

Philosophy, academic philosophy, and philosophy for children

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As the history of the phrase and the papers of the conference testify, the phrase ‘community of enquiry’ can mean something very general, most simply a group of people who question, think and research together, or can be used as a term of art, from specifying a particular pedagogy to referring to the worldwide scientific endeavour. In this paper, I shall explore not the nature of the community, but the form of enquiry. As a first step, I might say that I will only consider communities of philosophical enquiry. But then the question arises, what counts? I am interested when and how enquiry is philosophical, when the enquiry of the community – however that community is constituted – constitutes philosophy.

No doubt my answer has many implications for considering how communities of philosophical enquiry should be constituted and may be supported, for instance whether certain communal practices support better philosophy and how the virtues of being communal and the virtues of being philosophical relate to one another, but I will not have time to explore these implications here.

I begin with three examples of groups of people thinking together.

A group of men are sitting around dinner at C’s house. The conversation has turned to what they do. One of them, G, is an orator and teacher of oratory, and a second, S, is trying to understand just what that is. In particular, he’s trying to work out the *point* of what G does – is it simply to persuade people (for whatever purpose), is it to discover the truth, is it to promote justice, etc.? The conversation moves on to what would be a *good* purpose for oratory, and the importance of “speaking truth to power”. Are these men doing philosophy?

A group of children are sitting in a circle, listening and watching as their teacher reads them a picture book. The book is about two friends who engage together in an adventure. At the end of the story, the children sit quietly, thinking about the story, and after a minute or two, start talking in pairs about their reactions and ideas. Each pair agrees on a question that they’d like to discuss further, questions like “What is friendship?”, “Can people be happy without friends?”, “Why is it important to be courageous?”, “Is it courageous to disagree with your friends?”. They share their questions with the whole class, and then the class votes on which question to discuss. During the discussion, the teacher seeks to help the children think and question thoughtfully, carefully, and coherently, working as a group. After the discussion, the children reflect on what just happened, and share ideas for what they, individually or collectively, could do better next time to improve their enquiries. Are these children doing philosophy?

A group of university students are sitting in a lecture room. They are listening carefully, taking notes, and trying hard to understand some very abstract ideas about the fundamental structure of “reality”. Their lecturer is carefully presenting them with two opposing views, held by two important historical philosophers and defended by contemporary followers with new arguments. Every so often, the lecturer pauses to allow the students to talk to each other about the arguments, and ask questions. There will be an exam in two months, and the students sometimes express concern to each other about how well they will be able to answer a question on the topic under discussion. Are these students doing philosophy?

These brief vignettes pick out different guises of philosophy. The first is a loose adaptation of Plato’s *Gorgias*; the second is a rough description of the ‘enquiry’ part of Lipman’s methodology

for Philosophy for Children (P4C); the third, of course, is a familiar contemporary academic scene. Are all three activities forms of philosophical enquiry? Philosophy is undoubtedly 'enquiring', so we might say that philosophical enquiry is just philosophy (or vice versa). But what is philosophy? And is there a difference between doing philosophy and studying philosophy? If so, does either provide us with a better model of philosophical enquiry? What is the importance of philosophy in each guise?

Bernard Williams has argued that to do philosophy takes more than philosophy, and that what is taught in universities under the rubric of "philosophy" does not, in fact, involve doing much philosophy at all. For instance, the question of moral relativism, that is, whether there is any objective moral truth or whether the *only* moral standards are those that societies adopt, is a distinctively philosophical question. But, Williams says in his article "Saint-Just's illusion",

The ethical issues of objectivity, the questions of what truthfulness and an appropriate impartiality mean to us in our circumstances, remind us that... to think about those questions is also to think about a lot more than philosophy. It is to try to think seriously about a decent life in the modern world, and it is a platitude to say that it needs more than philosophy to do that.

But, he continues, "It is equally a platitude to say that philosophy should at any rate help one to do that. Moreover, it is true."

Philosophy helps. But does studying philosophy at university? Williams is sceptical:

a good deal of what is called teaching philosophy is nothing of the sort... what is being taught are the capacities to analyse issues, sort out one's terms, write clearly, and expound efficiently in a short time something one does not understand very well... it may be that acquiring these skills itself helps one to think about what is a decent life in the modern world. But it is not in the least obvious that acquiring these skills, and the exercises that impart them, help people to think about that question in the ways that philosophy, properly and impurely practised, would encourage people to think about it.

Philosophy degrees don't have a monopoly on these skills, but the abstract and intellectually demanding nature of the content may develop them to a greater degree than other subjects tend to. But the skills of critical thinking taught and developed in studying philosophy at university, so important in their own terms, do not comprise philosophy. One reason this is important is that the distinctive contribution philosophy can make to thinking seriously about living a decent life may be lost from the academic study of philosophy itself.

So, we ask again, what is philosophy? The quotes above may leave the impression that it is, in the end, just about ethics, but this is simply an effect of the context in which Williams makes these remarks. His more general definition, in his "Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline", is that philosophy is "part of a more general attempt to make the best sense of our life, and so of our intellectual activities, in the situation in which we find ourselves." Wilfrid Sellars, in "Philosophy and the scientific image of man" offers a similar conception:

The aim of philosophy... is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term. Under 'things in the broadest possible sense' I include such radically different items as not only 'cabbages and kings', but numbers and duties, possibilities and finger snaps, aesthetic experience and death.

Sellars makes less of the practical dimension of making sense of our lives and our situation, yet this is undoubtedly central to philosophy. Taking on that task, we need to know much that strictly speaking belongs to other disciplines, such as history, anthropology, psychology and social science. And that is why Williams says that philosophy is *impure* when practised properly – a claim that Dewey would strongly agree with.

So far, I have suggested that philosophical enquiry in the sense of doing philosophy involves making sense of our lives, and that this requires a wider knowledge base than traditionally taught in academic philosophy. We need now to think more about what it is to “do” philosophy. It is to approach the goal of making sense in a particular way, to engage in a certain kind of practice of enquiry. Let us call this “philosophizing”. Philosophizing is at the heart, and root, of philosophy as a discipline. What, exactly, is philosophizing, and what skills does one need to do it well? I have nothing to say here that hasn’t been explored in much greater depth by others: that philosophical questions aren’t solved by empirical investigation (though, as we have noted, that doesn’t mean such investigation is irrelevant), that there is a particular emphasis on conceptual clarification, that many distinctive marks of philosophizing derive from the enquiries of Socrates, such as an unwillingness to sit with easy or superficial answers, a careful attention to language, the insistent development of a point in both depth and breadth, the giving and challenging of reasons, the uncovering of assumptions, the consideration of counterexamples and implications, and so on. The men in Plato’s *Gorgias* and the children in the classroom are, I believe, both philosophizing. Whether they do so well or poorly depends on the virtues of their enquiry. That Plato’s dialogues count as instances of philosophizing is uncontroversial (arguably, it is definitional!); that children’s enquiries within P4C count as instances of philosophizing is controversial. I should say at this point that I understand ‘P4C’ throughout as referring to the tradition that retains a close link to Lipman.

Are children’s enquiries genuinely philosophical? I want to defend a positive answer, not by showing the academic qualities of children’s enquiries, but by showing how academic philosophy resembles the enquiries of P4C. To show this, I start from a significant difference: Each P4C enquiry begins anew, in the sense that it doesn’t begin from or seek to develop discussions of the question by others outside the community of individuals involved in the enquiry, while academic philosophy begins from and with the thoughts of other people in the recent or distant past who have discussed the question at issue. This also provides us with the beginnings of an account of the connection between what university students of philosophy study and doing philosophy.

Experienced teachers who conduct P4C recognise that asking the really “big” questions in an enquiry, such as “What is the relationship between mind and body?”, can lead to a sense of frustration. So much needs clarifying, so many areas need laying out and taking in turn, that a narrower question can often produce a better enquiry. There’s only an hour to discuss the topic, perhaps it will be followed up with another hour next week.

But imagine now doing enquiries for three or four hours a day, five days a week, thirty-six weeks a year for ten years. Of course, there are plenty of break out sessions, but the style of engagement with the question – the thinking, analysing, creating solutions and new points of view – continues. Imagine that over these ten years, you work with just one question, a “big” question perhaps, but still just one question. This is enough time to have laid out the areas, surveyed the different possible approaches, uncovered the assumptions and implications, and created new arguments favouring one position over another.

This, I want to argue, is similar to what academic philosophers do. And as a result of spending so long on the question, when things go well, the philosopher understands the many, many

different ways to analyse the question and the many possible answers it might receive. When she publishes her favoured analysis and her favoured answer – or more usually, a contribution towards an answer – other philosophers (‘the philosophical community’, we could say) take note. Her thought represents an effort and hopefully an insight. Her writing is a product of the process of enquiry she has undertaken. If I now want to think about the same question, I might be saved from certain errors of logic or confusion or oversight, if I take note of the work that she has already done.

Though controversial, we might usefully say that academic philosophy is a practice of enquiry that works with the products of that enquiry. Philosophy in universities is often described as a “continuing conversation” with the famous dead. (This cannot be exactly right, not least because the cultural significance and context of the views changes. But set that aside.) As in any conversation, we must understand what has been said (history of philosophy) and contribute our thoughts in response. To *join* a conversation that already exists, to work with the products of an ongoing enquiry, there is much that will need to be learned. And this forms the basis of what university students of philosophy study.

There are many arguments regarding how to think about any particular philosophical question (does it make sense? what *kind* of answer can we give? what *is* the answer? and so on) that have been developed by people who spent years thinking about it. It is unlikely, though of course not impossible, that anyone coming to the question for the first time will have as great an insight. If I start again with the question, not being acquainted with what philosophers have said, it might seem to people who have this familiarity that I’m trying to reinvent the wheel. As Richard Rorty has commented, academic philosophers know all the moves in the argument, the options, the implications, the strengths and weaknesses. To avoid reinventing the wheel, philosophy in universities is partly a matter of teaching – teaching the products of previous enquiries, so that students can join a conversation, not just start one of their own. But we may question whether they are, in fact, being provided with the right tools for the job – whether either the knowledge base or the method is as it needs to be to achieve the aims of philosophy.

P4C enquiries don’t start from existing philosophical theories, and it is reasonable to doubt whether (young) school children have the capacity for the highly abstract thought and complex logical moves that comprise philosophy-the-product. After all, academic philosophy is too abstract for most adults as well! But it is a mistake to conclude, on the basis of this, that the children are engaged in philosophical enquiry. For *all* philosophy starts from and depends on upon philosophizing, rather than the products of philosophizing. Perhaps this is something that university teaching needs to bear in mind to rebalance the teaching of technical critical skills that Williams describes and the practice of doing philosophy on a course that bears that name.

Some people object that what the children do is not philosophizing because they frequently do not address philosophical questions. Many of the questions children raise in P4C enquiries are sociological, or psychological, or political, or a matter of “folk wisdom”. How can thinking about these questions really be “philosophizing”? But the objection makes two mistakes. First, to make sense of our lives requires us to practice philosophy “impurely”, drawing on other disciplines. Second, it misunderstands how, in P4C, the question chosen relates to the ensuing enquiry. It assumes that an enquiry attempts to answer, or at least discuss, the question as set (much like an undergraduate essay), and so an “unphilosophical” question will receive an “unphilosophical” discussion. But in the hands of an expert teacher, an enquiry that starts from an unphilosophical question turns to discussing those dimensions of the question (e.g. a particular concept or the implications of a particular remark which someone contributes) that encourage or even demand philosophizing. Because it is philosophizing that is being taught and practiced, the fact that the

question is not one that an academic philosopher would address is beside the point. Of course, philosophical questions will usually support philosophizing better than “unphilosophical” ones, but the latter can serve well enough in the hands of a skilled P4C teacher. The same might be said of the influence of Socrates on any conversation he joined....

So, both academic philosophy and P4C enquiries are genuine forms of philosophical enquiry, of philosophizing. But does one realise the form, exemplify the activity and its good, more fully? To think about this, we must ask what the point of philosophical enquiry is. What good is it? There is, of course, the question of truth. Philosophy remains, as it always has, dedicated to discovering the truth for its own sake about what it is to be human, our nature and situation, the ethical, aesthetic, social, political, historical, metaphysical, and epistemological dimensions of human existence and experience (to name a few). Or if, on many questions, “truth” is too bold, the virtue of understanding, of “making sense”, is unchallenged.

But this formal aim of truth is not all that philosophical enquiry aims at, in either practice or teaching. Even as the search for truth, or the attempt to make sense of one’s life, guides one’s thinking, there is the importance of engaging in philosophical enquiry whether or not one achieves these ends. In his account of the virtues of enquiry, Lipman argues for the need for attention to different types of thinking, which he names the “3 Cs”: critical, creative, and caring thinking, with a “4th C” of collaborative thinking being proposed by Roger Sutcliffe, a leading UK-based P4C practitioner, and subsequently widely accepted. By contrast, academic philosophers might instinctively put more emphasis on the first C. Yet while the others are not much discussed in print, academic philosophers know very well the importance of thinking creatively, respecting and building on the views of others (collaborative thinking), and commitments to truth and integrity (caring thinking). There are virtues in being truth-seeking, not only in thought but in how one lives. Lipman is explicit about the moral purpose of developing the 4 Cs through philosophizing, the need for education to aim at producing reasonable individuals, who think clearly and independently, while engaging with civil society and contributing to the common good. Academic philosophy, by contrast, has not explicitly concerned itself with virtues of character, rather than the intellect. And yet, ever since Plato, many canonical philosophers have often argued that the ultimate purpose of philosophy was not only to enable us to make sense of our lives, but to enable us to lead a good life, and academic philosophers today continue to take the values of philosophy as values to live by, and not merely enquire into.

A good part of the value of academic philosophical knowledge, then, derives from its deployment. It is philosophical enquiry rather than its historical products, the constant renewal of making sense rather than an encyclopedic knowledge of the historical options, that plays the more valuable role in education. In the P4C setting, such knowledge helps the teacher help her students in their enquiries. Not in the sense of holding forth to them about famous philosophical theories (that violates much of the pedagogical theory on which the method is based), but in having, in advance, a knowledge of a wide variety of possible moves in the discussion, possible answers to the question chosen, possible connections that could be made, that, through questioning and suggesting, she could enable the students to discover for themselves. Such use of philosophical knowledge can help inform, interpret and shape the enquiry along more productive lines.

The point is not, of course, limited to teachers conducting P4C. One might hope that philosophy students can go on, in their contributions to society whatever form that takes, and indeed in their dinner conversations, to raise the standard of philosophical enquiry with those around them. Yet we should not be too easily optimistic about this. First, we can ask how

successfully the current teaching of academic philosophy imparts such knowledge, at least in any form that is flexible enough to help in a live conversation or enquiry. In particular, we may question whether the development of the 4 Cs of thinking is sufficiently encouraged to enable students to take full advantage of such knowledge in their lives. Second, Williams suggests that what is taught is *not enough* to help one fully engage in the really central task of philosophy, viz. making sense of ourselves. It is too isolated; and as a result, we may well conclude, philosophy is littered with answers and ideas – about ethics or human psychology – that are insufficiently tied to human reality.

Of course, this is not to say that the academic study of philosophy fails to contribute anything at all. It is not sufficient to point someone towards, or prepare them for, the task of doing philosophy; but that does not mean that it contributes nothing. Not only does it alert students to a range of possibilities for being human, academic philosophy starts, or at least contributes to, the process by which students may come to understand what philosophy really is by introducing students to philosophers (dead or alive), and if they are lucky, to philosophers who are engaged on the central task of philosophy as Williams understands it.

There are no easy answers in educating oneself or others in the practice of philosophical enquiry. Above all, doing philosophy well is challenging, both intellectually and emotionally; and therefore so is enabling others to do philosophy well. If Williams is right that this requires more than philosophy, and if P4C, in its aims, methodology, and the explicit recognition and development of all 4 Cs, offers an insight into a way of conducting philosophical enquiry, then there is something that the teaching of philosophy in universities can learn from both P4C and the “impure” practice of philosophy to better equip students with the ability to philosophize.