

## **fink's notion of play in the context of philosophical inquiry with children.**

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### **abstract**

Research in education indicates that the Philosophy for Children (P4C) curriculum is instrumental in achieving important educational objectives. And yet, it is precisely this instrumentalist conception of P4C that has been challenged by a second generation of P4C scholars. Among other things, these scholars argue that P4C must remain vigilant toward, and avoid subscribing to 1) developmentalism and 2) a reductive identification of thinking with rationality. On the contrary, they suggest that P4C must ensure that it gives voice to childhood, allowing it to enter a genuine dialogue with adulthood. Scholars who defend a non-reductive and non-instrumentalist approach to P4C, highlight the significance of play in philosophy sessions with children. In this paper I examine the extent to which the philosophical inquiry that takes place in the context P4C can be understood as a playful activity. I submit that Fink's account of play can help us reach a better understanding of what we mean by play, which in turn can help us examine the compatibility between the activities of P4C and play. In the first part of the paper, I examine some of the basic ideas of P4C and raise the question about the compatibility of philosophical inquiry and play. In the second part of the paper, I engage in a philosophical appreciation of play by drawing on the work of Eugen Fink. In the final part of the paper, I show how play – understood along Fink's lines – is compatible with philosophical inquiry as practiced in school settings.

**keywords:** fink; play; p4wc; philosophical inquiry; play-world; children.

### **la noción de juego de fink en el contexto de la investigación filosófica con niños(as)**

### **resumen**

La investigación en educación indica que el curriculum de Filosofía para Niños (P4C) es instrumental para lograr importantes objetivos educativos. Sin embargo, es precisamente esta concepción instrumentalista de FpN la que ha sido cuestionada por una segunda generación de estudiosos de FpN. Entre otras cosas, estos estudiosos sostienen que FpN debe permanecer vigilante y evitar suscribir 1) el desarrollismo y 2) una identificación reductora del pensamiento a la racionalidad. Por el contrario, sugieren que FpN debe asegurarse dar voz a la infancia, permitiéndole entrar en un auténtico diálogo con la edad adulta. Los estudiosos que defienden un enfoque no reductivo y no instrumentalista de FpN, destacan la importancia del juego en las sesiones de filosofía con niñas y niños. En este artículo examino hasta qué punto la indagación filosófica que tiene lugar en el contexto de FpN puede entenderse como una actividad lúdica. Sostengo que la descripción del juego de Fink puede ayudarnos a comprender mejor lo que entendemos por juego, lo que a su vez puede ayudarnos a examinar la compatibilidad entre las actividades de FpN y el juego. En la primera parte del artículo, examino algunas de las ideas básicas de FpN y planteo la cuestión de la compatibilidad entre investigación filosófica y juego. En la segunda parte del artículo, me dedico a la apreciación filosófica del juego basándome en la obra de Eugen Fink. En la última parte del artículo, muestro

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cómo el juego -entendido según la línea de Fink- es compatible con la indagación filosófica tal y como se practica en el ámbito escolar.

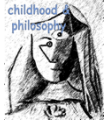
palabras clave: fink; juego; fpcn; investigación filosófica; juego-mundo, niñas/os.

### **a noção de fink de brincar no contexto da investigação filosófica com crianças.**

#### **resumo**

Pesquisas em educação indicam que o currículo de Filosofia para Crianças (FpC) é fundamental para alcançar objetivos educacionais importantes. E, no entanto, é precisamente essa concepção instrumentalista do FpC que foi questionada por uma segunda geração de estudiosos do FpC. Entre outras coisas, esses estudiosos argumentam que P4C deve permanecer vigilante e evitar subscrever 1) desenvolvimentismo e 2) uma identificação redutora do pensamento com a racionalidade. Pelo contrário, sugerem que P4C deve garantir dar voz à infância, permitindo-lhe entrar em diálogo genuíno com a idade adulta. Estudiosos que defendem uma abordagem não redutiva e não instrumentalista da FpC destacam a importância do brincar nas sessões de filosofia com crianças. Neste artigo, examino até que ponto a investigação filosófica tem lugar no contexto FpC pode ser entendida como uma atividade lúdica. Sustento que o relato de jogo de Fink pode nos ajudar a compreender melhor o que entendemos por jogo, o que, por sua vez, pode nos ajudar a examinar a compatibilidade entre as atividades do FpC e o jogo. Na primeira parte do artigo, examino algumas das ideias básicas de FpC e levanto a questão sobre a compatibilidade entre investigação filosófica e jogo. Na segunda parte do artigo, faço uma apreciação filosófica do jogo, baseando-me na obra de Eugen Fink. Na parte final do artigo, mostro como o jogo - entendido segundo a linha de Fink - é compatível com a investigação filosófica praticada em ambientes escolares.

**palavras-chave:** fink; jogar; fpcc; investigação filosófica; jogo-mundo; crianças.



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*philosophy for/with children and play:*

Philosophy is nowadays considered a valuable educational experience in many countries of the world. Researchers have attempted to measure the extent to which philosophy is instrumental to the development of skills such as problem solving and critical thinking, but also whether it contributes to the achievement of basic educational goals such as numeracy, reading and writing skills.<sup>2</sup> But even if philosophy does contribute to the above, its educational significance cannot be reduced to the development of such skills. As it has been often argued, philosophy, as practiced in school settings, is an invitation for students to engage in meaning-discovery, communal deliberation and inclusive democratic practices that allow them to negotiate, question and potentially transform their environment (Vansieleghem and Kennedy, 2011, p. 178; Murriss, 2016, p. 64). Students are thus not merely introduced to certain transferable skills, they are actually being invited to think “out of the ordinary” (Murriss, 2016, p. 64) or use their imagination to rearrange and reframe ideas and beliefs (Haynes, 2003, p. 42).

The most prominent figure giving birth to the idea of engaging pre-college students in philosophical thinking is Mathew Lipman. Lipman's philosophy for children (P4C) programme, developed with Anne Sharp at Montclair University, primarily focused on the development of the critical thinking skills that Lipman found missing from university students (Lipman, 2011, p. 2). Lipman's motivating conviction was that philosophy, “when properly reconstructed and properly taught”, can “bring about a significant improvement of thinking in education” (Lipman, 2003, p. 3).<sup>3</sup> Apart from critical thinking, however, P4C seeks to incorporate creativity, emotions and ethical thinking in its curriculum (Lipman, 2011, p. 9). These skills are considered important for the emergence of a society ““in which excellence flourishes in diversity and abundance” (Lipman, 2003, p. 3). In a discussion about the normative commitments of the P4C curriculum, Gregory recalls Sharp saying: “We are committed to procedures of inquiry, and practices of

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<sup>2</sup> See Trickle & Topping (2004). For a more recent research on the topic See Gorard et al (2017).

<sup>3</sup> See also Weber, 2011, p. 68.

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political and ethical interdependence that we take to be normative; and...to the aim of practical wisdom, or better ways to live" (Gregory, 2011, p. 206). The P4C curriculum, therefore, challenges the binary between theoretical activity and practice. Theoretical activity is not understood as a solitary and detached activity, but rather as an activity that can help children to get a grip of their environment, but also influence it (Vansieleghem and Kennedy, 2011, pp. 174-175).

It is commonly accepted that the P4C curriculum goes against teacher-centred approaches to education which aim to the transition of knowledge from the old to the young (Lipman and Sharp, 1978, p. 85; Lipman, 2011, p. 3) As Bleazby argues, P4C is incompatible with absolutism and "banking teaching" (Bleazby, 2011, pp. 454-455).<sup>4</sup> But although the P4C curriculum problematizes absolutism and teacher-centred methods of education, a new generation of P4C researchers and practitioners have put under scrutiny certain aspects of Lipman's approach. To give some examples, Van der Leeuw (2009) challenges the pervasive focus on analytical skills in Lipman's novels and manuals. Biesta (2011) problematizes the strong orientation toward knowledge exhibited by certain practitioners and researchers of P4C. Kohan (2014) argues that P4C tacitly subscribes to a developmentalist account of education, whereby children are being formed according to a specific political agenda. Weber talks about the danger of subscribing to a methodological monism – namely a reductive identification of thinking with rationality (informal logic) that seems to "suppress other approaches – such as phenomenology, hermeneutics or speculation" (2011, p. 237).

These thinkers who put the P4C curriculum under such a scrutiny have been called by Ronald Reed and Tony Johnson (1999), the second generation of P4C. Nevertheless, as Vansieleghem and Kennedy note, the second generation is not so much interested in criticizing its predecessors but in improving P4C practice by enriching it with insights from contemporary developments in philosophy (2011, p. 77). It could be argued that key figures of the second generation accentuate or develop further, certain elements that may not have been

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<sup>4</sup> "Banking Teaching" is a term coined by Paulo Freire to describe a method of teaching where the student passively stores information that are communicated to her by the teacher (Freire, 1993, p. 54). For a critical discussion of the relationship between Freire and Lipman see Kohan (2018)

sufficiently thematized and developed by their predecessors. Such a constructive criticism has led to the transition from philosophy for children (P4C) to philosophy with children (PwC) (Haynes and Murriss, 2013, p. 1084).<sup>5</sup>

For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on how key figures of the second generation understand the child-world relation, and how they consider play as an important feature of this relation. Insofar as the child-world relation is concerned, there is a cross-generational, so to speak, consensus that this relationship is one of an interplay between adaptation to and reconstruction of the world (Sharp, 1987, p. 41; Bleazby, 2011, p. 462). Meaning-discovery and meaning-creation are important features of Lipman's curriculum, but they have now come to the forefront and further elaborated by some contemporary scholars (Lipman et al., 1980; Van der Leeuw, 2009; Vansieleghem and Kennedy, 2011; Haynes and Murriss, 2013). This in turn, has opened the discussion about how P4wC gives to children the opportunity to challenge readily held beliefs, enables them to reflect on the possibility of a better world and encourages them to initiate change (Vansieleghem, 2005, Haynes and Murriss, 2012; Haynes and Murriss, 2013). It is precisely this child-world relation, cultivated by P4wC, that has convinced certain scholars about the significance of relating P4wC to play (Kennedy, 1999, 2002; Haynes, 2009 Weber, 2011). The imaginative, creative power of children and even their playful attitude are now considered as dispositions that enrich philosophical inquiry. Furthermore, children are considered as equal-partners in meaning-making (Murriss, 2000; Haynes and Murriss, 2013).

Nevertheless, it is this playful and imaginative aspect of play that could raise some doubts about the prospect of children doing philosophy. Does not philosophizing amount to a serious and rigorous way of thinking? Does not play and its naivete contradict the critical spirit of philosophy? Eugen Fink summarizes such a perspective toward philosophy in the following words:

There appears to exist a "hostility" between the image-laden, creative imaginative powers of play and conceptual thought. The human being at play does not think, and the thinking human being does not play (Fink, 2016, p. 78).

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<sup>5</sup> As I do not wish to draw a sharp distinction between P4C and PwC I will from now in use the abbreviation P4wC when I refer to contemporary uses of P4C or PwC.

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According to Fink, such a disposition toward play is deeply rooted in the Western philosophical tradition and goes back to Plato's dialogues. I will say more about Fink's account of play in the following section. It is important, however, to stress here that Fink gives an elaborate account of Plato's disposition toward play and how it has influenced modern assumptions about it. According to Fink, Plato is ambiguous toward play. On the one hand, there are numerous playful elements in Plato's work such as irony and the playful seriousness of his dialogues (Krell, 1972, p. 78). On the other hand, however, Plato downgrades the philosophical significance of play, recognizing, at best, the instrumental role of play in preparing children for adulthood (Fink, 2016, p. 98).<sup>6</sup> This ambiguity of Plato towards play is discerned by Smith (2011) who analyses it in relation to the Socratic credentials of P4wC. The problem can be formulated thusly: Although P4wC claims to be Socratic in its methods, in certain dialogues Plato has Socrates arguing that the playfulness of young people, who will possibly "contradict just for the fun of the thing", makes them unsuitable for philosophy (Republic, 539 c). In other words, even though P4wC understands its Socratism as something aligned with a certain kind of playfulness, Socrates himself has expressed his qualms about the compatibility of play and philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

What is then, the relationship between P4wC and play? Lipman himself does not develop an explicit account of the relationship of P4C and play. Nevertheless, as Smith observes, already since 1978 Lipman and Sharp talk about the significance of allowing different styles of thinking in a P4C setting (Smith, 2011, p. 222). In Lipman's and Sharp's words: "Children's philosophical practice may take many forms: there is the play of ideas which is sometimes casual and spontaneous, at other times studied and architectonic" (Lipman and Sharp, 1978, p. 87). Lipman makes a few more references to play In *Thinking in Education*.

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<sup>6</sup> This ambiguous relation of Plato to play, is nicely portrayed in D' Angour's paper "Plato and Play". D' Angour acknowledges that there are certain playful aspects in Plato's dialogues, but argues that Plato remains suspicious of play (especially spontaneous play) and reduces its positive attributes to the directing of "children's tastes and inclinations to the role they will fulfil as adults" (D' Angour, 2013, p. 299). For a reading that focuses on the playful aspects of Plato's philosophy see Ardley (1967).

<sup>7</sup> Smith makes a reference to the distinction between playfulness and dialectic in the *Theaetetus* (Smith, 2011, p. 223).



There, his account is rather ambiguous. “Those who converse with one another”, he says, “do so cooperatively, like tennis players volleying genially and interminably as they practice. Those who engage in dialogue do so collaboratively, like law enforcement officers working together on the same case” (Lipman, 2003, p. 88). Lipman ascribes a negative connotation to the word “play” as he links it to non-purposive conversation that is, philosophically speaking, less valuable than dialogical inquiry which is “characterized by dialogue that is disciplined by logic” (p. 92). Does this mean that dialogical inquiry and play do not go together? Elsewhere, he seems to suggest the opposite as he compares the mental moves that take place in a philosophical inquiry with “the distinctive moves made by a chess player” (p. 150). The impression one gets from these seemingly contradicting suggestions is that Lipman is open to the idea of understanding philosophical inquiry in terms of play, provided that play is not reduced to a free and aimless activity. He says, for example, that the moral imagination taking place in P4C sessions is not to be identified with a mere playful dealing with fictions (p. 14). He also states that the way to redeem children spontaneity is not through breaks of free play (p. 14).

As I have indicated, the second generation of P4wC scholars elaborate on topics that have not been adequately addressed by their predecessors. Practitioners and scholars related to P4wC have often highlighted the playfulness that characterizes philosophical inquiry with children, proposing thus a more elaborate account of play than the one offered by Lipman. To give some examples, Haynes (2008) makes constant references to the playfulness with which children engage in P4wC activities. Kennedy (2002) calls for the need to balance ourselves between “play and work, autonomy and interdependence, the pleasure principle and the reality principle” (p. 166). Weber (2011) engages in an analysis of Schiller’s criticism of Kant to highlight a similar balance between the sensuous and the formal drive, guaranteed by the ludic drive. In the following, I will attempt to contribute to the discussion on the relationship between P4wC and play, by exploring Eugen Fink’s philosophical reflections on play. As far as I know, Fink has not been mentioned in studies relating to the topic, notwithstanding the fact

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that he developed a rich account of play. I submit that Fink's account of play can help us reach a better understanding of what we mean by play, which in turn can help us examine the compatibility between P4wC and play.

### *fink's philosophy of play*

Eugen Fink belongs to what is often called the “philosophical movement of phenomenology”. Notwithstanding the fact that he is not among the most prominent names in this movement, he is, as Moran suggests, “the most speculative of his generation of phenomenologists” (Moran, 2007, p. 4). Apart from his phenomenological credentials (he was a highly valued assistant of Husserl and a colleague of Heidegger), Fink directed his speculative philosophy in a Nietzschean direction, situated play at the centre of his thinking (Fink, 2003) and suggested that play is a concept that determines the constitution of human beings through and through (Fink, 2016, p. 204; Bruzina, 2004, p. 532; Moran, 2007, p. 21). Also, on a matter that is relevant to the topic of this paper, Fink was explicitly concerned with the relationship between philosophy and pedagogy. Pedagogy, he says, is understood differently when humans are understood as created in the image of a perfect God and differently if “the human being's essence is ‘play’ and a few other things, such as ‘work’ or ‘ruling’” (Fink, 2016, p. 265). Fink's analysis of play is rather complex and touches upon issues of cosmology, philosophical anthropology, ontology and pedagogy. A comprehensive analysis of his concept of play deserves a paper on its own and exceeds the scope of this paper. In the following, I will draw from Fink's work four aspects of play that can help us explore the relationship between play and P4wC. These features are: 1) transcendence, 2) meaning, 3) rules, 4) sociality.

Fink challenges both therapeutic and developmental accounts of play because they ostracize play to the periphery of human life and thus fail to thematize play as a fundamental phenomenon of human existence. According to Fink, therapeutic accounts of play ascribe to it a legitimate, yet marginal role in human life. This is so, because they treat play merely as a “relaxing break” from





the burden of our everyday duties; “as a running away from the resistance of things into a dreamy, utopian realm” (2016, p. 16). For Fink, much like Huizinga (1955), play is an intrinsically valuable activity for human life.<sup>8</sup> Accounts that reduce play to a therapeutic break from work, describe it merely as a negative phenomenon and fail to do justice to its intrinsic worth. The same applies to developmental accounts of play, that treat play as a means of preparing children for adult life:

Behind this well-known pedagogical experiment, we find the common view that play belongs, above all during childhood, to the psychic constitution of the human being and then increasingly recedes in the course of development (Fink, 2016, 17).

Developmentalist accounts of play are nowadays criticized, among other things, for the objectification of childhood (See Gibbons, 2007). Fink traces the source of developmentalism in Plato’s description of play as a mirror-image; namely, as a reproduction of serious life. Such an account of play is, according to Fink, not entirely ungrounded but indicative of a disillusioned and detached mode of observation that distances itself from the concrete action of play (Fink, 2016, p. 108; 114). This disenchantment, he suggests, has an ontological ground. It rests on the distinction between true being and transient appearances. In this dualistic scheme, play has a positive role to play only insofar as it escorts the soul to truth. If, however, children-at-play are carried away from the seductive power of play, then their play removes them further from truth. As D’ Angour observes (2013, p. 300), in book seven of Plato’s *Laws* we find references to the risk of letting children introduce novelties into their games. If they are allowed to do so, they “grow up into men different from their fathers; and being thus different themselves, they seek a different mode of life, and having sought this, they come to desire other institutions and laws; and none of them dreads the consequent approach of that result which we described just now as the greatest of all banes” (Laws VII, 798c). Play is thus understood by Plato as being a carrier of a certain transcendence, but this transcendence is pedagogically valuable only insofar as it leads someone to an ultimate goal that is exterior to play (Fink, 2016, p. 115). For

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<sup>8</sup> For a comparison between Fink’s account of play and other philosophies of play, see Halák (2016).

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this reason, the job of the educator is to avail of play with the aim of turning "the tastes and desires of the children in the direction of that object which forms their ultimate goal" (Laws I, 643c). For example, the future builder must play with toy houses. The job of the lawgiver, in turn, is to allow some space for play, but only insofar as play is conducive to the proper education of children and citizens (Laws VII, 797aff), the highest of all goals being an acquaintance with "the true Being of the idea" (Fink, 2016, p. 115).

Fink challenges this account of play and suggests that play is characterized by a transcendence that does not "allow itself to be incorporated without further ado into the complex architecture of purposes" (2016, p. 20). What differentiates play from work (for example) is that play has its internal purposes and does not occur with reference to an external purpose (pp. 20-21). In order to understand this last point a few words about Fink's phenomenological understanding of the world-human relation are in order. Fink, like Heidegger, holds that the specific characteristic that differentiates human beings from other modes of existence, is their *being-in-the-world*. Human beings, Fink says, are inner-worldly beings in the sense that they relate to other beings (e.g., objects, concepts, etc.) by way of an implicit directedness toward a meaningful and contextualizing whole (i.e., the world). What this means, is that humans are not in the world in the same way that we usually take other beings (chairs, cars, stones, etc) to be in the world. Human beings have an understanding relationship to a contextualizing whole, and this understanding relationship is what makes possible a meaningful comportment toward beings. (p. 66; p. 202). This directedness, however, is implicit rather than explicit for two reasons. First of all, because the world does not share the structure of other beings; it is not an object with such and such properties, and therefore cannot be grasped in a way that an object or a concept is grasped. Second, because more often than not we are absorbed in our everyday dealings with beings and remain unaware of the underlying sense that holds together our activities. The world is for the most part understood by us simply as the sum total of the things that we encounter and the events that we experience in our everyday activities.



The world, according to this “natural attitude”, to use Husserl’s term, is unquestionably taken for granted as simply there (Bruzina, 2004, p. 175).

Following in the footsteps of Husserl and Heidegger, Fink talks about a world-constraint and a naïve, unquestioning submission to the world, indicating that for the most part, in our everyday dealings with things we – without realizing it – are carriers of certain biases and pre-judgements about how things stand (Fink, 1972, pp. 8-10). In a way, these prejudgements constitute what we could call a status quo which remains unquestioned and is taken as a natural fact. As Brinkmann and Friesen suggest, education (*Bildung*) for Fink, is a practice that enables us to free ourselves from this “natural attitude” and prompts us to take a broader perspective on reality (2018, p. 598).

Having the above in mind, we can now explore why Fink ascribes to play a special way of revealing what for the most part remains unnoticed – namely, the contextualizing world on the grounds of which our activities acquire significance. Fundamental activities such as work, play and struggle, he suggests, imply an understanding of the contextualizing world. To use Heidegger’s (2009) famous example, when someone uses a hammer, her activity relates to numerous other beings. It relates to other objects, for example, the nail or the table that is being fixed. But it also relates to other human beings, for example, those who will use the table for a specific purpose. All these relations constitute the context of meaningful relations within which the hammering takes place. Nevertheless, in play a peculiar understanding is in place. In play we understand our world and at the same time we open up other dimensions of this world (Fink, 2016; p. 202). Our ordinary concern with beings most of the times serves an ultimate purpose. This is to say, that most of our activities are oriented toward the future. We work for the sake of making ends meet and we struggle for achieving certain futural goals. When we are working or struggling toward a goal that is important for our future “the human realm appears ‘enclosed,’ autarchic in itself, nowhere pointing beyond itself” (p. 205). Play, however, differs. The peculiarity of play resides in the way that it transposes us from a realm of actual beings and determinate goals to a realm of phantasy. Fink admits that in play, as much as in work and struggle, one

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comports herself toward other beings (e.g., playthings, players, etc). Nevertheless, he insists that play is more than this. In play, we open up an unreal sphere of meaning – a play-world. The play-world is unreal in the sense that it resists being assimilated “into the context of the actual world” (p. 205). In the context of the “actual world” we strive to keep the actual from the non-actual or the tangible from the imagined separate (p. 209). When working toward a particular end we want to keep our imagination in check. This is apparent even in cases where imagination is seen as important for helping us overcome a particular obstacle, or to think “out of the box”. In such cases, imagination is not understood as an end in itself, but merely as a means for achieving a specific pre-established goal. To put this differently, even in cases where we use imagination for the sake of achieving a specific task, the world of our solid tasks and actualities remains unaffected.

Things, however, are different with play. At play, “we are not bound to the fixed orbit of actuality [...] We can rethink things, we can imagine their figures and properties in ways other than how they are” (p. 243). The play-world that is opened up by human play is, of course, not detached from the actual world. Fink is careful to note that the play-world is grounded on the actual world. And yet, play is irreducible to a mere imitation of the actual world. In play we mix the actual and non-actual without inhibition (p. 209). What is peculiar about the play-world is that it is at once actual and non-actual; “a sphere that is here and yet not here, now and yet not now” (p. 205). The play-world is significant because it is simultaneously less and more in comparison to actual things (p. 209). It is less in the sense that it does not have the concreteness and irreversibility of the actual world, but it is more because lights up possibilities that remain hidden; As Alvis (2019) puts it, play liberates us “from the rigidities in which mundane, everyday life presents itself” (p. 89).

Play is, therefore, not of a piece with other ordinary activities since it does not occur under the pressure of a goal-oriented life. Does this mean that play is purposeless and senseless? Anyone who has ever played would know the act of playing is never meaningless for the players, even if occasionally it appears meaningless to the non-participants. Fink highlights the intrinsic meaningfulness



of play and he also uses the term “play of sense” (*Sinn-Spiel*), to describe this kind of play in which the child already imaginatively forms a fictive “play-world” and gives itself a “role” in it. In way that resembles Winnicott’s observations about how the child becomes aware of its environment through play, Fink suggests that the “play of sense” is the “child’s first sense-imbued engagement with its environment, is the beginning of a self-relation and world-relation” (Fink, 2016, p. 227).<sup>9</sup> But Fink does not simply affirm that play helps children become aware of their environment. He goes as far as to suggest that play has the potential to create meaning, affirming in this way, precisely the innovative element that made Plato suspicious of play.

Each generation, each new surging wave of life brings a unique and original tone to the immemorial melody of human life, lives from an obscure and almost unconscious inner anticipation of life toward the future, to a certain degree as a vital project (2016, p. 227).

Through play, children (but not only children) open up a play-world that blurs the distinction between actual and non-actual. What is important to bear in mind is that play is a par-excellence meaningful activity, since it does not only imply an understanding, but it has the potential of liberating us from certain prejudgements that we unwittingly and unquestionably subscribe to and prompts us to actively engage in meaning-creation. Having established that play is one of the fundamental ways in which humans relate to the world, Fink suggests that the task of pedagogy is to “penetrate kinds of play” without channelling the productive imagination of children too strictly (2016, p. 265).

Another key element that characterizes play, according to Fink, is rules. Fink is suspicious toward accounts of play that treat it as free and unruly play. Play, for Fink is not unlimited and unruly:

One might believe that the charm of wholly free play in unrestricted improvisation is greatest. The pleasure of returning to the beginning, to the freedom before chaos.” However, that is *not* the case [...] Precisely the child places the greatest value on the observation of and compliance with the rules of the game. (2016, p. 266)

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<sup>9</sup> According to Winnicott, children at play, occupy and negotiate a space which is neither identified to their inner world, nor to an utterly external world, but points to the co-dependency of the former and the latter (2009, p. 55).

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The play that children enjoy is quite often characterized by certain rules, no matter how obscure or flexible these rules might be. "One cannot play at all without something binding being determined and adopted. And yet the rules of play are not laws" (p. 23) As Boronat notes, breaking the rules of a game is not the same as breaking the laws of ordinary life: "Breaking the law in normal life can have unpleasant consequences; breaking the rules of play means stopping the game (or even starting a new one" (Boronat, 2017, p. 102). The rules of the game are instantly changeable and thus not the same as laws. When at play we can always change the rules if the rest of the players agree, and the new rules that we decide upon constitute the binding force of our new activity (Fink, 2016, 23). Fink draws specific pedagogical insights from the negotiation of rules that occurs in play. In play, children freely subordinate themselves in self-imposed rules (2016, p. 267) which, as we have indicated, are subject to change and thus provisional. This means that through play children become active participants in the creation of meaningful relations or order, but at the same time they remain alert to the provisional nature of the produced meaning.<sup>10</sup>

The final characteristic of play that I would like to discuss is its social aspect. Fink defines play as "a distinctive mode of human being together." and as a "more relaxed form of sociability" (p. 258).

It [play] socially and joyfully brings human beings together in entertaining and short-lived communities. It binds and releases with a gentle hand. It fascinates and enchants, relaxes and carries us away for a while from our burdens, offices, duties. It frees us from our real situation and brings marvelous possibilities before us (p. 234)

It is important to remember that Fink does not subscribe to the view that play simply "carries us away from our burdens". Rather, he ascribes to play a positive role that is irreducible to therapeutics. Play is a fundamental way of being-together and has the added value of opening up new possibilities for us. Play implies, and brings about, a shared understanding of the game and its rules. Even in the case of solitary playing, the other player has to assume the existence of other players, together with a shared understanding among the imaginary players.

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<sup>10</sup> This relates to Fink's understanding of education as the production of meaning that is provisional in nature (See Brinkmann and Friesen, pp. 597-598).



A corollary to this is that even in solitary play, the player tacitly acknowledges her sociality. Furthermore, Fink does not shy away from hinting at the pedagogical implications of a philosophically nuanced account of play.

In particular, he challenges both child-centred and teacher-centred accounts of play because, as he says, they exclude the teacher from the community of play (2016, p. 269). Child-centred approaches exclude the educator as they argue for the significance of unmediated play, whereas in teacher-centred approaches the educator is merely responsible for structuring the educational game beforehand. In both cases the educators are not part of the community of play; they are not considered as players. Contrary to both approaches to play, Fink claims that the highest pedagogical possibilities occur when the educator is part of the community of play (Fink, 2016, 269). With such a claim Fink sheds light on how play encourages the cross-generational co-existence of adult and child, educator and student. From a pedagogical lens, the play-world is a place where not only the child can learn from the adult, but child and adult can learn from each other (Fink, 1970, p. 206).<sup>11</sup>

### *philosophical inquiry- a playful activity?*

Having analysed some of the key features of Fink's account of play, I would now like to explore the possibility of understanding the activities taking place in the context of P4wC as playful activities. In a community of philosophical inquiry, students are first introduced to a stimulus that provokes them to think and ask philosophical questions (e.g., a novel, a video, an object, etc). After that, the students are given some time to discuss their thoughts on the stimulus and then get to decide on one question that will be the focal point of the community of philosophical inquiry. The facilitator has an auxiliary role in this process, as it is the students who decide the topic of the discussion. Nonetheless, the facilitator remains active throughout the inquiry, moderating the discussion and engaging in facilitating moves (when needed) that help the discussion move forward.

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the educational co-existence of adult and child in Fink see Shchytsova (2019).

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In their paper "Playing with Philosophy", Laura D'Olimpio and Christoph Teschers (2017) argue for the merits of combining dramaturgical play and P4wC. D'Olimpio and Teschers show how drama-play can be used as a stimulus for a philosophical inquiry that will assist students to engage empathetically with the characters of the story. They do this by availing themselves of Nussbaum's suggestion that novels help us sharpen our moral attention by engaging with fictional characters in a safe fictional environment, and then putting our moral attention to work in actual life (Nussbaum, 1990). It is interesting to notice that for Fink as well, theater and role-play are exemplary occasions of play where the actual and not actual mingle (Fink, 2016, p. 256). Drama-play and narrative artworks are indeed excellent stimuli for philosophical inquiry as they open up what Fink would call a "play-world" within which students can open up new possibilities without feeling the burden that our usual activities carry with them. I would, nevertheless, like to suggest that it is not only the stimulus that introduces a playful aspect to the philosophical inquiry with children. The philosophical inquiry itself has all the elements one needs in order to think of it as a playful activity.

Although the participants of a community of philosophical inquiry do not enact a fictional character, they are being asked to wear their "philosophy hats" and act in an "as if" fashion. An interesting example is when students are being asked to argue for the opposite position than the one that they originally had. This activity need not be understood as a practice in sophistry or sterile argumentation, but as a practice that encourages students to be creative and think about possibilities that their initial position might have excluded.

During the philosophical inquiry students are being encouraged to engage imaginatively with different views and arguments in a safe and protected environment, guaranteed by the idea that the participants constitute a community of inquirers that are interested in moving the inquiry forward and not in engaging in conflicts that would spoil the game. P4wC can therefore be understood as a kind of play that involves a more flexible approach to what one thinks and believes – without subscribing to extreme relativism, as this would lead the





inquiry to a stalemate. The personal experiences of children are removed from the strict concern with the personal (e.g., should I share my toys with my brother) to the world of interpersonal relations within which issues of sharing emerge (e.g., what is sharing? Why is sharing important?). To put this differently, the rules of the “game” imply a kind of transcendence from the strictly subjective to the intersubjective. Children are being asked to put an emphasis on the inquiry, and they are encouraged to walk on other persons shoes, to be exploratory in their thinking, change their minds and express thoughts that might challenge the status quo or even their own predispositions (Haynes, 2008, p. 66). The environment is safe for such an exploration and is not subjected to the exigencies and expectations that characterize our everyday practices. This is not to say that the topics discussed are not related to our everyday practices, but that we do not feel the same burden about them. A characteristic example is the use of hypotheticals. P4wC encourages students to think freely about serious issues by way of hypotheticals. For example, the students can reflect on how the world would be if there were no rules. Precisely, because students are reflecting on a hypothetical scenario, they are freer to give their gut responses (e.g., I would steal that which I desire) and from there to move to more elaborate accounts about why this could be wrong or use their imagination to think about possible scenarios where stealing could or could not be justified.

Play, Fink says, “is a non-binding reaching out into the possible”. Play encourages this “reaching out” by unfettering us from our “factual bondage” and by allowing the situation to appear as not irremediable (2016, p. 266). Elsewhere, he says that play “restores to us a freedom from responsibility that we experience with pleasure” (2016, p. 207). This description, I argue, gives a perfect account of what happens in the context of a philosophical inquiry with children. Of course, one could think that this freedom might be too much; some may think that this lack of responsibility is too risky. What would happen if children in the circle did not feel responsible for what they are saying? Are we not risking ending up with cases of ridicule, bullying, disrespect, and in general lack of kindness? Here, it is important to remember that P4wC has its internal rules. These rules protect

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students from engaging in disrespectful conduct. The "non-responsibility" here, should not be understood as indifference toward the other, but as a chance to think freely and be open to changing your original opinion without feeling the burden of peer or teacher pressure.

As we have seen Fink's account of play allows us to think of rules as a positive characteristic of play. The fact that P4wC has its internal rules, should therefore not obstruct us from understanding it as a playful activity. There are of course certain rules that the community of philosophical inquiry abides to, but these rules are not there for the sake of securing a particular result, but for the sake of enabling the inquiry in the first place. How can we have a meaningful inquiry as a group if we do not carefully listen and respect each other, and in general if we do not establish some rules that will allow the inquiry to kick off? The limits set by these ground rules are not to be understood as restrictions but as starting positions for the inquiry. Heidegger's reflection on the Greek word for *peras*, translated as boundary or limit, is useful here. According to Heidegger, a boundary, in the Greek sense of the word, does not name that at which something stops, but that at which something begins (Heidegger, 2000, p. 63).<sup>12</sup> The limits that the rules of P4wC demarcate are therefore not to be understood or experienced as restrictions. Most importantly, they function as enabling limits, which move us from infinite possibilities to a horizon of determinate possibilities that we can negotiate.<sup>13</sup> Fink is quite insightful in this regard when he observes that binding oneself to the rules of play is, more often than not experienced pleurably and positively (Fink, 2016, p. 23). Furthermore, the rules of P4wC are subject to change as the group becomes accustomed and internalizes the process of the philosophical inquiry (Haynes, 2008, p. 21). Proof that the children participating in a community of inquiry immediately grasp the flexibility of the rules, is the confidence with which they propose changes (e.g., instead of talking randomly to talk one by one in a circle, or to allocate some time to the students that have not spoken much). Once more, Fink's distinction between the binding rules of a game and the rules of ordinary

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of Heidegger's account of *peras*, see Malpas (2006).

<sup>13</sup> As a sidenote it is interesting to note that primary students occasionally discern this function of rules and limits, when they are asked to reflect on the significance of rules in our lives.



life is helpful here. The community of philosophical inquiry is encouraged to discuss and negotiate the rules of the inquiry and agree to change some rules if they feel that this will make the inquiry more fruitful and more enjoyable. What is important here, is not simply the fact that philosophical inquiry can be understood as play despite the fact that it has internal rules. Pedagogically speaking, what is of utmost importance is the way that students are encouraged to reflect on the importance of rules and they are given the opportunity to be active participants in the formation of new rules while remaining alert to the provisional nature of these rules.

Another feature of P4wC that is relevant for our reflection is that of collaborative meaning-making. From Mathew Lipman up to what has been called the “second generation” of P4wC, meaning discovery and meaning-creation have been salient features of the community of philosophical inquiry (Lipman et al., 1980; Van der Leeuw, 2009; Vansieleghem and Kennedy, 2011; Haynes and Murriss, 2013). As Vansieleghem and Kennedy (2011) put it, even in the early formulation of the P4C curriculum, “philosophy is no longer regarded as a theoretical activity separated from the world, but rather as a potential that has to (and can) be developed in order to get a grip on one’s interactions with one’s environment, and to influence change.” (p. 175). The transformative potential of philosophical inquiry is highlighted by numerous scholars of the second generation (e.g., Vansieleghem, 2005; Haynes and Murriss, 2012, 2013; Haynes, 2008). These features of P4wC, I submit, tally nicely with the way that Fink examines the world-human relation through play.

As we have seen, in play we open up an unreal sphere of meaning, namely, the play-world. What is peculiar about the play-world is that it blends the actual and the non-actual, giving children the chance to experiment in a safe environment. It is this blending of the actual and non-actual that is helpful for a better understanding of what transpires in a community of philosophical inquiry. Building on Fink’s phenomenology of play, we can say that during the philosophical inquiry, students are given the chance to appropriate their world and open up this world to new possibilities. Through this process children get to

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understand their world but are also given the opportunity to reflect on hidden opportunities, and why not, transform it (influence change). To give a specific example, in a philosophical inquiry about the purpose of education, children are given the chance to "make sense of their educational experience as a whole" (Pritchard 2018), but at the same time to transform their relation to the meaningful horizon within which they find themselves in - i.e., the schooling environment. This means that students get to thematize the meaning and purpose of the schooling environment, but they also become active participants in the development of this environment.

As for the social and interpersonal aspect of P4wC, we have already hinted at how the sociality of children is enhanced through play (e.g., movement from the personal to the intersubjective, collective meaning-creation, negotiation of rules, etc). What is equally relevant here, however, is Fink's way of dismantling the adult-child separation. Fink's suggestion for the inclusion of the adult/teacher in the community of play tallies nicely with the role that the facilitator has in the community of philosophical inquiry. A key feature of P4wC is that the facilitators themselves are part of the community. This does not mean that the educator will express his/her thoughts and guide the students toward a particular answer. As Kennedy suggests, the community of philosophical inquiry aims at a gradual self-regulation that is achieved through a process of transformation that occurs in a dialogue between the participants. The role of the facilitator in this process is not that of an epistemic authority who instils knowledge to the students. Rather, "the goal of the facilitator is to distribute his or her function and thereby become just another member of the group." (Kennedy, 2004, p. 753). The authority of the facilitator must gradually recede as the group appropriates and internalizes his/her function. The way Kennedy puts it is enlightening, as he suggests that the facilitator teaches the art of playing to the participants (p. 759) and that his or her role transforms as the group becomes more familiar with the "game". As the community of philosophical inquiry comes closer to becoming self-regulated, the facilitator becomes more of a player and can make stronger contributions to the discussion "because the rest of the group is, in turn, strong". (p. 761) In other



words, the facilitator moves from being the one who invites children to enter the play-world of philosophical inquiry to being a part of this play-world. Given the above, the facilitator is unlike the non-participant lawgiver or the educator whose role, as portrayed in Plato's *Laws*, is to allow for play only to the extent that it prepares children for the achievement of external and pre-established goals. The P4wC facilitator introduces the art of playing to the participants and as the group matures, she becomes part of the community of inquiry and thus part of a cross-generational play of concepts and ideas.

### *conclusion*

In this paper I have tried to suggest that play is not only an important dimension of philosophy with children programmes, but that play is indeed conducive to the development of a flourishing philosophical inquiry with children. Drawing on Fink's exploration of play we can think of philosophical inquiry with children as a practice that opens up a play-world within which children are given the opportunity 1) to reach a better understanding of their world, 2) to collectively create their own understanding of reality, 3) to freely subordinate themselves in self-imposed rules and creatively negotiate these rules and 4) to do all of the above by way of a cross-generational dialogue that brings together educators and students.

Although the focus of my paper has been limited to the relationship between P4wC and play, one may tacitly wonder if philosophy in general has an intrinsic relation to play. I will not endeavour to give a conclusive answer to this question, but I would like to point to what Fink says about the relationship between philosophy and play. Fink problematizes the traditional view of philosophy as the opposite of play. This opposition, he says, stems from the traditional view of philosophy as a desire for the absolute light that will eliminate complexity, etc. Philosophy in that sense is characterized by "an ice-cold conceptuality" and "abstract reflection" (Fink, 2016, p. 229). Fink, however, argues for an intertwined relation between philosophy and play. Although philosophy is supposed to cast doubt on what is readily given and traditional, it also "strives for

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distinct clarity in the knowledge of beings" (p. 229). The latter tendency of philosophical thinking obstructs it from coming to terms with a complex, polysemous and fragmented reality. Philosophy, as it has been developed in Western history, has a disenchanting gaze. It reduces "manifold phenomena to the outline of what is essential, the conceptual insight into the structure of things" (p. 230). Such an ontology is tacitly at work in the contemporary world of science and technology, where what counts as real is that which we can grasp with certitude (Halák, 2016, p. 202). In contrast, play "goes around confidently with a broken, fragmented 'understanding of Being'" (Fink, 2016, p. 229). In other words, when at play, we encounter squarely that which philosophy flees from. Philosophy relates to appearances only negatively. It strives to set aside appearance in the name of what is truly actual. Play, however, exhibits a positive relation to appearances, and in that sense, problematizes the traditional philosophical preoccupation with indubitable certainty. One could therefore claim that play enhances philosophical reflection, moving it beyond a reductive understanding of reality, and allowing it to remain open to the complex and polysemous character of human existence.

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