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Reconsidering the Examined Life: Philosophy with Children

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Abstract

Can children be philosophers? In this paper I consider the child's eligibility for living "the examined life." In discussing my work with children at Hickory Ridge Middle School in Memphis, Tennessee I focus on what it has meant to treat the child as philosopher. Such engagement with the child is largely absent in the history of philosophy and even today Philosophy for Children and Philosophy of Childhood face questions within the Academy. In doing philosophy with children we move toward rectifying the absence of the child's voice in the canon and create a more inclusive notion of philosophy itself.

Introduction

It is an honor to be here today presenting alongside practitioners of Philosophy with Children that have been and continue to be so influential in my own work. To name a few of these influences: Gareth Matthews's book *Dialogues with Children* served as my introduction to Philosophy with Children—both fostering my curiosity in the field and providing useful techniques for group discussion. Jana Mohr Lone has given advice on discussion materials for my own classes and her blog (*Wondering Aloud: Philosophy with Young People*) remains a source of inspiration. Rafa Rondon provided guidance to Deb Tollefsen and me in the early stages of our Philosophy for Children program here at the University of Memphis. This is to name only a few of the ways that I have been influenced by this panel of speakers.

In truth, my excitement over participating in this conference has only been rivaled by a certain trepidation: what can I, a "Philosophy for Children rookie" if you will, bring to this conference that our esteemed speakers have not already sufficiently covered either in previous lectures, articles, or books? My own background in doing philosophy with children spans the

past six years, both as a high school philosophy teacher and middle school discussion group leader. In the fall of 2008 I, along with my good friend and colleague Matt Lexow, began leading philosophy discussion groups here in Memphis with eighth graders at Hickory Ridge Middle School. With the support and sponsorship of the Department of Philosophy at The University of Memphis (along with grants from the Squire Foundation and the Tennessee Board of Regents), this work gave rise to a community outreach program devoted to introducing philosophy to students in Memphis City Schools: “Philosophical Horizons.” In reflecting on this question—what can I bring to this conference?—I have returned to my own philosophical engagement with children at Hickory Ridge, an experience that has been formative for me, both as a philosopher and teacher.

In discussing this work today I will focus on two related points: first, I want to discuss the place of the child within the discipline of philosophy, both historically as discussed in central texts of the canon and currently in the United States where pre-college philosophy programs remain a rarity. Philosophy with Children faces significant challenges, including gaining recognition within the Academy as a legitimate area of philosophy and securing a place in pre-college curricula. These challenges stem, in part, from traditional views of who is eligible to philosophize; views which exclude the child from serious philosophical consideration. Second, with these challenges in sight, I will discuss both what it has meant to treat the child as a philosopher in my experience at Hickory Ridge and the value of doing so. Contrary to the traditions of our discipline, I hope to demonstrate that the child’s inclusion in philosophy need not (indeed, *should* not) be reduced to (what I will refer to as) a *one-way educational model* in which an instructor must bring philosophy *to* the child. Rather, we ought to make a space for doing philosophy *with* the child—engaging her as equal participant in open dialogue. As I will

argue here, this open engagement is philosophically significant both for individuals directly involved and for the discipline of philosophy itself.

Part I.

But we must first ask what place the child holds in the history of our discipline, not as student or subject, but as participant and active contributor to philosophical discussion. As often recounted, the tradition of western philosophy begins with the trial and death of Socrates. Socrates is condemned to death for exposing youths to philosophical discussion, thereby “corrupting” them; for “making the worse the stronger argument” and for “not believing in the gods” (*Apology* 23d, 24c). It is also in the *Apology* that Socrates’ provides the classic defense of philosophy: “the unexamined life is not worth living *for men*” (*Apology* 38a). Philosophical self-examination, then, is necessary for a virtuous existence; requisite for the good life.

But this declaration has often not been extended to the child, nor the woman or the slave and the examined life for which Socrates gave his life has, in large part, been the domain of the privileged adult male. This is not to say that we do not find any discussion of children and philosophy in the canon. To take some examples from the Ancients, both Plato’s *Republic* and *Laws* along with Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* include passages addressing the child, her education, and her place in philosophy. But these works (and many other texts in the canon—think Kant, Rousseau, or Rawls) do not provide the contemporary philosopher or educator with a legacy of doing philosophy *with* children. Rather, the child is described as unprepared for philosophy; as ineligible to live an examined life. Consider the following passage from Book VII of Plato’s *Republic*:

“I don’t suppose that it has escaped your notice that, when young people get their first taste of arguments, they misuse it by treating it as a kind of game of contradiction. They imitate those who’ve refuted them by refuting others

themselves, and, like puppies, they enjoy dragging and tearing those around them with their arguments...And, as a result, **they themselves and the whole of philosophy are discredited in the eyes of others**" (bold added) (*Republic* B.VII 539b-c).

For Plato, exposing the child to philosophy prematurely leads to the devaluation of philosophy "for illegitimate students shouldn't be able to take her up" (*Republic* B.VII 535c). Children are "as irrational as incommensurable lines" (*Republic* B.VII 534d) and, as such, do not populate the chosen elite who, as adults, are to be provided with philosophical instruction. In the *Laws* the child is described as "of all wild things...the most unmanageable...the most unruly animal there is...[which must] be curbed by a great many 'bridles'" (*Laws* B.VII 808d-e).

Aristotle too calls the child's rationality into question and, in turn, the child's eligibility for living the examined life. Like the appetite, the child must be "checked" or "pruned" (*NE* B.III 1119b4); the child is incapable of "choice" and cannot achieve *eudaimonia* or "happiness" (*NE* B.III 1111b10/ B.I 11002). But Aristotle's primary concern as to the child's ability to do philosophy differs from Plato's. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle writes:

"While young men do indeed become good geometricians and mathematicians and attain theoretical wisdom in such matters, they apparently do not attain practical wisdom. The reason is that practical wisdom is concerned with particulars as well [as with universals], and knowledge of particulars comes from experience. **But a young man has no experience, for experience is the product of a long time**" (bold added) (*Nicomachean Ethics* B.VI 1142a10-15).

For Aristotle, then, it is a lack of life experience that leaves the child without the resources (both in terms of practical experience and wisdom) to do philosophy and to live the excellent life.

Taken in isolation these passages present a clear disregard of the child's philosophical ability. And, given that they are authored by two of the most influential philosophers in the history of our discipline, it is important to consider the impact they have had on current views of the child within the Academy. But my discussion here has been brief and I do not intend to characterize the history of philosophy as completely devoid of serious consideration of the child

as philosopher. Despite Plato's charge against the philosophical acumen of the child in the *Republic*, a number of Platonic dialogues feature Socrates engaging youths in dialectic. In his essay "Socrates' Children" (in *The Philosopher's Child*) Gareth Matthews writes that "Socratic questioning...began as philosophy for children...Socrates himself seems to have found it entirely appropriate to engage children in philosophical discussion; moreover, he clearly respected children as philosophical discussion partners" (Matthews 12). Matthews supports this claim with passages from Platonic dialogues such as the *Theaetetus* and the *Meno* in which Socrates engages a young man or boy in philosophical discussion (in the case of the *Theaetetus* on knowledge and in the case of the *Meno* on virtue). Matthews suggests that we consider these dialogues as signs of Plato's changing view of the value and appropriateness of doing philosophy with children; a view which evolved along with the development of Plato's own philosophical theory apart from that of Socrates.

But even with these considerations noted, discussion of the child as philosopher is rare in the canon and the continuing legacy found in the discipline today is clear—pre-college philosophy programs are an anomaly in the United States, particularly in our nation's public schools. University level training and preparation for doing philosophy with children has emerged thanks in large part to the hard work and efforts of many speakers here today. But, it is clear that there is still much work to be done to permanently establish such training in university curricula. Seemingly, then, despite particular instances to the contrary, the message received from our history as a discipline is one of exclusion: philosophy requires a maturity found in adulthood, often only in the adulthood of males (or, perhaps even males of a particular social class); the child has not reached such maturity and is lacking requisite life experience and rational agency for philosophical engagement. Perhaps most significantly, the child is regarded

as capable of being taught, but as incapable of teaching another. It is this sense of the child that informs much of the skepticism facing attempts to do philosophy with children today.

Part II.

We challenge these conceptions by reconsidering the child's eligibility to live an examined life; by remaining open to the possibility of treating children as philosophers and the potential value of such engagement. My own experience as a student and teacher highlights the importance of these reconsiderations. I have been a student in both public and private schools; I have been educated by numerous teachers on many different subjects. But through changes in setting, subject, and teacher, a constant has always remained—I was there to learn, the teacher was there to teach. In my own experience as a young teacher (whether of English, World History, or Philosophy) I have often perpetuated this dynamic. So, when I first began leading philosophy discussion groups at Hickory Ridge Middle School I came “prepared”: I had tight lesson plans with insights at the ready; I had passages selected ahead of time for my students to read. I planned a fluid discussion, one in which all students were engaged and during which they would come to understand philosophy.

This method of preparation fell within what I call a *one-way educational model*: a relationship between teacher and student such that the former acts exclusively as educator (introducing all relevant class material) and the latter acts as the one to be educated (by hopefully mastering all material introduced by the teacher). This model can be effective when used to achieve a specific end: by means of it we prepare a student for a standardized test; we provide basic instruction in reading and arithmetic; we teach the facts that it has been decided the child needs to know. But this model poses serious difficulties for philosophical discussion with

children. To do philosophy *with* the child we must make room for the equal dialogue that is absent in a *one-way educational model*. This involves conducting discussions in the classroom as participant rather than as sole educator, as one willing to listen and learn from dialogue with the child.

My own experience at Hickory Ridge quickly revealed the need for this shift in educational philosophy. I began my first semester with the discussion group with selections from the *Apology* and, specifically, questions on the virtue of courage. Was Socrates courageous for not leaving Athens in the face of death or just plain stubborn? Perhaps he would have done better to live to philosophize another day? But the group's interest in courage diverged from my own; questions of violence and self-defense became paramount within the group; courage was discussed in terms of "protecting one's block or reputation", "having the back of a friend in a fight", or "standing up for one's family." The life experience of many of these children came through clearly in this discussion—violence is and has been more of a reality in their lives than in my own and, thus, these questions were not in the lesson plan I had prepared. Group members exercised what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as "a unique angle of vision", in this case, insight coming from their experience of the world as children and as individuals coming from a particular socio-economic background (Hill Collins 25).

This viewpoint was *unavailable* to me; no matter my work as a PhD. student or teacher, I could not bring the situated insight of these children to class with me. In fact, it was largely my "experience" in professional philosophy that prevented me from recognizing the philosophical import of these questions and insights. Like many philosophers, I held pre-conceived notions of the proper subjects for philosophy and the correct method of philosophical examination. As a result it was difficult to recognize the primary philosophical significance of the discussion

developing around me—I can assure you, however, that it was not located in my lesson plan on the *Apology*. It was in the attempts of these children to grapple with their experience of violence, to raise questions from the privileged perspective of the child—a perspective born from one who sees much but is rarely asked; from one who approaches philosophical problems such as “evil” and “violence” with an openness and vulnerability that is often disarming to the educator (As when we find ourselves thinking, “you shouldn’t be thinking about that—you are *only* six, or ten, or twelve, etc.”).

My role as an “experienced” philosopher was to foster this discussion rather than design it, to listen to these experiences and, eventually, to respond to the considerations of the group. It was the philosophical reflections of the children on violence that set the course for our discussion over the next few sessions—during which we read selections from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X with a focus on philosophical evaluations of conflict, both violent and non-violent.

I learned then that a crucial step in doing philosophy with children is to avoid “over-determination” of the child and the discussion (a valuable insight also developed by Michael Pritchard in his work *Philosophical Adventures with Children*). In my position as teacher I felt the need to lead the group to a pre-determined “right answer,” to make sure that discussion did not falter or “get off topic.” But as my own experience revealed, “some of the most exciting philosophical discussions among children seem, at least initially, to be ‘digressions’” (Pritchard, 151) and my attempts to rectify these aberrations hindered discussion. I remained strictly within the tradition of a *one-way* dialogue *from* teacher *to* student and, as a result, I rejected the privileged viewpoint of the child. When we leave no room for “digressions”—because we have

not planned for them or because they do not lead us to the “right answer”—we also leave little space for doing philosophy with children.

My experiences at Hickory Ridge have led me to disagree with the characterization of the child as ineligible for self-examination. Despite the claims of Plato and Aristotle to the contrary, children can flourish in philosophical discussion and their “life experience” provides ample ground for dialogue. It is true that the child is not schooled in technical philosophical discourse and argumentation. But such discourse can, in some cases, be prohibitive of important components of the search for truth. As a trained philosopher I often work hard to approach a problem in a way that comes natural to many children—to approach it anew, to consider it from all angles without pre-judgment or the pressing concerns of a research project. The child’s perspective often embodies this approach, while also recalling Aristotle’s own discussion of the beginnings of philosophy as found in wonder.

But, one might ask, if children *do* live an examined life why are essential characteristics of the philosopher (such as open questioning; intellectual curiosity; and engagement in focused discussion) decried as missing in many middle and high school classrooms? For the tradition of western philosophy as discussed here today does not sufficiently explain this absence. Nor do the words of the Ancients explain the lack of questioning we sometimes find in contemporary classrooms.

I suggest that a common position of the child in our society—that of pupil, of being told, of being taught—contributes to the child’s philosophical ability remaining as an unseen potentiality. The child possesses no desire to philosophize in an educational system in which doubt and disagreement are to be avoided, sees no need to question where answers are pre-determined, and has little impetus for creative and original thought when continually engaged as

one incapable of such contemplation. In short, children are often not given the *space* to philosophize by *us*, the professional philosophers and teachers (including myself). As a result, many children in our schools struggle with abstract conceptualization, with developing and clearly articulating their own opinions; in short, with doing philosophy. It is no surprise, then, that characterizations of the child as ineligible to live the examined life are seemingly justified.

There are certainly many teachers and philosophers who do not accept these characterizations of the child. Many teachers I have spoken with at Hickory Ridge and Booker T. Washington recognize the potential within their classrooms and are devoted to creating the best educational experience possible for their students. My conversations with these teachers (combined with my experiences in these schools) has shown me that if we are willing to create a different educational space for children, the child's philosophical potential can be actualized. Barbara Weber characterizes this response as creating "an open space where an equal dialogue between generations can take place" (Weber 4). Creating an open space for equal dialogue does not mean that we homogenize the adult and child or ignore differences between each other. There are differences between myself and group members at Hickory Ridge—in age, race, and socio-economic background to name a few. But it is a virtue of philosophical engagement as open space that these differences can be considered without determining the limits of our discussion before we start. Thus, differences which have played a large role in the historical and contemporary social climate of Memphis (such as race and social class) are discussed in our group at Hickory Ridge. We discuss the experience of racism; we explore what it means to respond to bigotry as a child and as an adult. We have had and continue to have different life experiences—I have not been a frequent victim of racism, nor do I see the world as a child—but when taken seriously in philosophical engagement we give the child a space to share her

privileged perspective. We put aside prerequisites for philosophy such as “adult” rationality and maturity and recognize a child with something to say about philosophy and its problems.

This perspective is one that I take as philosophically valuable in its own right. It stretches the bounds of philosophy and forces us to consider the relevance of our discipline to the social realities around us, many of which professional or academic philosophers may find themselves isolated from. As a philosopher working in Memphis City Schools I find that I am challenged by these children to ask what place our discipline holds for the serious consideration of events effecting disenfranchised members of our community. What response do we have as philosophers to socio-economic inequality and injustice here in Memphis? If we consider these questions important we need to act accordingly. To begin, we can listen and learn from those who find themselves in positions of disadvantage. In many cases children are “experts” in these areas from whom philosophers can learn much.

If the experiences discussed here today are considered valuable and the questions posed deemed significant, then there is a need for teachers and professional philosophers alike to remain open to treating the child as philosopher. For these discussions and questions, which have so clearly benefited me in my own philosophical work and development, are not otherwise possible. These experiences are no more feasible under the techniques that I used as a professional teacher in my start at Hickory Ridge (which I have referred to here as a *one-way educational model*) than they are operating under the view of the child put forward by Plato and Aristotle. If our experience with the child is colored by the thought that she is pre-rational—that her thoughts and insights are in need of correction—we close off dialogue with her. We rely on traditional characterizations of what the child is supposed to be rather than engaging the child as she actually is.

Perhaps, in sum, we ought to use today's discussion to examine the requirements we hold as necessary for participation in philosophy. Who is eligible to live the examined life and why? My hope is that upon reflection we will work against the tide of our discipline and make room for the voice of the child.

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