



THE ANT & THE GRASSHOPPER

THINKING ABOUT WORK, DESERT AND WELFARE

Session by Peter Worley.

This session exemplifies how to critically engage your class with traditional stories that have a clear moral message. You could stop the story before the grasshopper speaks and have two children dramatise the scene, anticipating what they think the characters will say. And/or you could tell them what the grasshopper says and ask the actor playing the ant to speak for the ant. Each time, make sure you give the class the opportunity to 'advise' the character(s) making use of 'the Advice Circle' (see below and this blog post (<https://www.philosophy-foundation.org/blog/the-advice-circle>)) Ensure also that you explain that the children acting are 'actors' so if someone says 'I disagree with Bethan because...' remind them: 'Bethan is the actor playing the ant, so you don't disagree with *Bethan*, you disagree with 'the ant'.' To emphasise this distinction you could ask Bethan to sit back in her chair in the talk circle and ask her what *she* would say to 'the ant'. Don't miss the opportunity to find out what the children think about the actual (Aesop's) story-ending, though the children are likely to be unfamiliar with it as they will probably have been told a much more sanitized version of the story. I like to use the original as I find it more provocative.

Equipment needed and preparation:

- ✓ Two empty chairs ready to go in the middle of the talk circle
- ✓ A pile of scrap A4 paper or A4 whiteboards and pens (you'll need up to ten)

Key concepts / vocabulary: prudence, work, reward, desert, welfare, right, good, justice, fair

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Key controversies: Should one help another who does not deserve help?

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Critical thinking tool:

Is/ought distinction - there is a famous distinction in philosophy between claims about how the world *is* and claims about how the world *ought* to be, often associated with the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776). It is known as the 'is/ought distinction'. Hume thought that no amount of description about what humans *actually do* will lead us to any moral conclusions about what we *should* do. According to this, the perennial plea, 'But Miss, everyone does it!' is no excuse! I should point out, however, that this idea is controversial; *ethical naturalists*, for instance, think that one *can* draw moral conclusions from facts about the world.

Key facilitation tool:

Is/ought questioning - whatever you may think about the relationship between the world and ethics, it does afford us a useful conceptual distinction in our questioning during moral/ethical discussions. If students give a *descriptive* answer to a moral or ethical question, then follow this up with a *moral* formulation of the question (being careful not to *moralise* or use the dismissive 'But', but 'and' or 'so' instead). So, if the question is 'Is it okay to hit someone back if they hit you?' and someone answers, 'Everyone does it.' then your follow-up question could be: 'So, if everyone does it, does that mean that we *should* do it?' This is another example of a leading question, but as with the example in 'Doing Philosophy' in *40 lessons to get children thinking*, I think it a justified use of a leading question because children are often not aware of the *is/ought distinction*, and because there is a necessary, logical relationship between the two sides of this ethical coin. It would be a *bad* leading question if you wanted the student to come to *your* view about it and used questions of this sort to achieve that. So, if the student concludes that the facts *do* bring us to a moral imperative, then it might just be that the student is an *ethical naturalist* (see *40 lessons to get children thinking*, page 71). If the class is old enough, there's no reason why you couldn't explain the 'is/ought' distinction to them.

SESSION PLAN:

Tell (or read) the following story:

(Adapted from Aesop's Fables)

There was once a grasshopper that liked to take things easy. It was summer time and what he liked most to do in the summer was to soak up the sun, sit back and watch the world go by. One day, while he was relaxing, some ants went by. He watched them for a while go this way and that collecting food and supplies. They were working very hard. In fact, they didn't seem to stop working at all while he was watching them!

'Why are you working so hard?' asked the Grasshopper, 'Don't you ever take a break?'

'No time to stop!' replied one of the ants, 'there's too much to do before winter comes! We need to gather our supplies.'

'But the weather is so beautiful,' pointed out the Grasshopper. 'What's the point of being alive if you don't stop to appreciate how beautiful everything is?'

But by the time the Grasshopper has finished his question the Ant was off again returning the leaves he'd collected to his nest, nearby.

The winter came and it was a particularly harsh winter: cold and barren. The Grasshopper was freezing and too cold, tired and hungry to notice how beautiful the winter could be. He was desperate. But then he remembered the ants! With what little strength he had left he found his way back to their nest and knocked on the door of one of their burrows - the one he saw the ant go into. Who should answer his knock but the ant he had spoken to in the summertime.

'Please will you let me in to the warmth of your nest, and could you spare me just a little of your food?' asked the Grasshopper as he looked at the ant sorrowfully.

Task Question 1:

- ✓ What should the ant say (or do) to the Grasshopper?

(At this point you may want to go straight into 'The Advice Circle' activity (see below) or you may simply want to follow a normal PhiE enquiry around this TQ)

Nested Questions:

- ✓ Should the ant help? If so, why?
- ✓ Should the ant refuse to help? If so, why?
- ✓ Does the ant have a duty to the grasshopper?
- ✓ Is it the ant's decision?
- ✓ Should the grasshopper bear responsibility for his situation?
- ✓ What would be the right thing to do in this situation?
- ✓ Is there a 'right thing' to do?
- ✓ If you could advise the ant (see 'the advice circle' below) what would you advise the ant to say or do?
- ✓ What is right?
- ✓ What is fair?

At the end of the session (or the beginning of the next session) finish the story:

The Ant says, 'You should have thought ahead to the winter. Go away and appreciate the harsh beauty of the winter.' With that the Ant closed the door in the Grasshopper's face leaving him to face the winter, alone, homeless and hungry.

Task Question 2:

- ✓ Did the Ant do the right thing?

Nested Questions:

- ✓ What would be the right thing to do in this situation?
- ✓ What is 'the right thing to do'?
- ✓ How should we decide what the right thing to do is?
- ✓ Is there a wrong thing to do? If so, what is it?
- ✓ Did you find the ending shocking? If so, why?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES:

A SET QUESTION

TQ2 may have to be a *Set Question* – one that you leave the class with to think about. One way to extend a Set Question is to have a philosophy corner in the classroom where a question is put up each week. Put some post-it! notes for the children to write their response to the Set Question. These can form the basis of another discussion or a piece of written work. Have a look at the following article for more: 'Improving Writing Through Dialogue' (<http://www.innovatemy school.com/ideas/item/1142-improving-writing-through-dialogue>).

THE ADVICE CIRCLE

This activity, apart from being fun, helps the children develop a metacognitive attitude towards moral decision making (for instance, if you are discussing a child's own behavior with them you could say, 'What would you advise *yourself* to do in situation X? You know, like you advised the ant in last week's philosophy session.'

Say: Usually, when we hear a story, we find out what happens in the story whether we agree with what the characters did or not; you don't get to tell the characters what you think; you don't get to offer them any advice so that they can do what you think is the right thing. Today, you will!

1. Place the two chairs in the talk circle, one for the Grasshopper and one for the Ant (you may want to label them for clarity)
2. Ask for two volunteers: one to play the Grasshopper and one the Ant.
3. Explain that the volunteers role-play, that is, they will speak to each other as *if* they are the Ant and the Grasshopper.
4. Allow short exchanges between the two characters. Stop them when there is something to discuss (e.g. Ant: 'You should have listened. You're not getting anything from me. Maybe now you'll learn your lesson.')
5. Now turn to the rest of the class and ask them: 'Is there anyone who would like to say something to the Ant or the Grasshopper?' If necessary, add: 'Do you agree with what they have said?' This might help to engage them critically. If children refer to the children playing the characters ('I think Thomas was mean!') then correct them ('You think the *Ant* was mean!') so that the actors don't take it personally.
6. After each short exchange have different children come up to play the characters. Encourage them to say something different to what has been said already (e.g. Grasshopper: 'Please help! I'll never do it again. I should have worked in the summer!')

THE HOKEY KOKEY (OR POKEY!) METHOD: IN, OUT AND IN AGAIN!

This method will help to get past a surface level discussion to the deeper, more abstract level, but returns to the 'surface' to test out the abstract, making sure that ethical discussions have a relationship to action and virtue. Though, remember not to moralise in a philosophy discussion!

1. Take a **key concept(s)** suitable for philosophical enquiry, such as (in this case) *help* and *desert*.
2. Take a **story** where the concept(s) features centrally, such as *The Ant and The Grasshopper* where the central concepts have a problematic relationship.
3. Find an appropriate section or **passage** that tests the concepts in question. Or you might want to consider the story as a whole (as in this case), though (as in this case) the enquiries may be led before the conclusion of the story.
4. Ask a simple but conceptually appropriate **question** using the following structure '**Should X F Y?**', for example, 'Should the ant help the grasshopper?' (This question is *concrete* or 'in the story'.)
5. Run an **enquiry** around this question.
6. Then ask an **abstract** ('out' of the story) version of this: 'Should you help someone who doesn't deserve help?'
7. This may also require a discussion(s) at a further remove, for example (in this case): 'What is help?' and 'What is desert?' or 'When does someone deserve something?' (Easier for children than 'What is desert?') These questions follow the structure of what are known as *Socratic Questions*, or what I call: '**What is X?'**-questions.
8. Run an **enquiry(s)** around this (or these) question(s).
9. Now for the key bit! Make sure that, once you have explored the abstract/ *Socratic Question(s)*, you return to the concrete question to '**test**' what has been said in the abstract (at steps 6, 7 and 8). This uses a strategy I call 'iffing' and it follows this structure: '**If you should p in situation q, then should X F Y?**' In this case: 'If you should always help someone who is going to die, then should the ant help the grasshopper?' (This question returns to the *concrete* in order to test what has been said in the *abstract*.)
10. Explore and **examine the implications** that follow from step 8. The class will need to examine whether the example of the story pulls their intuitions in a different direction. For instance, someone might say 'You shouldn't help someone who doesn't listen' but then they may say 'But the ant should help the grasshopper because if he doesn't he'll die'. Tensions between the abstract and concrete (what we reason and what we feel, or intuit) will be a good source of controversy for the philosophical aspect of the discussion.

For more on this method (particularly around the use of 'X questions' or Socratic Questions) see: 'Why Use Stories for doing philosophy with children' (<https://bloomsburyeducation.wordpress.com/2016/02/02/peter-worley-why-use-stories-for-doing-philosophy-with-children/>) by Peter Worley.

The following three blog posts might also help:

Peter Worley: 'A Philosophical Enquiry Strategy for Up-Against-It Secondary School Teachers' (<https://www.philosophy-foundation.org/blog/peter-worley-a-philosophical-enquiry-strategy-for-up-against-it-secondary-school-teachers>)

Steven Campbell-Harris: 'The Kokey Hokey Method' (<https://www.philosophy-foundation.org/blog/steven-campbell-harris-the-kokey-hokey-method>)

Tim Sprod: 'In Out, In Out, Shake It All About' (<https://www.philosophy-foundation.org/blog/in-out-in-out-shake-it-all-about>)

Related Resources:

- ✓ *Frederick* by Leo Lionni (picture book)
- ✓ *40 lesson to get children thinking*: The Diary, The Instant Success Switch
- ✓ *The If Machine*: The Ring of Gyges
- ✓ *The If Odyssey*: The Singing Women, Happiness and Forgetting, Choices
- ✓ *Once Upon an If*: The Promise Slippers, Once Upon an If (parts 1 and 2)
- ✓ *The Philosophy Shop*: Not Very Stationary Stationery, Dizzy, Identity Parade
- ✓ *Thoughtings*: It Wasn't Me, Bite, Do it
- ✓ *TPF Website*: Sinbad and the underground stream, Button