

Phenomenology as a Voice of Childhood

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“I believe nature can be cruel, it’s mad at us. But also nature includes us. And we are cruel to ourselves.”
-Thomas, 12

“When I can feel my body, I can feel the world. Maybe my body is also the world ... am I the world?”
- Rania, 10 years

When we conducted a qualitative study about “nature” with German and Canadian children in 2014, we began the community of inquiry with seemingly simple questions that engaged with the children’s sensations, feelings and associations.¹ We asked: “What is the first thing that comes to your mind, when you think of “nature?”” And as a follow-up question: “Can one smell, taste, hear, see nature? If so, how?” Here is how one group of children responded:

Nate, 15 years: “... one can, switch off one’s brain when I think about nature, for example, when sitting on the lake, to feel the nature, for one hour to not think about all the terrible things, all the problems of mankind.”

Liza, 12 years: “So, I really enjoy nature, for example when I go for a walk with my parents and listen to the birds singing, this I really enjoy.”

Rick, 11 years: “Most of the time peace and sometimes like shock.”

[...]

Patrick, 10 years: “So, I can imagine that one can be excited; [... for example] lightening is nice and bright and beautiful; that is to say when one looks at it from somewhere safe. But when you are not somewhere safe then it is not only beautiful ... I mean, it is still fascinating, but when you are standing there in open nature, then you are also afraid, I think.”²

In this example, the questions by themselves were not ostensibly philosophical, however, the excerpt shows that they immediately triggered philosophical topics like ‘beauty and terror’, ‘happiness’ and ‘the good life’. These sensual experiences then led into more complex philosophical deliberations regarding the topic of nature.

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² In order to maintain anonymity, all children’s names were changed.

1. Philosophy for Children and Its Critics: Introducing Ideas and Questions

One of the oldest criticisms against ‘Philosophy for Children’ has been that children are too young to engage in abstractions, critical thinking and logic. And indeed, P4C has often been reduced to a critical thinking program where logic is at the forefront of competence development. This constrained and one-sided understanding of what “counts” as philosophy (especially in North America) has led to much criticism of P4C in Germany (and many other European countries). It portrays philosophy as an abstract discipline with an ‘ugly’ or ‘cold’ face. And this misconception of philosophy as mere sophism, as the hostile competition of viewpoints or pure logic, is not new. In “Of the Education of Children,” the French renaissance philosopher and educator Michel de Montaigne writes: “It is very wrong to portray her [philosophy] as inaccessible to children, with a surly, frowning, and terrifying face. Who has masked her with this false face, pale and hideous? There is nothing more gay, more lusty, more sprightly, and I might almost say more frolicsome. She preaches nothing but merry-making and a good time. A sad and dejected look shows that she does not dwell there.”³

Thus, when we are trying to address the question whether or not children are able to engage in philosophical dialogues, what we need to ask first is: What kind of “philosophy” are we talking about? Do we interpret philosophy in the direction of either a “frowning face” or a “gay and merry making countenance”? And because philosophy encompasses such a long history and wide variety of traditions, the German philosopher Ekkehard Martens writes: “What we lack [within the P4C tradition] is a widely arranged and open, yet thorough philosophical foundation, which will act against and prevent an inflationary, nebulous, and for children harmful ‘philosophizing around’ without any aim, purpose or method.”⁴ But, instead of creating a unified or universal definition of what philosophy is or ought to be, Martens suggests to speak about “philosophy as a cultural practice” that embraces a variety of traditions and should be taught to everyone, just like reading, writing or arithmetic. And in order to develop some initial criteria to identify traits of philosophy in thinking, writing, acting and speaking, Martens suggests distinguishing between philosophical topics (or questions), philosophical attitudes, and philosophical methods:

- a. By *philosophical questions* he refers to questions that go beyond those that have an obvious answer or can be solved by means of empirical research. They often doubt common beliefs or touch upon the existential layers of life.⁵

³ Michel de Montaigne, *The complete works of Montaigne*, translated by D. M. Frame (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1958), 118. It should be mentioned that indeed some philosophical topics are more severe or existential than others. Yet, philosophy is always practiced among friends and not among enemies.

⁴ Ekkehart Martens, *Philosophieren mit Kindern: Eine Einführung in die Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Reklam Publisher, 1999), 7. This quotation is a ‘word to word translation’ from the original German text by B.W.: „Woran es jedoch mangelt, ist eine breit angelegte und gründliche philosophische Fundierung, die einem inflationären, für die Kinder schädlichen, weil vernebelnden Herumphilosophieren entgegenwirken könnte.“

⁵ See Martens, *Philosophieren mit Kindern*, 9-12. A classic example here are the four well-known fundamental questions by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant: *What can I know?*, *What ought I to do?* *What may I hope?*, *Who is a human?* (see: Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1998/1781).

b. With *philosophical attitude* Martens describes character traits, for example: the readiness and courage to follow uncommon or unusual ways of thinking, tolerance for the kind of irritation caused by unexpected ways of thinking as well as willingness to continuously question one's beliefs and actions.⁶

c. Finally, going back to Plato's Socratic dialogues, Martens unfolds five *philosophical methods*, namely phenomenology, hermeneutic, dialectic, logic and speculation.⁷ However, he does not narrow them down, by associating each of them with a specific philosopher or historical time. Rather, he sees them as different ways of solving a problem through thinking, dialogue or practice. This means that all five methods may occur within one philosophical dialogue or alternatively that the dialogue only concentrates on one method at a time.

In this article, we will build on Martens and argue that—while critical thinking and logic are very important aspects of the P4C pedagogy—they are not the only valuable parts of philosophical dialogues with children. Just as the history of philosophy is not all about logic, but rather includes other philosophical traditions like phenomenology, hermeneutics, dialectics, speculation and even physical practices (like meditation), so do philosophical dialogues with children include many facets, stages and layers that all have their specific value, depth and beauty.

For this chapter we will focus on phenomenology, in an effort to support Montaigne's rather optimistic statement about philosophy: i.e., that it offers us a space to explore concepts, ideas and experiences in a playful manner and with all our senses. Furthermore, phenomenology allows children (especially very young children) to begin their philosophical dialogues with their sensual and immediate perceptions of the world.

The starting point for our argument and reoccurring figure of speech will be Immanuel Kant's (1781) famous statement in his *Critique of Pure Reason*: "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."⁸ Yet, by referring to the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his notion of the "I can," we will explore in more detail why and how intuitions and concepts are anchored in our embodiment. In a parallel argument, this chapter suggests that children are still more grounded in an immediate sensual experience of the world that is on the one hand closer to "the things themselves," yet on the other hand might also be more blind, to borrow from Kant's vocabulary. Conversely, adults might have a more elaborate vocabulary, yet they are in danger of reducing the complexity of a phenomenon by relying too much on their conceptualized view of the world.

⁶ Ekkehart Martens, "Can Animals Think? The Five most important Methods of Philosophizing with Children," *Thinking: The Journal for Philosophy for Children*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2007): 12-3.

⁷ Ekkehart Martens, *Methodik des Ethik- und Philosophieunterrichts: Philosophieren als elementare Kulturtechnik* (Hannover: Siebert Publisher, 2003). Martens indicates that one might find more philosophical methods within the history of philosophy. In addition, each method has variations in the way it is practiced. Thus, the five methods he developed are examples and should not be seen as complete.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Hamburg: Meiner Publisher, 1998/1781), AA III, 75/B 75. It should be emphasized that this sentence is only used as a 'figure of speech'. This is not the place to go into any scholarly detail about the relationship between this statement and the phenomenological approach.

On this theoretical basis we suggest that by using phenomenology in a CPI, children and adults are encouraged to go back to the things themselves through the medium of the body. The goal is to cultivate and refine both our perceptions and our concepts. This refinement appears to be a dynamic twofold process because it entails: a. sensitizing our perceptions in order to go beyond our concept-based beliefs and dive into the actual experience of a phenomenon and b. elaborate our existing vocabulary by speaking about our freshly gained experiences with others. By doing so, we continuously refine and recreate our ways of perceiving, speaking and thinking. This article will end with an example of a CPI on the topic of friendship in order to show what a phenomenological exploration of a concept might look like in practice. However, it is important to stress that we do not argue to ‘only’ use phenomenological approaches. Rather we aim to show how concepts function as doors to different perspectives, experiences and realities, and we hope to encourage CPI facilitators to become more playful with both our perceptions *and* our usage of concepts.

2. A Brief Story of Phenomenology

2.1 On Perceptions, Concepts and Embodiment

Very generally speaking, phenomenology is the attempt to gain insight through an immediate description of what we perceive as well as how the perceived datum affects us. Edmund Husserl, the German founder of the phenomenological school of thought, claims that our consciousness is directed towards an object and thus consciousness is always consciousness of something: “The notion of an absolute reality is as absurd as the notion of a round square. Reality and world are just titles for specific sensory units, namely that something makes sense in relationship to our senses [...]”⁹ And because our consciousness is always directed towards the world with an intention, the things around us are only ever being disclosed in the light of these intentions. Or in other words, we never see the things “in themselves,” naked to our gaze.¹⁰ Within this context Husserl introduces the concepts *noema* and *noesis*: *noesis* is the intentionality of the person that discloses something as something and *noema* is the disclosed object through this intentionality.¹¹ This means our intentionality functions like a light that we shed onto the objects around us and make them appear to us as something. Our intentionality also means that the singular perceptions (*cogitationes*) are being unified around our consciousness. Consequently, within the phenomenological tradition of thought there is no ‘absolute observer perspective’, but rather consciousness and world are ramified through the body. The intertwining of perceptions, concepts and embodiment will serve as the backbone of our article’s

⁹ Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Publisher, 1913), 134. Translated from the original German edition by B.W.

¹⁰ At the heart of Husserl’s phenomenological approach is his criticism of premature scientific conclusions that tend to simplify or reduce the actual complexity of phenomena.

¹¹ See Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie* (Halle/Saale: Meiner Publisher, 1913).

argument.¹²

2.2 Merleau-Ponty on the Intertwining of Body, Consciousness and World—from the ‘I think’ to the ‘I can’

In his famous work *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty states: “Consciousness is being at the thing through the medium of the body.”¹³ This simple sentence already entails his later concept of flesh (*chair*), which elaborates on the intertwining of senses, meaning and world: we are visible beings who see, we are feeling beings who can be felt by others, and we are embodied beings who understand the world through the medium of the body. Or as Merleau-Ponty says himself in his last and unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible*: “One can say that we perceive the things themselves, that we are the world that thinks itself or that the world is at the heart of our flesh. [...] there is a ramification of my body and a ramification of the world and a correspondence between its inside and my outside, between my inside and its outside.”¹⁴ A newborn is not yet aware of her body. Her arms and legs do not yet belong to her; that is, she does not “indwell” her body. However, through double-sensation—by feeling her own body with her hands, like by biting into her finger and feeling the pain, then biting into a toy and not feeling any pain—the child learns to distinguish her own body from the world, while exploring the world through her body.

In order to understand the acquisition of language in young children, Merleau-Ponty elaborates on Kant’s intertwining of concepts and perceptions, while emphasizing on the body’s role. He says that we enact our senses (perceptions) by putting the objects to the uses that disclose their specific sense (meaning). This idea is based on his notion of the “I can.” He writes: “Consciousness is originally not an ‘I think that,’ [in the sense of Descartes’ cogito] but rather an ‘I can.’[...] Vision and movement are specific ways of relating to objects and, if a single function is expressed throughout all of these experiences, then it is the movement of existence, which does not suppress the radical diversity of contents, for it does not unite them by placing them all under the domination of an ‘I think,’ but rather by orienting them towards the inter-sensory unity of a ‘world.’”¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the “I can” is the enactment and actualization of meaning through the medium of the body. Thus, it can entail anything from “I can ride a bike” to “I can pick a flower” to “I can hunt.” In this sense, the “I can” lies at the heart of any concept formation because we do not know, learn or discover concepts abstractly, but rather discover them through our bodily engagement with the world and with others. “Language takes on a sense for the child when it creates a situation for him.”¹⁶ For example, we learn the concept of a flower while going for a stroll and smelling it with our family. Within the same context, we might also learn that some plants belong to the category of flower, but that there are also other plants called mushrooms, trees and so forth. Each concept functions like a

¹² Of course, Husserl’s original thoughts had significant influence on many thinkers and traditional philosophical topics and offers a wide variety of ways to learn from and bring them into a philosophical community of inquiry.

¹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Donald A. Landes (London, New York: Routledge Publisher, 2012/orig. 1945), 168-9.

¹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Illinois : Northwestern University Press, 1968), 136.

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 139.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 423.

joint that we place into the perceived world around us in order to distinguish one thing from the other: for instance, we learn to perceive the leaf as different from the branch, the branch as different from the tree, the tree as different from the giraffe eating the leaf, and so on. Yet, these concepts are only filled with meaning to the degree that they are tied to our bodily projects—we can use a leaf as a boat that floats on the river or we use a branch to make fire or pick flowers to make a bouquet. Only through these bodily enactments of the projects to which they are tied (in the form of “I cans”) do these concepts become filled with meaning and create a grid that we place onto the perceived world around us.

Generally speaking, then, the pragmatic sense of things is given by their purpose in relation to our projects. And we have projects because we are dependent on the world—that is, on the things in it that we need like food, shelter and cultural objects. The goal of our various practical projects is to provide us with these things. In accomplishing these projects, we determine how the world appears to us. As James Mensch, a phenomenologist and Merleau-Ponty scholar, writes:

Each project, when successful, exhibits those aspects of the world that are required for our purposes. The water of a stream, for example, is seen as water to drive my mill when I use it for this purpose. It can also appear as water to drink or to wash or cook with, depending on my particular needs. This determination of the appearing of the world and, hence, of its sense is also a determination of the way we appear to ourselves. We become the person who has accomplished these projects. The sense of our embodiment as an “I can” is correlative to such projects. The co-constitution of the sense of this “I can” and the sense of the world disclosed through such projects places us within the world.¹⁷

Consequently, the embodied “I can” ties the notion of intentionality back to the body.

Now, in all our language acquisition, from learning to pick the right fruit to eat or the right flower to make a bouquet, to learning how to ride a bike or drive a car, we do not learn concepts in isolation, by ourselves, but rather as part of a pattern of our bodily engagement with other people who form our social environment and disclose the meanings of the concepts to us. In a similar way we learn about the different meanings and functions of the natural and cultural objects that surround us. An example here is paper: it can be used as a surface to draw and write on or as material to start a fire or to make a paper airplane, and so on. As Mensch writes:

Each new use enriches our sense of what is meant by the word, “paper.” Behind this is, in fact, a multiple correlation: The components of a word’s meaning are correlated to the ways in which the object it designates can appear, which are correlated to its instrumental character, that is, to the purposes we can put this particular object to. Such purposes themselves are correlated to our specific projects. To the point that such projects are common, each of these correlated elements will also be common. The common meaning of an expression will point back to the common usage of an object as means for a given

¹⁷ James Mensch, *Embodiments: from the Body to the Body Politics* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern Publisher, 2009), 79.

goal. Thus, for everyone who uses paper to start a fire, the meaning of the word “paper” will include the fact of its being combustible.¹⁸

The word “paper” then is the abstraction of all the things I can do with the flat sheet. And each of them has a meaning for me as an embodied being (as an “I can”), which is why embodiment and concept formation are intertwined.

Turning now to the role of our perceptions (intuitions) within this process, here, Merleau-Ponty sees the body not as an obstacle that is standing between the world and us, but rather as a “vehicle to the world.” He writes:

It is that the thickness of the flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication. [...] The thickness of the body, far from rivaling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of the things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh.¹⁹

Merleau-Ponty, in line with Husserl’s detailed critique of the scientific reduction, warns us against making precipitated conclusions. An example here is the perception of colors: When we look at the wall and see it as greyish-yellow instead of white, we might think that our eyes are misleading us because we just see the wall as yellow while in reality, it is white. In this example the whiteness of the wall is an abstraction since in actuality the wall does not have any color at all; rather, what happens is that the sunlight hits the wall. Some aspects of the light are being absorbed by the surface properties while others are reflected and returned to our eyes. Thus, our body is not misleading us. We are not seeing despite our body, but rather the wall color is being actualized through the medium of our body. In other words: the color, light and eyes are intertwined.

Returning to Kant’s statement about concepts, we understand now that while concepts do make us see something as something, they also reduce the complexity of our perceptions and make us blind to other aspects of the world. For example, once we learn that the wall is actually white, we might find ourselves only seeing it as white while abstracting from all other nuances—that in some lighting, the wall might appear blue, yellow or shades of grey. This process of abstracting and constraining our perception becomes evident when engaging philosophically with young children. Since early childhood, our perceptions are still open to the naked appearance of objects. Consequently, children might see more details (or “so-ness”), yet might not be able to conceptualize what they see (or “whatness”). In the following dialogue excerpt, a five-year-old girl is wondering about a similar topic regarding experience, concepts and the intersubjective reality of what we see:

Arielle: “I think one always has to be two people in order to know if something is really there or if it is only in our head.”

Facilitator: “Why do you think that?”

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Visible and Invisible*, 135.

Arielle: “Well, if I see the clouds up there, then how do I know if I only see them in my head or if they are really there, outside of us? In the end, I can only see them, but not touch them.”

Facilitator: “Okay ...”

Arielle: “I just wish I could draw like Fritz Hoerauf [a contemporary German painter] then I could paint exactly what I imagine in my head. Otherwise no one ever knows what I am thinking.”

Facilitator: “Well, you can try to explain in words ...”

Arielle: “No, this won’t work, because if I think of a ‘red bed’ then you will never exactly know which ‘red’ I am thinking of, nor will you know which kind of ‘bed’ I am thinking of. The only way I could show you what I think of is by drawing it exactly how it is in my head.”

Facilitator: “Are you saying that the words you use are different from your actual imagination or the object you see out there?”

Arielle: “Well, yes ... You see, if I was a computer, I could send the picture in my head as a file to you ... I could copy it for you. Hm, but then ... maybe then you would no longer perceive it as my image; rather you would be filled with the image and the image would erase your own perceptions.”²⁰

The other side of Kant’s statement regards thoughts without contents—when a person’s words and concepts lose their meaning or are not filled with any intuitions. For example, for someone in a wheelchair the meaning of “I can go for a hike” has become abstract. Children are very aware of the abstractness of language. For instance, at the end of a CPI during which children talked about life after death, they had time to write or draw into their reflection journal. One girl drew a ladder that reached up into heaven. A girl sitting next to her commented that she needed to draw an elevator or escalator as well, because otherwise someone with a wheelchair would not be able to get into heaven.

The complete loss of any “I can” leads finally to the reduction of the body to a nonfunctioning object and eventually its death. Yet, if the decrease of intuitions and ignorance of concepts comprise a downward spiral that leads to a flattening of experience and eventually the loss of life, then reversely, the refinement of concepts and sensitization of our perceptions is an upward spiral that deepens our experience and increases our liveliness.

In order to show how refinement of concepts and sensitization of perception go hand in hand, the example of a wine connoisseur is very useful: young adults who drink wine for the first time may find it tastes mainly sour and notice little difference between a complex and precious wine versus a simple and shallow one. Yet with experience and a refinement of vocabulary—such as starting to read bottle labels or studying a wine aroma wheel they will learn to distinguish notes of hay or citrus in a white wine or hints of leather, tobacco or chocolate in a red wine. The process at work is an interlacing of language and perceptions: it is through concepts that we start to disclose those aspects of our environment and vice versa, creating new language for the things we disclose through our perceptions.

²⁰ The dialogue originally happened in German and was translated into English by the author of this paper.

Another well-known example is the word water and the word ‘snow’ as explained by linguist and anthropologist Franz Boas in his *Handbook of American Indian Languages*. He talks about Inuit people having multiple words for snow, stating:

To take again the example of English, we find that the idea of ‘water’ is expressed in a great variety of forms: one term serves to express water as a ‘liquid’; another one, water in the form of a large expanse (‘lake’); others, water as running in a large body or in a small body (‘river’ and ‘brook’); still other terms express water in the form of ‘rain,’ ‘dew,’ ‘wave,’ and ‘foam.’ It is perfectly conceivable that this variety of ideas, each of which is expressed by a single independent term in English, might be expressed in other languages by derivations from the same term. Another example of the same kind, the words for ‘snow’ in Eskimo, may be given. Here we find one word, aput, expressing ‘snow on the ground’; another one, qana, ‘falling snow’; a third one, piqsirpoq, ‘drifting snow’; and a fourth one, qimuqsuq, ‘a snowdrift.’²¹

And while for us a snowy landscape might just appear white and flat, people who grew up in this environment and learnt different concepts for snow’ will actually *see* these differences. Seeing such differences is key to their survival and will shape the “I can”—that is, how they actualize their identity with regard to their environment and perceptions.

3. The Frivolous Play with Concepts and the Sentient Body: Phenomenological Traits in a CPI

As we have seen, our perceptions of nuances are intertwined with the refinement of concepts—both are grounded in our “I can”. Thus, our perceptions can be cultivated, sensitized and expanded through a refinement of concepts and vice versa. However, every vocabulary, every way of speaking about the world, is contextual, situated and fragmented. It never captures the totality of what is. There is no bird’s eye perspective, or *pensée du survol*. We only ever disclose one glimpse, one aspect, one angle—just like how shedding light on one side of an object casts the other side in shade. In this sense, phenomenology can be seen as a complementary approach to Kant’s famous imperative *sapere aude*, meaning to have courage to use our own reason. Using phenomenology in a CPI, the starting point could be understood as having the courage to use our own senses. This dynamic two-fold process takes the immediate bodily experiences and perceptions as a starting point in order to disclose ever more nuances of a phenomenon. These experiences are then shared through dialogue. And by engaging with others, in listening and speaking, we create and refine our own language so as to keep up with our and others’ experiences. Here, concept formation creates a kind of second layer of awareness that deepens our experience. And by placing our concepts and attached beliefs in suspension, new ways of speaking and bodily enactments can emerge.

²¹ Franz Boas, *Handbook of American Indian Languages* (Washington: G.P.O., 1922), 3.

3.1 A Phenomenological CPI in Action

Many phenomenologists have tried to cultivate a phenomenological perspective by developing and using concrete exercises, such as detailed observations, descriptions of natural phenomena, or the focused use of one specific sense for the exploration of an object—for instance, describing a table solely through smell. For our purposes, the goal is far simpler. In this section, we will describe a philosophical dialogue with a group of teenagers on the topic of friendship in the hopes of revealing how a CPI can take a phenomenological turn rather than remain a mere critical thinking or dialectical exercise. The dialogue starts with a short introduction of Aristotle's three forms of friendship in book three of his *Nicomachian Ethics*. In the text, he distinguishes between friendships based on utility, pleasure and goodness of character. Aristotle argues that the first two kinds of friendship are founded on superficial qualities and generally not long lasting. On the other hand, friendship based on goodness of character is the best kind because these friends love one another for whom they are and not for what they stand to gain from one another.

Following this reading, the teen participants complete a short philosophical exercise using different examples of friendships: their Facebook friends, their peers, their dog, their mom, an invisible friend, a Barbie doll, a tree in the garden, God, themselves. They are asked to consider if each of these examples could be considered friends and why. After dialoguing on the subject, the teens came to the conclusion that none of the examples could be ruled out in and of themselves, but rather that the reasons depended on the particular situation as well as on the exact meaning of the classification "being a friend." This placed the concept of friendship in suspension and led into a moment of *aporia*, that is, of not knowing how to move forward. And it is this moment that brought the group back to the concrete 'things themselves'—in this case, to concrete examples of friendship. They were asked to each think of three friendships in their own life: one that counts as their best friendship, one as an unusual friendship and one as a past friendship. The teens described how each friendship is unique but also what still makes them classify that relationship as a friendship. After this exercise, the dialogue takes an unexpected turn: considering the uniqueness of each friendship example makes the teens aware of how manifold, nuanced and deep each of the examples are. Their concept of friendship was too narrow, appearing like an empty shell from which the actual experience had broken free. Now their memories and perceptions were meandering around and diving into each aspect of the relationship. It felt like a moment of no return where new concepts, words and descriptions had to be found in order to match the richness of their experiences. A critical thinking exercise would probably have taken the opposite direction, asking about necessary and sufficient criteria that eventually would have ruled out the one or other example to which they referred. Of course, there were moments when they tried to find common criteria that would fit all their examples, though that was not the sole purpose. In this sense, we should consider how critical thinking and phenomenology complement each other: critical thinking works on the precision of concepts and arguments, while phenomenology dives into the complexity of the phenomenon at hand and leads to a refinement of our perceptions by exploring what is different or specific. This enables a group to penetrate and push through the concept of friendship in order to see its nuances, helping them realize that each relationship is absolutely unique and cannot be compared to any other. In other words: each friend is irreplaceable.

4. Summary: The CPI as a playground of concepts

In this article, we tried to show how we each live within the world through the medium of our body. We act upon the world by finding new shapes, forms and concepts through which we indwell the world and understand ourselves in relation to it. For the infant psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott, creative play symbolizes the effort to be both connected with the sensuous world and simultaneously constructing concepts and interpretive structures that lift the continuous stream of being within the world of ideas and reason. For him the notion of play is so central because when we play we become creative—we acquire reality in an act of passive perception and active form-giving.²² In other words: our playing with the world is intertwined with our playing with concepts. Through this process, reality becomes *our* reality. Further, as he writes, “it is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to act creatively and to use the whole personality, and it is only in creativity that the individual discovers the self.”²³ We interpret the world and give it a shape, and this is the reconstructive force appropriated by children who play with reality. A very basic example is the creative use of objects by younger children, who use, for example, a table as a cave or a fork and a spoon as puppets. In a phenomenological CPI, children can play with words, concepts and meanings and thus create their own interpretations of reality, while adults are encouraged to abandon their old or leaned habits and concepts in order to re-enter the realm of possibilities and creativity. Thus, the phenomenological CPI may be described on the one hand as the intertwining of an inner sensuous perception of things and, on the other, as the recreating of a shared reality with others. Dialogue of this type therefore has great value, as illustrated by the words of a youth participant in our Nature Study:

Chanelle, 13 years: “I think at the beginning we had a lot of different ideas and by the end we could come up, not necessarily with one agreement, because there is never one right and there is never one wrong... I just really like how everyone had different ideas and tried to think of different perspectives. Because without thinking about perspectives a lot of people do not feel included, because you are not engaging them in what they think. So I liked that, and I think one of the reasons the conversation works is because people [...] elaborate and build on other people’s ideas but also, kind of are not stuck on one or their only their own idea and so it was a whole bunch of ideas and we were able to find a common in each one.”

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²² Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge Publisher, 2005), 72.

²³ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 73.

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