

The Virtues of Thinking:

an Aristotelian Approach to Teaching Thinking

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Philosophy is like having a conversation with a voice in my head.
Year 2 child (age 7)

In a recent article published in the TES Professor Tim Birkhead said the following:

The most striking thing about some undergraduates is their dependence, their lack of initiative and their reluctance to think for themselves... New undergraduates seem to expect to be told what to do at every stage. It is almost as though the spoon-feeding-and-teaching-to-the-test-culture at school has drained them of independent thought.¹

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In this paper I would like to say something about the phase of education that precedes the undergraduate phase, drawing on Aristotle to outline a solution to the ‘spoon-feeding-and-teaching-to-the-test-culture’ that Professor Birkhead speaks of. I would also like to say something about how philosophy, when included in this earlier phase of education, can address these problems.

Why Teach Philosophy?

Philosophy is a neutral forum in that it does not contain the biases of the various subjects that may be taught and it seeks to challenge any assumptions—including its own—that may be held by a subject. Other subjects don’t on the whole do this.

With regard to teaching thinking, philosophy is in the unique position of having thinking and reasoning as its subject matter and is not limited by needing reference to a body of knowledge in order to pursue discussions. One does not need to know lots about philosophy to be able to do philosophy in the same way that one needs to know facts about maths to be able to discuss maths fruitfully.²

Philosophy is also not an ‘anything goes’ subject where all contributions are considered equally valid by virtue of having been contributed and are admitted unchecked, though I think sometimes it is treated in this way. Done properly, I argue that philosophy has the capacity to offer evaluation and assessment methods to those taking part, so that the interlocutors acquire the attributes to be able to challenge the others in the group in a constructive and respectful way, helping the dialectic process to progress. To avoid problems with terms like truth that were certainly used by Plato and Socrates when speaking of the aims of dialectic, I will simply say that the participants learn ways to discern better answers from less good ones using the criteria of reasonableness as a standard. Also, importantly, these tools can be learned without being explicitly taught if the facilitator is skilled in the

¹ ‘We’ve bred a generation unable to think’ by Professor Tim Birkhead, *TES* comment, Feb. 16th 2009.

² These points are made in ‘Philosophy and the Development of Critical Thinking’ by Carrie Winstanley in *Philosophy in Schools* edited by Michael Hand and Carrie Winstanley, (London: Continuum, 2008).

right ways: first of all skilled in philosophy and secondly in the transmission of philosophical ideas and methods.

Can children do philosophy?

Philosophy is notoriously difficult to define, but I will provide a list of salient features that I think will be adequate for the present purposes of talking about philosophy with children. I have identified the following key features that I think constitute doing philosophy - I realise that there are difficulties with providing exhaustive necessary and sufficient conditions for doing philosophy, but if we don a Wittgensteinian hat we can see how it may work as a ‘family resemblance’:

- Conceptual analysis
- Abstract thinking
- Meta-level / second order thinking
- Generality
- Complex reasoning
- Non-empirical
- Special topics (metaphysics, epistemology, ethics)
- History of ideas
- Revaluation

Can it be demonstrated that children are capable of this sort of thinking? The following examples have been taken from some footage of children ranging from Years 4 to 6 (ages 9 to 11) who attend an after-school philosophy club.

Cieron’s mono-universe

I’ve got an argument to prove there’s only one universe and nothing doesn’t exist:

I know the universe is infinite, but say half of this room is the universe and the other half of the room another universe.

When they meet together, they must have a point where they meet.

And what is to define that the two universes are different? I mean they all have the same description; they cover everything.

And if the universe was here (points) and nothing was there (points elsewhere) the universe must be touching the nothing, and if it is touching it it must physically exist, therefore...

Felix's Monadology

They (atoms) might be the smallest physical thing, but surely energy must be made of something.

There might be, like, matter that (because even gas and things are made of atoms, which is physical) makes something which you can pass your hand through.

Maybe there's, like, something smaller than the atom which can't be divided because it's actually not really physical...

Felix's later reflection on this:

... How [can] something that doesn't officially exist make something that does exist?

You could say when two monads collide they get much bigger and make an atom, but how can things that don't have any stuff hit anything?

Nadia's valid point

If time is a thing, then, if there's no thing [*Ed: as is implied in the word 'nothing'*] then time wouldn't exist because it's a thing.

Noah's 'anti-things'

We've made up a classification for things that have no properties but do have consequences. We call them 'anti-things'.

So 'time': if you left a cloth in a drawer it would get dusty. That is a consequence of time. A consequence of nothing is that nothing solid exists. A consequence of existence is the exact opposite: solids appear. The consequence of gravity is that you go down if you go up. The consequence of motion is if you are going downhill you speed up.

So that is 'anti-things': no properties but they do have consequences.

Alice's argument against anti-things

It is a thing though: it's something that exists and everything that exists has a property. Like, things that exist might have a property that they don't have a property, but that's a property. An anti-thing couldn't be an anti-THING because it's a thing and it's impossible.

I am not suggesting that all these arguments are sound and valid, but then there are plenty of examples of 'real' philosophers getting it wrong, so it doesn't have to be a good argument to be philosophy, or even good philosophy. I do think that there are plenty of examples of features that constitute philosophy however. For example, complex arguments (Cieron) and in some cases expressed in standard form (see Nadia); all of the examples are abstract, meta-level discussions and some display a clear grasp of the language of philosophy with words such as 'argument', 'therefore', 'property', 'consequence', 'description', 'classification'—and that perennial favourite of philosophy—the neologism with the word 'anti-things'. There is reference to the history of ideas with Leibniz's monads and Felix not only comes up with a suitable Leibnizian insight about the basic stuff being non-physical but he also later demonstrates some very sophisticated revaluation when he

finds a worrying objection to this idea (*how can something that doesn't exist make something that does? Or, how can something that doesn't have any stuff hit something?*) All the ideas expressed by the children have a logical, *a priori* tendency and none, I think, rely on empirical data (children in philosophy sessions do have empirical discussions of course, but, at their best and with the right facilitation, it can be seen here that they are capable of fruitful, non-empirical discussions).³

Techne and Hexis

I shall borrow some terminology from ancient Greece to return to the question of thinking skills and I shall use the words *techne* and *hexis* to refer to what some educationalists⁴ have distinguished between *skills* and *dispositions*. Many students of philosophy will be familiar with *techne* as the word used by Plato to describe skills, crafts and art. Readers of Aristotle will be familiar with the word *hexis* as meaning 'having or possessing something', or 'tending towards a disposition'. Aristotle argued for the need to acquire *hexis* with regard to both moral and intellectual development. In other words one needs to cultivate good habits with regard to one's moral and intellectual life so that these good habits become second nature.

I shall argue, following from Winstanley and others,⁵ that the thinking skills approach to teaching thinking, such as can be seen in something like the critical thinking A level, is too much like *techne*. The problem with this approach is that skills may or may not be utilised, and very often are unlikely to be used until they have been internalised and naturalised, in other words, so that a *hexis*-like process has occurred.

One may think of it like this: imagine a bookshelf with many

³ These are, of course, end points in the discussions that they were taken from and in many ways the most interesting part of children doing philosophy like this is how they got there, but unfortunately there is not space to transcribe the entire session but if you would like to see more context to these insights then edited versions of these sessions are available to be viewed at:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/ThePhilosophyShop>

⁴ See Winstanley, *ibid.*

⁵ See Winstanley, *ibid.*

very useful books that you have read and underlined at some point in your past but the books remain on the shelf gathering dust and are not available to you when you need them. Compare this to a book that you have studied in great detail and know exceptionally well: it will often inform many of your thoughts and actions to some extent. Many people learn the bible in this way, or, a student of philosophy may have read a book like *The Critique of Pure Reason* in this way in preparation for a final exam or a set of essays. Good thinking is better learnt in this latter way (*hexis*) than in the former way (*techne*) and this is best done by ‘doing’ and ‘modelling’ rather than by ‘learning about’, or, in other words, when the knowledge has been learned by acquaintance rather than propositionally. (This is not to say that it can’t also be learned propositionally, but just that to be able to think well, as opposed to knowing how to think well, one needs to be well acquainted with the methods of good thinking: one needs to practise them).

Dialogue: Inside and Out

I shall now offer a method for developing the *hexis* approach to teaching thinking using a famous and illustrious method: the method of silent dialogue.

If we can enter into the world of Plato’s dialogues for a moment we can identify two kinds of dialogue: external and internal dialogue. The external dialogue is the dialogue had between the characters, in other words, a social kind of dialogue where two or more people work through an issue or problem together. In the *Theateatus* Socrates speaks of another kind of dialogue where the aim is to learn to be able to do what one does in the external dialogue but on ones own:

SOCRATES: And do you accept my description of the process of thinking?

THEATETUS: How do you describe it?

SOCRATES: As a discourse that the mind carries on with itself

about any subject it is considering. You must take this explanation as coming from an ignoramus, but I have a notion that, when the mind is thinking, it is simply talking to itself, asking questions and answering them, and saying yes or no. When it reaches a decision—which may come slowly or in a sudden rush—when doubt is over and the two voices affirm the same thing, then we call this its ‘judgement’. So I should describe thinking as discourse, and judgement as a statement pronounced, not aloud to someone else, but silently to oneself. (Plato: *Theatetus* 189e-190a6)⁶

This has become known as the ‘silent dialogue’. Here, one learns to challenge and reconsider and re-evaluate on one’s own as one might in a discussion with others. This has become a standard method in philosophy and Descartes’ *Meditations* is a good example of this being done, where the sentences and paragraphs constitute a series of objections and replies as if there were more than one voice even though there is only one writer. Of course, if we step outside of the world of Plato’s dialogues this is also what is happening in his dialogues as Plato is the true single voice. If one is including a thinking program in a school curriculum then an overall aim for the entire program (ideally over at least a six year period through primary school and beyond) would be to move from external dialogues such as those had with a group of children—or indeed a whole class—towards an internalisation of this process so that what the child starts by learning to do with their classmates they end by having learned to follow a similar process in their own head. Learning the method of silent dialogue at an early stage of their education would leave them with a life-long skill and would seem to me to meet the concerns raised by Prof. Tim Birkhead.

⁶ Plato, *Collected Dialogues*, Eds. Hamilton, Edith and Cairns, Huntington, (Princeton University Press, 1961).