

“Philosophy for Children as a Process and a Content Approach to Philosophy Education: A Response to Judith Suissa”

Maughn Gregory, December 2008

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Abstract: Judith Suissa criticizes two contrasting approaches of pre-college philosophy education: one that focuses on critical thinking and other philosophical procedures, and one that focuses on traditional content areas of academic philosophy. She critiques both approaches for failing to address questions of meaning in human life, as advocated by John Dewey. Philosophy for Children uses both process and content approaches to address meaning. Its method – the classroom community of inquiry – is a process of multi-dimensional and collaborative inquiry, and its content is philosophical concepts like justice, person, mind, beauty, truth, citizen, and good, that help students recognize the philosophical dimensions of their own experience. Suissa’s recommendation for “philosophy of the disciplines” would help adolescents grapple with their general existential questions, but not with questions about how to live meaningfully, for which they need to practice making judgments that can improve the ethical, aesthetic and other philosophical dimensions of their own experiences.

1. Introduction: Process and Content

Judith Suissa’s chapter in a recent book on philosophy in schools (Hand and Winstanley, 2008) is an important reminder that pre-college philosophy is as liable as any other school subject to become academic in ways that obstruct the meaning it could have for students. Suissa criticizes two ways, or contrasting approaches to pre-college philosophy education: one that focuses on critical thinking and other philosophical procedures – which I will call the “process approach,” – and one that focuses on traditional content areas of academic philosophy – which I will call the “content approach.” Her criticism is not that each approach neglects important features of the other, but that both fail to “address the meaning and significance of aspects of human life in order to continually improve it,” (Suissa, 134) – the role for philosophy famously advocated by John Dewey. In focusing on critical thinking and the critical function of philosophy, she explains, the process approach prioritizes questions of truth over questions of meaning, while the content approach – whether organized historically or thematically – treats philosophy as a predetermined body of knowledge abstracted away from concerns about human experience.

Suissa’s essay focuses on the education of adolescents, and she argues convincingly that what gets lost when philosophy becomes academic in these ways is precisely what adolescents most need it for: to grapple with angst-ridden questions about ‘what it all means’ and ‘what it’s all for.’ Her characterization of adolescent students is an important consideration for those of us involved in pre-college philosophy education. Unlike younger children whose inexperience inclines them toward wonderment, adolescents have accumulated considerable cultural and social knowledge, which can be burdensome and confusing, and their “struggle to find meaning

is a struggle not just to understand the concrete aspects of experience with which they are confronted in their everyday lives, but to make sense of the human knowledge, ideas and concepts reflected in ... social knowledge and cultural meanings.” (Suissa, 139.) Suissa’s call for secondary school philosophy programs to focus on questions of meaning echoes that of dozens of P4C theorists writing about adolescents over the last 30 years (see e.g. Benjamin, 1990; Katzner, 1979; Leckey, 2001; Lipman, 1986; Needleman, 1982; Turgeon, 1997).

The distinction between process and content approaches to school subjects and the warning that each may neglect what is important in the other is familiar to most educators, but Suissa’s contention that even taken together these approaches may not achieve meaningfulness in Dewey’s sense is one that is too rarely voiced, particularly in this age of chronic testing. She is right to direct this contention at pre-college philosophy programs, though mistaken in her identification of Philosophy for Children (P4C) as a process approach that focuses too narrowly on critical thinking and neglects questions of meaning. This is an ironic mistake, given the genealogy of the program: Matthew Lipman’s dissertation was an elaboration of Dewey’s theory of art as experience, which Dewey himself read and approved; Lipman and Sharp based their philosophical pedagogy on the work of Dewey and Peirce, and dozens of articles have been written on the relationship between Philosophy for Children and American pragmatism (see e.g. Barrett, 2000; Daniel, 1998; Gregory, 2000; Kennedy, 2006; Lipman, 2004; Melville, 1990; Morehouse, 1994; Reed, 1994; Sharp, 1993; Sharp, 1995). Indeed, a common criticism of P4C is precisely that it is too closely patterned on the very pragmatist “shift from truth to meaning” that Suissa (133) advocates.

2. P4C as Process

It’s true that the advent of Philosophy for Children coincided with the critical thinking movement in education, and Suissa is correct that the study and promotion of excellent thinking has been the cornerstone of Lipman’s work, as exemplified in both editions of his most important book, *Thinking in Education* (Lipman, 1991; Lipman, 2003), and as indicated by the subtitle of his recent autobiography – *A Life Teaching Thinking* (2008). But Suissa’s characterization of P4C as a critical thinking program ignores several fundamental (and well-known) features of the program. First, Lipman used the phrase “multidimensional thinking” to refer to his famous tripartite of critical, creative and caring thinking (see Lipman, 2003, chs. 11-13). In fact, his work provides a theoretical grounding for Suissa’s concern that exclusive focus on philosophy’s critical function ignores the importance of imaginative reflection and of our relationship to the social and natural world. (Interestingly, Suissa doesn’t cite a single work by Lipman.)

Second, Lipman drew on the work of Peirce scholar and Dewey colleague Justus Buchler to posit, as the aim of philosophical inquiry, not rational belief, but “ethical, social, political, and aesthetic judgments ... applied directly to life situations” (2003, 279). Of course, our philosophical judgments are meant to be *rational*, in that they should rely on sound arguments and good evidence; but in P4C this is not considered sufficient for them to be *reasonable*, which requires in addition that they be informed by multiple and diverse perspectives and that they be made accountable to a community of peers. Third, then, P4C incorporates critical (as well as creative and caring) thinking into a broader method of inquiry patterned on the pragmatist notion of the *community of inquiry* (Fisher, 2008; Gregory, 2008; Kennedy, 2004). Indeed, the theory

and practice of the community of inquiry, though never mentioned by Suissa, is the very cornerstone of Philosophy for Children. This is made explicit in every philosophy curriculum and teaching resource coming from the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, and in hundreds of academic books and articles (see e.g. Glaser, 1998; Gregory, 2002; Gregory, 2007; Gregory, 1995; Kennedy, 1990; Kennedy, 1991; Kennedy, 1994; Lipman, 1997; Lipman, 2003, chs. 4-5; Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan, 1980, ch. 4; Murriss, 2000; Sharp, 1987a; Sharp, 1987b; Splitter and Sharp, 1995).

3. P4C as Content

Philosophy for Children *is*, in part, a process approach to pre-college philosophy education, but the process it teaches is a multi-dimensional and collaborative inquiry process that children and adults can use to think through and with the subject matter of *philosophy*. In that regard, P4C is also, in part, a content approach, but one that eschews the traditional content approach to teaching philosophy that Suissa describes so well, which emphasizes canonical philosophical problems, concepts, arguments, and key figures. Instead, P4C draws student's attention to philosophical concepts like justice, person, mind, beauty, cause, time, number, truth, citizen, good and right. These concepts are not only foundational to the arts and sciences but are already implicated in children's experience, and are necessary for understanding and improving that experience. Splitter and Sharp (1995, 130) characterize such concepts as *central* to human experience (rather than trivial), *common* to most people's experience (rather than esoteric), yet *contestable*, or essentially problematic. P4C attempts to help students learn to discern such philosophical concepts wherever they arise – sometimes referred to as developing “a philosophical ear” (Gregory, 2008, 1).

Philosophy for Children operationalizes Dewey's proposition that “ethical,” “aesthetic,” “political,” and many other philosophical categories describe particularly meaningful dimensions of ordinary human experience. Dewey wrote, for instance, that “the work of art develops and accentuates what is characteristically valuable in things of everyday enjoyment. The art product ... issues[s] from the latter, when the full meaning of ordinary experience is expressed.” (1934, 17.) Many people think of aesthetic experience as something we go to a museum, a concert hall or a wilderness to have, as if the rest of life were devoid of aesthetic meaning. But Dewey argued that these exceptional aesthetic experiences should not be understood as segregated from, but as continuous with ordinary experience, which always has an aesthetic dimension. The experience of riding the subway, of sharing a meal, of sitting at a computer, of raking leaves – has specific qualities of beauty and ugliness, attraction and repulsion, for those who are awake to them. The aesthetic dimension of each experience constitutes part of the meaning of that experience, and as the pragmatists taught us, that meaning is unfinished. As we become more sensitive to the aesthetic dimension in experience, what we find are not fixed aesthetic qualities but aesthetic problems and opportunities unique to each situation, and the ways in which we respond to these will help determine the aesthetic outcome.

In the same way, ethics, politics, logic and metaphysics are aspects of the unfinished meaning of most of our everyday experiences. One of the most important tenants of P4C is that children's experience is just as replete with these philosophical dimensions as is the experience of adults. Education in philosophy should make us more sensitive to these dimensions and more intelligent

in our responses to their problems and opportunities (aims scarcely acknowledged in philosophy programs at any level). This is the only way in which future experience can be improved, and this insight was the core of Dewey's philosophy of education:

We always live at the time we live and not at some other time, and only by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future. This is the only preparation which in the long run amounts to anything. (Dewey, 1938; 1967, 49.)

4. Philosophy and Meaning

As Suissa helps us understand, an important part of the meaning of the adolescent phase of life is dealing with the existential questions that become acute in that phase, such as What does it all mean? and What's it all for? (140) Suissa's recommendation that secondary school philosophy address such questions via what I would call a "philosophy of the disciplines" approach is excellent. As she observes, "there is no room from within geography classes to step back and ask philosophical questions about what a culture is, what society is, and why, as humans, we are interested in such enquiry, nor to articulate ways in which questions such as these intersect with other questions and knowledge from different disciplines" (141).

But existential questions have two aspects, or sub-categories: the general and the personal. Suissa's recommendations would help adolescents to address big-picture questions about the meaning or purpose of human existence in general; but many of the existential questions of adolescents are intensely personal: What is the meaning or purpose of *my* life? Dealing with this category of existential questions is also an important part of philosophy, as Hilary Putnam recently observed:

[R]eflection on our ways of living ... has always been a vital function of philosophy.... [T]he ancient questions, 'Am I living as I am supposed to live?' 'Is my life something more than vanity, or worse, mere conformity?' 'Am I making the best effort I can to reach ... my unattained but attainable self?' make all the difference in the world. (Putnam, 2008)

These questions are unavoidably personal because they address how to live, or wisdom – which of course is where philosophy began, in the east and in the west. In this regard, it is significant that Yale psychologist Robert J. Sternberg has cited Philosophy for Children as one of only three educational programs he found that "seem particularly related to the goals of ... teaching for wisdom." (2003, 163.)

Suissa is wary of personal meaning as an aim for philosophy in schools. She worries that education which "privileges the immediate experience of the individual," or focuses too closely on "promoting self-understanding," may undervalue "knowledge or understanding of major aspects of human culture and society," and may aggravate the "remarkable self-absorption" of adolescents (136). Thus, she disapproves of the P4C method of "beginning from supposed problems and questions arising from the child's everyday experience, and drawing out their philosophical aspects ..." (135). But again, this method follows Dewey's insights that the child's

everyday experience is unfinished, that philosophical aspects are an important part of the meaning of that experience, that it is up to the child to complete the meaning of her experiences in satisfying ways, and that the primary role of education is to enable her to do that. “[O]nly by extracting at each present time the full meaning of each present experience are we prepared for doing the same thing in the future.” (Dewey, 1938; 1967, 49.) If philosophy has a place in schools it is to add to the scientific, sociological, historical, literary and other such possibilities for meaning that traditional school curriculum might help children to extract from their experiences, possibilities for ethical, aesthetic, political, logical and metaphysical meaning. If “understanding major aspects of human culture and society” does not serve this function, it is no different from the content approaches Suissa condemns.

The process of inquiry practiced in P4C and its programmatic focus on philosophical concepts are meant to help us to discern problems and opportunities that arise within the philosophical dimensions of our personal and cultural experience, and to reach sound aesthetic, ethical, logical and political judgments that might ameliorate our experience by making it more just, more beautiful, more reasonable, and in other ways more meaningful. In this way P4C construes philosophy as a disciplined practice, not only of grappling with the meaning of life, but also of living meaningfully, as Dewey recommended:

[P]hilosophy is love of wisdom; wisdom being not knowledge but knowledge-plus; knowledge turned to account in the instruction and guidance it may convey in piloting life through the storms and the shoals that beset life-experience as well as into such havens of consummatory experience as enrich our human life from time to time. (Dewey, 2008, 389.)

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