. An “Aside” About Truth or “What is Good for the Goose is Good for the Gander”

We all seem to be asleep at the wheel. Despite the critical role that truth plays in enhancing the possibility of achieving a good life, few take the pursuit of truth seriously. Indeed, in this so-called post modern era, it has become popular to claim, in the name of vindicating past minorities whose welfare has been seriously jeopardised by “untrue” truth claims - (and despite its evident self-contradiction) - that it is not “true” that there is such a thing as “truth.” Due to the hard-to-ignore, in-your-face, physicality of empirical claims, e.g., water is made up of hydrogen and oxygen, scepticism about the possibility of truth seems to be largely confined to non-empirical, or philosophical, issues.

Another factor which contributes to our scepticism about the possibility of making genuine progress towards truth on non-empirical topics is a lingering confidence in the *verifiability myth* and a corresponding naive understanding of what constitutes scientific truth. It is a common lay assumption that scientists prove or verify their claims - that scientists discover objective truths that stand the test of time and all further battering by relevant evidence. By contrast, it becomes almost self-evident that philosophy can never achieve such high standards of truth; that philosophers can never discover, once and for all, what counts as fair, just or good. If one can not achieve timeless truth - so it is reasoned - one can make no progress whatsoever.

All of this is dangerous, fuzzy thinking. For one thing (though it is actually irrelevant to the “truth” of whether or not “truth” exists), vindication of past victims of untrue truth claims, lies in demonstrating the falsity of those claims, not in the pretence that truth is a myth. Secondly, it is simply false that science discovers objective truths that stand the test of time. One hundred years from now, the very term “molecule” may be hopelessly outdated and with it the claim that a molecule of water is made up of one molecule of hydrogen and two of oxygen. Science progresses not on the backs of “once and for all” “objective” truths, but on the backs of falsifications - a claim eloquently defended by the eminent philosopher of science, Karl Popper.<sup>5</sup> A good scientist does not attempt to prove her claim to be true. Rather, she examines as much evidence as possible in a manner that is as precise and objective as possible<sup>6</sup> and only after she has failed to prove her theory false, is she justified in proclaiming its truth, and even then only conditionally, i.e., on the condition that the theory remain open to re-evaluation should new relevant evidence surface. This, combined with notions of “coherence” (how the theory fits with other theories), “comprehension” (theories that are more elegant and parsimonious are more persuasive than those that are cumbersome), “correspondence” (how the theory fits the facts), and “pragmatism” (does the theory work), all guide the scientist in her intuitions with regard to the truth. This, too, is what ought to guide the philosopher. If it is good enough for one, surely it is good enough for the other.

## iii. Why is Philosophical Thinking So Difficult?

Given the potential payoff of finding truth, the initial puzzlement surely is why truth is such a “hard sell”? Why is it that human beings, young and old, need to be cajoled, coaxed, compelled, coerced, constrained, and dragged kicking toward truth by well-meaning philosophers. The answer is over-abundant. Human nature supplies multiple and unfortunately often overwhelming reasons - *aside from its apparent truth value* - for an individual to espouse the truth of a claim.

The most prevalent cause for espousing the truth of a claim aside from its truth value is that tracking truth requires thinking and **thinking is hard work**. With regard to thinking, and contrary to the laws of motion, stasis seems to be the default value for most people. For many, giving in to the call of laziness is easier than rising to a challenge. Endorsing vague and unfounded opinions is a simple and quick way to gain access to a conversation.<sup>7</sup> One can always have an opinion on just about anything. By contrast, reasoned, precision judgements, take time, an inordinate amount of energy and hence are not always readily available.

If a single reasoned judgement is hard work, **logical consistency**, the theoretical counterpart of scientific coherence, is **even harder work**. Logical consistency demands that one treat like cases alike - the moral principle that underpins the golden rule.<sup>8</sup> It is easier for most people to *assume* - rather than feel compelled to justify - that, for instance, their own situation, or the situation they would prefer to be different, is “different.”<sup>9</sup> No wonder the easy way out is seductive.

*Logical consistency* is a necessary condition of truth. *Consistency per se*, i.e., over time, however, is no sure sign of truth. In fact, quite the contrary. The elusiveness of truth requires that one remain perpetually open to reconsideration in the light of new evidence. Lack of consistency over time, thus, interestingly, may turn out to be the *sine qua non* of a genuine truth seeker. Indeed, it is for that reason that a genuine truth seeker often tends to armour herself with humility, e.g., “it seems to me that,” “the evidence suggests that,” etc. By contrast, ignorance of the vicissitudes of the truth-seeking process leaves the naive open to the seduction of bravado soap-box oratory which, in turn, often results in finding oneself in an “immovable” situation. Once one has stuck one’s neck out, one becomes increasingly reluctant to have it chopped off. Once one has gone way out on a limb - to mix a few metaphors - one finds it **humiliating to back down**. Indeed, threat of humiliation has a paradoxical effect. The more questionable one’s original position becomes, the more strenuously one tends to defend it; the farther from truth one feels one’s position, the more adamantly one espouses its truth.

We are all of us at least a little neophobic. New settings - be they internal or external - raise anxiety levels. Will I be able to cope as well in this new environment as I did in the old one? Old ideas can be like old friends. We are comfortable in their company. We trust their responses. **We are highly reluctant to change**. After all, truth seeking may result in a psychic environment that is far less comfortable than the one I presently inhabit. There is something reassuring in simply assuming that if my ideas worked before, they will surely work again. “A thought in the head is worth than two in the bush” and all that.

Like old ideas, we also tend to be more comfortable in the company of old friends. We want to be liked, and one sure route to that end is to embrace truths that are similar to those defended by individuals whose affections we seek. This is the source of **group think**, a phenomenon that is pernicious amongst teenagers in particular and crowds in general. If I disagree I may be shunned. Besides everyone can’t be wrong. Surely it would be arrogant to presume that I have access to a truth that nobody else does. Fear of being an outcast, combined with lack of confidence in one’s own capacity to estimate truth, thus work together to persuade many individuals that it is safer by far to simply run with the crowd.

**Limited vision** is the corollary of “group think.” just as we strive to be liked by others, we also ourselves tend to like those who are like us. Similar minds do not challenge our self-confidence and self-esteem. However, chronic exposure to like-minded individuals ensures **limited exposure to a variety of viewpoints**. This, in turn, enshrines an inability to estimate the truth value of virtually any claim on the grounds of insufficient evidence.<sup>10</sup> Homogenised company, in other words, regardless of its quality, severely limit one’s ability to estimate truth.<sup>11</sup>

Amongst other things, I am a feminist; a philosopher; and an environmentalist. These positions are **part of my identity**. They are also positions which have their own identity, i.e., feminists believe “x” to be true; environmentalist believe “y” to be true. In the name of maintaining one’s status as a member-in-good-standing of various ideological groups, one is often tempted to pay lip service to central claims without seriously examining their truth value. This is hardly surprising. Defending an ideology often requires tremendous courage. To risk censure by publicly doubting a central tenet brings with it the threat of serious isolation.<sup>12</sup> If you are neither “for them nor ‘again’ them,” who are you? Seriously tracking truth, irrespective of ideological lines, can put one’s very identity at stake.

The last reason that one may espouse the truth of a claim regardless of its apparent truth value is perhaps the most obvious one. People lie, consciously or otherwise, and often chronically, because they have **something to gain**. Companies insist that the damage that they inflict on the environment is minimal, salespeople argue that their product is far superior than any sort of evidence might suggest, a child asserts that s/he did not lie, thus demonstrating a sad escalation of lying about lying, and so on. That we might have something to gain from defending a position irrespective of its truth value brings us full faced and on the opposite side of the claim made earlier that truth is vital to maximising success in any realm. This is the paradox about truth that needs to be thought through by all reasoning beings; that truth, which often in the short run seems to demand much of us, in the long run “is the best policy.”

Given all the above - that thinking is hard work; that logical consistency is harder work; that backing down is humiliating; that change, even in ideas, is anxiety provoking; that “group think” is so seductive; that like-minded people ensure a limited exposure to a variety of viewpoints; that one’s identity may be at risk; that there is often an “apparent” gain from ignoring truth - it is hardly surprising that individuals find it hard, often

desperately hard to think philosophically, i.e., to effectively (with maximum precision), look at as much evidence as possible (both in length and breadth), and to make a judgement with regard to the truth of an issue without bias (without being swayed by the pressure of immediate gratification). All of which leads to the conclusion that, if we are serious in wanting to pursue the goal of a world populated with fair-minded people, and if it is true, as I have argued, that thinking philosophically is a necessary condition for being fair-minded and that accessing truth, in any case, will maximise the possibility of success in any realm in which a reasoning being functions, we will have to be prepared to make a serious, full-fledged, formal effort to ensure that youngsters develop the capacity and the propensity to think philosophically despite the overwhelming pressure to do otherwise.

## PHILOSOPHICAL TOPICS

### i. *Why Are Philosophical Questions So Important?*

A simple perusal of philosophical questions will not only enlighten the reader as to what might count as a philosophical question but also immediately suggest why these questions are important. However, intuition alone is not their only support. I will also argue that a particular subset of philosophical questions, namely those that relate to ends are of critical importance because, on the positive side, being able to reason about ends dignifies us as persons and gives us some control over our destinies. On the negative side, if we do not reason about ends, we will be blind to the possibility that the course on which we are travelling, severally and collectively, may not only be non-optimal, it may be positively disastrous (which would hardly be surprising given the purported survival value of truth).

### a) *Examples of Philosophical Questions*

The following is a list of philosophical questions that was compiled in a recent philosophy class within a time-frame of only a few minutes. A simple perusal of these questions reveals that these are issues that need to be tackled, both severally and collectively, if we want to maximise our individual and collective well-being.

*Should drugs be legalised? Should I take drugs? If so, what kinds are permissible and why? Should I condone or object to other people taking drugs?*

*Should organ donorship be mandatory? Is a flat tax fair?*

*Is it important to use politically correct language? Should same sex couples be allowed to adopt children?*

*In a situation of overpopulation, is it ethical for a government to legally restrict the size of families? Would it be ethical not to?*

*Are tree huggers unethical? Or is it unethical not to be a tree hugger?*

*Why is the "F" word so offensive?*

*Why do people swear? Have I done something wrong if I swear?*

*Should I be prepared to share most/all of my personal possessions?*

*Should I spend less money on material objects than I presently do?*

*What should I do when a debt is not repaid? Should I lend money to a friend? Should I lend anything to a friend, e.g., homework?*

*What is beauty?*

*Should I be influenced by what is considered beautiful?*

*Should I spend more time and energy or less time and energy on attempting to be beautiful?*

*Should I have a face lift? Why should I be honest?*

*Should I always be honest? If not, when is dishonesty acceptable and why?*

*Is it OK to be bully if I can get away with it? Should euthanasia be legalised?*

*Is it wrong to kill animals? Is it wrong to allow them to suffer?*

*Do different rules apply to different animals? Would society be better if there was no such thing as marriage? If I have the option, should I live with someone before getting married?*

*Should teachers be paid higher salaries? What makes a teacher a "good" one? Should doctors be paid a set wage?*

*Should aboriginal agreements be honoured?*

*What is our obligation, if any, to those who are less fortunate?*

*What should I do if someone is talking about my friend behind his or her back?*

*Is sex out of wedlock OK? If so, at what age?*

*Is it OK to have any number of sexual partners? What makes a good friend a good friend? What should I do if I see someone else doing something that I think is wrong? e.g., about to drive after drinking; cheating on a loved one; on an exam; on taxes.*

*If ageing parents are no longer self-sufficient, should I invite them to live with me? Should I invite them to live with me in any case?*

*Should I jeopardise my career prospects in order to spend more time with my family?*

*Should I spend less time watching TV?*

*Is "hanging out" with my friends important or a waste of time?*

*If I am angry, is it OK to show it? Is it OK not to show it?*

*Should young offenders be treated differently than their adult counterparts? If so, in what way should they be treated?*

*If I disagree with what someone says, is it OK for me to say so? Is it OK for me not to say so?*

*Do I know myself better than other people do?*

*If I had a different name, would I be a different person? How should I ask others to address me?*

*Is responsibility a burden or a benefit?*

*Might victims contribute to their own victimisation?*

*What is the optimal arrangement for child rearing from the point of view of the child, the mother and the father?*

*Is it OK to spend most of one's day in pursuit of academic goals? If not, what sorts of other goals ought one to pursue? Should academic achievement be the top priority? What counts as academic achievement?*

*What is a good life? What should I do, think, and feel in order to attain a good life?*

#### b) Personhood and Autonomy

Being able to imagine oneself in the future is unique to self-conscious being. So too, then, obviously, is being able to imagine oneself in a variety of situations, and hence being able to make **choices** about what kind of person one wants to be; what kind of relationships in particular, and community in general, one wants to be instrumental in creating; and what sort of life one wants to live. Being able to choose ends is unique to self-conscious beings, or *persons*. In forsaking a scrutiny of the ends toward which we move, we throw away what makes us unique.

However, we do more than disgrace our personhood by eschewing a scrutiny of the ends towards which our behaviour points. We also trample on our own autonomy. We are, after all, all of us born animals subject to the tyranny of the stimulus environment in which we move. It is only as we gain the ability to imagine ends, that these projected "reasoned stimuli" become part of the stimulus environment which controls our behaviour. The more complex, rich and precise these *reasoned stimuli*, the greater their magnet pull relative to the original baseline. It is through reasoning about philosophical topics that human beings gain control over their actions. It is through reasoning about philosophical topics that we acquire autonomy.

Another way of putting this point would be to say that if we want to pay homage to our personhood as well as enhance our autonomy, wisdom, not sheer intelligence, ought to be our goal. **Wisdom** is concerned with the objective or unbiased evaluation of ends; **intelligence**, by contrast, focuses merely on the evaluation of means, e.g., who can get the most bananas? A "philosopher" -literally translated - is a lover of wisdom. Who could doubt the merit of producing "philosopher kids"?

#### c) We Are "Otherwise" Blind

If we promote "skilled" thinking without seriously enquiring about "ends," we will do more harm than good. One can not promote a "means" without implying an end. If we promote intelligence as a "value-free" value in the materialistic, capitalistic, highly competitive, "consumer heaven" in which we live, we will, at the same time, promote (by default) materialism, class-consciousness, cut-throat competitiveness, self-centredness and an utter lack of concern for truth. This unhappily is an accurate description of many of the students who come to educators for "marks"- rather than education. They see themselves as part of a rat race competing against one another to get into institutions of "higher learning" so that they can get lucrative jobs (better than their competitors) so that they can make lots of money (more than others) to buy coveted materialistic excesses

(better than the Jones) so that they can have children who will be able to get into the “better” schools, in the hope that they will get better marks than their classmates, so that they will get the better jobs, so that they can make lots of money, and so on. If we promote “skilled thinking” without seriously analysing ends, we will inadvertently support whatever vision is going down, irrespective of its insidiousness.<sup>13</sup>

Echoing similar concerns about the dangers of promoting “intelligence,” i.e., “skilled thinking” without seriously analysing the ends, Richard Paul, in a recent monograph argues that:

*“Skilled” thinking can easily be used to obfuscate rather than to clarify, to maintain a prejudice rather than to break it down, to aid in the defence of a narrow interest rather than to take into account the public good. ...One can learn to be cunning rather than clever, smooth rather than clear, convincing rather than rationally persuasive, articulate rather than accurate. One can be judgmental rather than gain in judgement. One can confuse confidence with knowledge at the same time that one mistakes arrogance for self-confidence. ...the result can be the inadvertent cultivation of the manipulator, the propagandist, and the con artist. ... When this happens, schooling often does more harm than good. (p. 11-12)<sup>14</sup>*

## ii. Why is it so Difficult to Seriously Tackle Philosophical Questions?

There are two principal reasons why people rarely attempt to grapple with philosophical questions, particularly questions about the ends toward which they themselves are moving. The first is that they assume, disastrously and utterly incorrectly, that someone else has already done that, and secondly, they have little or no confidence to tackle such questions in any case.

### a) Someone Else Has Done That.

We fail to ask serious questions about “ends” (e.g., what kind of person do I want to be; what kind of community do I want to live in; what is a “good life”?) rather than “means” (how quickly can I acquire the most bananas?) because we get dropped into the status quo and assume (since our betters also assume, since their betters also assumed) that winning this race must be the best life has to offer. If this were not the case, surely there would be some attempt to educate us with regard to alternatives? Distracted by the drug of consumerism” and a wide variety of mind altering chemicals, we are dropped into the tragedy of an intergenerational human parade moving forward without direction.

### b) We Do Not Believe We Are Capable of Tackling Philosophical Questions in Any Case.

Our faith in the ability of science and technology to solve problems of matters of fact has lead us to an over-concentration on matters of fact and an unwarranted assumption that truth can only be accessed with regard to matters of fact. We have lost faith in our ability to tackle questions which are the exclusive property of thought alone - though these are the very questions that relate to “ends.”<sup>16</sup> So we bow to our computers and assuage our growing anxiety that human life as we know it may already be out of our control with the ludicrous belief that, science, and in particular, computer technology will save the day. But, computers, like the wheel, are only a “means” and becoming efficient about “means” only propels us all that much faster toward ends we have not yet examined. Surely, in the name of personhood and autonomy in particular, and in the name of well-being in general, and regardless of our lack of philosophical confidence, it behoves us to look where we are going before we concentrate on speeding up the process.

## PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN PROMOTES PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING

The key ingredient of the program entitled *Philosophy for Children* is the creation of a *Community of Inquiry* whose goal is to push towards truth on a topic picked by participants from supplied philosophical materials which provide a wide range of important profound issues from which to choose. The participants of a philosophical *Community of Inquiry* (who can be as young as five - see appendix) themselves attempt to find answers to profound philosophical questions. The success of this Community depends largely on the philosophical astuteness of the facilitator. The facilitator’s job, amongst others, is to ensure that the discussion focuses on an issue that is philosophical (rather than empirical); that participants be precise (What do you mean by that? Can you give me an example?); that multiple points of view are considered at the same time

(How does that relate to what Jane said earlier?); that length and breadth of evidence is considered (What will the impact of that position be on other people in different circumstances? What are the long term implications?); that logical consistency is honoured (Are you prepared espouse the principle in the following different circumstances?); and so on.

A review of the description of the philosophical facilitator's role within a philosophical *Community of Inquiry*, immediately reveals how participation in such a community promotes *philosophical thinking* and hence fair-mindedness. It does so because it enables participants to

- figure out **which questions are important** to ask, i.e., be awake  
(*participants must come up with their own questions*);
- be courageous in tackling **any question**  
(*the facilitator allows discussion on any question that the community chooses*);
- access as much relevant data as possible from as **many angles** as possible  
(*which, interestingly, is why communities in multi-cultural societies are particularly productive*);
- insist on **accurate, precise** formulations  
(*the facilitator never allows participants to get away with "politician's rhetoric"*);
- **assess** how the data bears on the question at hand  
(*by asking that very question*);
- **judge (without bias)** which of competing answers are more plausible (closer to the truth) (e.g. *through demanding logical consistency*);
- be prepared to **abandon** answers that are inadequate  
(*often the first sign of a successful community is when a participant says "when we first began the discussion I thought 'x'; now I think 'not-x.'"* );
- **modulate confidence** in proportion to the strength of the data to which they have access (*as data will be required to support positions*);
- understand that their **fallibility** requires that they always remain open to new data;  
(*humility is a trait that inevitably develops as result of long term exposure to the complex Communities of Inquiry*);
- **persevere in the face of complexity**  
(*long term membership in a Community of Inquiry convinces participants that there is value in progress made toward truth despite lack of closure<sup>17</sup>*);
- put "**good thinker**" at or near the top of their identity characteristics  
(*because participants find that "good thinking" enhances their well-being<sup>18</sup>*);
- be **moved by reasons**  
(*because the community moves toward truth on relevant issues, e.g., what they ought to do on the play ground, not whether or not they might have worked for the French underground during WW II*).

## PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN FOCUSES ON PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS

There are a lot of "critical thinking" programs that focus on skills and many focus on attitude. My contention is, however, that philosophy has a unique contribution to make to the recent contemporary effort to enhance good thinking because it promotes good thinking by focusing on philosophical topics (see examples in Appendix). Of course, if we are unconcerned about ends, if we do not care whether or not our youngsters ever ask themselves what kind of people they want to be and how their immediate actions and goals bare on that end, if we do not believe that it matters whether anyone wonders what kind of community best nurtures human well-being, if we ourselves think it is unimportant to ask what counts as a good or worthwhile life, then any reputable thinking program is probably as good as any other. On the other hand, if we do care about being able to evaluate the "ends" toward which we as individuals, as societies, and as the human race are moving, if we wish to maximise the capacity that is unique to persons and to thereby enhance our autonomy by projecting our own reasoned goals into the stimulus environment that controls our behaviour, then we must be serious about ensuring that we are all not only willing to tackle the myriad of difficult philosophical issues which we now blindly confront but that we are able to do so. If we truly want a world populated with wise, fair-minded people, if this is a goal toward which we at least ought to aspire, then what we need is not just a

dose of philosophy; what we need is a deluge!

## APPENDIX

Many may wonder, indeed doubt, whether young children can grapple with genuinely philosophical issues. It is for that reason that I include here a list of questions that were recently (1995/96) tackled by real children in grades one to five. The questions in bold print are questions actually articulated and picked by the children. The questions in regular print are the philosophical questions that were pursued in the ensuing discussion.<sup>19</sup> The number in brackets indicates the grade level.

**Why is Elfie afraid to talk? (2)**

(Why are we afraid of things? Shyness)

**Why does Seth make fun of Elfie? (1)**

(Why do we make fun of people? Is it nice? If so why? If not why not? Why do we call it “making fun”?)

**Why do people say negative things about other people’s things? (3)**

(Mine is better than yours; gossip: keeping up with the Jones) (What is day dreaming? Is imagining useful?)

**Why doesn’t Gus just look in the mirror and judge for herself what she looks like? (3)**

(Why are we concerned with what other people think of the way we look? Which people are we concerned about? Are we concerned with how others look?)

**Why does Gus want to know everything? (4)**

(If you were granted a wish by a genie to know something what would it be? Would it be nice if you could know everything and not have to learn it?)

**Why does Elfie like Sophia so much? (1)**

(What is it about other people that makes us like them? Dislike them? Can we control the process, e.g., you should love your neighbour; your brother?)

**How did the students get into their individual bubbles and how did they get into their big bubbles in the end? (2)**

(What is a day dreaming? Is imagining useful? What would it be like to be in a bubble? Would you rather be in an individual bubble or in a group bubble? Why? Is your mind like a bubble?)

**Why does Mr. Sprockett wait until tomorrow to tell the students about the contest? (2)**

(What is the role of surprises in our lives? What are good surprises? What are bad surprises? What is suspense? Why do we enjoy suspense? Why are guessing games fun?)

**Why are they talking about who’s beautiful anyway? (4)**

(What is beauty? In what way is beauty important?)

**Why do people use excuses? (5)**

(What is the difference between a good and a bad excuse? What is the difference between an excuse and a reason? If you can get out of trouble by thinking up a good excuse, should you?)

**Why did Elfie bury her head in the pillow? (K)**

(When people say things that hurt our feelings, why would we want to bury our head in a pillow? Why do we sometimes not want other people to know when we are sad? Does it help to hide our feelings?)

**Why does Gus want to know where things come from and in particular where the book comes from?**  
(3)

(Why does anybody want to know where anything comes from, e.g., whether or not it is an original or that it belonged to Grandmother? Is learning about history important?)

**Why are contests fun? (K)**

(Is competition always fun? When is it fun? When is it not fun? Do there always have to be winners and losers? Give me an example of a good contest; a bad contest?)

## NOTES

1. By “length” I mean taking a long term view into account; by “breadth” I mean taking into account as many viewpoints that relate to the issue as possible.
2. It is important for budding thinkers to learn that they have a right, and potentially, the ability to tackle any question that falls into the former category, but that they ought to *withhold* judgement on the latter until they have sufficient relevant data to warrant it.
3. It is by imagining ends that self-conscious beings gain control over their actions. These projected imagined ends become part of the general stimulus environment that moulds the behaviour of that individual. The more rich, complex and precise these imagined ends are, the stronger the magnetic pull. It is thus that autonomy is born. More will be said on this topic under the heading *Personhood and Autonomy*.
4. Because such individuals pride themselves on being “fair-minded,” they often have a “holier-than-thou” attitude and are even more adamant about their inadequate conclusions than those who are simply and obviously biased.
5. Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations; The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. London, 1903. Collected Essays.
6. See criteria for philosophical thought.
7. In a recent class, for example, one of my students argued that “women would only be free in a society in which patriarchy did not exist.” It sounds lovely and very politically correct on the surface, but what does it mean? Would a non-patriarchal society be one in which no women stayed at home; in which half the men and half the women stayed at home; in which both men and women worked part time and stayed at home the rest of time; in which there was no marriage; in which there were no men-what? It takes time and a huge amount of energy to combat the high levels of frustration that one will inevitably encounter when trying to think through this difficult notion, but a concept without precision can have no impact on behaviour. If you don’t know what a non-patriarchal society looks like, how can you help bring it about?
8. This problem is dealt with at length in R. M. Hare’s books *Freedom and Reason*, OUP, 1963, and *The Language of Morals*, OUP, 1967.
9. In another recent class, one of my teenagers argued that “since teenagers are inevitably going to engage in sex, parents might as well condone it.” In the course of discussion this individual was asked whether it followed then (in the name of logical consistency) that, since it seemed inevitable that there would always be such crimes as theft, rape and murder, society might as well condone them?
10. Access to maximum evidence is a necessary condition of estimating truth. See page 2.
11. Even though it may be true that all crows are black, one ought to have little confidence in espousing that claim if one has only seen one black crow. Limited data is as limiting in judging the truth of non-empirical claims as it is in judging factual issues.
12. Catherine Hakim, a sociologist and senior research fellow at the London School of Economics caused an uproar by challenging a long-standing feminist assumption when she wrote in the *British Journal of Sociology* that a recent survey revealed that only a small number of women are truly career-minded. A critique of her findings was published in the same journal and signed by 11 eminent academics. This incident was reported in the *Vancouver Sun*, April 1, 1996, p. A8.
13. In the March 1996 Provincial Strategic Plan published by the British Columbia’s Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour (the new name for what used to be the Education Ministry!), “ensuring students are

prepared to find employment in a competitive labour market” (p.2) comes at the top of their “purpose” list, followed by more accessible “learning opportunities” and “value for money.” The “Skills Ministry” of British Columbia thus apparently sees their mandate - almost exclusively - as getting students ready for the “rat race.”

14. Richard Paul, *Pseudo Critical Thinking in the Educational Establishment: A Case Study in Educational Malpractice*, Santa Rosa, published by the Foundation for Critical Thinking, 1993.
15. In an article entitled *Dysfunctional Society*, Al Gore argues that the addiction metaphor is helpful because it suggests, he thinks correctly, that mindless consumerism is a response to the psychic pain of having no authentic purpose or meaning in life. Published in L.P. Pojman’s *Environmental Ethics*. Boston: Jones and Bartlett Pub., 1994.
16. A prevalent sign of this “philosophical lack of confidence” is rampant **relativity**, or - since it results in a state of utter “directionless” - what might be appropriately referred to as “the human version of lemmings disease.”
17. A detailed discussion of truth also helps maintain the enthusiasm of participants who may be initially discouraged about lack of closure.
18. It is helpful to review with participants *why* they are being asked to engage in this community inquiry, i.e., why it promotes philosophical thinking; why philosophical thinking is important, i.e., the value of truth; and, as well, the factors that will pressure them to abandon philosophical thinking.
19. *The Vancouver Institute of Philosophy for Children* wishes to thank all the teachers of Collingwood School in West Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, who, in participating in the *Philosophy for Children* teacher-training program submitted tapes for comment and feedback. The data enclosed here were gathered from those tapes.

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