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Knowledge of Children

March 15, 2018 by Blog Contributor

by Maria daVenza Tillmanns, PhD

When rationality fails us we are puzzled and left with a sense of *aporia* (απορία) meaning *puzzlement* or *wonderment*. We are “at a loss,” perplexed. Many of Plato’s dialogues leave us with this sense of *aporia*. What we thought we knew, we have to admit we do not know – rationally. On the other hand, we may have developed a deeper sense of what love or courage means in the process. Where the capacity of knowing fails us, we develop a deeper sense of understanding. Eastern philosophy tries to give us a deeper sense of reality through showing the limits of rational thought as well. Yin and Yang do not contradict each other, but rather complement each other. The Zen koan of the sound of one hand clapping is to guide students to enlightenment by way of giving the mind no way out. Where the mind hits a wall, enlightenment can emerge.

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(*philo sophia*) and not “love of knowledge,” (*philo gnosis*). While etymology does not dictate meaning, it does provide insight. Love of wisdom reaches deeper into our grasp of the world; wisdom goes beyond a mere rational explanation of the world. In this way, Socrates brings his interlocutors to a place of “not-knowing,” similar to that of masters of Zen Buddhism. For that is the place of enlightenment or wisdom.

My interest in philosophy for children began when I was attending a Plato Seminar as a philosophy major at Clark University in 1978. Reading Plato’s dialogues always left me with the feeling that in the end you could not really know the nature of something, for example, what it means to be courageous in *Laches* or the nature of friendship in *Lysis*,— and yet you would have some intuitive grasp of these concepts. These dialogues left you with a sense of a deeper understanding of the nature of some *thing*. Similarly, in the *Symposium*, Socrates asks his friend Diotima to explain the nature of love and she gives us a myth. The myth brings us to a better and deeper understanding of love in a way that a rational description of it never could.

Oftentimes we to replace deeper thinking

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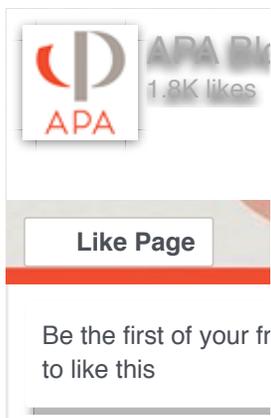
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with knowledge. The more I know, the less I have to think. I have the answers, so I do not have to live in a world of uncertainty, ambiguity, feeling perplexed or “at a loss.” However, this is precisely the place where true thinking begins: *now what?* It is the place where understanding develops through a deeper sense of connectedness—our *inborn-Thou*, as Martin Buber would say (I will come back to this later).

It is as though our ability to explain the world we live in resembles the tip of the iceberg above the surface. Similarly, what we understand but do not have words for exists below the surface. What is below is certainly as real as what exists above the surface, but we cannot explain it the same way. To explain what exists below the surface we need metaphors, analogies, poetry, music or scientific explanations such as space-time or the Higgs boson. Nevertheless, we know gravity when we drop a shoe to the ground; we know love reading Solomon’s Love in the Song of Songs (New American Standard Bible); we know courage when we read about Hector’s bravery in Homer’s Iliad.

My reading of Plato’s dialogues shows the limits of our rational knowledge of the world but leaves us with a deeper

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understanding of something, be it bravery, friendship or love. This deeper understanding, in return, would not only enable us to *recognize an act* of courage for example, but confirm what we intuitively understood it to be in the first place. Human *actions* will always defy rational explanations.

Just as we read fairy tales to young children with the intent to impart some (moral) understanding of the world we live in, I decided Plato's dialogues when re-written for children could in effect accomplish the same. It would appeal to the child's intuitive grasp or the wisdom presented in the story in much the same way as fairy tales do. Myths, legends, fairy tales, and Plato's dialogues I would say, give us something to think about – to ponder really. These dialogues do not ask us to give a rational, cognitive account of bravery, friendship, or love for they cannot. They ask us to set up a kind of internal compass, guided by a sense of understanding by which we can learn to recognize the value of something (not all that glitters is gold), the potential danger of something (recognizing red flags in life), and to navigate the world in which we. This compass relies on intuition and guides us in our decision-making to survive a complex and dangerous world. The compass needs to

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be educated much in the way Socrates tried to educate his interlocutors in the Agora, or Zen Buddhists try to educate their students.

To navigate our ship in this world, we need concrete skills, of course. What use is it knowing how to sail by the stars when we do not know how to handle a ship on the high seas. But with all the technical skills of sailing lacking the knowledge of how to orient our ship, we are lost at sea. My sense is that we put too much weight on acquiring concrete knowledge and too little—now-a-days anyway—on our ability to sail by the stars.

How did we not see the red flags regarding a mass shooting, or the child abuse of predatory priests, parents or coaches? What happened to our ability to read the signs, to distrust the obvious? Reading Plato's Dialogues clued me into what mattered in life. The dialogues show that most of what we think we know we do not and cannot give words to explain rationally. And yet in this is wisdom. Perhaps this is why the oracle told Socrates that he was the wisest Athenian. He knew, but also knew that what he knew he could not impart to others through *gnosis*, but rather through *sophia*.

After I told my professor in the Plato Seminar that I would like to re-write some of Plato's dialogues for children, he told me about Dr. Matthew Lipman and his Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children at Montclair University, New Jersey. My professor suggested I write my final paper on a topic in philosophy that could be understood by children. That's how Stella (12 years old at the time), my landlady's niece (we all lived in the same triplex house in Worcester, Massachusetts) ended up writing a story in dialogue form, *How Come the Opposite of What I think is True is Usually Really True?*

The paper focuses on how fear often interferes with our thinking. We often do things we might not do otherwise, if it weren't for the fact that fear had us thinking differently, often leading to the feeling of regret: *what was I thinking?*

We need to understand fear intuitively, and using real-world cases, rather than rationally—for fear cannot be explained rationally. How do I know when my thinking is motivated by fear rather than fairness, for example? It's rational to justify retaliation, hitting back against others as being "fair." But is it? As Ronen Bergman explains in *Rise and Kill First—the secret history of Israel's targeted*

assassinations—violence may have led to many successes but ultimately is a poor strategy. Yet violence for many remains the ultimate “solution.”

In the paper, Stella and I explore our intuitive understanding of how fear influences our thinking and often not in a good way. Instead of being open-minded and fair about some issue that affects us personally, we may become closed-minded and unfair instead. We take sides, we want to retaliate, or we cannot see any reason to trust or believe what the other thinks or has to say. We dismiss their arguments, we belittle them, or in other words, we see no merit to them.

Why was Michigan State not able to respond to the pleas and red flags long before Dr. Larry Nassar finally got arrested for sexually abusing the gymnasts in his charge? *What were they thinking?* Did they fear the reputation of the University was at stake and “preferred” to ignore the signs instead, hoping these were “isolated” incidents that would “go away”?

How often do we “miss” the signs and wonder “how come” we didn’t “see” the red flags earlier, whether we are talking about mass shootings at schools, abuse,

bullying leading to a student's suicide, and so on.

The compass we use to navigate life needs to be cultivated from an early age. My sense is that the arts, including Plato's dialogues cultivate our navigational sense. It does not *tell* us rationally what is good or what is bad. It is not that simple. Remember, the stars we sail by, are not fixed, either. So we need to develop a sense for what may be right or not in any particular situation. We may have a general sense, but need to learn how to apply this general sense to specific situations, which are unique. In every new situation we have to figure out what is the right thing to do. And this may be different for different people as well. Too often we look for a one-fits-all solution, including our moral sense of right and wrong. And this is where we so often end up resorting to a violent "solution," just to end it all. While we may have acquired so many technological advancements in our modern world, on the level of understanding how to navigate the world we may have regressed even, now that we can increasingly rely of highly technically advanced weapons. Again, violence seems to bear the only "solution."

Yet, with our compass intact, we might

be better able to recognize the red flags when we see them in real life and not find ways to rationalize, justify or ignore the reality right before our eyes. When we recognize them early, they can be handled so much easier and better. Molehills are less difficult than mountains. And to get rid of a mountain, you may just have to blow it up, using violence (once again).

Children are born with an intuitive grasp of the world, the "*a priori* of relation," according to Buber. From early on, they have to "figure out" how to survive. They may quickly sense if being in the arms of a particular adult feels safe or not and may start crying if they do not.

In doing philosophy with children, I became aware of their intuitive understandings of things. I was immediately struck by how insightful they were. Children seem to see connections between things intuitively. And this is what I want to build on in my philosophical discussions with them.

Let me give some examples of what I see as children's intuitive grasp or compass in practice. In these examples I was struck by their insights, based on how they connect the dots between their understandings of things as they

experience them in real life:

"I think you're afraid when you are angry."

"If you're bad to people, you cannot be very smart."

"You're brave when you can trust yourself."

"You need to be a little afraid in order to be brave, so you know the danger you are in."

"I didn't want my baby brother to get punished for accidentally breaking his favorite toy, so I took the blame."

These comments are from elementary school children. They reveal that they have an intuitive grasp of the connection between fear and anger or courage and trust, or intelligence and kindness. It takes philosophical acuity to pick up on the (intuitive) connections children make; inviting them to give reasons and

explanations as to how these ideas may fit together—and if they do.

This is where I find a lot of excitement and joy among the children discussing these ideas. They enjoy building on each other's ideas, agreeing or disagreeing with what others have said. They can be quick to change their minds. It is as if they are painting with ideas. They are learning how to express their thoughts and feelings clearly, and why they may agree or disagree with someone. The discussion is about finding out about the nature of something; children, being inquisitive, are excited to learn about these puzzling concepts. Whereas fear may be a good thing in some instances, it may not be in others. Lying may be necessary in some instances and a good thing, and in other cases it may be harmful and hurtful. So how *do* you decide? And this is where navigational skills come into play. What may work in some instances may in fact be the entirely wrong thing to do in other cases. So how *can you tell*? This is where you need to learn how to respond to complex situations, and not reduce all situations to a one fits all solution.

It also amazes me how the children remember what we have talked about regarding other stories we have read as

well as how they find fascinating connections between the stories. For example, we read *The Giving Tree*, by Shel Silverstein and *Tico and the Golden Wings*, by Leo Leoni. One of the main themes in both stories centers on the nature of giving. Very quickly, the children felt that while Tico gave one of his golden feathers to those who needed help because they were poor, the giving tree gave her whole tree away, until nothing was left but her trunk. The kids noticed the boy to whom the giving tree was giving all was never really happy. He had a frown on his face in all the illustrations. He just wanted more and more—and she kept on giving. On the other hand, the people Tico gave his golden wings to were grateful. Eventually, Tico gave all his feathers away too, but with every feather he gave away, a new feather, a black one, came in its place, so Tico was able to still fly.

While, the children do not come away with a rational explanation of the nature of giving, they do get a better understanding of what it means to give. They are building their compass to navigate the world. The compass has the cardinal directions, but it also has all the degrees in between. And every degree can make a huge difference in how to steer your ship.

So where does children's' intuitive knowledge originate?

In *I and Thou* (1923), existentialist philosopher and scholar Martin Buber wrote, "It is simply not the case that the child first perceives an object, then, as it were, puts himself in relation to it. But the effort to establish relation comes first... In the beginning is relation – as category of being, readiness, grasping form, mould for the soul; it is the *a priori* of relation, the inborn Thou. *The inborn Thou is realized in the lived relations with that which meets it*" (my emphasis, p.27). This *a priori* relation to the world forms the basis for the intuitive knowledge we have of the world. Intuitive thought then emerges from one's total engagement, one's "lived relations" with the world. In other words, we are born with an intuitive *inborn* compass.

Children aren't the only ones who have a total engagement with the world. Artists, for example, rely on the knowledge that originates from a total engagement and openness, to which they give expression through their art. And it is through their art form that they convey their deeper understanding of the world.

While we always have the capacity to retain some form of an intuitive

understanding of the world, often it is *replaced* by the cognitive skills we develop in school. As a result, our cognitive skills are often developed as if they were in a vacuum, disassociated from our being. This disassociation creates a dependency on others with authority, or with certain social status, or on following trends and fads. If we cannot self-regulate our thinking using our own compass, we depend on others. This dependency robs us of our ability to enter into *interdependent* relationships with each other, with our *inborn* relationship with the world and ourselves intact.

In his article, 'The Impact of Philosophy for Children in a High School English Class' (available at *inter-disciplinary.net*), Chad Miller says, "The continued irrelevance and disregard of the students' experiences, questions and ideas by schools, has too often left them with the inability to think responsibly for themselves; the school has told them what to think and why to think it." Philosophy for children, however, honors the inborn relationship children have with the world around them. It helps them to cultivate their inborn compass, their inner authority, be self-critical, to self-regulate, and indeed truly be in charge of their own thinking.

Because young children have not yet developed the cognitive skills to express themselves, they use their imagination, and they rely on it to convey their understanding of the world. Imagination is the language of intuitive knowledge, borne out of our *inborn* relationship with the world.

Imagination is also the language of fairy tales, legends and myths. It reaches far into the world beyond our rational comprehension and is therefore also philosophical in nature. This brings us to why children are natural philosophers *par excellence*.

If we rob children of their intuitive knowledge and imagination in order to develop their cognitive skills as rapidly as possible, we essentially rob them of this inborn relationship with the world. We can train people to be very smart and knowledgeable, but at the expense of their inborn intelligence. They thus become disconnected from the world, from other people, and from themselves. And all the therapy in the world cannot make up for what we have now lost. The loss also leads to dangerous consequences. Disassociated logic can allow us to do the most horrible things to the environment, other life forms, and other people, and provide justifications

for it. Integrity and character may also become empty concepts, because, as Buber would say, we have replaced the 'inborn Thou' with the 'It'. The I-It relationship is strictly instrumental in nature and serves the individual's needs at the expense of the relationship they have with the world (*I and Thou*, p.23).

Buber describes the world as one in which there is a "constant swinging back and forth" of the *I-It* and *I-Thou* relationships. Yet if we are disconnected from our *I-Thou* relationship only the *I-It* relationship determines our interactions and relations with the world and other people.

We need to foster and nourish the 'inborn Thou' by strengthening children's relations to the world around them and other people. The only way to restore the inborn Thou to our society is to allow children to develop their intuitive knowledge by allowing them full reign to their imaginations in the arts and sciences and in doing philosophy with them.

What expertise do philosophers have and what can they bring to a philosophical discussion with children? Philosophers are experts in *not* knowing. In practicing the art of philosophy, we engage each

other to think together to explore concepts we only vaguely understand. Thinking together not only binds us, but also allows us to explore unknown and perhaps unknowable territory with joy, curiosity and confidence. Children have a natural capacity for aporia for puzzlement and wonderment. Through asking children what they already know through their intuitive knowledge, and putting thinking itself into question, we can help them become aware of themselves as thinking beings.

As thinking beings, as beings with a fine-tuned compass, children can learn the skills they are taught in school, but not at the expense of their own thinking. With their own thinking intact, they can skillfully apply what they learn in school to the world they live in.

Maria daVenza Tillmanns teaches a program that does philosophy with children in underserved San Diego schools in partnership with the University of California, San Diego. In the 1980's she attended Dr. Matthew Lipman's workshop in philosophy for children and later wrote her dissertation on philosophical counseling and teaching under the direction of the Martin Buber

scholar Dr. Maurice Friedman.

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