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Parrhesia & Doing Philosophy with Children

Maria daVenza Tillmanns considers the need for freedom of speech for children.

'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press...'
(The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, 1787)

The term *parrhesia* first appeared in Greek literature in the Fifth Century BC. It took on many different meanings, but generally it referred to the notion of speaking freely and frankly. The most famous example of frank speech in ancient Greece is perhaps when Alexander the Great visited Diogenes of Sinope and asked him what he wanted, wishing to grant him a favour. Diogenes replies by asking him to move a little to the side, in order to stop blocking his sunlight. More broadly, *parrhesia* refers to speaking one's own sense of truth in the face of power. As (possibly) Voltaire so poignantly states: "If you want to know who controls you, look at who you are not allowed to criticize." In other words, it isn't for you to question or criticize those who have power over you. In *Discourse and Truth: The Problematicization of Parrhesia* (1983), Michel Foucault says that "*parrhesia* is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth for which he is willing to risk his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In *parrhesia*, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy" (p.5).



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There was also a form of *parrhesia* devised to give a person the license to speak freely without fearing for his or her life. For example, to combat flattery received as a result of one's status, granting *parrhesia* was a way for a person of consequence to learn the truth from someone in a subordinate position without this being considered insubordination. For example, a sovereign who has power but lacks truth will grant *parrhesia* to one who has truth but lacks power, such as a court jester or a councillor.

There is another sense of *parrhesia*, which Plutarch discusses in his treatise *The Education of Children* (c.100 AD). This *parrhesia* is when one expresses oneself freely through a bold and ignorant arrogance. This becomes nothing but "sheer vocal noise" by "putting confidence in bluster" (*Discourse and Truth*, p.24). What makes *parrhesia* negative in this sense is the lack of *mathesis* – of learning or wisdom. For *parrhesia* to be positive, it must be linked to intellectual formation and moral fortitude through good education. For Socrates, this means overcoming self-ignorance, and is why it's so important to 'know thyself', as the speaker's personal relationship to truth endows them with self-knowledge. And in knowing the truth about oneself, one is better equipped to know the truth more generally. This cycle increases one's self-knowledge, as well as one's knowledge of the truth. Self-scrutiny then, is a form of exercising or practicing *parrhesia* with one's self, be it to undercut self-ignorance, as Socrates pointed out, or self-delusion based on self-flattery, as Plutarch pointed out.

The importance of self-knowledge is being able to stay close to oneself without being dependent on forces which can negatively influence one's relationship with oneself. In other words, *independent thinking ultimately depends upon self-knowledge*. This is also the point the physicist David Bohm makes when he talks about needing to become aware of our thinking as a movement in order to become less identified with our unexamined habits of mind or thought patterns. This enables us to *witness* our thoughts and feelings, instead of simply having and reacting to them. This form of self-scrutiny enables a shift to take place from "a more identified first-person perspective to a witnessing third-person perspective of the very contents of our mind and consciousness" ('Bohmian Dialogue', O. Gunnlaugson, *Journal of Dialogue Studies*, Vol.2 No.1, 2020, p.26).

Creating self-awareness also helps bring our *logos* - our thinking - in line with our *bios* – our lifestyle. As Foucault states in *Discourse and Truth* : "Similarly, Socrates' *basanic* role – that of 'touchstone' - enables him to determine the true nature of the relation between *logos* and *bios* of those who come into contact with him" (p.37). (The Greek word *basanos* means 'touchstone', which was a black stone used to test the genuineness of gold by examining the streak left on the stone when 'touched' by the gold. Similarly, Socrates' *basanic* role enabled him to determine the true nature of the relation between the life and thought of his interlocutors. Socrates won't let his listener go until he has thoroughly put all his ways to the test.)

Thinking About Fairness With Children

In the case of children, the *bios-logos* relation is still intact: in children there is no discrepancy between how they live and how they think. Since children, especially young children, operate from this integrated *bios-logos* mode of being, their way of questioning is also grounded in a *bios-logos* understanding of the world. This is why doing philosophy with children can greatly improve philosophy in general, as most Western philosophy is *logos*-based (One may want to make an exception for the existential philosophers, who were also focused on lived human experiences).

In his book, *Filosoferen met kinderen op de basisschool (Doing Philosophy With Children In Elementary School)*, Berrie Heesen shows how doing philosophy with children is a form of *parrhesia* – of speaking freely – in that it encourages children to speak up, straight from their own experiences, their own thoughts and feelings (p.43): to speak from their whole being, holding nothing back, saying everything as they see it. They speak frankly as they understand the truth about the world to be. It is only later, as we mature, that we tend to lose this close relation, causing a split between *logos* and *bios*.

It is my contention that doing philosophy with children when they still have this close relation between thinking and living allows them to become aware of that relation through self-scrutiny, enabling them to maintain their self-possession and the basis for truly independent thinking. Discussing complex and perplexing issues with children also fosters learning and wisdom, good reasoning and thinking skills, as well as moral and ethical thinking skills. In other words, *parrhesia* creates *mathesis*.

However, as Darren Chetty points out – correctly, I believe – providing children with a forum to express themselves freely may be easier said than done, given the fact the forum provided frequently operates from within what he calls a 'gated community' of inquiry ('Racism as 'Reasonableness', *Ethics and Education*, Volume 13, Issue 1, p.1, 2018). For Chetty, the 'gated community' refers to an acceptance of 'reality' without "historicizing, examining and challenging prevailing notions" of what constitutes reality. For instance, as long as white supremacy constitutes our basic understanding of reality, we're operating in a gated community. It's not enough to question thoughts and assumptions if that doesn't mean venturing outside of the gated community.

Our question is whether doing philosophy with children could function as a kind of *basanos* or touchstone which tests the degree of accord between a child's life or *bios*, and his or her thinking, or *logos*. Let me give some examples of my own experience of doing philosophy with children to get an idea as to whether it can fulfill this touchstone function in some way.

After a prompt has been given in class, such as reading a picture book and posing a question about the story, children then discuss what the story means to them. For me, the key to starting the discussion is to ask children an *aporia* question, meaning one where they are at a loss or perplexed (*aporia* means 'puzzlement' or 'wonderment'). Many of Plato's dialogues for instance leave us with a sense of *aporia* whenever we come to a seemingly insoluble impasse in a philosophical inquiry. What we thought we knew, we have to admit we do not know. Yet even while not knowing we may become increasingly aware of what it means to be courageous, for example, even though we cannot explain it rationally. We develop a deeper understanding.

In fact, to start with an *aporia* question helps to bring children into a place of *parrhesia*, since they now have to speak from what they truly believe in order to address the perplexing problem. When a bewildering question arises, they have nothing to go on except their own sense of truth. And in the process of discussing these perplexing issues with their classmates, the children develop a deeper understanding, based partially on what others have said. So the children learn to integrate others' perspectives, and to develop a broader view of the topic under discussion.

Here's an example of using *aporia* questions to prompt children to speak frankly about how they see and understand things. After reading a picture book to the class, we would discuss the story in a circle on the floor, centered around questions the story would elicit. Consider issues around the story 'The Club' in *Grasshopper on the Road* (1978) by Arnold Lobel. Grasshopper is going down the road when he sees a bunch of beetles carrying signs that say that they love morning. When they see Grasshopper, the beetles ask him whether he likes morning, and he says he does. The beetles are thrilled and make him part of their 'We love morning' club. They give him a wreath and a sign to carry. But things go terribly wrong when Grasshopper announces that he also like afternoons, and night is very nice too. The beetles are shocked and rip the wreath from him and take away his sign: "Nobody, nobody who loves afternoon and night can be in our club!" And so Grasshopper continues on down the road alone.

The first question is whether it's okay for the beetles to throw Grasshopper out of the club.

The children have different ideas about this; some say yes, because it's the beetles' club and they make the rules. Others believe that the beetles should leave Grasshopper in the club, because he does love morning, after all. But the *aporia* question is, Is it *fair* to throw Grasshopper out? Even if the beetles have the *right* to throw Grasshopper out of the club, should they?

The children often decide it's not fair, if the beetles didn't tell him about the rules to begin with. They made him a member of the club because he loved morning, and threw him out when he said he also loved afternoon and night. Grasshopper didn't have a say in any of this. Then again, Grasshopper could have figured out that the beetles only loved morning, because their signs said they loved morning – although, they might have carried 'We love afternoon' signs in the afternoon, and night ones at night... The children generally concluded that the beetles were rude and unkind to Grasshopper. Being rude is not fair.

A further *aporia* question is, What *would* be fair? One child proposed that one beetle might take Grasshopper aside and explain the rules of the club to him, and then makes sure Grasshopper is treated with respect, whether he stays or leaves.

A third *aporia* question is, How do we *know* something is fair? That can only be answered in a real life situation by the way someone decides to act according to what they think is fair. For some, retaliation is fair.

In a third grade classroom we were discussing the notion of fairness, and one pupil questioned whether it was fair that she was asked not only to clean her own room, but her brother's 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. The point here is not that when questioning her family's values she decides to no longer to abide by them, but that she has the ability, or awareness if you will, to question these values in the first place. This gives her a sense of empowerment and self-esteem – a sense of ownership and of being in charge of her own life. It's not a matter of agreeing or disagreeing with her parents' values *per se*. She may well abide with those values. However, this does not 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.

Staying on the subject of fairness, one pupil considered that being rude was itself 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 to *how* it was done. This example shows how the reasons being presented might apply to the larger picture of what it means to belong to a club. Are we entitled to treat someone we believe does not belong in 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."

Dragons & Giants

In Lobel's *Frog and Toad Together* (1972), Frog and Toad want to find out if they're brave. Looking in the mirror doesn't really tell them, so they decide to climb a mountain to find out. While doing so, they come across a snake that wants to eat them for lunch; they are suddenly in the path of an avalanche of rolling stones; and on the mountain top, a hawk sweeps over them. All these encounters terrify them. Finally, having reached the top of the mountain, they run back down as fast as they can, back to Toad's house, where Toad crawls under his blanket and Frog hides in the closet. They stay there for a long time, feeling very brave together. The question is, *are* Frog and Toad brave?

Many children will initially say that to be brave you cannot be afraid. Since Frog and Toad are afraid, they cannot be brave. The *aporia* question is, Can you be brave *without* being afraid? If you're not in the least afraid, what makes you *brave*? If you're not afraid of dogs, are you brave when you see and go past them in the street?

Children are often puzzled by this question and often don't find a way out of the dilemma until they come up with the idea that an element of danger plays a role in being brave. The snake presented an element of danger, as did the avalanche and the hawk. One child commented on this that if you're not afraid, you don't know the danger you are in.

Another *aporia* question is, Are Frog and Toad brave when they decide to jump out of the way of the snake, the avalanche, or the hawk? It seems *not*. But it raises the question of Frog and Toad being foolish rather than brave if they were *not* to jump out of the way.

A third *aporia* question has to do with how we know we are foolish or brave when dealing with what's dangerous. This question can only be truly answered by someone in real life through the way she decides to act in a dangerous situation. And is the act truly brave, or simply foolish?

What makes these questions *aporia* questions is that they seem counterintuitive. On the face of it the questions don't seem to make sense. Children are at a loss, until they figure out, for example, that what lurks below the apparent paradox is an understanding of what it means to be brave in real life. Reason alone says that you cannot be brave and afraid at the same time; but real life tells you that without being aware of the danger and the fear that comes with it, you cannot be brave.

I proceed by asking the children to give examples of when they were brave, so connecting our discussion to what it means to be brave as we think about it (*logos*) to being brave in real life (*bios*). Some mentioned that they had to be brave on their first day of school, or when they had to stand up to a bully, or when they first learned how to swim. In all these examples, children described how they had to overcome some initial fear: fear of failing, fear of the unknown, fear of someone acting stronger than they were. In this sort of way, children become aware of how their thinking and being are related.

It is the format of discussing issues which matter to them that gets the children actively engaged. Their 'will,' as Dr Montessori would say, is engaged with the reality around them, and through activating the will, consciousness develops (*The Secret of Childhood* - Maria Montessori, 1966). Without an active sense of self-awareness, the child cannot exercise self-authority and acquire self-possession. The child cannot 'know herself'.

However, if the connection with the self is lost as a result of 'breaking the child's will', is it her ability for self(-willed)-authority, self(-willed)-scrutiny, and true independent thinking. Alice Miller refers to this practice of the denial of *parrhesia* to children as 'poisonous pedagogy': it is efforts to break the child's spirit in order to establish adult power 'for your own good'. But when self-esteem is lost, so is one's ability to listen to the voices of others and to accept them as equals. Montessori therefore stressed the importance of *actively* engaging the child's will in the learning process. Demanding obedience robs the child of her inner authority, needed to guide her in her activities. This creates dependency, and ultimately a need for conformity. The child cannot act on her own volition. It is no surprise then when children lack self-esteem in these circumstances.

In Plato's Chariot Allegory in his dialogue *Phaedrus*, the soul is composed of a charioteer and two horses – one horse being reason, the other more unruly horse being passions. In a high school class where the teacher decided to discuss the Allegory of the Chariot, I asked the students, "If the unruly horse was considered a 'bad' horse, why was it not better to eliminate that horse all together? What service did this horse render, after all?" This is a question I would also like to now pose to the reader... Consider, for instance, the influence of your *bios* on your *logos*, and vice versa.

When doing philosophy with children, they experience that their thoughts and feelings matter; that they are essential in the learning process. And if their own thoughts and feelings matter, so do those of their peers, who deserve to be listened to and accepted as equals. In the process, children learn to speak from their hearts and minds, knowing that they will be taken seriously. Some opinions are better than others, and children are generally quick to admit that, "Oh, what Tracey said made me change my mind." This is self-scrutiny and freedom of speech at work.

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