

# Whose Philosophy? Which Politics?

## a response to Michael Hand's 'Can Children be Taught Philosophy?'

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### **Introduction**

The opening chapter of 'Philosophy in Schools' is an exercise in blockage removal. Michael Hand sets out to dissolve some objections to teaching philosophy to primary children, specifically those made on the grounds that young children cannot do philosophy because it is too difficult. Blockages removed, he provides a positive conceptualisation of philosophy and philosophical practice, with examples, to illustrate how philosophy might be both possible and relevant in the primary classroom.

### **1. Hand's conceptualisation of philosophy for children**

Hand begins his positive characterisation by arguing that asking philosophical questions, *and* using philosophical methods for investigating them, are both necessary to philosophy. This establishes that philosophical method must be part of the package for teaching children philosophy.

In 'What philosophy is', Hand tells us that 'Philosophy, then, may be loosely but fairly described as the study of concepts and conceptual schemes.' Conceptual analysis is the '...attempt to clarify concepts and their relations by attending to the ordinary use of words.' This 'higher order' or 'second order' form of enquiry is valuable because of its utility. Hand avoids saying that conceptual analysis is the essence or whole of philosophy, instead asserting that it is central and indispensable to mainstream philosophical practice. Drawing on a view of children's capabilities, Hand argues that, though some philosophy is too difficult for children, it is possible to teach them conceptual analysis.

In the final section, we are given two examples of this that are relevant to the lives of children. Each involves selecting concrete particular examples from children's experience, and using them to spark off interrogation of the relevant contested concepts and their relations: for example fairness, responsibility, sharing and punishment.

What we get then as philosophy for children is 'philosophy lite', a pared down version of analytic academic philosophy. Learning 'philosophy lite' is relevant to children because it addresses their concerns in the immediacy of the place in which they arise. It's accessible because it makes no unusual cognitive demands. It's useful because it helps young persons to map their conceptual terrain.

In the wider practice of philosophy, 'lite' could be seen as first philosophy, a practice where a trained philosopher helps the questioning child onto the first rung of the philosophy ladder. To use Midgley's metaphor, this is the 'plumbers apprentice' view of philosophy for children, Key Stage One of initiation into the tradition.

## 2. Loosening the knots

I have sympathy with the aim of Hand's paper, philosophers removing blocks on children doing philosophy. I agree that conceptual analysis is important, and that young children are capable of doing it. Having traversed the philosophical and cultural divide between philosophy *of* education and Philosophy for Children (P4C), perhaps this is no surprise, its part of what I do. I disagree fundamentally, however, with the conception of philosophy presented. And I believe that the introduction of Hand's version of philosophy into classrooms would be a regressive and damaging move.

It's not the criticisms of P4C I object to. It's reasonable to question whether it's sensible to say that children are naturally philosophers. Even the weaker argument: '...if children naturally do philosophy, then there's little need to teach it.' might help provoke others into thinking about whether other natural abilities, like socialising and communicating, need to be taught. And the attack on the 'no right answers' view of philosophy, where Hand claims that it is *necessarily* true that questions have right answers, again might stimulate an interesting dialogue.

I welcome these criticisms. Where I find unease and disappointment, is not here, but in the assertions about what philosophy is.

Take the rejection of the 'philosophy as a canon of texts' view. Hand argues that, 'Studying the philosophical canon .... is not philosophical enquiry itself.' So what is Hand doing when he reads Plato? Is he not engaging in philosophical dialogue? Does he not find his assumptions, conceptual schemes and beliefs challenged and changed? Is he not aware of being philosophically questioned by the text?

And then there's 'Philosophy, then, may be loosely but fairly described as the study of concepts and conceptual schemes.' Loosely? I can't think of a more constricted conception. Identifying conceptual analysis with philosophy is like identifying puns with comedy. Hand does avoid saying philosophy is essentially conceptual analysis, but replaces essentialism with reductionism. And this is the heart of the matter. 'Philosophy lite' reduces philosophy from the 'phronesis' of traditional philosophical practice to the 'techne' of modern conceptual analysis. Why?

Conceptual analysis may be central and indispensable to philosophy, but so too is dialogue, which means having a voice and a community and listening. So why is this social, political, lived, dialogic dimension of philosophy not considered in Hand's conception? Is he too focussed on the blockage to see the baby disappearing with the bathwater?

### 3. Towards genuine dialogue

The problem may be the failure to engage. It does seem methodologically curious that Hand attempts to construct his own account of philosophy for children, by himself, from a restricted set of resources taken from the English analytic philosophy tradition. Why do this when P4C is theorised and practiced so widely, with books and journals and conferences and opportunities for dialogue with practitioners and for observing philosophy in schools?

If Hand were to engage, he would find P4C explicitly and openly conceptualised by many of its advocates in contradistinction to analytic academic philosophy. He would discover that P4C has different philosophical underpinnings and a different methodological lineage. Instead of Bambrough, Flew, Ryle, Peters, Wilson and Strawson, he would find Socrates, Plato, Dewey, Pierce, Vygotsky, Freire and Lipman.

To understand P4C, one needs to take account of its different history, purposes and values. P4C champions democratic inclusion, is constructive, pragmatic and political. In this tradition, the moments of speaking and listening and action are not separable from philosophy, they are central to the practice. This holistic conception of philosophy resists reduction to either concept work or dialogue work, hence the equal emphasis on creative *and* critical thinking, community involvement *and* rational thought.

Hand may disagree, but to ignore the tradition is rude. And if he took the contexts of P4C seriously, he might see that there are many areas where philosophy *of* education and P4C could get into mutually productive genuine dialogue.

Take the politics of the classroom. Young persons are trained by a regime that rewards and punishes them according to how well they regurgitate and repeat the answers given by superiors. In this context, a discourse with 'no right answers' is defined in contrast to the standard model. In P4C, philosopher-citizens help in the co-construction of their own understanding. Where Hand thinks up questions that he thinks are relevant to young persons, P4C facilitates their construction of their own questions and their setting of their own agenda.

Or higher order thinking. In the context of dialogic philosophy, higher order thinking is not merely thinking about concepts. It is also thinking about process, about the mode of engagement in which concept formation, schematisation and analysis occur. So metacognition is thinking about learning, its value and meaning. This implies reflecting on the role and place of philosophy, not as an academic discipline but as critical action, something we do.

These controversial political, social, moral and practical aspects of P4C raise conceptual questions that could usefully be addressed through a conversation between philosophy of education and P4C. But the conversation needs to be two way and show proper respect for the other.

And the other in this case includes young persons, young persons who form and use and map concepts, including 'higher order concepts,' young persons who naturally seek meaning, significance and power, young persons who do not need to be insulted in a deficit model as 'stumbling' while real philosophers 'exhibit careful attention.' In my experience these young persons are regularly open minded, listen carefully, think critically and creatively, change their minds, and care about their peers, their community and truth.

#### **4. Invitations not conclusions**

I invite Michael Hand then, to accept the criticism, and to see his foray into children's philosophy as a first step in a longer, perhaps richly rewarding journey, into the traditional theory and practice of P4C.

For to continue to judge P4C by the standards of analytic academic philosophy would be to continue miss the point. It would mean losing important opportunities for challenging his and others' thinking about the aims of philosophy and education. It would mean closing down chances for investigating '...the relevance of philosophy to problems children genuinely face, and its power to contribute to their solution.'

When John Stuart Mill advocated teaching citizenship by doing it, he was doing more than careful second order reasoning. He was being a philosopher. When Plato described the Socratic elenchus, he was not mapping conceptual terrain, he was doing philosophy.

Lets hope that this stimulating chapter heralds a move by Michael Hand into a genuine conversation with P4C. And let's hope it helps him towards a broader and more dynamic vision of philosophy, one where the question of the definition of philosophy is something we can share.