Perceiving "The Philosophical Child": A Guide for the Perplexed

A review of Jana Mohr Lone's The Philosophical Child.

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The Philosophical Child
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Though Jana Mohr Lone (2012) refers to children's striving to wonder, to question, to figure out how the world works and where they fit as the "philosophical self," like its parent discipline, it could be argued that the philosophical self is actually the "parent self,"—the wellspring of all the other aspects of personhood that we traditionally parse out, e.g., the intellectual, moral, social, and emotional selves (p. 5). If that is the case, then to be blind to "*The Philosophical Child*," the latter being the title of Jana Mohr Lone's book, is, in a sense then, to be blind to the child. Thus, though Mohr Lone says that the subject of her book is to assist parents in supporting the development of children's philosophical selves (p. 7), that claim may mask the gift that this lovely book can bring to the parent-child relationship if it is interpreted as helping children to become "smarty pants" in the sense of acquiring esoteric skills to excel in the ivory-tower (albeit children-oriented) discipline of academic philosophy. This is not the focus of this book. This is not an invitation to learn about the history of philosophy—about what some wise, usually white, usually men said about the fundamental questions that intrigue all humans. This is not an invitation to memorize and thus to sit in awe of what others think (or thought)—as is too often the case in university classrooms. This book, rather, is a guide to how to actually philosophize—how to use questions to energetically and courageously make progress toward finding answers that one, through reflection, comes to believe are the best, given the reasons and evidence available. And to the degree that we and our children are successful, we give ourselves (as Mohr Lone notes this is a reciprocal gift) and our children the gift of continuously learning to become ever wiser.

The methodological engine Mohr Lone espouses is that of questioning—both in the adult reader and, hopefully, all the children with whom the adult thereafter has contact. As Mohr Lone points out, "Questioning is an essential skill for evaluating the constant flood of information that bombards children, for gathering what they need to make good decisions, and for conveying the gaps that remain in their understanding of particular topics or situations. The more skilled a child becomes at framing good questions, the more able she will be to think clearly and competently for herself. And the only way to develop this skill is practice" (p. 29).

Ahh, some adults may immediately think, my children must already be doing philosophy. After all, they are frequently questioned both at home and in school.

Ahh, though, the philosophical response will be, "Are your children being asked 'real' questions?" If a "real" question is a "through-and-through" question, i.e., a question to which no one present knows the answer, then, unhappily, one must conclude that most children are rarely exposed to "real" questions. Most are, rather, exposed to rhetorical devices used by others, usually adults, to test whether the "victim" can repeat what the "questioner" already knows. And if a child does not know, or worse, if a child has the audacity to actually raise a question that publically broadcasts what s/he does not know, since this has the potential of being both shameful and embarrassing (p. 29), it would follow that the common experience of so-called "questioning" actually weakens the tendency to engage in "real questioning."

But what, then, is a real question? Mohr Lone answers this question with a wealth of breath-taking, heart-breaking examples. After reading *Charlotte's Web* with your child, for example, you might ask, "Would life be the same without death?" or "If you could choose to live forever, would you?"(p. 44). Or, after reading *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* with your teen, you might ask, "What would you do if you lived in Omelas (a city whose entire good fortune depended on the despair of one child locked in the cage)?" Or you might ask whether they think their own happiness might depend on the misery of others (p. 91). Or after reading *The Real Thief,* you might ask, "What is required of friendship?" Or, "Are friends on Face book real friends?" or "What's the difference between being popular and having friends?"(p. 95). Or, after watching the film *The Matrix*, you might ask, "What's wrong with living in a fake world as long as one is 'happy'?" Or, (echoing Robert Nozick's "Experience Machine"), you might ask, "What else can matter to us, other than how our lives feel from the inside?"(p. 71). Or, after reading *The Ugly Duckling*, you might ask, "If the duckling believed he was beautiful, would he be more likely to be seen as beautiful? Or, "What does it mean to have inner beauty?"(p. 114). Or, after reading a picture book, you might ask, "How did the book make you feel? Do you think the pictures or the words were more important in making you feel this way?"(p. 106). Or, when walking in the forest with your child, you might ask, "If you found out that what you were listening to was really a person imitating the sounds of birds singing, and there were no birds here, would listening to this feel the same way to you?"(p. 111).

All of these questions, of course, are such that *neither* the questioner nor the one questioned knows the answer (an apt definition, perhaps, of a "real" question). As such, they invite us into uncharted territory, and as such, illuminate—rather than paper over—the world of uncertainty in which we live (p. 39).

However, precisely because this book invites us to embrace uncertainty, it may initially be off-putting for some adults who find comfort in the more predictable role of guide and mentor—the giver of knowledge. This is hardly surprising. The feeling of uncertainty is "naturally" repulsive. As Neuroscientist Robert Burton (2008) notes in his book, *On Being Certain: On Believing That You Are Right Even When You Are Not*, its opposite, the feeling of certainty, is as powerfully reinforcing as crack! We are addicted to being certain! And while the fact that the premonition of being certain may give us an evolutionary advantage that motivates some to slog through tedious investigations, this addiction, like most, when practiced chronically, is very much to our peril. As Burton notes, and as I argue at length in my book, *Thinking Your Way to Freedom*, accessing the genuine merits of your opposition and thus actively inviting in uncertainty with regard to your original position, is the primary method we have for moving toward truth on any issue. And given that that is the case, "We must learn (and teach our children)," Burton passionately argues, "to tolerate the unpleasantness of uncertainty. . . . We have methods for analyzing and ranking opinion according to their likelihood of correctness. That is enough. We do not need and cannot afford the catastrophes born out of a belief in certainty" (p. 223).

However, modeling uncertainty with equanimity (Mohr Lone, 2012, p. 125) so that children, through the excitement of genuine questioning, can develop competence in "thinking for themselves" (p. 127) and thereby take control of their own futures and develop the confidence to build meaningful lives (p. 122), is not the only payoff for embarking on a philosophical journey. As Mohr Lone herself attests, the authenticity of such give-and-take dialogue—the ease of this sort of communication—inevitably creates relationship (p. 17), a space of reflective

intimacy (p. 125), or, what, in other circles, is called "attachment." And this is no small gift. As Neufeld and Mate (2005) argue in their book, *Hold On To Your Kids*, current "economic and cultural forces . . . have dismantled the social context for the natural functioning of both the parenting instincts of adults and the attachment drives of children" and, as a result, the substitute peer (rather than parent) orientation is such that aggression and delinquency can be fueled by making students less teachable and by formenting unhealthy lifestyle choices (p. 38). We adults, in other words, are losing the power to "hold on to our kids" precisely because that power comes not from technique, but from the quality of the adult-child relationship that is presently under threat due to both parents' working, divorce, mobility, etc. (p. 50). Since this power to bond with our children is subtle, its absence will not be obvious to those who mistake it for force. It is critical to note, therefore, that this power is not simply about, for example, being successful in setting firm boundaries (as important as that may be); this is, rather, "the power to command our children's attention, to solicit their good intentions, to evoke their deference and secure their cooperation. Without these four abilities," Neufled and Mate note, "all we have left is coercion and bribery" (p. 49).

Creating such "attached" relationships, of course, takes time and listening—precisely the ingredients that are necessary for philosophical dialogue. As Mohr Lone notes, "one of the many pleasures of philosophical inquiry with children is that this activity pushes us to slow down, pay attention, and think deeply," "to stop the relentless stream of 'Oh, I have to do this now' thoughts and actions" and allow oneself to be drawn into the slow thoughtful space of philosophical exploration (p. 26), where listening "to our children's questions and comments, without feeling compelled to jump in and provide answers, is crucial" (p. 8).

Though time and listening do indeed seem to be crucial for relationship-building, perhaps the even more foundational requisite for attachment is the ability to "see" the other. In her attempt to explain philosophical sensitivity by reference to "naturalist sensitivity," Mohr Lone notes that a "Naturalist sensitivity involves skill at observing distinctions among living things and seeing details and changes in the natural world that many of us miss; walk in the woods with a naturalist, for example, and he or she will *notice* small differences among plants, rocks, insects, and flowers that elude those of us not in the habit of *looking* for them. A naturalist will '*see*' a web of relationships and connections, a subtle and complex set of interconnected organisms, not *visible* to people who have not cultivated this capacity" (emphasis added p. 25). Though this analogy is meant to lay bare the kind of sensitivity that both the adult and child ought to nurture so that they can *see* the wonder, complexity, and challenge of the world in which we live, it could just as well describe the goal of being able to see the wonder, complexity and challenge of the children in our midst. If we do not see our children, we cannot relate to them; if we cannot relate to them, we cannot see them. This is a sometimes mystifying dialectic, the only entrance to which is genuine dialogue of the very sort that readily emerges from the soil of real questions.

In one of Mohr Lone's conversations about childhood with fourth-graders (after reading *Albert's Toothache* about a toothless young turtle who complains of a toothache), young Julia comments that she thinks "that children are deeper than adults" (p. 35). Upon being pressed to elaborate, she says, "I mean childhood is not just about becoming an adult. It's a time of its own. What happens to kids affects us our whole lives. That's mostly not true of adults. I think what we experience we feel more deeply, and it stays with us" (p. 36).

In so saying this, Julia becomes visible as never before, as do her peers. So, too, will your children. So, too, will your students. So, too, will all those with whom you adventure forth through philosophical inquiry. This extraordinary book, then, is a guide for parents, for teachers, for all of us, so that we may offer the hand of wisdom to others, including our children, and, in so doing, become whole ourselves. Thank you, Jana Mohr Lone, for writing this holy book.

References

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