

## Philosophy for Children

### I. The concept of the Community of Inquiry

Central to the heart of P4C lies the notion of a community of inquiry. Originally a term from Pierce to reference interaction among scientists, the concept of "COI" dominates the discussion of educational revisionism as presented by commentators on the P4C movement. The key description marking a COI is: a group (a social setting) of individuals who use dialogue (interaction among participants) to search out the problematic borders of a puzzling concept (inquiry as philosophical.) Implicit in the ideal workings of this group are two key concepts:

a demonstration of thinking that is caring (each member is supported and allowed to be an integral member of the community), creative (new ideas are sought out and encouraged) and critical (good reasons are expected for one's ideas and positions). fallibilism (a willingness to be corrected and an acknowledgment of possible error or perspectivalness).

Thus, the COI offers us a dual message of promoting critical thinking and encouraging an obligation to one's fellow inquirer. As such the concept of COI attempts to address contemporary challenges to education to produce better thinkers and more caring members of society who can tolerate differences at the same time they can submit conflicts to reasonable scrutiny. In a COI all participants must respect one another as thoughtful persons who seek communally to better understand the issue at hand.

In describing the COI as central to philosophical inquiry with children I have tried to achieve a certain degree of metaphysical neutrality by focusing upon the methodological structure of the discussion. However, once we probe beneath the surface definition we discover a cache of important metaphysical and epistemological issues that appear to be embraced uncritically, or at least accepted as givens. Two of these controversial issues are:

the ontological nature of the individual vs. that of the community

the criteria of a "good" reason (the question of truth) or discovery vs. construction

It is important to recognize the presence of these issues within the P4C method and to explore how these issues color our vision of that method. We will note certain tensions among writers about P4C in terms of which metaphysical vision best embraces the ideals behind the COI. In the sections below I will suggest also a series of questions that are provoked by discussions of the COI which will hopefully lead to further reflection and dialogue with the P4C community itself.

### II. Individual vs. Community

In his article "The Five Communities" (1) David Kennedy offers us a rich differentiation of a COI into communities of gesture, language, mind, love, and interest. (2) The concepts of gesture and language highlight the nuances of human communication that

embrace physical stance, the unspoken presentation of the body itself as response and the powerful nature of spoken language as enriched by "stress, pitch, contour and juncture" (3) in addition to one's personal vocabulary and idiosyncratic use of words. By his phrase, "community of mind" Kennedy attempts to capture a phenomenological sense of mind as active agent immersed in a spatio-temporal-affective locus which is ever changing. He draws a portrait of the situatedness of thought which nevertheless struggles to eternalize itself in the shape of the argument before the group. The community of love references the nature of the COI as caring as it recognizes the vulnerability of its members and cherishes them. The community of interest focuses upon the self, the individual who works to position himself within the group even as every member does likewise. In this aspect of community, Kennedy details a socio-psychological environment of individuals moving towards community.

Throughout his discussion of these aspects of the community of inquiry, Kennedy emphasizes the nature of the community as telos (4) and the need to struggle with one's individuality as a limitation to achieving the connectedness within the community. The tendency to exert one's self and make a play for power is clearly the source of conflict within and fragmenting of the COI. Indeed, at times, there is the suggestion that the individual cannot achieve selfhood apart from the community and any attempt to maintain a degree of separation should be vigorously discouraged. This reliance upon community as central to the human endeavor is echoed by some other commentators as well. (5)

The challenge is to chart a course between the twin shoals of an egotistic individuality and a self-erasing communality. To what extent do I need a community to become myself? Could one develop a community of one? of two? of twenty? How different need we be? Are we participating in a vital COI if we are too homogenous a group? From a practical standpoint, how would we go about avoiding this, if homogeneity is indeed a weakening of the COI potential?

When Sharp writes "The success of the community is compatible with, and dependent on, the unique expression of individuality," (6) and Traverso comments

"we can conceive of two levels of development. On the one hand, the development that each individual gains on her or his own thanks to the interaction with the rest of the group, and on the other hand, the strengthening of the community as a function of the interpersonal enrichment gained from dialog." (7)

they are highlighting a tension between the importance of maintaining and developing one's individuality and the vitality of meshing with others within a community where one must be willing to subsume one's individual ideas to some extent. But, there is also the suggestion that the community has a status of its own, larger and more complete (and more important?) than a sum of the individuals who make up its participants. Is there a metaphysical entity of "community?" How does such a community express itself and operate in the world? (8) What rights, responsibilities, life does such a community have? How do we reconcile the life of the individual with that of the community?

These are not new questions or issues. The philosophic tradition from Plato and Aristotle through Hobbes, Locke, Mill and Rawls have struggled to craft answers to the challenge of the individual versus community. When supporters of philosophy for children speak of the community of inquiry, we can discern echoes of these ideas in the ways in which we follow the development and purpose of the COI. In a recent article (9) John C. Thomas eloquently charts his way through concepts of natural and formal communities as he builds a concept of COI which acknowledges its formal characteristics (artificially engineered with goals in mind) while also recognizing elements of natural communities (like-minded and caring individuals coming together in trust and love) within its parameters. The artificial community of a classroom constructed out of similar aged and grouped children assigned to room X and teacher Y is transformed into a living experience of being-with one another (10) where "deep emergents" (unspoken affective communication) can occur and flourish. The individual is nourished by others and in turn offers others unspoken reflections of self through the mirror of philosophic dialogue. In Thomas' vision of the community we see clear recognition of the perilous journey of the individual into communion with others where identity must be preserved at the same time it is enriched and enlarged by the exchange with the other. The result is an entangling web of interrelations and expansions of self which borrows an image from chaos theory: an orderly disorder or disorderly order.

As we depict the growth and development of the COI we cannot avoid another important question, that of knowledge, of truth.

### III. Truth and Meaning

Historically the P4C movement has grown out of the educational critique offered by John Dewey. Associated with the philosophical movement of pragmatism, P4C also looks to the ideas of Pierce and Mead for support. Pragmatism offers a particular epistemological view which focuses upon truth as contextual, the weaving of meaningful propositions as strictly answers for specific situations. Recent developments in educational theory have emphasized the nature of knowledge as a construction. And, finally, the reigning philosophical climate today is that of a post-modernism emerging from thinkers such as Derrida and Rorty. Here we discover a provocative tension between ideas of truth and ideas of meaning. Associated with this issue is the debate between epistemological relativism and absolutism. How do these influences shape the community of inquiry and its dialogic activity? Are we seeking the truth in community? Or is that very word verboten in today's intellectual climate? If we are seeking meaning, can we do so within the context of a heterogeneous community where we do not share one another's world views?

At a recent spring P4C conference in Mendham, N.J., these questions often came to the fore as we struggled to communicate across language and cultural barriers. To what extent does my language (or my culture) encapsulate me and render me unable to communicate with those who do not share my mode of expression and being? If ideas are linguistically constructed, can we escape the situatedness of the word? Is truth linguistic,

cultural and hence situational? A post-modern vision of knowledge would claim 'yes' as an answer to these questions but would then go on to justify dialogue on the basis of sharing and creating meaning. As Fabian Gimenez states:

"...to recognize the creative capacity of the word is a good route for the construction of a notion of truth, not as correspondence rather as interpretation — always linguistic, therefore, contingent, provisional — of the world and others. We can conclude from this that the plurality of interpretations, that is, the multiplicity of possible worlds, constitutes the linguistic framework of philosophy understood as constructive activity of meanings." (11)

The notion of truth as a construction is a popular one with roots in a number of philosophical theories from Piaget and Vygotsky to Dewey on to Rorty. In so far as we construct the community, we are also building together a vision of the world as we see it. The question is: is this the truth? A truth? Any truth? But, when we describe the mission of a participant in the COI as a crafting of "good reasons" for one's statement, belief, claim, then we imply that one might offer reasons that were not "good" and we invite scrutiny on the meaning of "good" in this context.

In his article, "Philosophy and Community in Education: A critique of Richard Rorty", (12) Michael Schleifer emphasizes that philosophy for children is grounded in a clearly universalist concept of the truth which "foster(s) respect for differences without rejecting a notion of what human beings share together in terms of their similarities and a common human nature." (13) He argues that the community of inquiry presupposes a standard of truth in its Socratic presuppositions. (14) The relativism advocated by Rorty and the deconstructionists renders incomprehensible the envisioning of the COI as a community dedicated to philosophically important issues and an inquiry towards truth and wisdom. The "community" (15) aspect of COI presupposes the possibility of communication across national, cultural, and other differences. A concept of community as advocated by Rorty restricts us to meaning within a particular "speech community" with any claims to knowledge necessarily limited to that one group, place and time. "To accept Rorty would certainly call into question the possibility of establishing global or international communities." Schleifer goes on to explore how Rorty and Lipman, although both claiming intellectual roots in Deweyism, have followed different ideological branches. Rorty emphasizes the role of anti-foundationalism and chance in knowing while Lipman pursues Dewey's notions of fallibilism as a response to relativism and the communal nature of the self as leading to knowledge within a community of inquiry. He concludes that P4C advocates do indeed ascribe to a concept of truth in the sense of Dewey's "warranted belief."

"Sharp argues, with Putnam, Macintyre, and Bernstein in support, that communities of inquiry are not condemned to relativism and endless self-correction, that some progress can be made, and that the concepts of truth and justification cannot be reduced to the conceptual scheme of the tradition." (16)

Another commentator who clearly espouses a non-relativism stance with respect to truth is Susan Gardner. (17) She points out that the very notion of "critical thinking" and the goal of the community of inquiry as that of progression forward in the comprehension of an idea assume that there is indeed something to be grasped and that it is more or less "graspable." (18) When we sketch out the role of the facilitator in the inquiry we explicitly detail qualities of thinking that are desirable and worthy of promoting and those that are not. Behind these movements of communal thinking are standards of excellence that must hold for the community and not just function at the whim or personal preference of some subset. This becomes particularly vital, as Schleifer noted, when one is participating in a multicultural/linguistic community. To end each discussion by simply acknowledging differences is intrinsically dissatisfying and limiting and militates against the very concept of building an COI, a community of inquiry. Gardner emphasizes this point:

"Through the process itself, youngsters will learn to listen to the points of view of others, to self-correct in light of countervailing evidence, to enjoy the liberating impact of trying out new thoughts, they will learn that it is important that opinions be justified, that reasons be offered for suggested courses of action and that not any reason is acceptable and so on. However, the discussion has to go somewhere and where it goes must be in the direction of the truth." (19) (*italics — Gardner's*)

However, here we must interject a challenge: does this presupposition of the truth as objective (to some extent, at least) beg the very question that might be on the table for discussion, i.e. what is truth? In this case, we have gone from a postmodern relativist position that attempts to make no claims about a truth, (20) thereby seeming to pull out the foundation for a sense of inquiry as directional and progressive, to a modernist position that claims there is a truth (21) which might limit our abilities to listen, to attend to the other and to be sensitive to the need for fallibilism.

Several individuals have addressed this dilemma and offer us some ways of thinking about the COI and its program which might avoid the conflict. At the June 1997 ICPIC (International Council for Philosophical Inquiry with Children) conference, Ross Philips (22) suggested that we operationalize a "minimalist concept of truth" which will allow us to approach the dialogue as directional and meaningful while avoid espousing a particular theory of truth, relativist or non-relativist, prior to examination within the community. In developing a methodological concept of truth, Philips recognizes the triviality of a discussion which presupposes that truth is irrelevant or non-existent (what he labels the "deflationary view") and yet acknowledges the danger of a priori dismissals of epistemological challenges to truth.

Christina Slade takes a similar approach in her thoughtfully crafted article, "Conversing Across Differences: Relativism and Difference." (23) Tackling the related issue of creating a community of members from varying cultural, linguistic and conceptual backgrounds, Slade argues that implicit in P4C is the belief that discourse across differences can and does occur. She distinguishes among a cluster of "relativisms": linguistic, cultural and logical as well as a range from strong to very weak. By

differentiated among versions of relativism, Slade can embrace the insights offered by a relativistic stance (awareness of limitations and recognition of perspectivalness of knowledge claims) while avoiding the perceived limitations (the claim that all differences are opaque and insurmountable from without the context:)

"Very weak relativism could equally be seen as a principle of charity — to beware of one's own assumptions... Indeed I would suggest that relativism is incompatible with recognizing a justified difference, whether in judgments on ethical issues or in logic."  
(24)

As Phillips explored a provisional theory of truth, Slade offers us a study of the quandary in which a relativistic logical stance leaves us. To debate the validity of a logical world view implies a logical context in which the debate is occurring. We are left contemplating the challenge of Goedel's Incompleteness theorem, again. However, Slade sees some possible resolutions to our dilemma in Habermas' "ideal public sphere" and Lipman's COI: "each of these approaches takes the process of discussion as fundamental, rather than the product. In the community of inquiry, for instance, there exists the procedures of reasoned debate through which the conception of rationality itself can be debated." (25) She concludes that in dialogic reasoning we can reason through different logic styles by respecting the arguments of others at the same time we debate and point out errors or inconsistencies in reasoning. It appears here that to become a genuine community the members must share some commonality in their concept of truth for communication to occur.

Yet, have we resolved this paradigmatic question of truth? Do these ideas of "minimalist truth" and "very weak relativism" enlighten the nature of the COI or do they simply fail to satisfy both sides and leave everyone questioning what theory of truth is really being assumed here? Perhaps we need not achieve such a resolution in our description of a flourishing community of inquiry. Perhaps the sign of one is the willingness to engage in dialogue, attend to the other and care enough about the subject under discussion to see the communal search as a genuine adventure into mapping a cognitive terrain to a greater extent than has hitherto been achieved. Wisdom lies in the search and the search is not presupposed to be in vain nor to be obvious.

In conclusion, by recognizing the metaphysical horizons of P4C we hope to promote further reflection upon the role of philosophy within human experience and the nature of the COI as a rich matrix for ontological interpretations. Indeed, philosophy should be at the very heart of the educational endeavor.

## Notes

(1) in *Analytic Teaching*, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 3-16

(2) "I want to call them "communities" because each of them is the expression of a communicative, interpretive process, converging on a common body of signs.", *ibid.* p.3.

(3) *ibid.*, p.7.

(4) "This telos...promises a state of perfect reasonableness, inclusive unity and radical openness... ", *ibid.* p.13.

(5) See Fabian Gimenez and Gabriela Traverso (*op. cit.*) for a recent discussion of the centrality of the notion community in COI.

(6) Ann Margaret Sharp, "The Community of Inquiry: Education for Democracy", *Thinking*, vol. 9, no. 2, p.33.

(7) Gabriela Traverso, "Community and Hermeneutic Rationality", *Analytic Teaching* , vol. 17, no. 2, p.21.

(8) Is there an analogy here with the mitochondria that exist within the individual cells of our bodies? Such microscopic beings exist as part of the larger biological unit, the human person, and indeed make the existence of that larger unit possible by their own communal activity. Yet they can be viewed also as individuals in their own right — a world within a world. Mitochondria are individuals who, together in community, support a larger individual.

(9) "Community of Inquiry and Differences of the Heart," *Thinking*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 42-48.

(10) "Deep-emergents arise from communal being when discourse takes place within a form of life that is shared in a mutual being-with. Language speaks from the heart of being. Only when differences of the heart are joined through common community can those differences which separate us be overcome by the common forms of life that unite us." *ibid.*, p.47.

(11) Fabian Gimenez, *op. cit.*, p.17.

(12) *Analytic Teaching*, vol. 17, no. 2, pps. 27-34

(13) *ibid.*, p. 27 (*italics are Schleifer's.*)

(14) Robert Fisher in his article "Socratic Education", *Thinking*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 23-29, discusses at length the nature of Socratic dialogue in Lipman and other programs and highlights the roots of the COI in the tradition of philosophy initiated by Socrates which is differentiated from the academic model developed by Plato himself.

(15) *ibid.*, p. 32.

(16) *ibid.*, p. 33. Schleifer directs us to the article by Ann Margaret Sharp (see fn. 6), her footnote # 11, for a review of the differences between the concept of truth of P4C and that of relativism.

(17) See her most recent two articles: "Philosophy: a Potential Gender Bender," *Analytic Teaching*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 35-44 and "Inquiry is no mere Conversation," *Analytic Teaching*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 41-50.

(18) Susan is very careful to distinguish her concept of truth from some absolutist concept which would entail finality and completeness and preclude correctability.

(19) Susan Gardner in "Inquiry is No Mere Conversation," *Analytic Teaching*, vol. 16, no. 2, p.46.

(20) But does, note, seem to make the claim that it is definitely true that there are no absolute truths...(or is it simply, that truth does not matter?)

(21) Interestingly enough, "The Truth" often appears to be what I, or the reigning group, think it to be...

(22) of La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. His paper, "Motivation and the Goal of Inquiry," should be published in the Proceedings of the Conference, sponsored by the University of Akureyi, Iceland.

(23) *Analytic Teaching*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 3-12

(24) *ibid.*, p. 6-7.

(25) *ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

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