# Does Developing Moral Thinking Skills lead to Moral Action?
## Developing Moral Proprioception

### Maria daVenza Tillmanns

**Abstract**:  This paper explores the relationship between thinking and acting morally. Can we transfer critical thinking skills to real life situations? Philosophical practice with clients as well as with school children creates a context for not only being a critical and reflective thinker but also a *self*-critical thinker and *self*-reflective thinker. In his book *On Dialogue,* David Bohm explores the notion of proprioception of thinking; focusing on thinking as a movement. The tacit, concrete process of thinking informs our actions in a way that rational thinking by itself cannot. We can try to impose rational thinking on our tacit, concrete process of thinking but knowing how to be just abstractly, for example, does not necessarily make us act justly in the moment. Philosophical practice puts us in touch with our own tacit, concrete process of thinking. Through dialogue (Bohm, Buber) we become more than skilled *rational thinkers*; we become skilled *thinking beings*.

**Key Words:** Philosophy, Philosophy with Children, Moral Development, Proprioception, Tacit, Concrete Knowledge.

> *'Being President doesn't change who you are, it reveals who you'* –
> First Lady Michelle Obama at the Democratic National Convention (08/4/2012)

Former First Lady Michelle Obama is often remembered for her quote: "When they go low, we go high." Yet, I find her quote about how being president *reveals* who you are, revealing of moral character (or lack thereof). There is truth to her observation that moral character reveals itself under certain circumstances. The question is where moral character resides before it is revealed?

Here I want to refer back to what I heard from my mother whose family survived a 3-year Japanese concentration camp during WWII. She was in the camps from age 13 – 16. One of the things she saw and remembered was how being in the camps revealed who people were. Some, who under normal circumstances, were upright citizens, kind and empathic showed themselves to be "monsters" in the camps.

Many in the field of doing philosophy with children believe that doing philosophy with children develops moral and ethical behavior as well as good critical thinking skills. The question is how.

I have written a number of articles referencing David Bohm and his work on dialogue. He talks specifically about the difference between the rational mind and the mind of "tacit, concrete knowledge" (see also Polanyi 1969). Put simply, while the rational mind (explicit knowledge) may be able to explain how to ride a bike, tacit, concrete knowledge will *reveal* whether one can actually ride a bike or not. Our tacit concrete knowledge is often the source of our decision-making in terms of how we act or react at any given moment without our being explicitly aware of it.

My contention is that it is our tacit, concrete knowledge, which also *reveals* our moral character or lack thereof.

Much of our enculturation is learned unconsciously, through osmosis, we might say. We simply absorb the cultural values we grow up with. Enculturation exists on the level of tacit, concrete knowledge, and informs our conscious, explicit knowledge in a way we are not aware of. Gloria Wekker refers to our "cultural archive" as a "storehouse of ideas, practices, and affect, that which is in between our ears, in our hearts and minds…"[1] It also refers to "a way of acting that people have been socialized into, that becomes natural, escaping consciousness."[2] It is for these reasons misleading to think that philosophical inquiry, as practiced in philosophical counseling as well as doing philosophy with children, would somehow be free from these same societal influences when claiming to be "neutral" and "objective."

From the perspective of the dominant political system, for example, racism is considered "reasonable," creating a notion of "racialized common sense." [3] It is simply the norm. "Reasonableness," then, cannot claim to be "neutral" or "objective," for it blocks perspectives that challenge and disagree with what has been taken to be 'reasonable' from the perspective of "racialized common sense."

Darren Chetty, a doctoral candidate at University College, London has written extensively on philosophy, education, and racism. In his work on doing philosophy with children, Chetty shows how philosophical inquiry with children itself is not immune from "racialized common sense" produced by the 'racial contract'.[4] So how do we examine and challenge these dominant 'common sense' assumptions?

In other words, we can rationally agree that racism is wrong, but it continues to underlie our societal and cultural norms and values. Systemic racism is pervasive in all our institutions and pervasive in our "common sense" notions. So how do we become aware of these unconscious societal influences?

These unconscious assumptions run deep in a nation's cultural history and according to Bohm lie at the heart of our collective tacit, concrete knowledge. For this reason, he sates:

> "The point is that dialogue has to go into all the pressures that lie behind our assumptions. It goes into the process of thought behind the assumptions, and not just the assumptions themselves."[5]

From the perspective of "tacit, concrete knowledge," it appears that Chetty is referring to the "tacit, concrete knowledge" of "racialized common sense" that underlies rational thinking and motivates it, and of which we are unaware and "ignorant" of how it influences racial disparities. This collectively shared meaning, Bohm states, is very powerful.

> "The tacit process [of thought] is common. It is shared. The sharing is not merely the explicit communication and the body language and all of that, which are part of it, but there is also a deeper tacit process which is common."[6]

> "I am proposing that thought is actually a subtle tacit process. The concrete process of thinking is very tacit. The meaning is basically tacit [unspoken]. And what we say explicitly is only a very small part of it."[7]

Bohm concludes that "thought is emerging from the tacit ground, and any *fundamental* change in thought will come from the tacit ground."[8] (My emphasis).

According to Bohm, thought can become aware of itself through proprioception, which is essentially "self-perception."[9] Through proprioception the body can perceive itself; it can perceive its own movement. Bohm argues that if we conceive of thinking also as a process or movement, we should be able to develop a "self-perception" of thinking as well. Bohm suggests that we can develop the proprioception of thinking.

It is my contention that we can also become aware of our moral thinking as a process or movement and be able to develop a sense of moral "self-perception." In other words, that we can develop moral proprioception.

Only through dialogue, Bohm states, can we begin to uncover the tacit ground which informs our (moral) thinking. We need an "empty space," as he says, "Where we are not obliged to do anything, nor to come to any conclusions, not to say anything or not say anything. It's open and free."[10] Dialogue, he argues, provides that "open space."

I believe philosophical practice with clients or doing philosophy with children provides that "empty space," where one can develop proprioception of thinking and "uncover the tacit ground" which holds our common meaning and history of our norms and values. We need to problematize and explore the way our "taken for granted" norms and values are constituted and understood.

If we do not examine the thought process, the thinking, behind the assumptions and not just the assumptions themselves, as Bohm explains, we cannot truly bring about a real change of thought. In other words, we can change our thinking on the level of explicit thought, or rational thought, but if we do not change thought on the level of tacit, concrete thought, no real change can occur.

Rational thought and the idea that we ought to be just and fair in our interactions with people in itself will not lead us *act* justly and fairly in the moment.

It is easy to deceive oneself and make oneself believe one is a 'good person' and well intentioned. But who are we when put to the test and thrown outside of our comfort zone so to speak? Who are we then? And can we act solely from a rational imperative, as Kant suggests?

What does our "comfort zone" consist of if not the context provided by the common tacit, concrete knowledge we hold? And is it really a "comfort zone" or does it put us in a state of cognitive dissonance when we rationally convince of ourselves of not being racist but find ourselves acting in racist ways when we least expect it?

When Amy Cooper, a white woman walking her dog in the Ramble, in New York City's Central Park encountered a Black man Christian Cooper, a birdwatcher. Her dog was unleashed (which was against the law) and when he asked her to leash her dog she refused. When he beckoned the dog with a treat, she yelled at him to not touch her dog and placed a 9-1-1 call explaining to the police that an African-American man was threatening her life.

For all intents and purposes, Amy Cooper is not a racist per se, but in this particular moment, she "knows" to appeal to the deep racial disparity that exists on a tacit, concrete level to help her gain ground and threaten Christian Cooper.

Had Christian Cooper been a white man this tactic would not have worked. She may have told the police that a man was threatening her life, but saying that a white man was threatening her life would not appeal to the tacit, collective shared meaning of what it means to be Black in the US.

The question is how to make any fundamental change in society, if telling ourselves not to be racist on a purely explicit, rational and abstract level has failed to make any fundamental changes through the ages from slavery to Jim Crow, to KKK violence, to mass incarceration, police brutality and the white-supremacist storming of the Capitol on January the 6th, 2020. Racism may take on different forms but continues to exist on a tacit, shared level throughout all levels of society.

I have been involved in philosophical practice and in doing philosophy with children, adolescents and adults throughout my career. An "empty space," which I call "the gap" (see my

1998 dissertation) is where dialogue allows us to problematize the taken for granted and slowly uncover (reveal) our tacit, concrete knowledge.

The gap leads us to a place of uncertainty and puzzlement; a place of aporia. Creating a sense of puzzlement essentially creates a space where one has to think with one's whole being which includes our tacit, concrete knowledge.  For example, in Plato's dialogues any sense of certainty existing on the level of rational thought is categorically undermined.

In Plato's dialogue *Laches* the nature of courage is discussed. At the end of the dialogue, we are left with no clear rational (explicit) definition of what courage truly is. In the process, however, we develop a deeper understanding at the tacit, concrete level of thought. Aporia transforms (explicit) knowing into (tacit, concrete) understanding.

Aporia bypasses our purely rational thinking and appeals to our tacit, concrete thinking, which *informs* our explicit knowing and questions it.

Here I would like to present some examples of my work in doing philosophy with children. My focus is on presenting children with aporia questions, questions that are puzzling and confusing. Aporia questions cannot be answered on the basis of the explicit knowledge they learn in school; instead, it brings them to a place where they have to appeal to their own thinking and come up with their own answers.

Children learn by doing, by *riding* a bike. Making children aware of their "doing" knowledge develops proprioceptive knowledge giving them a tool with which they can evaluate their rational thinking. They can question reality from a deeper perspective and more comprehensive perspective.

Here are a few examples from my own work with elementary school children (from first through fourth grade).

After reading a picture book to the whole class, we would proceed to discuss the story with half the class in a circle on the floor, while the other half was doing deskwork. The discussion centered on questions that the story would elicit.

In a third-grade classroom, we were discussing the notion of fairness after reading Arnold Lobel's picture book story "the Club," in *Grasshopper on the Road*.  In the story, Grasshopper is rudely thrown out of the club celebrating morning - after first being made a member because he says he too loves morning - when he declares that he also loves afternoon and night.  After a collaborative discussion with her peers, one pupil questioned whether it was fair that her mother asked her to not only clean her own room but that of her brother as well.

She may conclude that it is in fact fair for her parents to expect her to clean his room as well – based on the values her family has. But she may also question these values on some other

level. The point is not that when questioning her family's values she decides to no longer to abide by them, but that she has the ability, awareness, if you will, to question these values in the first place. This gives her an awareness of her own thinking giving her a sense of empowerment and self-esteem as well.

It is not a matter of agreeing or disagreeing with her parents' values per se. And she may well continue to abide with her family's values. However, this does not have to entail a contradiction. What it does entail is that there are multiple ways of looking at things and multiple ways of considering what makes something fair or not and she now has the power to decide for herself.

Staying on the subject of fairness, one pupil considered that being rude was itself an act of not being fair. He applied the notion of fairness not just to whether it was fair or not to oust someone from the club but *how* it was done. This example shows how reasons were not only presented to argue for or against allowing someone into the club, but also how they may apply to the larger picture of what it means to belong to a club in the first place. Are we entitled to treat someone we believe does not belong to our club poorly or even rudely? Is that fair?

As Bohm would say, "[this] goes into the process of thought behind the assumptions, and not just the assumptions themselves."[11]

Another example has to do with the idea of will power in "Cookies," in *Frog and Toad Together* by Arnold Lobel and whether getting rid of the problem of wanting to eat all the cookies and getting sick rather than resisting the temptation of eating all the cookies is really a form of will power. One pupil commented that simply getting rid of the problem was "fake will power." When the problem is eliminated, the will power it takes to resist is also gone. Real will power consists of resisting the temptation of giving in to something in the first place.

This example shows how the idea of will power is brought into a larger context viewed from the perspective of what it really means to *have* will power - having the *ability* to actively resist a temptation in real life - and not just in a theoretical sense. Some argued persuasively that the characters in the story were at least *trying* to exert will power, by putting the cookies in a box tying a string around it and placing it on a high shelf. But in the end, they could only conclude that getting rid of the problem by throwing the cookies out to the birds was the only way Frog and Toad in the story could deal with the dilemma they were in.

Another example has to do with the idea of doing something on purpose or not and how that does or does not make a difference in "A New House," in *Grasshopper on the Road* by Arnold Lobel. During the discussion, I asked the question whether it makes a difference when someone bumps into you on the playground and it was done on purpose or not. Well, surely it does. And surely, we can come up with good reasoning skills to make our point. But one pupil brought the issue into a larger context and questioned his/her own responsibility in the situation stating that

if the person who was bumped into, was bumped into because he/she had not tied their shoelaces which made the person trip and bump into you. In other words, what if *you* are partly responsible for the accident?

Through these examples, I am trying to show how children are not simply theorizing and using good critical thinking skills, which can be checked off on a list of thinking skills. They are aware of how what they are discussing also applies to real life and how.

They are learning to be aware of the much larger framework of tacit, concrete knowing in which these questions arise. This gives them the *power* to question and not just the *skill*. They are *empowered* to question and think for themselves. In this way, I believe, we can prepare children for developing not just their moral thinking skills but provide the context for developing moral character as well.

Maria Montessori and Alison Gopnik's extensive research suggests that children are already primed to understand the larger whole because this is the world they have to grow into. They are working out their relationship to the larger whole. We may see their behavior as driven by their own needs, but misread their needs as being related solely to themselves and not to how they fit in the world they participate in.

It is my contention that when children know they are in charge of their own thinking they develop the moral character and integrity to live in a world that is more just and transparent. Becoming skilled decision-makers is one thing, but being able to follow through on those decisions in real life situations and becoming skilled thinking beings takes courage and courage builds moral character.

Can doing philosophy with children with a focus on open dialogue enable children to develop moral proprioception and moral character involved in true independent questioning, thinking, and acting? I believe it can.

*Maria daVenza Tillmanns is former President of the American Society for Philosophy, Counseling, and Psychotherapy (ASPCP), and is currently heading a project in doing philosophy with children in an underserved school in San Diego in partnership with the University of California, San Diego. She is the author of a book series inspired by her work doing philosophy with children and adults, Why We Are in Need of Tails and Why We Are in Need of Tales, part I. Why We Are in Need of Tales, part II, with a focus on dreams will appear shortly.*

# References:

Bohm, David. *On Dialogue*, ed. Lee Nichol. New York: Routledge, 1996.Chetty, D. "Racism as 'Reasonableness': Philosophy for Children and the Gated Community of Inquiry." *Ethics Educ.* 2018, 13, 39-54. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2018.143093

Gopnik, A. *The Philosophical Baby.* What Children's Minds tells Us about Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009.

Hamilton, Edith and Huntington Cairns. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*,

"Laches," trans. Benjamin Jowett. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.

Lobel, Arnold. The Club, in *Grasshopper On The Road.* New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978.

---.  The New House, in *Grasshopper On The Road.* New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978.

---.  Cookies, in *Frog and Toad Together.* New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972.

Mills, C.W. White Ignorance in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by S. Sullivan, and N. Tuana. Albany: SUNY Press, 2007.

Montessori, Maria. *Aan de Basis van het Leven.*  Nederlandse bewerking van *The Absorbent Mind* door J.J. Prins-Werker. Rustenburg Amsterdam, 1976.

Polanyi, M. The Logic of Tacit Interference, Chapter 10: Grene, M. ed. *Knowing and Being Essays.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969.

Shotwell, A. *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011.

Wekker, G. *White Innocence.* Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

---

[1] G. Wekker, *White Innocence. Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 30.
[2] Ibid, 20.
[3] A. Shotwell, *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011)
[4] C. W. Mills, *White Ignorance in Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. S. Sullivan, and N. Tuana (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007)
[5] David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, ed. Lee Nichol (New York: Routledge, 1996), 9.
[6] Ibid, 14-15.
[7] Ibid, 14.
[8] Ibid, 14.
[9] Ibid, 24.
[10] Ibid, 17.
[11] Ibid, 9.