Editorial

Philosophy in University Disciplines and Philosophy for Children

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One of the more puzzling practical educational developments in our own time is that many Faculties of Education have dropped any direct reference to philosophy in their programs. Historically Faculties of Education have recognized "educational foundations" that included philosophy of education, history of education and usually sociology of education as well. But the present trend is to drop these and to have programs in the so-called Learning Sciences instead. It is not clear if this is because the "learning sciences" seem to offer something definite while philosophy only offers processes of reasoning and sometimes logical practice without definite solutions.

Closely connected with this is the puzzle that while the highest "earned" degree in nearly all universities world-wide is the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D., or DPhil at Oxford) philosophy is hardly appreciated or understood in any discipline except philosophy departments themselves. In some areas, like physics, there is even open hostility to philosophy of science and to philosophy in general even though such departments always offer a Ph.D. as their highest degree.

On the other hand, "philosophy for children" is a worldwide movement that began in the 1970s under the influence of Matthew Lippman, then working at Montclair State College, who wrote a number of influential dialogues involving children including "Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery". At the present time "philosophy for children" is recognized in a variety of ways at the Universities of British Columbia, Alberta and Calgary in Western Canada and at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto in Ontario as well as a wide variety of institutions in the

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United States and the United Kingdom as well as a variety of other European countries.

A recent development in this regard is that the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary has decided to implement a program in philosophy for children jointly with the philosophy department as part of a tiered program leading first to a graduate certificate, then to a graduate diploma and finally to a Master of Education graduate degree. This degree is available to anybody with an initial four-year university degree interested in philosophy for children. Of course, it might be available to those already school teachers. But it could be of interest to those working in private organizations or clubs with children, with homeschoolers or those in the area of childhood mental health as well.

The founder of this approach, Matthew Lippmann had as his fundamental notion that children can and should begin thinking and reasoning as early as possible and that this is something that is both, with a little encouragement, quite natural to children and that will stand them in good stead for their rest of their lives both in everyday life and in the context of any disciplines in which they may happen to be engaged. Closely connected with this is the idea that philosophy is not a connected series of results of thinking that has been going on for millennia, especially in the West from the early Greek thinkers. If the results of philosophical thinking are to be codified and remembered, then it would be better to think of these results as having been "kicked upstairs" in John Austin's terminology as science, often as natural science. Rather philosophy is an activity or a process of approaching any problem of puzzle whatever and that, like any other skilled activity, can only get better with practice. As one philosopher put it, Ludwig Wittgenstein, the form of a philosophical question is "I don't know my way about".

If these views are true then perhaps a better way to think about all human disciplined activity is as continually involving processes of philosophical thinking with a view to or hope of leading to a permanent result that leaves the philosophical activity behind but results in catalogued permanent and perhaps useful results of a definite kind that have been "kicked upstairs". The preliminary thinking, wherever and however it is found, however, would be in fact philosophy. This would also account for the still prevalent practice that the highest earned degree in any university discipline should be termed a Doctor of Philosophy degree since the thinking that goes into an original thesis in any discipline would necessarily be an example of the activity or process of approaching any problem

or puzzles worth considering, that is a process of philosophical reasoning or thinking.

We might illustrate this from a few examples from the thinking of Galileo and Newton who are clearly central scientific figures who would have been considered "natural philosophers" in their own time. Among Galileo's many puzzles was the Aristotelian claim that heavier bodies necessarily must fall faster than lighter ones. And there are obvious examples for this view. For example, if you drop a light fluffy feather and a coin from the same height the feather floats down and the coin plummets directly down, the coin landing earlier than the feather to the ground. The question that would have puzzled Galileo in thinking about this is whether or not the fact that a feather and a coin usually would fall in the air that we breathe. So does the feather's shape and fluffiness react differently in air than a coin? And if so, how would a larger and heavier coin and a smaller and lighter coin fare? The distance from a tabletop to the floor is not very far. But suppose we went to a greater height and dropped a couple of coins, or even something heavier like say a couple of metal balls, one much larger than the other. Could we neglect the effect of air and only consider how quickly each was attracted to or tended to fall towards the ground? Galileo ultimately arrived at an experimental trial that involved (so the commonplace story goes) dropping such objects from the leaning tower of Pisa. And as he saw it, the larger and the smaller ball landed at the very same time. So here we have both the philosophical thinking and the result that in this case was "kicked upstairs" as a scientific result and a permanent possession. In teaching this later the processes of reasoning are as a rule neglected and only the result is learned.

If one were concerned with young children's thinking about falling objects, including themselves (as childhood is often a time of stumbling and falling, sometimes with painful results) one might pose a question like: Do bigger things fall more quickly than smaller ones? One would then like the children reason and perhaps act in the context of that question. It would be unimportant whether they actually arrived at the Galilean result as long as they thought out loud about it, perhaps along, perhaps together with other children.

Another obvious case of philosophical thinking in the same vein is the story of Isaac Newton approaching an apple tree on his family farm while avoiding the plague in Cambridge where he was an undergraduate student. He noticed an apple falling from the tree, perhaps at the same time as he saw the moon in the early morning sky as it sometimes is and wondered if the motion of the moon around the earth was a kind of falling just like the apple falling from

the tree. After sufficient puzzling and trying out different possibilities he arrived at the notion that they were the same kind of motion that could be calculated in the same way mathematically. The result was science but the thinking was philosophy.

The kind of problems that puzzle all of us where we do not know our way about are of two main kinds. One is the kinds of puzzles that the world appears to pose to us and the other is the kinds of puzzles that our use of language, especially the written form of language and the conventions embedded in that language tends to pose to us. Both of these puzzle kinds are available to and present to children just as they are to adults. And both require the kind of thought that is philosophical to aid us in coming to grips with them, to dissolving them, or to arriving at definite solutions to them that are permanent.

For example, questions like the following puzzle adults but can also appeal to children of any age:

Is it bad to hit someone when one is angry at them?
Is a hotdog a sandwich?
Should we be able to eat anything we want to?
Can a dog talk?
Is dreaming just living in another world?
If my school class voted to go to the skating rink of Friday but I voted against it should I have to go anyway?
Why does everything fall to the ground?
How come you can't usually see air but you can feel it when you breathe in and out?
Should mommy be able to tell you what to do?
Can a stone feel?
Is it better to say "I have never done anyone any harm" than "I ain't never done no harm to no one"?
Is it true that if my dog likes bones and Mary's dog likes bones that all dogs like bones?

These are questions of the kind that children can wonder about and talk about. And in the process they can engage in forms of thinking and reasoning, of posing further questions, of suggesting answers or ways to find answers. And all of these things are important beginnings to reasoning and arguing in a serious way that is necessary for most of the rest of their lives.

Anyone interested in working with children in the context of philosophical thinking should look up the website of the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary and look at the graduate certificate program in Philosophy for Children that is

offered in Summer School and followed up by a course in each of the Fall and Winter terms beginning this summer (2021) in June.

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