

# TEACHING CHILDREN TO THINK ETHICALLY

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## **Ethics cannot be taught by information transfer.**

There is much that we teach our children—that, for example, Napoleon was defeated at the battle of Waterloo, pasta is the national dish of Italy whose geography closely resembles a boot,  $3 \times 3 = 9$ , and salt is made of Sodium and Chloride. Though some of our students do not fare as well as we would like in our educational systems, nonetheless there is much of which we can be proud. The literacy rate in North America is 99% (as it is in most of Western Europe), which contrasts markedly with, for instance, Ethiopia where the literacy rate is approximately 35%, while Chad's is near the bottom at approximately 25%.<sup>1</sup>

There is a lot, then, that we do well in teaching our children. Given that this is the case, why do we fall so short in the ethical domain? Why is it that we don't just teach our children to be kind to one another so that it actually happens? Why don't we instruct our children to refrain from verbal and physical abuse so that we actually get rid of, or at least minimize, violence? Why don't we just send lying and cheating to the dustbin of history by seriously motivating our children to refrain from doing so?

The answer is, I will suggest, that we are stuck at the altar of information-transfer worship. This "information religiosity" is lethal because it fails to touch the reasoning that informs the way our children actually behave. In his book *How We Think*, published 100 year ago, John Dewey noted, prosaically, that attempting to manufacture moral growth by teaching kids what they ought and ought not to do can have "no more influence on character than information about the mountains of Asia."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, according to Dewey, an attempt at direct value inculcation can do more harm than good because, if successful, it creates a servile attitude (referred to by Adorno and his colleagues in the 1950's as an "authoritarian personality"<sup>3</sup>) and increases "dependence upon others, and throws upon those in authority the responsibility for conduct." And, in any case, says Dewey, "As a matter of fact, direct instruction in morals has been effective only in social groups where it was a part of the authoritative control of the many by the few. To so attempt in a democracy is to rely upon 'sentimental magic.'"<sup>4</sup>

This distinction between information transfer and wisdom, between theory and practice, is a common one, as John Dewey is at pains to point out.<sup>5</sup> "Information is knowledge that is merely acquired and stored up," notes Dewey, while "wisdom is knowledge operating in the direction of powers to the better living of life." And since we focus in our schools on the former, while virtually abandoning the latter, we ensure, according to Dewey, that "Pupils are taught to live in two separate worlds, one the world of out-of-school experience, the other the world of books and lessons."

## **Schools focus on products rather than process.**

Should we not find this neglect of our children's practical reasoning positively outrageous? Well, perhaps not. Such an educational approach would require that we infect our students with a passion to seek out and to

test the adequacy of the reasoning that supports their own judgments and opinions. Since such an educational approach would require that we focus on process rather than product, and since, to be effective, it would require that we stimulate, investigate and, where necessary, seek to alter the reasoning processes employed by our children to answer real questions that actually challenge them “where they live,” both its implementation and its measurement of success would be substantially more difficult than an approach that is tied to information accumulation that focuses on the “correct answer.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, given “the large number of pupils to be dealt with, and the tendency of parents and school authorities to demand speedy and tangible evidence of progress,”<sup>7</sup> and given “the mechanics of school administration and its seeming inevitable bureaucratic need to focus on examinations, marks, gradings, promotions,” and so on,<sup>8</sup> we ought, perhaps, to have sympathy for this focus on the product, rather than the mental processes by which the product is attained.<sup>9</sup>

### **Children learn how to think with or without guidance.**

While sympathy for the difficulty of implementing such practical reasoning programs may be appropriate, nonetheless, we ought not to be blind to the fact that refraining from such teaching does not mean that learning is not happening. And this is a serious problem because, again in Dewey’s words, if these habits of practical reasoning are not habits of careful looking into things, then they are “habits of hasty, heedless, impatient glancing over the surface; if not habits of consecutively following up the suggestions that occur, then habits of haphazard, grasshopper-like guessing; if not habits of suspended judgment till inferences have been tested by the examination of evidence, then habits of credulity alternating with flippant incredulity, belief or unbelief being based, in either case, upon whim, emotion, or accidental circumstance.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, to the degree that we remain wilfully blind to the cultivation of unhindered, unreflective habits of practical reasoning, we are guilty of delivering our children into the slavery of inconsiderate impulse, unbalanced appetite, caprice, or the circumstances of the moment.<sup>11</sup>

### **Aren’t adulthood and/or higher education necessary for reflective reasoning?**

But, one might object, if reflective thought really does require, as Dewey argues, “Active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends,”<sup>12</sup> surely this is the stuff of sophisticated philosophical consideration that can only be acquired either with age and/or higher levels of post-secondary education. Surely our high schools, let alone our elementary schools, are not the appropriate place to tackle this sophisticated challenge.

Oh really, responds Dewey, so you think adolescence is a synonym for magic?<sup>13</sup> This condemnation laced with such irony is Dewey’s way of underscoring the point that waiting until young adulthood to teach ethics is utterly ill-conceived. Such criticism seems well deserved, particularly given the fact that so many of entrenched adult problems are already readily accepted as having their source in childhood mis-education. We would find it outrageous, would we not, if anyone suggested that there would be no serious repercussions for allowing kids to consistently eat junk, read porn or spend all day watching violent TV? Why then are we not equally outraged by the suggestion that there will be no serious repercussions if kids spend most of their waking hours in a moral vacuum? Thinking, after all, begins in babyhood and it is only, according to Dewey, if we make the most of this “thought-fact,” already active in experiences of childhood, that there is “any promise or warrant for the emergence of superior reflective power at adolescence, or at any later period.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Philosophy for Children is an “unappreciated” antidote.**

This then is the clarion call for the educational program called Philosophy for Children (also known as P4C) because, unlike its postsecondary brethren, Philosophy for Children has kept its focus firmly anchored on practical, rather than on theoretical, reasoning. One way it does so is through its insistence that the topics scru-

tinized in Communities of Inquiry are topics that are relevant to, and picked by, the participants. This is crucial because it is these topics that are ones that give youngsters real pause in real life. Paradoxically, however, though this is the strength of P4C, it is also its weakness in terms of its general acceptance, not only to those in charge of school curricula, but even by the discipline that gave it birth. Those who associate the hallowed discipline of philosophy with discussions of Plato, Kant, and Mill, look down with derision on a practice that would have its participants scrutinize such topics as whether it is OK to lie to parents, snitch on a classmate, gossip about a friend, engage in physical or verbal bullying, or cheat on an exam. These are clearly unsophisticated topics that could only be of interest to inferior scholastics incapable of engaging in “real” philosophical dialogue with the “big boys.” To scholars who come to a conclusion of this sort, Dewy boldly sneers: “[Y]our specialized abstract focus has been cut lose from its practical and moral bearings, your extravagant habits of inference and speech, and your ineptness in reaching conclusions in practical matters, and your egotistical engrossment in your own studies, are precisely what should alert us to the tragic effects of completely severing abstract studies from ordinary connections in life.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Philosophy for Children has been less powerful than it could be.**

Adherents of philosophizing with children, however, are themselves not without blame for its lack of general acceptance. Since Philosophy for Children grew out of the seeds planted by the pragmatists, P4C has perhaps been overly confident that the practice explains itself. Thinking is an activity after all, and like any other activity, the learning is in the doing.

And so it was that the Community of Inquiry not only became the pedagogical anchor of Philosophy for Children, but also has been left pretty much on its own to deliver the implicit message of its efficacy and its worth. Thus, in trying to propagate the program, the focus has been largely on teaching teachers how to run such communities by engaging them in such communities, with the assumption being that both the teachers and the students would learn in the experience how important it is to have reasons for what they think and feel, to stay open to opposing viewpoints, and ultimately, to experience the exhilaration of following reasons wherever they lead. Thus, in his seminal book *Philosophy Goes to School*, Philosophy for Children founder, Matthew Lipman, says explicitly that “there can be no difference in the method by which teachers are taught and the method by which they would be expected to teach,”<sup>16</sup> and since the goal is to eschew “knowledge transmission,” teacher training must likewise refrain from the temptation to engage in lecture-type abstract analyses of the pedagogical forces at work in such communities.

The difficulty with this approach of leaving the practice of P4C to implicitly speak for itself is that it may leave the program, and the teachers who embrace it, exposed and unarmed in the face of those who challenge why any one should expect these communities of inquiry to have long-term practical implications; mute with regard to the expected learning outcomes; perplexed as to how these sorts of inquiries differ from ordinary discussions that take place in virtually every classroom around the world; unhelpful to students who ask what principles ought to be adopted in order to maintain momentum in the absence of such communities; and certainly uninspiring with regard to why students should try to transfer this sort of thinking outside the classroom, particularly when such thinking is often contrary to their own short-term best interests.

These implicit questions must be answered explicitly by Philosophy for Children not only if Philosophy for Children is ever going to be accepted by mainstream educational bureaucracies, but also in order to maximize its own efficacy. What I am suggesting, in other words, is that Philosophy for Children ramp up its theoretical message both to its participants, and to those who would judge its merits.

### **The need for more precise messaging.**

Elsewhere (in my book entitled *Thinking Your Way to Freedom*<sup>17</sup>), I have detailed a justificatory theoretical backdrop. However, given the limitation of the present situation, I will only briefly outline four theoretical mes-

sages that I believe must be delivered with both detail and passion if enhancing wisdom (as opposed to information transfer) is ever to be considered an appropriate enterprise in our schooling systems, and if we are ever to reasonably hope that our youngsters will walk securely along that path.

These four theoretical messages are as follows:

1. We should ramp up the message that P4C can enhance practical reasoning;
2. We should explain that the payoff of unbiased practical reasoning is freedom;
3. We should outline a clear vision of what unbiased thinking looks like; and
4. We should come clean on ‘truth,’ i.e., we must tackle the dangerous myth of ‘relativism,’ in order that we may show that practical reasoning really matters.

I will briefly deal with these four in turn.

1. The message must focus on practical reasoning.

There can be no doubt of P4C’s efficacy in enhancing intelligence and/or critical thinking, as has been demonstrated by, amongst others, the early tests with the New Jersey Test of Reasoning Skills.<sup>18</sup> However, given the fact that children’s intelligence and critical thinking skills can be enhanced in a myriad of other ways, it seems to me that the noise of the competition, and the accountability pressures to which teachers and administrators are subject, will too easily drown out attempts to make the case for an expensive intelligent-enhancing program like P4C. Thus, it seems to me that we ought rather to stress what P4C can uniquely do, i.e., that it can enhance the quality of practical reasoning. Focusing thus on wisdom, rather than merely on intelligence, also reinvigorates the moral strength of P4C advocates to challenge the “powers that be” for failing to include practical reasoning as an educational priority. Interestingly, this focus will also send an important message to students, i.e., that we care deeply about how they act, and not merely about what grades they get.

2. The payoff is freedom.

But why should students care that we care about how they act? Why should they respond to such a program? If we are to harness students’ motivational forces so that they will sustain the hard work of reasoning through the pros and cons of various potential actions plans, we must provide them with a theoretical framework that makes the case that there is a payoff. To do this, students need to understand that though all of us feel like choosers, most of us are just placeholders for the strongest messages that waft through our social linguistic environment. They need to understand that, in order to credibly make the claim that their decisions are their own, i.e., that what they do is a product of their own reasoning rather than simply a function of mindless messages introjected from others, they must seriously reflect on the reasons that back all potential options, and importantly, be prepared to adopt the least weak option. Students must be reminded, again and again, that it is only by seriously and impartially reflecting on the reasons that guide their actions in the short, medium, and long term, that they can describe themselves as masters of their own fate, as creators of themselves, and only to that degree can they describe themselves as wise individuals and worthy of respect.<sup>19</sup> Students need to deeply understand, in other words, that the payoff for engaging in genuinely unbiased practical reasoning is ‘freedom’ in the self-legislative sense.<sup>20</sup>

3. What unbiased thinking looks like.

Autonomy requires that one think impartially. However, in order to think impartially, one needs a clear image of what impartial thinking looks like. Images, after all, are what pull out behaviour. In sports, for instance, it is readily accepted by experts that one needs an image, for example, of what good skiing looks like in order to so guide one’s body—and the more precise the image the better the chance of success. Likewise, one needs an

image of what precisely unbiased thinking looks like. The over-arching assumption that threads through that vision, and upon which the entire enterprise rests, is the unshakable belief that the adequacy of any claim is only ever a function of the adequacy of the reasons that back it. And it is here that the teaching of some logic (as opposed to exclusively engaging in communities of inquiry) is imperative so that students can see that, through logic, the strength of reasons can actually be objectively estimated. Amongst other logical moves, they will need to be taught how to find hidden premises, and how to estimate the strength of premises as a function of their vulnerability to counterexample.<sup>21</sup> They will need to be gifted the explicit explanation that this attempt to falsify reasoning is a logical move, not an asocial insult. And they will need to be taught that after thus testing for the local sufficiency of any given position (through attempting to falsify premises), the relative adequacy of any premise that survives the test for local sufficiency must then be measured against its strongest possible opposition thus establishing which is the best candidate for global sufficiency, i.e., they must be prepared to fairly balance the pros and cons of all options on the table. Learning these terms, i.e., local and global sufficiency, though antithetical to P4C's typical laissez faire approach, adds enormously to its power by laying out precisely what logical steps need to be undertaken to move toward impartiality.<sup>22</sup>

And from the above it follows, but must be explicitly stated in order to begin to change attitudes, that one's opposition is truly one's very best friend since it is only through testing one's positions against the strongest possible opposition that one has any clue to their adequacy. Hence, since impartially estimating the truth of competing claims is the only route via which one can escape the tyranny of outside pressures, it is only through genuinely reflecting on the merits of one's opposition that one's own autonomy is possible. Our youngsters must learn, in other words, to abjure the common tendency—even in communities of inquiry—to simply shut up while others are talking primarily so that they can rehearse how better to reinforce their own viewpoints. They must learn, rather, that it is to their own benefit to assist in fleshing out the strength of what is being said because to do otherwise is to deprive themselves of the only method to 'truth' that is available to mortal minds—which brings us to the fourth topic.

#### 4. What's 'truth' got to do with it?

A 2009 survey of Canadian teens, reported in the August 14, 2009 edition of *The Vancouver Sun*,<sup>23</sup> disclosed that 64% of Canadian teens agreed with the statement that "what's right or wrong is a matter of personal opinion." To those who do not cringe at this monstrous misguided pseudo-democratic relativist assumption, I challenge you to de-horrify for the rest of us such decisions as the one made in 1997 by David Cash, a Berkeley University engineering student, who chose to turn the other way as his friend raped and then drowned a 7 year old girl, and who then proudly proclaimed that what his friend did had nothing to do with him and that it was not his place to judge.<sup>24</sup>

Make no mistake about it: relativism is a virus that not only protects evil, it perpetrates it, and its only antidote is truth. Our responsibility then is absolute and critical. We must explain explicitly to our youngsters that there is truth in ethics and what counts as true in ethics is the same as what counts as true in science: what counts as true is what survives a rigorous impartial falsification process. There is no space, in other words, between the process and the product.<sup>25</sup> Like a jet engine, we move forward toward 'truth' by putting behind us that which is faulty just as we move toward 'clean' by washing out dirt.<sup>26</sup> And though, as a result, we must discard the holy grail of 'Truth' with a capital "T," i.e., we will never know that a claim will inevitably survive future challenge, nonetheless, the process supplies us with ample ammunition to speedily annihilate relativism on the grounds that we are perfectly capable of judging when one person's reasoning is more faulty than another's, just we are capable of judging when someone's clothes are dirtier than someone else's.<sup>27</sup> We only need the truth-seeking process, in other words, to annihilate relativism; we do not need sanctity or special privileges for claims and/or persons. And it is this process that we must gift to our children: both in practice and in theory.



### Summary

In summary, it is my contention that we must keep up the fight of trying to inspire our educational practitioners to focus on educating the practical reasoning of our youth and that we must deliver a clear message that Philosophy for Children is in a unique position to do just that. And in order to do that, as well as to ensure that P4C can indeed deliver on its promise, it is my contention that we must gird the practice of Philosophy for Children with the scaffolding of a precise vision of the sort outlined here that will unite P4C practitioners under one clear communicable banner, and one which will enhance its pedagogical power by convincing teachers, administrators and students of the urgency and efficacy of what we offer. With this new armour, we can go forward with renewed enthusiasm, and perhaps succeed where Dewey failed a hundred years ago, convincing those mired in educational bureaucracy that the payoff of embracing a process with a clear vision for educating thought that guides behaviour is one that can no longer be responsibly ignored. Whether we like it or not, our kids are in charge of their own actions; for God's sake let us give them the tools to do so wisely.

### Endnotes

1. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_literacy\\_rate](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_literacy_rate). Web. Nov. 3, 2009. Web.
2. John Dewey, *How We Think*, (Stilwell, KS: Digireads.com Pub., 2007), 258.
3. T. Adorno, E. Frenkel-Brunswik, D. J. Levinson and R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1950).
4. Dewey, *How We Think*, 258.
5. *Ibid.*, 26.
6. *Ibid.*, 29.
7. *Ibid.*, 29.
8. *Ibid.*, 29.
9. *Ibid.*, 29.
10. *Ibid.*, 34-5.
11. *Ibid.*, 35.
12. *Ibid.*, 7.
13. *Ibid.*, 34.
14. *Ibid.*, 34.
15. *Ibid.*, 28.
16. Lipman, Matthew, *Philosophy Goes To School*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 4. 17.  
Susan Gardner, *Thinking Your Way to Freedom: A Guide to Owning Your Own Practical Reasoning*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).
18. M. Lipman, A. M. Sharp, & F. S. Oscanyan, *Philosophy in the Classroom*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).
19. Gardner, 36.
20. Hence the title of my book *Thinking Your Way to Freedom: A Guide to Owning Your Own Practical Reasoning*.
21. Arguing, for example, that “ ‘x’ is wrong because it is unnatural,” can be dismissed out of hand because it carries the hidden premise that “all things that are unnatural are wrong”—presumably said by someone who doesn't think it is wrong to wear clothing, or use a computer, etc., i.e., the counterexamples.
22. For more details, see Gardner.
23. Reported by Douglas Todd, “Metro Vancouver more international than rest of country,” *The Vancouver Sun*, August 14, 2009, A1 and A7.
24. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy\\_Strohmeyer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeremy_Strohmeyer). Web.
25. Gardner, 36.

- 26. *Ibid.*
- 27. *Ibid.*

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