

## RECENT INTERVIEWS WITH PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN (P4C) SCHOLARS AND PRACTITIONERS

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### Abstract:

In these two long-distance interviews, Iranian Saeed Naji, founder of the Philosophy for Children (P4C) movement in Iran, questions two veteran practitioners of philosophy for children/community of philosophical inquiry (CPI). He raises issues related to P4C/CPI as representative of a larger educational paradigm, which he calls “reflective education,” and weighs its prospects for replacing what he calls the “traditional paradigm” worldwide. He also queries the two scholars on issues such as criteria for appropriate texts/stimuli for practicing philosophy with children; issues around teacher preparation; the epistemological paradigm of CPI and its relation to the logic of scientific discovery and mathematical proof; the status of CPI as a “new” or reconstructed form of the discipline of philosophy; the prospects for a narrative approach to philosophy as exemplified in the new literary genre of the Lipmanian philosophical novel for children; the relationship between the practice of CPI in schools and the possibility for educational reconstruction, particularly in the area of social democracy and school governance; the significance of understanding the child as a “privileged stranger” to patriarchal colonialist culture, and the social implications of a form of education based on dialogue rather than forced enculturation; and the implications for the construction and delivery of curriculum in a school in which CPI and emergent curriculum were central organizational elements.

Keywords: Philosophy for Children; Epistemology; Dialog; Democracy.

### Entrevistas recentes com estudiosos e praticantes da Filosofia para Crianças (FPC)

#### Resumo:

Nessas duas entrevistas realizadas a distância, o iraniano Saeed Naji, fundador do movimento de Filosofia para Crianças (FPC) no Irã, interroga dois praticantes veteranos de filosofia com crianças/comunidade de investigação filosófica (CIF). Ele levanta questões relacionadas com FPC/CIF como representativas de um paradigma educacional mais amplo, que ele chama de “educação reflexiva”, e pondera suas perspectivas de substituir o que ele chama de “paradigma tradicional” na escala mundial. Ele também interroga os dois estudiosos sobre questões como os critérios para textos/stimuli apropriados para a prática de filosofia com crianças; questões sobre a preparação dos professores; o paradigma epistemológico das CIF e sua relação com a lógica da descoberta científica e a prova matemática; o status das CIF como uma forma da disciplina de filosofia “nova” ou reconstruída; as perspectivas para uma aproximação da filosofia pela narrativa, como exemplificado no novo gênero literário lipmaniano das novelas filosóficas para crianças; a relação entre a prática de CIF nas escolas e a possibilidade para a reconstrução educacional, particularmente na área da democracia social e da governança escolar; a significância do fato de entender as crianças como “estrangeiros privilegiados” para a cultura colonialista patriarcal, e as implicações sociais de uma forma de educação baseada no diálogo e não numa aculturação forçada; e as implicações para a construção e entrega de um currículo em uma escola na qual CIF e currículo emergente são elementos centrais da organização.

Palavras-chave: Filosofia com crianças; Epistemologia; Diálogo; Democracia.

Entrevistas recientes con estudiosos y practicantes de la Filosofía para Niños (FPN).

Resumen:

En estas dos entrevistas realizadas a distancia, el iraní Saeed Naji, fundador del movimiento de Filosofía para Niños (FPN) en Irán, interroga dos practicantes veteranos de filosofía para niños/comunidad de investigación filosófica (CIF). Postula cuestiones relacionadas con FPN/CIF como representativas de un paradigma educacional más amplio, que llama “educación reflexiva”, y pondera sus perspectivas de sustituir lo que el llama de “paradigma tradicional” en escala mundial. También interroga a los dos estudiosos acerca de cuestiones como los criterios para textos/estímulos apropiados para la práctica de filosofía para niños; cuestiones sobre la preparación de los profesores; el paradigma epistemológico de las CIF y su relación con la lógica del descubrimiento científico y la prueba matemática; el status de las CIF como una forma de disciplina de “nueva” o reconstruida filosofía; las perspectivas para una aproximación de la filosofía a través de la narrativa, como ejemplifica el nuevo género literario lipmaniano de las novelas filosóficas para los niños; la relación entre la práctica de CIF en la escuelas y la posibilidad para la reconstrucción educacional, particularmente en el campo de la democracia social y del gobierno escolar; el significado de entender a los niños como “extranjeros privilegiados” para la cultura colonialista patriarcal, y las implicaciones sociales de una forma de educación apoyada en el diálogo y no en una aculturación forzada; y las implicaciones para la construcción y entrega de un currículo en una escuela en que CIF y currículo emergente son elementos centrales de la organización.

Palabras-claves: Filosofía para niños; Epistemología; Diálogo; Democracia.



## RECENT INTERVIEWS WITH P4C SCHOLARS AND PRACTITIONERS

Saeed Naji is an Iranian scholar, trained in physics and philosophy of science, and is a faculty member at the Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies (IHCS ) in Tehran and a specialist in Philosophy for Children. He and various colleagues introduced P4C in Iran around the turn of the century, and he founded the Philosophy for Children Research Department (FABAK) at IHCS, with the goal of producing an appropriate version of the program for the Iranian people, as well as organizing academic activities in this area. Dr. Naji trains teachers in P4C, provides informational sessions for school administrators and university students and professors, and has recently co-founded a peer review journal, *Thinking and Children* under the aegis of FABAK. He has undertaken a series of long-distance interviews with selected Western P4C scholars/practitioners, including Matthew Lipman and Ann Sharp, which have appeared in two volumes recently published in Farsi, under the title *P4C: Interview with Leaders*.

## INTERVIEW WITH PHILIP CAM

June, 2013

Philip Cam is an Australian philosopher, educator and writer of books for children and teachers. His latest book, *Philosophy Park*, a history of philosophy in story form, together with a teacher resource, has just been published by The Australian Council for Educational Reserach Press.

SAEED NAJI: *First, please tell us your general view about the outlook for P4C as an educational program. What is your evaluation of its effectiveness? In your opinion, can P4C (as a reflective paradigm of education) replace the traditional paradigm of education through the world?*

PHILIP CAM: First let me say that in what follows I use the term Philosophy for Children broadly to include all those approaches influenced by Matthew Lipman, rather than as applying only to the IAPC program. I should also admit that I am not as well informed about the research literature on the educational effects of Philosophy for Children interventions as perhaps I ought to be. My only excuse is that I am a philosopher rather than an educational researcher. Still, as anyone even slightly acquainted with that literature will know, there has been a growing body of evidence in recent years that these kinds of interventions yield significant results. The consistency in the results of these studies is worth noting. For example, I was interested to see the cognitive gains in the Scottish study by Trickey and Topping ('Collaborative philosophical inquiry for schoolchildren: Cognitive gains at 2-year follow-up,' *British Journal of Educational Psychology* (2007) 77, 787-796) because, although they were using a different measure, there was a parallel between what Trickey and Topping observed and the improvements in state-wide testing scores of students at Buranda State School in Brisbane, Australia, where the philosophy program has become integral to the way teaching and learning occurs in the school. All the same, it seems to me that Philosophy for Children around the world has relatively little professionally designed empirical investigation, and the movement needs to recruit more people with the credentials to do educational testing.

If you are asking how long I believe it will take for the kind of reflective paradigm of education represented by Philosophy for Children to replace what you're calling the traditional one around the world, I am not at all sure that this will happen. There has been some movement in that direction in at least some of the countries with which I am familiar, but I am reminded of John Dewey's discussion of the relationship between the form of education and the nature of the society in which it occurs. I would like to think that the world is becoming increasingly more open, pluralist and democratic, and to that extent the basic conditions for the kind of transformation you're asking about will continue to foster it. But it is by no means a foregone conclusion that the world will inevitably continue in that direction. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is going to see a continental shift in economic and political dominance, possibly including large-scale conflict, and who knows what that will mean for education around the world in the longer term.

SAEED NAJI: *What is your evaluation of the resistance of the traditional paradigm (and its advocates) against the reflective paradigm of education? Will the structure of our societies, in which media and economic values are dominant, allow us to promote thinking in all of schools in the world?*

PHILIP CAM: To some extent, I have begun to address this question in what I said above. It is interesting to note, however, that we are beginning to experience a transformation in media with the advent of digital media and social networking. It is already demonstrating some of its capacity to decentralize power and give more people a voice. If things continue to go in that direction, we are likely to see most educational authorities place greater emphasis upon educating for good judgment and the ability to engage in open discussion and dialogue. Therefore, the changes wrought by this new technology are themselves a force for growth in the kind of education in which we are engaged. Technological and economic change is also inclining educational authorities to place greater emphasis on critical and creative thinking in many parts of the world and this makes it hard to resist John Dewey's idea that the development of thinking should lie at the heart of school education. Over recent years, I have been running workshops in Singapore, a place where not too long ago there would have been strong resistance to any incursions on what you're calling the traditional paradigm. In a way, that says it all. As to what I see as the humanistic dimension of philosophy, however, I am less sanguine. It is all too easy for there to be greater emphasis upon critical and creative thinking in school education for economic reasons, and an emphasis upon the importance of new technologies, without any significant attention to the kinds of reflections that we associate with philosophy.

SAEED NAJI: *So, unlike Heidegger, you are optimistic about nature and future of technology, and may possibly think the virtual world can compensate the deficiencies of the real world without any problem. Aside from this issue, in P4C we try to deal with real experiences and we cannot deal with a virtual world and promote many thinking skills through this area – for example, in community of inquiry, the presence of students and their face to face meeting and interaction is necessary. So we cannot organize COI via media such as television and etc. As such, the media are excluded from a P4C approach. If we're hopeful and optimistic about using medias in this area, how can we overcome this contrast?*

PHILIP CAM: I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist regarding the impact of new technologies in society overall. They can and do have both good and regrettable effects. Even the development of social media is a mixed blessing. The



same applies to the possibilities of virtual communities of inquiry. I am a strong believer in the value of the kind of face-to-face encounters that the community of inquiry standardly employs. However, don't forget that the conception originally derives from Charles Sanders Peirce who conceived of the worldwide community of scientific inquiry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The advance of scientific communication through the development of things like internationally circulated scientific journals made this possible. Maybe 21<sup>st</sup> century technologies can help us to develop more global versions of the community of philosophical inquiry. That might be done through schools as well as in other contexts-getting people around the world thinking together.

SAEED NAJI: *The story collections suggested for P4C classes are increasing. Except Lipman's novels for the IAPC program and some other novels, almost all of P4C stories are short stories. Some (e.g. Per Jespersen) use Hans Christian Andersen stories, some (e.g. Robert Fisher) introduce fairy tales and summary of some famous stories, some (e.g. Karin Murriss) picture books and so on. You also have another approach and have introduced stories which are written specially for P4C class. In your opinion, what are the weaknesses and strengths of each of these approaches?*

PHILIP CAM: While Lipman's novels are very little used in Australia these days, in some respects they still represent the gold standard for Philosophy for Children story materials. The continuity provided by the novel as a format, the fact that they were purpose-written with a focus on philosophical subject matter, and the fact that they at least attempt to provide a sequence of materials that extend throughout the school years, are all in their favour. By comparison, fables and fairy stories are problematic. Take fables, for instance. They are usually meant to drive home a moral and, as in the traditional presentation of Aesop's fables, the moral may even be explicitly drawn at the end. In any event, the structure and intent of the story is didactic rather than being driven by a commitment to ethical inquiry. While fairy stories may contain things that can be cause for philosophical wonderment, they are certainly not written with that in mind – and the same is true of the great bulk of children's literature. This is not to say that this whole corpus of literary work contains nothing of value when it comes to stimulating philosophical reflection. There is sometimes a sense of philosophical whimsy in children's literature and a teacher or materials constructor who knows how to judiciously select material for the purpose and construct support materials around it will be able to provide the philosophy class with something serviceable. Years ago, I wrote a book called *Thinking Together*, which was based around selecting and using children's literature as a basis for philosophical discussion. When I began collecting philosophical stories from people around the world (including from Mat Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp) the short-story format simply came with the territory. However, the collections of my own stories (e.g. *Thinking Stories 3* and my more recent *Sophia's Question*) make use of continuity. *Thinking Stories 3* uses a cycle of stories with many of the same characters appearing indifferent stories and occasionally even revisits the same events from a different perspective. *Sophia's Question* is a philosophical novella, very much in the tradition of Lipman's well-known works. At the moment, I am working on a history of philosophy in story form for 10-12 year-olds, starting with the pre-Socratics, and based very closely on famous passages and central ideas of the various philosophers I have included. So far as I am aware, nothing like this has been attempted before. Although I am using the short-story format, the book

will have as much continuity as the history of philosophy affords and the story material homes in on some of the most significant ideas and debates in that history. They are two major strengths, so far as I am concerned.

If we look at the issue you raise, placing children's literature (whether traditional or contemporary) in one basket and purpose-written materials in the other, there is an obvious kind of trade-off. Quality children's literature has the advantages of skillful story-telling, with compelling characterization and a well-crafted plot. Picture books sometimes (although not always) have the added advantage of imaginative and vivid illustration. With the odd exception, however, children's literature isn't overtly philosophical and teachers who almost always have little in the way of philosophical training have to learn how to use that material to assist children to bring out any latent philosophical interest that the material may possess. By contrast, purpose-written story material is likely to be philosophically informed and to come with support materials that assist the teacher and students to engage in philosophical inquiry. The downside is that the narrative and characterization skills of the author may not be outstanding and in any case he or she faces the unique challenge of integrating a philosophical exploration with these traditional elements. Character and plot cannot be the flimsiest covering for the philosophical content, but neither must those traditional narrative elements so submerge the philosophical content as to make it all but invisible. Like walking a tightrope, you have to keep the balance just right.

Finally, let me note that the philosophical narrative devised for the purposes of school education is a genre in its infancy. I think it has great potential which has hardly had the chance to show itself as yet. I only wish that there were more people in the Philosophy for Children movement who were willing to have a go.

SAEED NAJI: *What is your view about open-ended short stories? What is their strength and deficiency if we try to use them in P4C classes (as Gareth Matthews apparently did)?*

PHILIP CAM: Gareth Matthews was well-known for his recommendation of children's literature as a stimulus for philosophical inquiry. He had a good eye for its philosophical possibilities, although I wouldn't say that those books necessarily contained open-ended stories in the sense of lacking narrative closure. It is rather that they have an open intellectual quality that can stimulate thinking about issues and ideas and thereby provide an entry-point for inquiry and discussion. That seems to be a requirement on any stimulus for philosophical thought and certainly argues in their favour.

Even if a storybook is promising, however, teachers may have to devise their own support materials for it and they may have little background in philosophy to call upon and precious little time to devote to the task. As a result, the lesson plans may not be philosophically very well informed and the teacher may find the task of devising such lessons extremely demanding. One way out of this problem is for teachers who would like to use short story materials to begin by using purpose-written materials or, at least, stories for which good support materials are available.

SAEED NAJI: *As Lipman et al. (1980) say, P4C books should encourage children's imaginations rather than pre-empt them. But there is something unwholesome, even parasitical, in the thought of adults (writers of children's books) seeking to hold on to their own creativity by pre-empting the creativity of their own children. So, until we can devise effective ways of getting children to think for themselves the least we can do is write books for*



*them that will promote their creativity rather than diminish it. The question is then: how can a writer abandon his/her desires and experience and make stories free of his/her imaginations? Is it possible psychologically? How?*

PHILIP CAM: The problem here would be clearly illustrated by a children's author who created a rich imaginary world that left nothing to the imagination of the reader, or where the lives of those who inhabited that world were fully circumscribed by the author. On the other hand, I don't see a problem with authors of children's literature using their own creative powers to develop children's imaginative and creative abilities. In my view, educators need to attend to creative thinking every bit as much as critical thinking and the writers of children's books can certainly support them. I don't think this involves writers abandoning matters with which they are concerned or freeing themselves from their own imaginings. As you suggest, it is not obvious how that would be possible, even were it desirable. Yet it is entirely possible for an author to create circumstances—situations, predicaments, or dilemmas—where various characters respond differently, or where the characters are not sure how to proceed, or where they respond in ways that are questionable. In these and other ways, children's authors can raise issues and ideas in a manner that enables children to exercise their own imaginations and to respond creatively to them.

SAEED NAJI: *And how can we find out that a writer was able to make his/her writing free of them?*

PHILIP CAM: As you can see, I am not at all sure that a writer either can or should do this.

SAEED NAJI: *Among P4C stories we can find fantasy stories and science fictions as well as real ones. If they are equally useful, this question still remains: what could be the contribution of imagination? In other world how much must these stories be imaginative far from reality and realism?, Or there is no relation between philosophical adequacy of the stories and the percentage of imagination in them?*

PHILIP CAM: I am reminded of the fact that philosophers have often used imaginary realms and situations to help us think about an issue or a problem. I recall, as an undergraduate, coming across the discussion of personal identity in the English philosopher John Locke, who asks us to imagine that the soul of a prince has come to inhabit the body of a cobbler, whose soul has just departed. Locke's (somewhat dubious) forced-choice question is: Do we now have the prince or the cobbler? This thought experiment could have come straight out of a fairy story—say, the Frog Prince. Likewise, children's thought experiments often begin with "Imagine that..." or something similar. So, while I think that children's philosophy needs to speak to children's experience, that doesn't mean sticking resolutely to realism. We should look to the ways in which either realism or fantasy and play upon the imagination function within the story, not at whether the story belongs to one genre or another.

SAEED NAJI: *Per Jespersen believes that Lipman stories are so typically American that they are of no interest for Danish children. He says that in his stories, Lipman tries to make logic the only basis of philosophy and even ethics, and thus his stories don't work in countries such as Denmark. What is your view about this claim? Are the stories really so limited? What are the strengths and deficiencies of Lipman's novels, in your opinion?*

PHILIP CAM: There are a couple of issues here that need to be distinguished. The first is about the cultural baggage that Lipman (or, indeed, any storyteller) is



bound to be carrying. Although Australia is subject to a continual barrage of American popular culture, we found some resistance among teachers to Lipman's novels as being too American. My suspicion is that the same is true in Denmark. Frankly, I doubt whether Danish children are likely to be less interested in Lipman's stories than Australian children because the stories are American. They may not be much interested, but that is far more likely to be because the stories are now dated and that they were never all that captivating for the average student.

The second issue concerns the philosophical basis of the stories. While it is true that Lipman began by building *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery* around an introduction to Aristotelian logic, it is not fair to characterize his entire corpus as a series of courses on logic. Logic is one element, but then so are ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics, the philosophy of language, and so on. That Lipman wanted to teach children to think logically in all these fields is hardly a criticism, unless one takes issue with philosophical enterprise as a whole.

SAEED NAJI: As you have written in your book, *Thinking Together*, P4C stories must contain these characteristics.

- a. They must contain something of philosophical promise (philosophical themes).
- b. They must have an open-minded outlook on life that will encourage children to puzzle and question, to hypothesize and explore.
- c. They must contain plenty of dialogue. It is better for the dialogue to be exploratory, involve deliberation, and show people thinking together.
- d. If a story contains pictures, the pictures must be imaginative and as much as possible express ideas, to be evocative and have something to puzzle over.

According to (a), each story should embed the philosophical concepts such that they match children's concept formation. What kind of concepts can we use in the stories? Is there any psychological guide to find out what kind of philosophical concepts are appropriate for children in different age periods?

PHILIP CAM: As you may know, there is a large psychological literature on children's conceptual development that goes back at least as far as Piaget's *The Child's Conception of the World*—a wonderful book, by the way, even if it is mistaken in many ways (as Gareth Matthews, among others, has pointed out). I first read a précis of the book as an article that Piaget wrote entitled 'Children's Philosophies'. Piaget didn't think that children were able to engage in philosophy, at least not properly speaking, but anyone who is interested in a psychological guide to children's philosophical conceptions at various ages could do a lot worse than beginning with Piaget.

Having said this, my many years of experience of working with teachers and children, and often writing for them, is consistent with the view expressed by the educationalist Jerome Bruner in *The Process of Education* half a century ago, that the rudiments of any discipline can be taught to anyone at any age provided that they are appropriately introduced. This is definitely true of philosophy and for much the same reason that Bruner gives. This is that the basic ideas that lie at the heart of a discipline and the basic themes that give form to life are both simple and powerful. They remain inaccessible to young children only if these things are presented in too formal or elaborate a way prior to children having the chance to try them out for themselves. In other words, the basic concepts of philosophy are appropriate to children of any school age and the secret to their successful introduction is to couch





them in ways that meet with the experience and understanding of children of a given background and age.

SAEED NAJI: *Regarding the meaning of philosophy in P4C, it may include logic tout court, the logic of moral judgments, the logic of decision-making in social areas and so on. What about the logic of scientific discovery and mathematical proof? Can P4C stories contain the logic of scientific discovery and mathematical proof? If yes which approach to scientific discovery is better to use in the stories?*

PHILIP CAM: A little over 100 years ago John Dewey published a book for teachers entitled *How We Think*. It is still in print. In that book, Dewey treats thinking as inquiry, and it is very much scientific inquiry that he has in mind. So when Dewey says in *Democracy and Education* that learning to think should lie at the heart of school education, he thought of science education as providing the model. It is of some interest that when Lipman put forward the view that philosophy rather than science might occupy that role, his basic model of the thinking process was very close to Dewey's.

As a philosophy student, I was brought up on the debate around the logic of scientific discovery initiated by Karl Popper's response to David Hume's so-called problem of induction. Taking this as an example, I would rather that students gain a sense of the problem of whether science relies upon induction or whether the logic of scientific discovery is essentially deductive than merely teach them a preferred model.

More generally, there is no problem with generating philosophically inspired discussions in science. My Australian colleague, Tim Sprod, who has been involved in the Philosophy in Schools movement for many years, has recently published a book entitled *Discussions in Science*. Tim's book provides a good example of what can be done.

SAEED NAJI: *One part of my Ph.D thesis was devoted to replacing Popperian falsification with problem-solving processes in COI, although they are somewhat similar and related to scientific research. What is your opinion about such a replacement generally?*

PHILIP CAM: It seems to me that there is a close connection between Popper's basic idea that science proceeds by conjecture and refutation and the procedures underlying Lipman's community of philosophical inquiry. If they are following the process that Lipman envisaged, when students address a philosophical question, they come up with suggestions – opinions for others to consider, ideas that may be worth exploring, possible solutions, and so on. They explore the implications of these suggestions and test them out, drawing upon experience and their broader knowledge and understanding. Suggestions are discarded when they are found to be unsatisfactory in one way or another, while others survive to face the test of further experience, as the inquiry progresses. Having said this, it is obvious enough that philosophical inquiry is in many respects different from scientific inquiry. In a nutshell, I would say that science deals with problems and questions for which we have developed mathematically rigorous methods of empirical testing, whereas philosophy deals with questions and issues that, at least as things stand, are not susceptible to such methods. Therefore, in philosophy, emphasis is placed upon conceptual exploration and invention and attention is paid to careful reasoning in ordinary language. That difference needs to be reflected in the philosophy classroom and, in my view, should be deeply embedded in general education. After all, most of

the important issues and problems in life are closer to the philosophical than the scientific.

SAEED NAJI: *Is it possible to use cartoons and comic books instead of stories in P4C classes? And if a facilitator wants to use some animations in P4C classes, what characteristics must the animation have?*

PHILIP CAM: I haven't used animations myself, but I know that many philosophy teachers have successfully used animations, film clips, and the like as a stimulus for philosophical discussion. It may turn out that there are some features of animations we need to look for that are peculiar to them, but my initial suggestion is that they would tend to work best if they had the same kinds of features that you listed above from *Thinking Together*.

SAEED NAJI: *Some people may believe that decentration is one of the chief aims of P4C stories. Their reason may be that the stories offer the child the chance to decenter from the immediacy of their own personal ideas (whatever they are). Some people may go beyond this and claim that philosophizing is by nature decentration and vice versa. What is your view about it?*

PHILIP CAM: Novels, plays and short stories all involve decentering, by placing us in the author's, playwright's, or story-teller's world, which is presented from the perspective of a narrator or one or more characters. When we come to what we may call a story of ideas, we also have an intellectual and conceptual decentering. Thus, a philosophical exploration carried by interaction and dialogue between characters, as typically occurs in P4C stories, produces at one and the same time a double decentering, that is both philosophical and narrative. I would say that, to be educationally effective, both the social and intellectual positioning of material should be in Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD). That is to say, as a provocation to thought, it requires students to extend themselves, while not being either socially or philosophically out of reach.

SAEED NAJI: *P4C can increase the rational and dialogical basis of culture--so it can make a considerable impact in this area. How much can the program promote the culture and morality of different countries in your point of view? Can we be optimistic about an international community of children and the young?*

PHILIP CAM: I am fully convinced of the moral and cultural potential of this work, but in order for that potential to be realized it will have to find its way from the margins of our educational systems to their center. In parts of the world that I know, neither the educational culture, nor the culture in general, make this transition at all easy.

SAEED NAJI: *Can this reconstruction of philosophy that is P4C be considered to be a movement against the skepticism (radical localism) implicit in some postmodern approaches?*

PHILIP CAM: The collaborative inquiry-based teaching and learning that lies at the heart of P4C pedagogy represents a middle way between traditional epistemological absolutism and the relativism associated with post-modernism. While philosophy is not an empirical science, it shares with science some aspects of its experimental methods. It deals with open questions. It treats initial responses to such questions as suggestions--ideas, hypotheses, propositions, theories, and what have you--that need to be investigated. Evaluation by way of reason and argument, and the exploration of alternatives, then provides the way forward. And as in science, the end results, are not typically final or absolute conclusions, but rather



ones that have so far stood up to our best efforts to investigate the matter. Such an approach, eschews both skepticism and dogmatism in favor of reasoned inquiry.

I hope these comments are helpful. Kind regards.

#### INTERVIEW WITH DAVID KENNEDY

July, 2013

David Kennedy is Professor of Educational Foundations and Fellow at the IAPC in Montclair NJ, and co-edits *Childhood and Philosophy* with Walter Kohan. His most recent book, *My Name is Myshkin: A Philosophical Novel for Children*, is published by LIT Verlag.

SAEED NAJI: *For its founder Matthew Lipman, P4C is a clear example of applied philosophy, and in a way the most privileged representative of the applied philosophy movement, which is applied to education for the purpose of producing students with improved proficiency in reasoning and judgment. So, philosophical (and logical) themes are strongly emphasized in stories and teacher training programs designed by him. But in some latest branches/versions of P4C it has gradually faded. It is said that P4C facilitators have no need to learn philosophical themes – that only basic acquaintance of the field is enough. It is also suggested that there is no need to write philosophical novels like Lipman's--that many existent stories in children's literature can be useful in community of inquiry (COI). What is your view about the contribution of philosophy to the P4C movement and its success as an educational alternative to traditional education?*

DAVID KENNEDY: **Applied Philosophy.** The idea of “producing” students with “improved proficiencies” is a bit mechanistic, isn't it? Is the “production” metaphor appropriate for speaking about education at all? I wouldn't call that kind of relation to children and childhood “applied philosophy,” but rather training or even conditioning of some kind. It's a non-philosophical goal, and the idea of using philosophy to replicate adults in the image of ourselves (or even of what we want to be) represents a reproductive and indoctrinatory rather than a transformative or reconstructive educational impulse. So if we hold to the latter, we need to find some other goal to rely on when we do philosophy with children, and I would suggest that we identify ourselves as philosopher-educators under the sign of *dialogue*. Then our form of applied philosophy is understood as a practice that unfolds *between* child and adult. The application is in recognizing the child as interlocutor, as voiced, as subject, above all as capable of mastering the basic critical elements of philosophical discourse, which implies the capability of using those same elements creatively.

**Philosophical themes.** Do you mean the ones that fall under the traditional categories of ontology, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics? What we find in talking with children is the obvious, which is that those categories describe thematic elements of lived experience itself: they are already present in children's thinking and feeling, once something puts that thinking/feeling in motion. Children are already thinking about being and the nature of persons when they are confronted with other kinds of animals than ourselves, for example. They are already thinking about personal identity when they wake up from a strange dream. They are already thinking about authority and power when dealing with adults (or other children) who boss them around, or accuse or punish them unjustly. And one can get to any one of the philosophical themes by finding it in a narrative of some

kind, whether it is a Lipmanian novel, a children's picture book or a Kiarostami film. So although the stimulus may be essential and important to the group inquiry that follows it in a CPI session, it is somewhat like the ladder that falls away once one has climbed up on the building.

Also, I think that every person develops their own key philosophical themes over the course of their lifetime, if they are awakened to reflection. How that awakening happens is another matter, but once they are, the theme of justice (*dikaioisune*) for example will develop for each person through their life experience. What Plato has to say about justice in the Republic--or Rumi in a poem--will, in the best of circumstances, act as a dialectical challenge to my own thematization of justice. It is not so much a question of my agreeing or disagreeing with Plato or Rumi, but of the ongoing reconstruction of my own concept through interaction with Plato's development of the concept, or Rumi's aphoristic impact. And that concept will be triggered into action--into felt-realization and the imperative to act--if only by speaking out against *injustice*, for example--when I encounter either positive or negative instances of the concept. When, for example, I am subjected to unprovoked police brutality or even witness it unleashed against others, my concept of justice is encountered and realized in a situation that demands some kind of action of me, whether internal or external. True philosophy always ends in life--right in the middle of it.

**The teacher's philosophical preparation.** So as a philosophy teacher talking with children, should I have a broad knowledge of how the concept of justice (for example) is constructed throughout the canon--whether philosophical or theological? How could one *not* wish for that? Personally, I believe that everyone who practices P4C should be involved in a steady course of reading in philosophy, and that it should include both primary and secondary sources, as well as readings in poetry, literature, and philosophy of science and of religion. The richer the teacher's personal reading of philosophy, the richer will be the resonances that are struck in his or her mind when she or he sits down with a group of children to listen, clarify, question and connect the ideas that flow from the fountain of children's group discourse. As Lipman suggests in the first episode of *Elfie* in which Elfie replicates Descartes *cogito ergo sum* through reacting internally to the taunts of a classroom tease, we do find children at times actually articulating ideas that are in the canon--whether Descartes' cogito, Spinoza's conatus, Hegel's master-slave, or whatever. They are philosophical memes, and the teacher's job is to listen for and to recognize them, which of course implies having read some philosophy. When I became interested in P4C, I started out by reading all nine volumes of Frederick Copleston's very good *History of Philosophy*. The idea was to develop a philosophical ear, so that I could hear the themes and patterns in children's discourse--how they are the same and different from adult's discourse. There is of course the issue of how that ear is developed--whether there is a genetic dimension that makes it stronger in some people than in others from birth; its connection with early childrearing patterns that implicitly discourage and even punish or encourage questioning; its relationship to other forms of intelligence, and so on. One could, I suppose, have read the whole canon and every book about the canon through, and still not recognize philosophical themes when they emerge in children's untrained discourse; but that seems to me to depend on how we see children, what we expect of them, and what we think they are capable of or not, not to speak of what we think is bona



fide philosophical discourse. What criteria do we invoke when we judge a conversation to be philosophical or not? That is a question that community of philosophical inquiry (CPI) has triggered in the philosophical community, which is immediately present as soon as philosophy is practiced between people rather than by individuals, and which is only amplified as soon as philosophy is practiced among children.

**What is an appropriate philosophical text for use with children?** Lipman's novels, as both banal of plot and philosophically extraordinary as they are, represent a cultural and literary invention, a new genre, based on what he called the "dramatization" of philosophy. Lipman had virtually no literary models to work from—nothing anywhere near what he set out to do, which was to present philosophical issues and problems to children in language they could understand; to do so *apart from* any particular philosopher or school of philosophy; and to do so in the context of their own lived experience, communicated through a narrative. That narrative context of the novels was the classroom, which tends to be ostensibly a bit dull. Children are portrayed in traditional public school situations, set in turn in traditional American northeastern-states-middle-and-lower-upper-class-American social situations. The atmosphere of the children's conversations is didactic, but the didacticism is inverted: the teacher is moderately good at suggesting questions and puzzles and that's all; the children are interrogating each other, and as such teaching one another. They are in effect modeling a new pedagogy—or at least the possibility of one—for the adults around them.

As a new genre of fiction, the philosophical novel for children has great literary potential, which is already being explored, and the form is expected to move from being just a classroom tool—a sort of "hands on" textbook—into mainstream children's fiction circles. Nor is there any dearth of analogous books written for children—most especially the short illustrated books for young children that evoke philosophical themes. The major difference between the philosophical richness of many picture books and the Lipman-type text is that in the latter the philosophical material is on the "top"—visible and emphasized and consciously discussed in the characters' conversations—whereas in the former the material is not directly referenced as such, but is embodied in the narrative.

For example, in the famous British children's book *Peter Rabbit* by Beatrix Potter, none of the themes powerfully evoked by the story—good and bad, adults and children, humans and animals, accidents, stealing, rules, danger, fear—are discussed by any of the characters or even directly referenced by the author; rather they are evoked by the plot itself. In a Lipmanian text, the philosophical themes come even before the story, prominently placed and meant to be drawn attention to. This presents a methodological challenge for the facilitator, who, if she or he follows "classic" Lipman/Sharp pedagogy, starts with the children's own questions rather than the writer's or the teacher's. With no philosophical concepts or dialogue visible in the text for children to encounter, those questions will typically be limited to queries like "Why did Peter ...?" or "Should Peter have done this or that . . .?" or "Why is Mr. McGregor so mean?" etc. It takes some work, and often some sort of subtle manipulation of the conversation to get from "comprehension" questions like that to the philosophical level. This represents a complex ethical issue for the facilitator to work out if she or he seeks a balance between student and teacher choice, for teacher manipulation of any sort is seen by many as disempowering,

whereas CPI is—intrinsically it would seem—about personal and social empowerment, and if the pedagogical form doesn't match the intrinsically empowering discourse, there is conflict, or loss of interest. Of course it often takes the facilitator some effort and manipulation to get most children to question the philosophical themes in the Lipmanian novel as well, just because they are not used to asking these kinds of questions of a text, or recognizing philosophical prompts as they read. In other words, the problematic pedagogical issue of the justification of teacher manipulation in order to move the conversation from the behavioral, psychological, or sociological toward the philosophical is, essentially, present in the case both of the picture book and the Lipmanian novel.

In fact any number and kinds of "texts" can be used as stimuli in CPI—all the way from a photograph, an aphorism, a film clip, a whole book or movie, a poem, a song, a role play, a dance, a scientific theory, or even a walk somewhere or a period of meditation. Once children have learned to ask the philosophical question or questions that the text suggests—once, that is, they become "users" of that discourse—they can find the deeper questions most anywhere. Lipman was concerned—and rightly so—to stay in touch with the Western philosophic tradition with its implicit canon, but as philosophy as a common, dialogical discursive practice with unmistakable connections with democracy—that is, as CPI—works its way into the fabric of standard educational practice, the range of possible thought-provoking stimuli moves to the boundaries of art, drama, and literature, and we see in fact how porous the boundaries between philosophy and the arts and sciences are—and thereby, analogously, how close philosophy is to all the disciplines that are studied in school. We see how we need only move slightly within the field of science, for example, to find ourselves thinking and talking philosophically—about epistemological matters (what can be known and how), ontological issues relating to the nature and modalities of beings; ethical issues having to do with the use and misuse of technology, or the relation between scientific and religious knowledge and practice, and so on—in short, doing philosophy of science. It is the same with each of the disciplines.

The further implication of this is that the moment we allow authentic philosophical inquiry into the schoolroom, there are opportunities for educational reconstruction on a profound level. When the school moves from the realm of the answer to the realm of the question, from indoctrination to inquiry, from a frozen epistemological zone to a fluid, transformational one, this also affects power—the way the school is governed, and thus the way *dikaiosune* is practiced. If understood as an emancipatory practice, a school in which CPI is the grounding discourse becomes a site for adult-child dialogue on every level, including what is studied and how. It includes how decisions are made—both in the classroom and school-wide. Because its model is an ideal speech community—a community which strives to reach shared authority—it acts to deconstruct hierarchy and patriarchy, and hence acts as a haven for social democracy throughout any system in which it is practiced.

SAEED NAJI: *You assert in your paper, "Philosophy for Children and the Reconstruction of Philosophy," that it is children's historical marginalization in the Western construction of rationality that now makes of them privileged strangers to the tradition. In your opinion how can P4C give them their philosophical rights and permission to enter this realm? Isn't there too much resistance by powerful gatekeepers (e.g. some academic*





*philosophers), by people who choose ignorance, by those for whom complex critical, creative and caring thinking is troublesome and even dangerous?*

DAVID KENNEDY: I'm not sure I completely understand what you are getting at in this question, but I suspect that it has at least something to do with children's contribution to the post-Cartesian reconstruction of rationality. Merleau-Ponty said, famously, that the "task of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" was to "explore the irrational and integrate it into an expanded reason." The post-colonial and post-Holocaust West, where it has not become reactionary and xenophobic, has pursued that expansion by opening itself to the other, in search of the dialogical self; it has been shamed by its own history of patriarchy, domination, exploitation, authoritarianism and cruelty into seeking its own salvation in that self-reconstruction. The voices of the marginalized—women, children, aboriginals, the immigrant, the enslaved, people of color, the mad, the artist, the principled enemy of the state, the sexual "deviant"—these heretofore silenced and brutalized people have attained a privilege—we might call it the privilege of having suffered at the hands of—to put it bluntly—white male supremacy. Those who accuse the West of "decadence" *tout court* don't understand this dialectical situation. It is a situation of risk and danger, but only because it is a prolonged moment of transvaluation of values.

Children and women constitute the only groups of these "privileged strangers" that have the appearance of being "natives"—who are, so to speak "inside the gates of the culture." Hence their epistemic privilege is different from that of the imprisoned or enslaved or discriminated against because of color or ethnicity or religion. But they both undermine and challenge the values and practices of white male supremacist culture, and hence their voices are either not heard or are suppressed, and their otherness is constructed as a deficit, a weakness, a fault, or even an evil. They are considered to be without "reason." But just what is interesting is the contribution they can make to an "expanded reason," and what it would mean for the evolution of our species if adults valued the psychological time and space of childhood in their own lives. For this, adults would have to begin to listen seriously to real children, and to take them seriously as moral agents as well, which means treating them to the greatest extent *possible* in every situation as if they had the same capacity for reflection, autonomous thinking and ethical choice as they expect from other adults. Only in this way, it seems to me, could we even dream of evolving into a species for which war and violence and injustice and oppression and vicious subspeciation (that is, treating other groups of humans as if they were a different species) had become so abhorrent to our inmost sensibilities that we would, generally, find their practice unnatural and repulsive. Not just children but childhood as a form of subjectivity are then, our best and perhaps only hope for the sort of planetary transformation for which we are desperately crying out for right now, and that hope can be realized only by reconstructing the way we see children—that is, our philosophy of childhood. Practicing community of philosophical inquiry with children is one of the key methodologies for reconstructing our philosophy of childhood, and the adult-child collective called "school" is one best site for realizing that reconstruction in fostering the skills and dispositions of a new, non-violent sensibility and culture.

SAEED NAJI: *In addition to being a reconstruction of traditional philosophy, CPI represents a new paradigm of education--namely a reflective one. In your opinion, how long*



*will it take for this new reflective paradigm of education to replace the traditional one around the world?*

DAVID KENNEDY: This paradigm which you describe as “reflective” is already present and growing around the world, as represented, for example, by two exemplary international organizations: the International Democratic Education Network (IDEC) (<http://www.idenetwork.org/index.htm>), which provides links to schools that practice direct democracy and student empowerment in more than 30 countries, as well as hosting a large yearly conference; and the Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO) (<http://www.educationrevolution.org/>). There are many more, some of them more radical than others, but the one hallmark of them all is the central concept of living with children as beings with voice and agency, capable, in cooperation with facilitating adults, of reason and choice. The fundamental idea of democratic schools is that children learn autonomy and cooperation, and hence justice and peace through practicing it in their own lives and the lives of their co-participants in the adult-child collective called school, which is an embryonic society. The key unresolved issues that both drive and preoccupy the democratic school movement revolve, in my opinion, around questions that are most directly encountered by philosophical anarchism, which are questions of authority. There may in fact be a working discrepancy that emerges around issues of authority between democratic education and what I would call dialogical education. The credo of typical democratic educational theory is anchored in individual “rights” discourse. For example, participants at the Berlin IDEC Conference of 2005, agreed on a statement that described the major characteristic of democratic education as follows: “We believe that, in any educational setting, young people have the right: to decide individually how, when, what, where and with whom they learn.” Dialogic education theory, on the other hand, might insist that the decisions as to “how, when, what, where and with whom” are in fact arrived at through communicative interaction, that tensions between the goals of adults and children are a natural outcome of their different standpoints, and that democratic dialogue assumes compromise. Hence the form of curricular agency more characteristic of dialogical education is what is called “emergent curriculum,” whereby students express interest as to “what,” and adults propose as to “how, when, where and with whom,” relying on the rational authority of age and experience. The role of CPI in this adult-child dialogue seems to me to be crucial. The discussion circle of CPI is the space in which that form of “expanded reason” that is the natural potential birthright of the big human brain can find expression—in which the epistemological and ontological assumptions that tend to restrict our capacities as peace- and justice-makers can be challenged and replaced with more adequate and more adaptive ones.

In any case—whether the approach is directly anarchistic or dialogical, it may be expected that neither educational approach will be taken up by more than an awakened minority of educationalists, given the powerful role of universal nationalized schooling as an ideological state apparatus, and the growing colonization of education by corporate capitalist goals—what is referred to as “the economic model” of education; a model which, ironically enough, serves only to dramatically accentuate and reproduce ever-increasing levels of economic inequality and exploitation world-wide. Combined with this global trend, what we find in the present historical moment is that as the democratic, emancipatory and justice-oriented impulses of peoples all over the world grow and spill over into the public



space of the street, the forces of extreme, irrationally punitive, even sadistic violence by the repressive state apparatus grow as well. With each upheaval of the people followed by violent crackdown by the repressive state apparatus, the specter of the police state is becoming more of a reality, from Europe to the North and South America, to the Middle East to the Far East to Africa – that is, worldwide. The values of reflective, dialogical, democratic education are at absolute odds with this growing dystopic reality, and apart from a historic breakthrough—which, I am convinced, will ultimately come only from “the street” – we can look forward to a long period of painful struggle with the state- and corporate-organized powers of darkness.

SAEED NAJI: *What is your assessment of P4C’S achievements in the teaching of the sciences and mathematics? Will P4C teaching method be available in all school materials soon?*

DAVID KENNEDY: As of yet CPI has not fulfilled its logical promise of spreading through the curriculum and taking its place as the philosophical understructure of each of the disciplines. Some of Lipman’s novels, and several others of the same genre do in fact focus on disciplinary or near-disciplinary themes – aesthetics, ethics, language, environmental philosophy, poetry – but as yet there is no systematic application of the “philosophy of” each discipline to the study of the discipline itself. We might imagine a school in which the science and the math curricula each devoted one day a week to philosophy of science and philosophy of math. Further, we might imagine a school in which science and history, art and even mathematics curricula emerged from the philosophical inquiry rather than visa versa. I am thinking, for example, of how a group philosophical inquiry into the concept “alive” led naturally to an empirical inquiry by the class into the nature and classification of organisms, which led back to a philosophical exploration of the concept of “organism,” and the ontological assumptions of the classificatory systems of Aristotle and Linnaeus, which led back to a project which involved the playful invention of alternative classificatory systems, and so on. My sense is that the ultimate best outcome of bringing philosophy to every discipline would be the actual reconstruction of the school disciplines as we know them, because the conceptual interconnections between disciplines would increasingly emerge, leading to the invention of new ways to construct cross disciplinary curriculum – for example through science and history and mathematics projects which were approached through multiple disciplinary lenses.

Just as CPI as a dialogic paradigm promises the reconstruction of power in schools (democracy) and hence the reconstruction of authority, so it promises profound reconstruction in curriculum, which in this case implies reconstruction of our broad epistemological paradigm and of our ontological convictions. This epistemological shift is particularly critical at this moment in our planetary history, when our dominant assumptions about the human relationship with nature, with other species, and with each other have become so dangerously depersonalized and instrumentalized as to represent an empirically verifiable threat to the global ecosystem. And as I’ve been trying to say, it is no surprise to me that our hope for this shift in epistemological and ontological paradigms is tied to childhood, children, and the places in which adults and children encounter each other – in educational settings. The new, reconstructed sensibility that I spoke of above – the evolved “human nature” that “instinctively” repudiates oppression, violence and subspeciation, and of whom we know very well there are millions of exemplars

already on this earth—has its deepest origins in childhood, and will emerge, among other places, in the interactions between children and adults. The dialectical logic of these interactions is such that this new sensibility promises to emerge, not through indoctrination or psychological conditioning of children by adults, but through the *mutual influence* of the two: through children internalizing adult subjectivity in such a way that it incorporates the changes in adult subjectivity that arise from adults engaging in authentic dialogue with children. It is this promise that, in my understanding is CPI's is highest calling, and which has been P4C's fundamental motivation from the start. Thank you, Saeed!

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