

**Susan T. Gardner**  
(Canada)

## Love Thy Neighbour? Maybe Not

Published in *Children Philosophize Worldwide. Theoretical and Practical Concepts*. Eds. Eva Marsal, Takara Dobashi and Barbara Weber. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Publisher 2009. Pp. 421-426.

### Perhaps We Shouldn't Be Teaching "Caring"

For their own good, for the good of their immediate peer group, and for the good of society at large, our children, most of us believe, should learn to respect others. After all, isn't this what "respect of persons"—a notion so laden with philosophical accolades that it has become ensconced in the hall of unquestioned background assumptions—is all about. But what precisely does "respect for persons" mean? Does this mean that we want our youngsters to respect a serial killer, or a pimp who entices youngsters into prostitution, or a money-addicted executive who puts both workers and the environment at risk in order to make egregious profit? Does this even mean that we want our youngsters to respect the school bully or the tyrant teacher? In a world in which the melding of different cultures is increasing exponentially and ever more potentially dangerously, and in a world in which educational efforts are heroically trying to rejig programs so as to hone young minds to become more tolerant of differences, the time has come to take a starker look at programs that try to enhance such tolerance, or to promote caring. "Take another look?"—you may wonder. Why should we do that? Surely such programs, at best, will transform young minds so that they "will contribute to making the world a better place for all of its inhabitants"<sup>1</sup> or, at worst, be ineffectively benign. Given such a "no lose" situation, why embark upon a serious investigation? The answer is that there may very well be serious risks lurking in such "love thy neighbour" good intentions. What these risks might be, why they are difficult to perceive, and how we might short-circuit them will be briefly explored in what is to follow.

### 1. Weakening the "Standing Against" Response.

To argue that children need to learn to respect others—that they need to learn what some have referred to as "caring thinking"<sup>2</sup>—is, I think, as problematic as the religious precept that "we ought to love one another." The adage only really works in a world in which no one is yet formed. That is, if we all entered the world on the word "go" and we then all loved one another—utopia would result. But none of us are born into a blank slate. Rather, we must learn to negotiate our way around a world that is populated by as many victimizers as victims. The difficulty about promulgating such sweet-

---

<sup>1</sup> Singer, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Lipman, 1994, Sharp, 2006.

sounding attributes as “caring thinking” is that too much warm vanilla may paralyze an agent at precisely the moment when the courage to *stand against* might be the only viable ethical option. Indeed, if one assumes that there are as many victimizers in the world as there are victims, one wonders why we are not just as adamant about teaching our children “standing against thinking” (think Christ overturning the temple tables) as we are in our efforts to encourage them to reach out.<sup>3</sup> This is not to imply that “caring/respect/tolerance programs” inevitably fail to understand the importance of standing against. Thus, for instance, the Philosophy for Children movement, that has recently added “caring thinking” to its central duo of critical and creative thinking, includes, as one of the four elements in caring thinking, “affective thinking,” described as the capacity to “experience strong emotional and cognitive response to an offence.”<sup>4</sup> This is certainly a laudable attempt to bring balance to the notion of caring, but, aside from the fact that its “incidentalness” might be lost or forgotten by teachers newly immersed in an already complex methodology, it leaves, I fear, a hitherto strong “thinking program” out of balance—a problem to which we shall now turn.

## 2. The Danger of Colonialization

In his book *Thinking in Education*,<sup>5</sup> Lipman argues that Philosophy for Children (P4C) helps to develop *critical thinking* in that it aims to help children make better judgments by helping them become conscious of criteria, pay attention to context, and develop dispositions of self-correction. And P4C helps to develop *creative thinking* in that it “aims to develop a finely tuned sensitivity to context, a consciousness regarding criteria, and fostering dispositions of self expression, and self-transcendence.”<sup>6</sup>

What is of particular note about these definitions is that they are “valence neutral,” that is, they focus entirely on the process of thinking, *not* the end point. And it is precisely this *procedural focus* that anchors the power of philosophy in general, and of Philosophy for Children in particular. In not dictating to participants what they ought to think or what they ought to feel, philosophy implicitly recognizes the dignity of potentially autonomous agents. This is not the case with the promulgation of “caring thinking,” whose very title brings with it the not-so-hidden vision of where it is that I want you to go and what kind of person I want you to become. This focus on the end product is particularly problematic for P4C, whose core pedagogical tool is the community of inquiry (COI). If a teacher enters a community of inquiry already knowing where s/he wants her students to go, s/he cannot participate as a genuine inquirer. To get a more concrete picture of the problem, imagine, for a moment, a teacher, recently convinced of the importance of nurturing “caring thinking,” trying to facilitate a community of inquiry on the topic of bullying. With the regulative ideal of “caring” firmly implanted before her mind’s eye, how could s/he not, even if only subliminally, try to nudge her students toward caring for the victim, when, perhaps, a more fruitful tack might very well have been to explore why Susie hasn’t got the gumption to stand up for herself? What will have happened, in such a situation, is that the so-called “com-

---

<sup>3</sup> Think Christ washing the feet of whomever.

<sup>4</sup> Sharp, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Lipman, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Sharp, 2006.

munity of inquiry” will have been rigged from the start—and the students will know this. The very title “caring thinking,” in other words, brings with it the risk of robbing teachers of their most important weapon as COI facilitators, namely ignorance, and we thus, paradoxically, by overtly stumping for “respect for persons,” undermine the possibility of teachers approaching their students with genuine respect for the potentiality of their autonomy. Given the risks of such a substantive regulative ideal, one wonders how the notion of “enhancing caring” crept into such a hitherto valence-neutral “thinking program” as Philosophy for Children. Let us explore briefly why this may have been the case.

### 3. Why the Notion of Teaching Caring Makes Sense

#### (1) Expanding Circles of the Moral Community

In his book *Animal Rights and Human Obligation*<sup>7</sup> and elsewhere, Peter Singer portrays human caring as evolving in concentric circles, both from a sociological and from an individual point of view. Thus we all, hopefully, start off caring deeply for our parents, and then expand the circle to include our families, and then to include members of ever larger communities. From a societal historical western point of view, the initial circle of respect included mainly white men, which eventually expanded to include women, then people of different races, and so on. For Singer the ultimate goal is that the outermost ring of caring include all sentient beings. If this were an accurate picture of such “moral development,” then it would seem to follow quite naturally that educators ought to be in the business of nudging the expansion of caring circles as if one were, as it were, watering trees. Thus, in her article “Hope Instead of Cognition,” Barbara Weber echoes Singer’s sentiment when she argues that “on the level of caring thinking, being exposed to emotionally touching content helps us to cultivate compassion and expand the definition of what we regard as belonging to ‘us.’”<sup>8</sup>

The metaphor of ever-expanding circles of who counts as “us” is enticing but it is, I fear, ultimately misleading. It implies that each ring is homogenous, and that the power of the connection is inversely proportional to the distance from the centre. But it is not at all evident that this is the case, nor is it evident that it should be the case. If your brother is a terrorist, you may find that you have more compassion for individuals whom you haven’t even met, and of course there are an abundance of individuals who turn Singer on his head by willingly jeopardizing the lives of humans in order to save the habitat of the spotted owl. As it turns out then, it is not at all evident that “expanding circles of care” is an accurate or even helpful metaphor, despite its surface seduction.

#### (2) A Perceived Gap between Sentiment and Reason

Many thinkers worry that an “over-focus” on reason leaves a person’s values untouched and untamed. Thus, if we accept Hume’s argument that it is sentiments, not reason, that determine action, then it appears to follow quite naturally that honing reasoning skills can have little if any impact on enhancing the ethical dimension of an individual’s actions. In a not dissimilar vein, Rorty, in his article “Human Rights, Ra-

<sup>7</sup> Singer, 1976.

<sup>8</sup> Weber, 2008, p. S. 28.

tionality, and Sentimentality,”<sup>9</sup> argues that critical thinking of the Kantian categorical imperative sort can do little in terms of making us better people. Thus, Rorty suggests that instead of focusing on reasoning, philosophy should instead look to stories and metaphors to inspire the emotions. He suggests, for example, that reading Uncle Tom’s Cabin would surely inspire our compassion for the slaves in a way that, say, focusing on the more abstract principle that “all humans are created equal” may not. There can be no question that images tap more directly into actions than abstract thinking. Charities, for instance, have long known that a picture of one starving child will solicit far more funds than statistics about thousands killed or maimed. Of course, advertisers have also long known that one busty babe on the hood of car will do far more in soliciting sales than statistics about auto efficiency or safety. This second example, interestingly, shows in a way that perhaps the first does not that the fact that emotionally-saturated images incite action more readily than reason in no way suggests that the role of reason has, in some sense, been co-opted; in fact quite the contrary. Surely one needs to bump up the judicious review by reason precisely at those times when images—whether real or imagined—are particularly compelling. All of this leads to the conclusion that if ensnaring action in educational mesh is the goal, there can be little doubt, as Weber<sup>10</sup> argues, that directing the focus of communities of inquiry into stories and films ought to become a priority, with the caveat, of course, that the approach be balanced.<sup>11</sup> None of this suggests, however, that we should somehow be pushing caring. After all, the point and power of the community of inquiry is that it is *reason*, not the facilitator that ultimately determines the outcome.<sup>12</sup> And whether the outcome is an increase in compassion and a deeper concern for humanity, as Sharp understandably hopes for if “caring thinking” is truly enhanced,<sup>13</sup> or whether instead it is a sense of despair over the idiocy of our so-called rational species, it cannot and should not be decided a priori. If the communities of inquiry do their job, the best we can hope for is that it will be reason that rules the passions and not—contra Hume—the other way around.

#### 4. “Practical-Reasoning” and “Respect for Reasoning” in Philosophy for Children

It may very well be that to suggest adding “caring thinking” to the dual prongs of critical and creative thinking is a P4C attempt to fix what is not broken. That is, given P4C’s pedagogical anchor of employing communities of inquiry to analyze topics that are of personal importance to participants, P4C is already in the business of “down and dirty” practical reasoning. Also, precisely because of reason’s hegemony in the community of inquiry,<sup>14</sup> to the degree that participants internalize the process, they will inevitably adopt a generalized “respect for persons” in the sense that they will feel obliged to reasonably defend their positions and to be open to the reasons offered by

---

<sup>9</sup> Rorty, 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Weber, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> As for example Eastwood’s “Flags of our Fathers” mirrored by “Letters from Iwo Jima”.

<sup>12</sup> Gardner, 1995, 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Sharp, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Gardner, 1995, 1996.

those who think differently. Battersby and Bailin, in their article *Reason Appreciation*, echo this point when they say that “reasoning is the least manipulative and most respectful way to motivate and change belief and behaviour. To give reasons rather than threats, to reason with, rather than cajole or manipulate, is to respect the autonomy of the other person.”<sup>15</sup>

## 5. A Different Title

Nonetheless, P4C advocates may worry that without a special moniker, the P4C program will be unable to transmit the message that its critical/creative approach is more than just a theoretical orientation; that, indeed, long term exposure to P4C can be expected to change people for the better. Is there some way in which we can articulate what would count as “change for the better”—other than being better reasoners—that is nonetheless “valence neutral”?

My suggestion is that we borrow shamelessly from the existentialism movement and argue that exposure to P4C ought to enhance “existential thinking.” Adopting such a title does not result in the lovely ring of the three c’s, but it nonetheless captures in an entirely valence-neutral way that P4C will demand of you that you clearly understand that *what you do* creates *who you are*, and that since an accurate description of *what you do* is, like any other truth claim, subject to falsification by reason or evidence, *who you are* is not a matter of constructing your own truth. For your identity to be genuine and “sticky,” you need to reason your way to the least “reasonably shaky” depiction amongst alternative descriptions. Within a community of inquiry, claiming to be a baker, in other words, on the basis of your skill at making martinis just won’t cut it.

This is not the appropriate place to analyze in detail whether adding a third prong to the critical/creative dyad of Philosophy for Children is even necessary, and whether, if it is, the notion of “existential thinking” fits the bill. The point of this paper, rather, is to suggest that the notion of “caring thinking” brings with it hidden dangers and that P4C may be adopting it at its peril.

## Conclusion

One of the P4C national web sites states that children who are exposed to P4C become more tolerant. Oh really? Even if there were empirical evidence to show that that was the case, is that what we really want? Do we want Johnny to become more tolerant of his schoolmate’s victimization of the local homosexual? Do we want him to become more tolerant of his sister’s use of crystal meth? Do we want him to become more tolerant of his friend’s ingenious and yet-to-be-discovered distribution of school quizzes and exams? Do we want him to become more tolerant of his brother’s cavalier exploits into the arena of unprotected and exploitative sex? Do we want him to become more tolerant of the fact that his neighbour drives a gas-guzzling hummer, shoots endangered wildlife for fun, and thinks that all appeals to environmental protection are for wussies? Do we want him to become more tolerant of his peers’ acceptance of drink-

---

<sup>15</sup> Battersby and Bailin, 2007.

ing and driving? If the answer is “no” to any or all of above, then what do we want of Johnny? Surely the answer is that what we want of Johnny is for him to see both himself and others as persons *in the sense that* he recognizes that the actions of persons are guided by a vision, and that the truth of anyone’s vision is a function of the challenges it reasonably withstands. What we want of Johnny, in other words, is to get his reasoning in gear in order to challenge both himself and others—who, importantly, inevitably co-define one another—whether, for instance (using an overlap of the above examples), they are truly prepared to assent to becoming tyrannical, self-defeating, cheating, oppressive, self-centred idiots. And to correspondingly ask himself if he is prepared to become tolerant of intolerance, unconcerned by the destructive short-sightedness of those whom he loves, an oppressor by proxy, an enabler for cheaters, an idler in the face of the piece-meal destruction of the web of life, and ultimately an idiot himself. And even in those instances in which visions are not mutually exclusive, it does not follow that caring does, or even, should result. The Mother Teresas of this world may care little for the Napoleons, the Marie Curies may care little for the Donald Trumps, the Einsteins may care little for the Angelina Jolies, but they can still see one another as persons and recognize the truth in their visions. There are many paths to God.

### Reference List

- Battersby, Mark and Sharon Bailin. “Reason Appreciation.” In *Reason Reclaimed* edited by Hans V. Hansen and Robert C. Pinto. Newport, VA: Vale Press, 2007.
- Gardner, Susan. “Inquiry is No Mere Conversation: It is Hard Work.” *The Australian Journal for Critical and Creative Thinking* 3, no. 2 (1995): 38–49; also *Analytic Teaching* 16, no.2 (1996): 41–50.
- Lipman, Matthew. *Thinking in Education*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- . “Caring Thinking.” Paper presented to the Sixth International Conference on Thinking, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston MA, 1994.
- Rorty, Richard. “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality.” In *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures*, edited by Susan L. Shute and Stephen Hurley. New York: Harper Collins, Basic Books, 1993; also in: *Truth and Progress*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Sharp, Ann Margaret. “Unterrichtsgegenstand Gefühle: Das Klassenzimmer als Community of Inquiry.” In *Ethische Reflexionskompetenz im Grundschulalter. Konzepte des Philosophierens mit Kindern*, edited by Eva Marsal, Takara Dobashi, Barbara Weber and Felix Lund. Frankfurt/M: Peter Lang, 2007.
- Singer, Peter. *Animal Rights and Human Obligations*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976.
- . *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981.
- Weber, Barbara. “Hope Instead of Cognition? The Community of Philosophical Inquiry as a Culture for Human Rights Based on Richard Rorty’s Understanding of Philosophy.” In: *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children, Special Edition Germany*, edited by Barbara Weber, Volume 18, Number 4, pp 23-32.