

The privilege of boredom: How philosophy can happen in isolation

<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/privilege-boredom-philosophy-isolation-anil-gomes/>

The day before the shutdown I went into our daughters' school to teach philosophy. A number of teachers were absent, either because they had underlying health conditions or because they lived with people who did. Many of the children were absent too. The teachers were busy photocopying worksheets, trying to figure out what would be required of them in the coming days and weeks. I went in to add an extra pair of hands, to feel I was being useful. Each class, from reception to year six, came to me in turn. We sat in a circle on the floor and talked. One exercise involved a chair and a story about aliens who came down to our planet, took the chair, and started to wear it on their heads (an idea borrowed from Peter Worley's *The If Machine: Philosophical enquiry in the classroom*, 2010). Is it a chair? Is it a hat? Is it a chair being used as a hat? One year six told me that Slinkys had been designed for use as springs in factories but are still a toy because you play with them. A year three told me that she could sit on her sister but that doesn't make her a chair. They fizzed with ideas and laughter. The next day we all withdrew into our homes.

Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* begins with a withdrawal. The meditator isolates himself in a warm room, free of all distractions, so that he can properly examine his beliefs and identify those that will form the firm foundation for his philosophy. There he stays for six days, with no leave for exercise, shopping or medically required travel. There he reflects on his beliefs, on God, and on nature, and there he comes to realize his essence as a thinking thing. Descartes's philosophy begins in quarantine. It begins in social isolation.

Feminist critics have alighted on this starting point, the fantasy of isolation, the privileging of the mind above the body, the insistence that knowledge can be achieved all on one's own. These are indicators of a certain mindset, it is said, one that bakes into its starting point the conclusions it aims to draw. But someone must be doing the shopping, someone must be lighting the fire. Mary Midgley wrote an essay for BBC Radio in the 1950s which was more specific in complaint: Descartes's problem, she said, was that he was a childless bachelor. For only someone without a family would think of isolation as the starting point for philosophical reflection. Her essay was rejected by the editor as a "trivial, irrelevant intrusion of domestic matters into intellectual life".

Those of us at home with children at the moment cannot avoid the "irrelevant intrusion of domestic matters into intellectual life". A conversation with a colleague about some nicety of Kant was interrupted by my daughter screaming "That's not fair!" outside the bedroom door. The few books I have brought home snuggle up against Monopoly, marble run and Lego. My attempts at reading and writing are punctuated by the making of snacks, the settling of disputes, the sound of children's television. Withdrawal from the world is not much of a withdrawal when some of the world comes with you.

Midgley thought that the absence of the family from philosophical thinking was a problem for philosophy, and that Descartes's philosophical views would not have survived close contact with

the messy reality of small bodies that place demands on your own. “For anybody living intimately with [another] as a genuine member of a family”, she wrote in the rejected essay “Rings and Books” (now available at www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk), “*Cogito* would be *Cogitamus*; their consciousness would be every bit as certain as his own”. Having children, she said elsewhere, is extremely valuable when one comes to talk about the difference between people and animals. Perhaps she meant that children are a reminder that our intellectual pursuits have to be earned just as much as walking and using cutlery. Midgley’s reflections present children as the bump in the carpet that reveals the fundamental flaws in grand philosophical visions.

This is one way to make the family intrude on philosophical theorizing, as a counter-example to the crude distinctions that philosophers have made. But it presents too limited an intrusion. Our thinking about children often does involve compromise, and it would not be a surprise if children straddled some of our dichotomies. Sometimes they are to be held responsible; sometimes they are to be accommodated. That doesn’t show that no distinction can be drawn between things that we hold responsible and things that we accommodate. It shows only that the borders are fuzzy, and that it is in these borders that children reside. Children *complicate* our stories. But this doesn’t show that the stories are wrong. It shows only that they need supplementation.

More interesting would be a philosophy that *started* with children, not as a liminal concern but as objects of philosophical inquiry in their own right. Yet it’s hard to know what this would look like. It lies deep in our ordinary thinking that children represent a temporary stage in the development of a lifeform whose natural endpoint is the reason-endowed mature human adult. And that tempts us to think of the goods of childhood as comprehensible only in light of the goods that are found in the life of a fully functioning adult. We think of adulthood as the *point* of childhood and the role of education to equip children with the skills and knowledge required to live as an adult. This is why those of us who are homeschooling reach so desperately for phonics and maths apps, wanting our children to be prepared for what is to come. What would it be to reject this way of thinking? It would force us to value childhood on its own terms, not as a route to something more valuable, but as important in and of itself. This would be the intrusion of domestic matters in the form of a wrecking ball, not complicating philosophical theory but knocking it down and forcing it to be built somewhere else.

Still, even this more extreme intrusion is limited in its own way, since it forces us to change only the *content* of our philosophical views. This is Midgley’s point: Descartes’s ideas need amending, she claims, in light of truths that are obvious to those who live with families rather than isolate from them. Say this is right about what Descartes said; it doesn’t affect the fact that it was his social isolation that enabled him to say it. Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia points this out to Descartes during their correspondence: “the life I am constrained to lead does not permit me enough time at my disposal to acquire a habit of meditation according to your rules”. The “interests of my house, which I must not neglect, ... the conversations and amusements that I cannot evade” prevent her from finding the time and space that the *Meditations* suggest are needed to achieve philosophical insight.

Social isolation has given me the clear stretch of time that Descartes says is required to do philosophy. Teaching has been cancelled or moved online; birthday parties have been abandoned; the spare bedroom is warm enough once I wrap a blanket round my shoulders. But disciplined reflection is difficult, and more so when one is surrounded by those who have a claim on one's time and attention. In his reply to Princess Elisabeth, Descartes modifies his demand, telling her that she need only devote a few hours each day to "thoughts which occupy imagination". Easier, perhaps, but still no state-sanctioned walk in the park.

The problem here is more demanding than that envisioned by Midgley. It suggests that although we can do the philosophy *of* children, we cannot do philosophy *with* children, because being with children is incompatible with the disciplined attention required for serious intellectual work. It is right that children have rarely been the object of philosophical attention, but even if that changed, and even if that would be a change for the better, it would only allow the family into the *content* of our philosophical thinking. It would not make the family part of its *method*. Philosophy with children can seem like a school sports day, or the weddings that young children dress up and enact when stuck in the house: innocent in and of itself, enjoyable even, but fundamentally a pastiche of something that has significance only in the life of a mature, fully functioning adult.

So what was I doing with those children while we waited for the schools to close? We were certainly playing, with ideas, with stories, with words. And if serious intellectual work requires attention and dedication, then we were not thinking. For we were too distractible, too easily amused by the world and each other. But our playing was not unconnected with the kind of reflection that Descartes undertakes, just as the egg-and-spoon race is not unconnected with the 800m sprint. In neither case should we think of the adult activity as the perfection of something that is engaged in badly by the child. But nor should we think of them as only mimicking the form of the adult enterprise, as if they were pretend weddings. Talking philosophy with children is its own activity but it can change into disciplined reflection, not by becoming more perfect but in the way that spring turns into summer, giving rise to something different but no more, or less, valuable for all that.

When does playing with ideas become intellectual work? Descartes's *Meditations* is self-consciously a *meditation*, "a deep consideration, careful examination, studious casting, or devising of things in the mind" as Cotgrave's French–English dictionary of 1611 has it. And just as spiritual meditation involves a series of reflective exercises designed to reorientate one's attention away from oneself and onto God, so too does Descartes's philosophical meditation involve a series of philosophical exercises designed to reorientate one's attention from the senses to the true nature of mind, world and God. These exercises were designed to take our natural aptitude for thought, to channel it and to inculcate habits of attention. This is difficult. It is time-consuming. It is also deeply, deeply boring. And this was surely its point, for it is only by going slowly that the mind can be led away from itself to God and the truth.

Boredom is a constant for our children during self-isolation. It is a constant for us. We miss our friends, we miss the pub, we miss the conversations, the touching and the breathing. We know, now as ever, that boredom is far from the worst that people will experience during this pandemic. Descartes reminds us that boredom can also be a privilege. For boredom allows the mind to wander, to rest on an idea longer than it would otherwise have done, to start off on a road which leads to habits of attention. It is Descartes's attentive thinking which leads him to God and, through God, out of isolation and back to the world. Our return is less triumphal, the world's contours encroaching only slowly in worry, anger, and confusion. But while we wait on its approach, the boredom remains. And this is one way in which isolation with the family can give way to philosophy: through the kind of thinking that comes out of being deeply, deeply bored.

Anil Gomes
Trinity College, Oxford
March 2020