Philosophy for Children and Other People

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Abstract

A review of Gareth Matthews' *Philosophy and the Young Child* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), and *Dialogues with Children* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), with a discussion of William Perry's theory of cognitive development. Originally published in: *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy* (Summer 1987): 19–22.

1 Introduction

It is a matter of fact—and has been so for a considerable amount of time—that philosophy is taught at the pre—college level. However, to teach philosophy at that (or at any) level is one thing; to teach it *well* is quite another. Fortunately, it *can* be taught well, as a host of successful experiences and programs have shown. But in what *ways* can it be taught? Are there differences in the ways in which it can or should be taught at the pre-college level from the ways in which it is taught in college? Are there differences in the ways in which it can or should be taught at the elementary-school level from ways in which it can or should be taught at the secondary-school level? There are other questions, of a similar nature, that the beginning *college*-level teacher of philosophy might ask: "I have never taught Introduction to Philosophy before; how should I go about it?" And there is a further question: *Should* it be taught at all? This question can, of course, be raised at any educational level, but it is especially acute at the elementary level.

Two recent books by Gareth Matthews—*Philosophy and the Young Child* (1980) and *Dialogues with Children* (1984)—provide explicit answers to the questions whether and how philosophy can or should be taught to children. I believe that they also provide, implicitly, answers to the other questions. Matthews is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst; he is known for his work on ancient and mediaeval philosophy, as well as for his previous articles on philosophy and children. His two books are about the nature of philosophy and about celebrated philosophical puzzles as much as they are about philosophizing *with* and *about* children, although they consist mostly of conversations with children about philosophical puzzles. Their message is an important one, presented simply and elegantly.

2   Philosophy and the Young Child

It is Matthews' thesis that philosophy is natural and enjoyable for children, but that they are "socialized to abandon" it (1980, p. vii). Moreover, adults can and should talk to children about "matters we ourselves find difficult or problematic"—namely, "the naively profound questions of philosophy"—because children can "make a useful contribution" (1984, pp. 2–3). In *Philosophy and the Young Child*, Matthews points out that

> [t]here is a certain innocence and naivete about many …philosophy questions. This is something that adults, including college students, have to cultivate when they pick up their first book of philosophy. It is something natural to children. (1980, p. 73.)

How does one do philosophy with children?

> To do philosophy with a child, or with anyone else for that matter, is simply to reflect on a perplexity or a conceptual problem of a certain sort to see if one can remove the perplexity or solve the problem. Sometimes one succeeds, often one doesn't. Sometimes, getting clearer about one thing only makes it obvious that one is dreadfully unclear about something else. (1980, p. 83.)

But there is a caveat, as discussed in a chapter of *Philosophy and the Young Child* titled, aptly enough, "Anxiety":

> To do philosophy *successfully* with children requires that one rid oneself of all defensiveness. …[One] should simply enlist the child's help so that [both adult and child] …can try together to work out a satisfactory answer. (1980, pp. 84–85; emphasis added.)

2

These two books demonstrate how this can be done. Besides being able to serve as pedagogical handbooks for those who wish to do philosophy with children (whether or not in a formal, classroom situation), they are also excellent introductions to what philosophy is all about: If non-philosopher friends ever ask you what philosophy is or why you like it, give them these books.

Philosophy and the Young Child consists of 9 short chapters, each a wonderful collection of snippets of children's (often quite innocent) philosophical comments, followed by (slightly more sophisticated) discussions of the "naively profound" philosophical questions raised by those comments, references to writings by professional philosophers on those questions, and metaphilosophical speculation on children and philosophy. For instance, on page 1, we are told that "Tim (about six years), while busily engaged in licking a pot, asked, 'Papa, how can we be sure that everything is not a dream?' ". Matthews asks, "Does it, or should it, make any difference to Tim to know whether he is awake or dreaming? If so, what difference? Wouldn't the pot taste just as good?" And in an endnote to this last question, Matthews observes: "Augustine seems to have thought so; see his *Contra academicos . . .* 3.11.26" (1980, p. 107). If Matthews' two books are as widely read as they ought to be, perhaps his publisher should consider bringing out a companion anthology of readings! Though not intended for this purpose, these books, thus supplemented, could easily be used as introductory philosophy texts.

Why does Matthews hold that philosophy is natural and enjoyable for children? In the chapters titled "Puzzlement" and "Play", he observes that philosophy is "motivated by puzzlement" (1980, p. 11). More precisely, philosophy frames questions that call

> into doubt . . . ordinary notion[s] . . . in such a way as to make us wonder whether we really know something that most of us unquestioningly assume we know. (1980, p. 2)

This, of course, is what got Socrates into trouble; perhaps it is what socializes us out of the urge to philosophize. In "Play", Matthews explains that philosophy is "conceptual play" that can be pursued or merely enjoyed, often based on "the intentional misinterpretation of a form of words," a form of rhetoric "endemic to philosophers . . . [as] an aid to clarifying the logic of a family of expressions and the concepts they express" (1980, pp. 11, 14–15, 18). This rhetorical form is also, of course, endemic to children, which helps explain why they would find philosophy natural and enjoyable. Moreover, the game of philosophy is an important one:

> Parents and teachers who . . . refuse to play this game with their children impoverish their own intellectual lives, diminish their relationships with children, and discourage in their children the spirit of independent intellectual inquiry. (1980, p. 21.)

3

But it must be played carefully: Questions should not be asked derisively or dismissively, but "inquiringly, reflectively, or playfully," if they are to elicit philosophical thought (1980, p. 71).

In the chapter on "Reasoning", Matthews elaborates on the naturalness of children's philosophizing:

> [F]or many young members of the human race, philosophical thinking—
> *including, on occasion, subtle and ingenious reasoning*—is as natural
> as making music and playing games, and quite as much a part of being
> human. (1980, p. 36; emphasis added. Cf. pp. 26–27.)

He demonstrates such reasoning by constructing (semi-formal). arguments—"polished just a bit" for clarity—out of children's philosophizing. In the process, he also shows how children's philosophizing can even provide "interesting and important criticism[s] of" various philosophical theories (1980, pp. 30–31; cf. p. 34).

In the chapters of *Philosophy and the Young Child* titled "Stories" and "Fantasy" and in the chapter of *Dialogues with Children* also titled "Stories", Matthews pays homage to the "writers . . . of children's stories who have been almost the only important adults to recognize that many children are naturally intrigued by philosophical questions" (1980, p. 56). Here, he discusses philosophical puzzles that arise in Tashlin's *The Bear That Wasn't*, Baum's *Oz* books, Thurber's *Many Moons*, Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh*, Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, Lobel's *Frog and Toad Together*, Wiseman's *Morris the Moose*, and Myller's *How Big Is a Foot?* A list of the puzzles discussed in these books reads like the curriculum for a Ph.D. program in philosophy!—dreaming, skepticism, ontology, appearance vs. reality, epistemology, personal identity, perception, semantics, free will vs. determinism, essential vs. accidental properties, the problem of non-existents, measurement, and philosophy of mind.

But there are villains in *Philosophy and the Young Child*: Jean Piaget and Bruno Bettelheim. According to Piaget's developmental approach, children's philosophical and intellectual development progresses neatly in stages, but Matthews finds this unreasonable, for three reasons: (1) it is hard to define philosophical progress (but cf. Rapaport 1982, 1984a), (2) philosophical progress isn't directly age-related (if anything, it may be *inversely* age-related, as this very book testifies!), and (3) Piaget's stages don't correspond to stages in the history of philosophy. Moreover, "it is the deviant response that is most likely to be philosophically interesting" (1980, p. 38)—recall Socrates, once again. And to Piaget's claim that children's thought is uncritical, Matthews responds that this "suggests that it would be folly to try to talk philosophy with a child and capricious and unreasonable to expect a child to say anything philosophically interesting" (1980, p. 48). These

two books, especially *Philosophy and the Young Child*'s chapter on "Reasoning", are testaments to the lack of such folly.

Matthews reserves his harshest words for Bettelheim (1976). On the surface, Matthews observes, Bettelheim appears to agree about the philosophical value of children's stories, but—according to Matthews—he holds opinions about children that are "factually false and morally repugnant . . . [because they] express an attitude of superiority that is morally inappropriate to one's dealings with other human beings" (1980, p. 69). What might these opinions be? Matthews makes a good case that Bettelheim believes that children are animistic, lack abstract understanding, are unrealistic, have either all-encompassing despair or else perfect bliss, and are unmerciful—and he makes an equally good case that none of these things are true.

3 Dialogues with Children

In *Dialogues with Children*, Matthews is a bit more explicit about his goals than he was in the earlier book:

> My first aim is to interest adults in a range of fascinating questions that they can profitably reflect on with children, questions that should not be considered the exclusive province of professional philosophers. My second aim is to portray . . . the possibility of having a relationship with children that is different from any my readers are likely to be used to. (1984, p. 3.)

The methodology he offers here is a bit more precise, too, though I hasten to add that nowhere does he say, "First do this, next do this . . .". Rather, he demonstrates by example, the book being a record of a year's worth of conversations with children in a Scottish school. Here, however, I shall try to summarize his method, as illustrated in the chapter titled "Happiness".

Taking a cue from the authors of the children's stories he so admires, Matthews first writes the beginning of a short story, with lots of dialogue, about some philosophical topic or question, preferably one that is relevant to the lives of the children in the class. In "Happiness", it is: Can flowers be happy? Sometimes, the topic is suggested by the children, as in the chapter titled "The Future", which is about whether dogs can have mental representations (e.g., thoughts about the future): "One day Esther asked for a story about a dog. . . . I promised to bring a story-beginning about a dog for the next class" (1984, p. 102). This "story-beginning" is then used to start a class discussion. (In "Happiness", they discussed whether plants have minds, or can talk, or can feel things). The discussion is tape-recorded, and the tape—together with the children's suggestions—is used to write the rest

of the story, thus ensuring its relevance for them. (The chapter titled "Cheese"—if cheese is made of milk, cows give milk, and cows eat grass, is cheese made of grass?—is especially clear on how to do this.) Occasionally, the conclusion of the story can be drawn from the work of some philosopher: In "Happiness", Matthews applies Aristotle's theory of *eudaimonia* to plants. Often enough, a child will have said something very like what some philosopher has said:

> Martin: "Dogs probably think that what we use are not words, in their sense of 'words'." I thought here of Wittgenstein's saying, "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him". (1984, p. 73.)

The final story is then presented to the children, both as a creative product and as a record of their conversation, with perhaps some further discussion.

It is interesting—and supports Matthews' claims about the naturalness of philosophy for children—that when he tried this with adults (specifically, teachers), they were less imaginative: "Since they thought it would be obvious to any mature thinker that plants *really* have neither wishes nor ideas, they thought children should be 'educated' to this reality" (1984, p. 12). What the adults were missing was "the free exploration of possibilities", without which "one will remain unclear about" difficult matters (1984, p. 19).

There are many other philosophical issues in *Dialogues with Children*: In "The Ship", Matthews discuss the Ship of Theseus puzzle, prompted by a real-life encounter with a restored ship that, Matthews was assured, was simultaneously 85% new timber and "perhaps the oldest square-rigger afloat" (1984, p. 38). The chapter on "Knowledge" deals with claims to knowledge and evidence for such claims, using a discussion from a kindergarten class about how and whether you know what the seeds really are inside a package labeled 'lettuce seeds'. The chapter called "Words" describes a game based on the *Gulliver's Travels* episode about a language that uses objects instead of words: This led to a fairly deep discussion between Matthews and his students on semantics and the origin of language. There are also chapters on "Ethics" (a discussion of utilitarianism and the Golden Rule), on "Time Travel", and—in the chapter on "Developmental Psychology"—on counterfactuals: A 3-year-old says to his father: "If you were me, you wouldn't like bananas, either. ... [But] then who would be the daddy?" (1984, p. 113).

Just as, in *Philosophy and the Young Child*, Matthews criticized Piaget's developmental theory, here, in *Dialogues with Children*, he takes to task developmental theories in general. One of his objections to developmental theories as such is that they can lead adults to chalk up a child's "strange" remarks to conceptual or logical limitations of the child's particular stage in some developmental scheme:

> One unfortunate result of this is that it predisposes one to ignore, or

> misunderstand, the really imaginative and inventive thinking of young
> children. (1984, p. 32.)

Worse,

> By filtering the child's remarks through our developmental assump-
> tions we *avoid* having to take seriously the philosophy in those re-
> marks; in that way we also avoid taking the child and the child's point
> of view with either the seriousness or the playfulness they deserve.
> (1984, pp. 52–53; emphasis added.)

According to Matthews' analysis, developmental theories about children ig-
nore "the capacity to do philosophy" (1984, p. 116). He offers three reasons for
this. One is that Piagetian developmental psychology looks at philosophy from the
continental viewpoint, in which "philosophy ... has tended to be more pretentious
and more systematic than ... in English-speaking countries ... [where philosophy
is] akin to the kind of reflection young children are ... good at" (1984, pp. 117–
118). A second reason is that developmental psychology is only minimally con-
cerned with the development of capacities (such as philosophical thinking) that are
"ignored in our society" (1984, p. 116). But, Matthews argues, developmental psy-
chologists *should* say something about philosophy, since they are the experts on
what "children *should be*" like (1984, p. 119). Thus, if they say by omission that
children are not philosophical, then they imply that children *should not be*, which
implication, by the end of these two books, the reader will surely reject. The third
reason is that developmental psychology assumes development along a scale that
culminates in a mature stage, '[b]ut nobody has thought about what a reasonable
standard of maturity in philosophical thinking ... might be" (1984, p. 117).

4   Perry's Cognitive Developmental Scheme

There is one developmental theory, however, not mentioned by Matthews, that
illuminates various aspects of doing philosophy with children, namely, William
Perry's scheme of cognitive and ethical development (Perry 1970, 1981; cf. Rapa-
port 1982, 1984ab). *Very* briefly, according to Perry's scheme (Perry 1981: 79),
students initially approach education from a position of "Basic Duality", in which
"Authorities know, and if we [students] work hard, read every word, and learn
Right Answers, all will be well". They move on to a different kind of Dualism, in
which "True Authorities must be Right, the others are frauds. ... Good Authorities
give us problems so we can learn to find the Right Answer by our own independent
thought."

Next comes "Multiplicity", in which students recognize that "some uncertainties and different opinions are real and legitimate *temporarily*, even for Authorities", followed either by a form of Multiplicity characterized as "Authorities don't know the Right Answers, everyone has a right to his own opinion; no one is wrong" (shades of the typical college freshman!) or by a form of "Relativism", where "Authorities are not asking for the Right Answer; They want us to *think* about things in a certain way, *supporting* opinion with data."

The fifth position on Perry's developmental scheme is another form of Relativism— "Contextual Relativism"—characterized as follows: "*all* thinking must be like . . . [the previous position], even for Them. Everything is relative but not equally valid. . . . Theories are not Truth but metaphors to interpret data with. You have to think about your thinking."

Positions 6–9 are forms of "Commitment": First, "I see I'm going to have to make my own decisions in an uncertain world with no one to tell me I'm Right." Then, "I've made my first Commitment!", followed by "I've made several commitments. I've got to balance them . . . ", and then "This is how life will be . . . ".

There are also Transitions between the positions, and there are points of "deflection from growth", so the scheme is neither discrete nor linear.

If, as Matthews has urged, philosophy is natural and enjoyable for children, then it should be easiest to do at the elementary-school level. Now, the first observation we may make is that this appears to contrast with Perry's scheme, since doing philosophy is quite clearly a Contextually Relativistic or Commitment activity. But Perry's data came from college students, so perhaps there are earlier stages, including an early, proto-Relativistic/Commitment stage that is "socialized" away. It need not disappear forever, though: Matthews observes that if children remember their philosophical puzzles, then if they study philosophy in college, they "may find . . . an old friend" in some philosophical puzzles (1980, p. 4). Thus, the task of the secondary-school or college philosophy teacher is to reintroduce students to the activity of philosophy (1980, p. vii). If such "proto" Perry-positions exist, and if philosophy were taught more uniformly across the curriculum (as described, e.g., in Radest 1984), then students might move through Perry positions more quickly. In any event, there is clearly room for empirical investigation here.

A second observation about the Perry scheme and doing philosophy with children concerns Matthews' remark that it won't "disturb and upset" children to show them "that we don't know all the answers, perhaps don't even know where to look for answers" (1984, p. 2). Now, *if* children are Dualistic, then such an admission *ought* to upset them. If Matthews' claim is, nonetheless, correct, then perhaps the fact that children go through the Dualistic stage is an artifact of *our* failure to talk to them honestly about our non-omniscience. Moreover, Matthews offers an extremely valuable pedagogical technique that suggests that he is dealing with

8

Relativistic/Commitment (or proto-Relativistic/Commitment) students: His story-beginnings were written by him, but the rest of the stories are based on the dialogues with children:

> One [aim] was to give them the idea that the conclusion we reached, if any, depended heavily, if not exclusively, on them. ...I thought it was important for them to have the sense that what they said mattered. ...My other main aim was to encourage them to accept the problems as something they might want to think through for themselves. (1984, pp. 26-27.)

There are two more crucial parts of Perry's scheme, parts that can, I think, account for these observations and distinguish his scheme from other developmental theories. First, it is "recursive" or "circular" (cf. Perry 1981: 97): No matter what position one has reached in some intellectual endeavor, when one undertakes a new endeavor, one begins at a much lower position, reverting even to Dualism. For example, having been a professional philosopher for over 10 years, I am presumably at a late Commitment position in philosophy, but when I began studying computer science a few years ago, I began by being Dualistic in my computer studies. Second, Perry's scheme is "multi-level": In the situation just described, I was *simultaneously* a Commitment-position philosopher and a Dualistic computer scientist (though, I hope, I rapidly moved to Commitment in computer science, too!). Thus, it may not be the case that there are "proto" positions preceding Dualism. Rather, it is at least arguable that children who are Dualists in the classroom may well also be, say, Relativists with respect to doing philosophy. (Possibly, they may be Relativists with respect to *any* "non-standard" intellectual activity, not just philosophy.) More importantly, though, with respect to Matthews' third objection to developmental theories, the Perry scheme does not hold that there is a *single* stage of "maturity". Rather, one can reach "mature" positions several times, and at different times, with respect to different intellectual endeavors. Nor is a high position necessarily a "mature" one in any *age*-related sense. If anything, later Perry-positions are precisely ones at which—unlike other developmental theories as characterized by Matthews—something can be said about philosophy.

5   Conclusion

But the main value of Matthews' books lies not in philosophical discussions of developmental psychology, but in the philosophical conversations and wonderfully humane attitudes found in them. Let me conclude with two more quotations that illustrate this. In the forward to *Dialogues with Children*, Robert Coles observes that

the 'dialogues' recorded here are no miraculous product of a one-in-a-million exchange, but rather are culled from a sensitive father's, a knowing teacher's, everyday experience. They have their echoes, surely, in all of our lives, if we would but stop and remember, stop and notice and, not least, join a child's proposed colloquy. (1984, p. xii.)

For, as one of Matthews' students said,

There are so many things we could talk about. (1984, p. 121.)

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