

Are Philosophy and Children Good for Each Other?

MAUGHN GREGORY

The answer to the question in the title partly depends, of course, on our conceptions of philosophy and of children. Philosophy, like religion and science, is many things to many people. It is all at once (though not for all concerned) an academic profession, an amateur hobby, and an attitude. I will explain a little what I mean by offering six different answers to the question, "What is philosophy?"

To begin with, I believe philosophy exists at its most general as an attitude, which I would describe as a genuine sense of wonder. I believe almost any object or event may prompt this wonder, but the wonder is always directed toward meaning, in the sense that we might wonder about what the object or event means, or means for us. Philosophical wonderment is more intense than idle curiosity. In my own experience (when I am still susceptible to it) it is a strange combination of excitement and discomfort. There is an element of yearning in it: a yearning for greater meaning, where 'greater' might mean clearer, expanded or more profound. I believe this kind of yearning toward meaning is reflected in the word 'philosophy' which of course translates from the Greek as 'love of wisdom,' keeping in mind the erotic connotations of love. In this regard, also, I believe it is significant that philosophy as an experience of yearning toward meaning isn't something we can turn on and off, though I do think it is possible to cultivate our susceptibility to it.

Second, and more particularly, philosophy is a field of inquiry into a family of perennial questions such as, "What is justice?" "What is beauty?" "How can I be sure of what I know?" "What is the right thing to do?" and "What is real?" This notion of philosophy follows quite naturally from the one we began with, if we consider that these kinds of questions might be described as questions of ultimate (or at least penultimate) meaning. This gives philosophy a rather particular content, though I would quickly interject that I am not an essentialist, so I don't believe there are any final criteria for what should be meaningful for human beings.

However, I do think it's fair to generalize that for most people, certain questions are more meaningful than others. And I find very useful the description offered by my friends Ann Sharp and Laurance Splitter, that most philosophical questions approach ideas that are of *central* (rather than peripheral) concern to our lives, *common* (rather than idiosyncratic) in human experience, and *contestable* (rather than settled or pre-ordained) in status.

Next, philosophy is a kind of practice—a method of inquiry into the kind of content I have described. What that method is or should be is itself a contestable philosophical issue. In fact, this concern for method—this inquiry into its own means of inquiry—has typified philosophy from the beginning.

I will very briefly describe the practice of philosophical inquiry as I have come to think about it through my association with Philosophy for Children, and that is in terms of its cognitive and social dimensions. By 'cognitive' I mean thinking, though let me say that I believe thinking is something done with the entire body, and that it is a social as well as an individual activity. Philosophy has always included the pursuit of good thinking, where 'good,' to me, means nothing more than 'efficacious' in struggling with questions of a certain kind. Again, being a non-essentialist, I don't think we can ever come up with a set of thinking moves, skills or dispositions that is definitive in that it corresponds to the contours of Truth, or Nature or the human mind. But I do believe that thinking tools have been evolved in various times and places that can help us cope meaningfully with different kinds of experience, and that some of these are useful for many kinds of experience. To this end, facilitators of Philosophy for Children model many kinds of good thinking strategies, engage students in practicing good thinking moves, and in reflection on what it means to think well in various contexts. My own preference is to evaluate our philosophical thinking, not against the standards of logic, but against the results of our inquiry: did the kinds of thinking we engaged in help us construct greater meaning—help us satisfy our philosophical longings?

The social dimension of the practice of philosophy is traceable to Socrates' practice of dialogue, but my own understanding of this dimension derives from the more recent observation of American philosopher Charles Peirce that

Maughn Gregory is Associate Professor with the Department of Educational Foundations at Montclair State University in Montclair, New Jersey, and is Director of the IAPC. The following paper was delivered as a keynote address at I Simpósio Sobre O Ensino De Filosofia [A Symposium on Teaching Philosophy] at Colégio Notre Dame, in Ipanema, Rio De Janeiro, Brazil, July 2002.

philosophy flourishes in a certain kind of environment that he called (and that we in Philosophy for Children still call) the 'community of inquiry.' People in a community of inquiry work together to collectively advance an inquiry around questions of common concern, by carefully considering, challenging, and building on one another's visions and reasons. The community of inquiry makes possible what Peirce called 'self-correction,' meaning to revise our own conceptual, moral or aesthetic judgments, rather than having them corrected by an external authority. Individuals self-correct when they replace some of their previously-held ideas or values with ones they have determined, through the give-and-take of inquiry, to be more adequate (meaningful). Communities also self-correct, in the sense of reconstructing shared understandings and values that can become the bases of collective action.

I acknowledge that I have presented this method of philosophical practice prescriptively, as a recommendation for how it ought to be done, at least for certain purposes. I believe we have to be prescriptive when we define any discipline, so long as we value that discipline, either for itself or for the consequences of practicing it.

The history of philosophy is more or less a record of men and women animated by an intense wonderment to inquire into questions of ultimate meaning for them. My fourth answer, then, is that philosophy is a category of world literature that records centuries of this kind of inquiry. Within academia we sometimes think of philosophy as a canon of thinkers and writers (some of whom, let us not forget, were also warriors and lovers, engineers and poets, as well as philanderers, drunks, Nazis and psychopaths).

However, there is quite a bit of controversy among professional philosophers about who and what belongs to this canon, and even the non-controversial core of even the Western philosophical canon is astounding in its multiplicity.

My remaining two answers to "What is philosophy?" are different contexts in which the practice of philosophy as I have described it takes place. Fifth, then, philosophy exists

as an academic discipline: a field of academic study, a category of professional literature, and a rather exclusive professional community. The purposes of this discipline include the preservation of the philosophical canon, the perpetuation and improvement of the method of philosophical inquiry, and the practice of philosophy itself, i.e. the pursuit of questions of ultimate meaning.

Sixth, however, outside of the profession, philosophy also exists as an amateur hobby, a shared enthusiasm, an individual and social pastime for millions of people. There are countless informal, grass-roots reading clubs, discussion groups, and Socrates Cafés all over the world devoted to philosophical practice. Even more informally, philosophy happens

among friends and family, at dinner tables, in taverns, and on road trips. And of course, philosophy is something many of us do in solitude: in the woods, in reading chairs and in bathtubs. The familiarity of non-professionals with the canon, and their ability to utilize the professional literature that surrounds it, is often weak. But if they take up genuine questions of ultimate meaning and if they are able to inquire carefully into those questions, giving some attention to method, and in particular if they belong to a philosophical community that pays attention to regulating its own practice, then I would call these inquiries 'philosophy' and I should be surprised if they did not often find the meaning



they sought. This latter claim, of course, applies to children as well as to adults.

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The claim that philosophy is good for children will strike some of my colleagues as audacious, because they suppose that it rests on a teleological conception of children that explains what they are meant to become, what they lack now, and what is conducive to directing their growth in that direction. In fact, I must confess that I don't have such of a conceptualization of children or of 'childhood'. The claim I make for philosophy is that it is good for children in just the way it is good for adults, or put another way, the benefits (and perils) that philosophy offers to people apply to children as well as adults. Having said that, I will continue to refer to children, so that my remarks might be more easily applied to educational contexts.

Very simply, the ways I believe philosophy is good for children correspond to the prescription I gave above for the practice of philosophy. The first is as an education in standard tropes of good thinking, dialogue and judgment making, as well as initiation into ongoing inquiry about the nature and uses of these tropes. I do not believe these tropes are trans-cultural, trans-historical truths, but I find them eminently useful and in that regard, worth knowing. Like most tools, we acquire skill in using them only through practice, and I know of no better practice for thinking than the practice of philosophy.

Second, philosophy as I have described it, offers children the experience of collective inquiry: of sharing responsibility for the inquiry with a group of their peers; of relying on one another to maintain the integrity of the inquiry, of making the community intellectually safe for the exploration of multiple viewpoints, of practicing democratic interaction, and of constructing the kind of common understandings and shared interests that make collective action possible and worthwhile. The political implications of enculturating children into such a social practice are profound.

Third, philosophy provides children the opportunity to pursue meaning for themselves, and so to experience and satisfy that special yearning for meaning. Children are of course impressionable, like adults are, and this raises the concern that exposing them to logic and to the ideas of other philosophers (or of their teachers or parents or peers for that matter) will lead them to appropriate other people's meaning rather than to construct their own. I take these concerns seriously, but I believe they need to be balanced against the concern that a lack of exposure to a historical dialogue of ideas, and to a variety of tools of thinking will leave them less able to pursue their yearning for meaning.

Like all prescriptive definitions, the one I have offered harbors the dual dangers of being too narrow, and so excluding other legitimate methods, and of being too broad, and so including illegitimate (i.e. ineffectual) methods. What's at stake, of course, in distinguishing legitimate from

illegitimate methods, is whatever we value about the practice of philosophy. I am not a relativist about these three things I value in that practice, so I don't shrink from the claim that they are good for children. In our dealings with our children I take it that we are unable to be value-neutral even if we wanted to: unable to avoid interacting with them in ways that will impose some of our values on them in ways they are powerless to escape. Education is inescapably a kind of formation. Therefore, I believe that rather than attempt to be value-neutral regarding our children's education, we ought to attempt two other things: First, we ought to try to educate our children in the goals and the means we have evolved for living well, e.g. with health, peace, justice and beauty as we define them. But second, we ought to expect and to prepare our children to reconstruct these goals and means in light of their own experiences and inquiries. There is considerable tension between these two points, but I believe this tension is indicative of the fact that formation can liberate as well as constrain. It reflects our hope that by prescribing education for certain cognitive, emotional and social habits, we will facilitate the kinds of intelligence that will enable our children to live joyfully, and to re-determine for themselves what that might mean.

Finally, philosophy needs children in order to self-correct. The practice and the content of philosophy, as I have described them, are precious enough that we should attempt to preserve and cultivate them, but at the same time we should be liberal enough to allow them to change and grow, and we need children to do both. Let me suggest only three ways that children are good for philosophy. The first is simply that philosophy needs good practitioners, and children very often make excellent practitioners. This is an empirical claim substantiated by a growing field of educational research. Second, insofar as philosophy involves constructing meaning from common and central human experience, and since so much of our experience is shared with the children in our lives, it would be irresponsible for us to inquire into the meaning of that experience without including our children's perspectives: the details they notice, the injustices they feel, the imaginative possibilities they see. To dismiss their input from our inquiry would simply be bad philosophy. Third, I will hazard a generalization that children on the whole are more susceptible than adults to philosophical wonder. Perhaps this is because children are comparatively less socialized. In any case, I have found that in practicing philosophy with children adults are sometimes able to rekindle their own sense of wonder.

The notion of self-correction implies that our most meaningful philosophical judgments are provisional and fallible. We need children to philosophize with us, to help us reconstruct not only our philosophical concepts, but our notions of what philosophy is and what it's for. In these inquiries adults and children won't always be able to yield to one another's visions; but being able to do so sometimes is *an essential aspect of practicing philosophy.*