SITUATED RELATIONSHIP AND PHILOSOPHICAL PRAXIS

Anna Maria Carpentieri
Leonardo Da Vinci Public High School, Italy
Translated by: Principato Antonino

Abstract

The paper is about the connotations of the philosophical novel. It explores the question of whether and how the philosophical novel can become functional model for philosophical praxis. I argue that the philosophical novel is a tool for activating a relational process whereby the concept of "situated relationship" becomes clear and is enhanced in conjunction with the activation of philosophical praxis. A "situated relationship" is identified as a relational practice which is contextualized and exerted in and between thinking, language and action, within the framework of an educational process which becomes a dialogue-oriented research through relational networks. This form of thinking is not only Logos, but also Pathos and Ethos, inasmuch as the interconnection of thinking, language, meaning and behavior is made manifest, recognized and practiced in thinking and with thinking. By fostering awareness of the cognitive and affective dimensions, this form of thinking can extend such awareness to the relational dimension, interpersonal and intrapersonal, within a constant circular form of complementarity.

Key Words: Situated Relationship, Narrative Context, Near, Far, Meta-relational

Relación situacional y práctica filosófica

Resumen:

Este trabajo explora la cuestión de si las novelas filosóficas pueden llegar a ser un modelo funcional para la praxis filosófica. Argumento que la novela filosófica es una herramienta para la activación de un proceso relacional mediante el concepto "relación situada". Una "relación situada" es una práctica relacional, la cual es contextualizada y ejercida en y entre el pensamiento, el lenguaje y la acción en el marco de un proceso educativo que se convierte en un diálogo orientado a la investigación a través de redes relacionales. Esta forma de pensar no sólo es Logos, sino también Pathos y Ethos en la medida que la interconexión de pensamiento, lenguaje, significado y comportamiento se hace manifiesta, reconocida y practicada en y con el pensamiento. Mediante el fomento de la toma de conciencia de las dimensiones cognitivas y afectivas, esta forma de pensamiento puede extender esa consciencia a una dimensión relacional interpersonal e intrapersonal dentro de una forma circular constante de complementariedad.

Palabras Llave: Relación situada, Novela filosófica, Práctica filosófica.

Relação situacional e prática filosófica

Resumo:
Este trabalho explora a questão de saber se as novelas filosóficas podem chegar a ser um modelo funcional para a praxis filosófica. Argumento que a novela filosófica é uma ferramenta para a ativação de um processo relacional mediante o conceito de "relação situada". Uma "relação situada" é uma prática relacional, a qual é contextualizada e exercida em e entre o pensamento, a linguagem e a ação no âmbito de um processo educativo que se converte em um diálogo orientado para a inversigação atravès de redes relacionais. Essa forma de pensar não somente é Logos, senão também Patohos e Ethos na medida em que a interconexão de pensamento, linguagem, significado e comportamento se faz manifesta, reconhecida e praticada em e com o pensamento. Mediante o fomento da tomada de consciência das dimensões cognitivas e afetivas, essa forma de pensamento pode extender essa consciência a uma dimensão relacional interpessoal e intrapessoal dentro de uma forma circular constante de complementaridade.

Palavras-chave: Relação situada, Novela Folosófica, Prática filosófica.

How Philosophical Stories Model Philosophical Praxis

In *Philosophy & the Young Child*, Gareth B. Matthews opens his chapter, titled, "Stories", with the interesting consideration that it is neither psychologists, nor educators (even world-famous ones), who discover children's natural philosophical potential. Rather, it is children's story writers who do. Matthews writes, "…It is writers—at least some writers—of children's stories who have been almost the only important adults to recognize that many children are naturally intrigued by philosophical questions."[1] Analyzing some of the more popular and beloved children stories, Matthews stresses the cultivation of a philosophical mentality through these texts, inasmuch as they present specific themes which tend to pose philosophical questions. For instance, when it comes to philosophical topics, Matthews, referencing one such story, says, "The philosophical themes that emerge in *The Bear That Wasn't* thus include at least these four: dreaming and skepticism; being and non being; appearance and reality; and the foundations of knowledge."[2] He then adds, "But its style, which I call 'philosophical whimsy', consists in raising, wryly, a host of basic epistemological and metaphysical questions familiar to students of philosophy."[3]

These considerations raise some obvious questions: Why does the story seem most suitable for gathering these suggestions? In other words, what reasons could justify choosing this literary genre to draw philosophy closest to children and teenagers? Literary prose and poetry offer us numerous instances in which written language becomes a channel, an opportunity to ask ourselves questions, a cue to think about themes and issues related to the human being, our background, our existential doubts and perplexities.

For philosophical praxis to become some sort of functional pedagogical model, however, it is necessary that a text be a real opportunity, a real con-text in which to do

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[1] Gareth B. Matthews, *Philosophy & The Young Child* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 56.
[2] *Ibid*, 59.
[3] *Ibid*.

philosophy and a real pre-text to do philosophy from. Not only does the text need philosophical content that is identifiable and recognizable as such; it also needs some sort of philosophical matter to elaborate and problematize through procedures which are activated and subject to activation. But, why just a story?

Let us start by saying that every story has a plot which is can be considered its texture and mode of development. That is to say, the story has a structure and a thematic thread of its own. In philosophical stories and novels, structure is connoted by specific elements which are coordinated and connected to each other, and its thematic development corresponds to an articulated and outcome-oriented process. As is the case with any other narrative containing characters and contexts, philosophical stories and novels lend themselves to being dramatized (at times with the aid of other forms of language) in order to be understood and internalized fully.

In philosophical stories and novels which aim at being models of philosophical praxis, the concepts of *near* and *far* play an essential role. In order to make children and teenagers curious and to motivate them to inquire, a story or novel has to be *near* their backgrounds, to their situational and relational contexts, so as to guide them in the recognition of daily concepts and issues by drawing their attention to the seemingly obvious aspects of the world they live in and experience. In these respects, Ruffaldi, Carelli, and Nicola stress that the story is the literary form which most effectively and intentionally binds concept with experience, by placing the former, as it were, within the events themselves, which can get the child or teenager used to identifying the conceptual dimension of daily life and human existence.[4]

Whatever is *far* is to be taken to mean functional detachment. So, it can become a space, a strategy that is highly educational insomuch as it is cathartic and maieutic. In my view, when we use a philosophical story or novel, it is vital that educators be aware of the pedagogic functionality of this detachment, as well as the educational scope and purpose for which is to be recognized. Reading the stories and novels, however, causes the members of a community to be actually involved in the contexts, situations,

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[4] Enzo Ruffaldi, Piero Carelli, and Ubaldo Nicola, *Il Nuovo Pensiero Plurale* (Torino: Loescher, 2012)

thoughts, words and actions of the characters. The ensuing co-participation facilitates empathic identification processes. Empathic identification processes have a cathartic and maieutic function, inasmuch as they enable children and teenagers to express and communicate their ideas, opinions and judgments, as well as emotions and feelings related to whatever there is in the story or novel that they have experienced. They also enable the child to express and communicate his or her own self, at times even to recognize and clarify the 'other-than-oneself'. This relational context generates openness, it creates the opportunity to read and question the other-than-oneself and the other-in-oneself.

It is just such physical and mental detachment from the contingent events in which the child is immersed—as is, initially, the case with reading stories/novels—that enables the child to enact identification processes which will eventually become instruments of transference toward their own world, as he or she is now free from inhibition and pre-judgment. By then, the text will have exerted a very important function of its own, insomuch as it will have been a pre-text for the pupil's questioning and self-questioning. By fostering the pupil's empathic participation, detached narration enables greater involvement, precisely because it is difficult to start from the self, to look into oneself, to see clearly, to surface one's own opinions, judgments, emotions and/or feelings and give them to others. Starting from someone else's narrated thought can enable the pupil to arrive more easily to a narration of his/her own self which is most likely to be shared and, over time, become the practice of a narration-of-our-own in progress.

The following consists of a series of statements from children, aged six, centering on their reading of Mat Lipman's philosophical novel, *Elfie*. These offerings from students will serve to substantiate what I have suggested above—that through the philosophical novel's function of 'detached narration', children are more able to develop a self-narration around the philosophical themes in the text.

"What I Would Like to Say to Elfie" (On being and feeling stupid)

> Erika- You shouldn't think you do not know the answer.
> Noemi- You shouldn't think you're shy.
> Giorgia- You shouldn't think you're ugly.
> Simone- Don't think they'll find out about your secrets.
> Adriana and Daniel- Don't think you're stupid.
>
> Facilitator- In your opinion, do you believe Elfie thinks she's stupid?
>
> Annalisa- Yes, because she thinks she knows nothing.
> Simone- Because she's not like Sofia.
> Sara- Because she thinks she knows nothing.
>
> Facilitator- Do you think Elfie is stupid or feels stupid?
>
> All Pupils- She feels stupid.
>
> Facilitator- What is the difference between being stupid and feeling stupid?
>
> Annalisa- "Elfie feels stupid": she's not stupid; she just feels stupid.
>   "Elfie is stupid" means she *is* stupid.
>
> Facilitator- Who agrees with Annalisa?
>
> All pupils in the class agree with her.
>
> Facilitator- Do we sometimes feel like Elfie? Who feels like Elfie?
>
> All pupils raise their hands and admit that, at times, or often, they feel like Elfie, including the Facilitator.

At the outset, the children were somewhat perplexed and silent upon listening to passages from *Elfie*; however, little by little, they learned to contribute and participate more and more actively. Some of them showed difficulties expressing their ideas and opinions. Later on, as they became more familiar with Elfie, a quiet, shy and insecure character from the novel, the students managed to discuss and inquire with each other.

By offering Elfie advice and suggestions, the pupils would then talk on their own behalf with their classmates. As a result, their self-esteem and self-knowledge increased considerably. At the conclusion of this particular session, when children were asked what the reading had meant to them, they answered as follows:

Federica- I felt quite well with that book.
Luca- I'd like to go on with that book.
Chiara- I learned many things when Elfie said she felt stupid.
Noemi– I have learned that Elfie isn't stupid.
Erika- We ask questions - playing with questions is so much fun.
Roberto- I work and have great fun.
Luca- I have learned to talk more.
Andrea- I have learned to listen.
Adriana- I like Elfie because she tells about herself.

It is clear from this session that children began to get used to expressing their own ideas in a "democratic" atmosphere; that is to say, engaging the text and their own ideas in an environment of mutual respect. They participated more and more actively in the discussion and recognized the problematic aspects of their own experiences, thus learning to ask themselves questions and to compare and share with each other. They began to take initial steps on toward reinforcing their language and meanings, as well as developing their thinking and judgment making skills.

How P4C Novels Represent Philosophical Formative Models

Within an educational framework, a story or novel that aims to be a model of philosophical praxis should feature a certain philosophical and psycho-pedagogical depth. It should also be a means to achieve educational objectives, thus becoming both a tool and a process. As such, this type of narration should be a mode of thinking translated into narrative – an opportunity for evoking, recounting, and self-recounting. This narrative must be shared, participated with, enlivened, because it is related to the self and the other-than-self, to the others in community and to the world at large, to the experience made and the experience to make. Narrative becomes a model of philosophical praxis when it hosts and welcomes a situated relationship, when it nurtures, and allows the nurturing of, relational praxis. Narrative becomes a functional educational paradigm when it becomes the time and place for possible situated, contextualized and exerted relationship.

As such, the philosophical story and novel becomes a terrain for relationship, one that represents a protected space in which the relationship can safely grow, one that

features a certain time for trying, possibly practicing and transferring related experience into actual experience. This relationship is a connection, a liaison to be built and for building, both means and end, structure and process, investigative dialogue, for every single member of and for the community, some sort of continuous and continual interaction.

In this manner, narrative will induct and conduct a single and collective thinking process which can generate a concurrently-shared knowledge structure. This collectively-built knowledge is set in a narrative context that is both mental and physical, temporal and social, a narrative context which is experienced through interpersonal and intrapersonal relational praxis. Thus, narration is characterized by a relationship which is situated in and between thinking, language and action, a relationship which is exerted within the specificity of the aforementioned dimensions and their complementary interconnections by all members of an inquiring community. A philosophical praxis that features a certain concern for situated relationship fosters and enhances the pupil's participated thinking and language, thus stimulating his or her awareness of the process.

In my view, after using P4C curriculum programs with children and teenagers, planning and fostering the growth of an inquiring community has shown that P4C novels stimulate the development of philosophical praxis because they are models of situated relationship in many respects and dimensions. Above all, the pedagogical and philosophical force of these novels are the effect of Lipman's intentions, as well as of those, like Ann Sharp, who sought to develop texts that are adaptable to the cultures in which they are practised—philosophical novels that could be contextualized, associated to the various conditions and contexts of situation in which they will be read and inquired into by the children and teenagers involved.

In an interview with Marina Santi, Lipman stresses the importance of translating the P4C novels and the associated curriculum into one's local culture, so that readers can easily recognize it as familiar, as something they have already experienced:

> The main characters of the stories are familiar characters the reader can identify himself/herself in; they are not "alien" characters. Harry, Lisa will then become "local" children, speaking the local language and

doing things that get them closer to the local people. The program must be set and contextualized, so that Spanish children have their own Spanish books and Italian children their own Italian books. At the same time, though, the children must recognize universal features in the characters and the general nature of the problems they are faced with.[5]

In this way, philosophical novels are to be culture-related and in line with the universal and extendable idea that philosophy acquires thinking as subject matter and research method. Thus, thinking is a dialogue-structured research process, i.e. a network of relations to be recognized, made manifest and practiced together through dialogue, as is the case with curriculum novels and the processes they stimulate in the inquiring communities that use them. In the same interview, Lipman places great emphasis on the relational in philosophical praxis:

When children do philosophy, we want them to learn to think "in networks", in a systemic manner, through organized relational areas, not in fragmented disarticulated "bits and pieces"! If this idea of thinking is at the heart of Philosophy for Children, then students can develop their attitudes toward "relational" thinking. In this manner, it is the thinking process itself which can be conceived of as relational dynamics.[6]

Also, in *Thinking in Education*, Lipman characterizes the relational dynamics of thinking when he suggests that, "thinking is a process of finding or making connections and disjunctions…The generic term for connections and disjunctions is relationships…each relationship, when discovered or invented, is a meaning, and great orders or systems of relationships constitute great bodies of meaning."[7] In this way, thinking stands a form of relational process, inasmuch as it is a dialogical dynamics between relation and meaning.

When describing the more precise relation between reflexive thinking and dialogue, Lipman states the following:

The common assumption is that reflection generates dialogue, when, in fact, it is dialogue that generates reflection. Very often, when people

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[5] Marina Santi, "Conversazione con Matthew Lipman," in Antonio Cosentino (ed.), *Filosofia e Formazione* (Napoli: Liguori, 2006).

[6] *Ibid*.

[7] Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 16.

> engage in dialogue with one another, they are compelled to reflect, to concentrate, to consider alternatives, to listen closely, to give careful attention to definitions and meanings, to recognize previously unthought-of options, and in general to perform a vast number of mental activities that they might not have engaged in had the conversation never occurred…we pick up from the audible dialogue the ways in which people draw inferences, identify assumptions, challenge one another for reasons, and engage in critical intellectual interactions with one another.[8]

Lipman indicates the interconnection between mental acts and language acts as well as between these and the practice of the corresponding mental operations, between thinking skills and types of reasoning, between reasoning, concepts, criteria and judgments. Moreover, he identifies a close relation between thinking, language and meanings, and urges us to recognize the importance of their interdependence in a form of philosophical praxis which starts from the texts and reaches as far as the actual backgrounds and experiences of the members of the inquiry community involved.

Ann Sharp also speaks of the link between thinking, language and silence, by exemplifying Bruno, one of the characters in "Pixie". Bruno's silence is groaning with words, which stay unsaid until his interpersonal and intrapersonal relation changes, until the relation with his context is modified. Sharp states:

> Another way of looking at the meaning of the "Pixie" story is to interpret it as a story of self-investigating language. Bruno (silence) comes to see himself in his relation with Pixie (speech) as a person with a voice, who has something to say and knows how to say it in such a way that the others can take him seriously. The class community creates a non-oppressive egalitarian and considerate context where Bruno carries out his research on language itself, on its relationship with thought, with the world and, finally, with himself.[9]

In Lipman's novels, the thinking-dialogue process characterizing the protagonists and characters develops in contexts of relation between instances of logos, which remains as such, or becomes pathos and ethos. Stimulated philosophical praxis yields thinking situations generating cognitive and affective, emotional and value-based

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[8] Matthew Lipman, Ann Margaret Sharp, and Frederick S. Oscanyan, *Philosophy in the Classroom*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 22.

[9] Ann Sharp, "Silenzio e Parole in Pixie," *Filosofia e Formazione*, 257-58.

backgrounds which constantly intersect, thus developing and enhancing the pupil's thinking, speech and behavior according to his or her own experiences. In this manner, the multi-dimensional nature of thinking can be cultivated in its critical, creative, emotional and value-based aspects and in the relations characterizing it. Ann Sharp often reminds us that an inquiry community can become a place for educating emotions, as well as the educational value of training pupils to identify their own emotions by investigating them. Children and teenagers must be trained to develop their curiosity toward emotional life, as well as to become aware of the relation between emotions and judgments.

By way of conclusion, I think it is important to point out Lipman's insistence on orienting educators toward a path of creativity, even in the realm of philosophical stories for children and teenagers. Inasmuch as they are models, philosophical novels can help generate other novels. What is essential here, however, is the novel's function as stimulus for and orientation toward the formation of an inquiry community—a community of philosophical dialogue which writes not only *my* story or *your* story, but also *our* story, within a mode of research and action that translates into relational interpersonal and intrapersonal practice; a practice which is exerted within the person and between persons, in a dynamic relationship with self, others, and the world, by co-building a form of knowledge which culminates in action, with a view to a form of being which becomes training and getting trained through a process of self-transformation.

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