

## AN APPROACH TO “PHILOSOPHIZING” DISCUSSION

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### Abstract

This paper responds to the concern that many novice Philosophy for Children facilitators have about how to ensure that students' discussion is philosophical. Two ways of addressing this concern are outlined, and the second of these is identified as the approach my method builds upon. In particular, I focus on those agenda-setting questions students pose that might be called “psychological speculation” questions and offer a range of moves for proceeding from those into more centrally philosophical discussion. The approach draws on familiarity with traditional areas of philosophy, and shows the practical everyday use for facilitators of such familiarity. Those who offer professional development in Philosophy for Children may find this approach a useful one to introduce in introductory or follow-up workshops, and novice facilitators will find enough guidance here to be able to apply these moves in their practice. A discussion of the distinction and the relationship between philosophical and empirical questions is undertaken, in passing, and a suggestion put forward for assisting novice P4C facilitators to discover their own abilities to find groups of related philosophical questions. Practical examples of the moves in my approach are provided, and a guide for building on them is offered. Finally, a connection is drawn between the questions that flow from traditional academic areas of philosophy and the idea of philosophy as ‘love of wisdom’.

Key words: philosophy for children, facilitation, teacher training, philosophical, questions

### Uma aproximação para “filosofar” a discussão

#### Resumo

Este artigo responde ao interesse que muitos novos facilitadores de Filosofia para Crianças têm a respeito de como assegurar que uma discussão dos alunos seja filosófica. Duas maneiras de encaminhar esta questão são destacadas, e a segunda delas é identificada como a abordagem sobre a qual meu método se baseia. Particularmente, eu enfoco as questões prioritárias apresentadas pelos alunos que poderiam ser consideradas dúvidas de “indagação psicológica” e ofereço variados desdobramentos para conduzir essas dúvidas a uma discussão essencialmente filosófica. O método se baseia na familiaridade com áreas tradicionais da filosofia, e mostra a prática cotidiana para facilitadores com tal familiaridade. Aqueles que trabalham com desenvolvimento profissional em Filosofia para Crianças podem achar esta abordagem útil para iniciar ou desenvolver oficinas, e os novos

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facilitadores encontrarão aqui orientação suficiente para serem capazes de aplicar estes desdobramentos na sua prática. A discussão sobre a distinção e o vínculo entre questões filosóficas e empíricas está colocada, brevemente, e uma proposta é direcionada para auxiliar novos facilitadores de FpC a descobrir suas próprias habilidades para encontrar grupos de questões filosóficas relacionadas. Exemplos práticos de desdobramentos no meu método são fornecidos, e um guia para tê-los como base é apresentado. Finalmente, é delineada uma relação entre as questões que surgem de áreas acadêmicas tradicionais da filosofia e a ideia de filosofia como “amor à sabedoria”.

Palavras-chave: Filosofia para crianças; facilitação; formação de professores; perguntas filosóficas

### **Una aproximación a “Filosofar” la discusión**

Resumen:

Este trabajo responde a la preocupación que muchos coordinadores novatos del programa de Filosofía para Niños tienen sobre cómo asegurar que las discusiones de los estudiantes sean filosóficas. Se describen dos formas de abordar esta preocupación, la segunda de ellas es el enfoque sobre la que se basa mi propuesta. En particular me centro en la agenda de preguntas realizada por los estudiantes que podría ser llamada de preguntas de “especulación psicológica” y ofrece una gama de movimientos para proceder a partir de aquellas más importantes para la discusión filosófica. El método se basa en la familiaridad con las áreas tradicionales de la filosofía y muestra el uso de esa familiaridad en la práctica cotidiana de los coordinadores. Aquellos que ofrecen un desarrollo profesional en Filosofía para Niños pueden encontrar en este enfoque una aproximación útil a los talleres introductorios y los coordinadores novatos encontrarán una guía adecuada que les permitirá aplicar estos movimientos en su práctica. Se lleva a cabo una discusión de la distinción y la relación entre preguntas filosóficas y empíricas, de paso, se realiza una sugerencia para ayudar a los coordinadores novatos del programa para que puedan usar sus propias habilidades para encontrar grupos de preguntas filosóficas relacionadas. Mi método ofrece ejemplos prácticos y una guía para actuar a partir de ellos. Por último se presenta una conexión entre las preguntas que se derivan de las áreas tradicionales de la filosofía académica y la idea de la filosofía como “amor a la sabiduría”.

Palabras clave: Filosofía para Niños, coordinación, capacitación de profesores, preguntas filosófica.

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A common concern for novice facilitators of philosophical inquiry with school students is whether the discussion they are having is indeed philosophical. And a common aim for those involved in providing professional development is to find ways in which to address this concern. This paper<sup>2</sup> offers a simple practical approach for doing this, and, I hope, adds another useful strategy for Philosophy for Children trainers to put in their tool-boxes. The idea behind the approach I shall propose is that a wide range of powerful “philosophizing” questions can be generated from a fairly basic understanding of the traditional areas of philosophy.

The novices’ question “How do I know if we are doing philosophy?” can be addressed in at least two ways. The first is by offering techniques for encouraging participants in the community of inquiry to pose initial, agenda-setting questions that are clearly philosophical. Activities such as Cam’s Question Quadrant<sup>3</sup> work to heighten students’ (and facilitators’) awareness of different types of questions, and help them to identify and pose philosophical questions. These questions fall in the fourth sector of the quadrant, the “Inquiry” quadrant, where questions are open, and “intellectual” (in contrast to those that are “textual” or based on the text). Cam’s first two examples: “Is it important to have lifelong friendships?” and “Can something last even longer than forever?” will very likely lead to philosophical discussion. The Question Quadrant has proved to be a powerful and useful strategy for both facilitators and students. It is interesting to note that philosophical discussion can also come from questions outside the fourth quadrant. In particular, questions that are open and textual can sometimes lead very naturally to philosophical discussion, for example “Should Goldilocks have eaten the bears’ porridge?” is clearly on its way to a discussion of the ethics of stealing. More strikingly, philosophical inquiry can arise from the oddest

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<sup>2</sup> This paper contains, explains, and sets in context just the first tool presented in a practical workshop, entitled “How to bring more richness and rigour into philosophical inquiry – whatever the topic, on the fly.” That workshop was presented at the 15<sup>th</sup> ICPIC Conference in Vancouver, July 2015. My thanks to the participants in that workshop, and to the students, teachers and P4C colleagues I have worked with, who have helped me extend and refine my practice. Special thanks also to my late colleague, collaborator and friend, Jonathan McKeown-Green.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Cam, *20 Thinking Tools*, Melbourne: ACER Press, 2006. Pp. 32-36.

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questions, if the facilitator has a sense of the possible philosophical pathway an inquiry take - I once had an astounding discussion about the philosophy of language with six year olds, which grew from the seemingly unpromising question “How did Wilfred get the egg out from under the hen?” after one child suggested that Wilfred *ask* the hen...

The second way to address the novices’ question, then, is to provide techniques for encouraging philosophical discussion when the possibilities for it arise, even if the original question is not philosophical. Many non-philosophical questions raise philosophical issues, and equipping facilitators to help students detect and explore these is clearly a worthwhile aim, and one that I hope to serve in this paper.

With any group of students new to philosophical inquiry, a range of philosophical and non-philosophical questions can be expected in response to stimulus stories, picture books, images, film clips etc. Among these are the ones I want to focus on here. I think of them as “psychological speculation” questions, and they include: “Why is Miranda so bossy with Pixie?”, “Why do people lie?”, “Why is Susie a bully?”, and “How did Henare choose what to treasure?”. These are important questions; they are questions we need to think about if we are grappling with personal and social relationships, which are so much the stuff of life. And if we think of philosophy as “love of wisdom”, then asking and answering these questions seems very much part of philosophy. Part of wisdom surely consists in understanding others, their motivations and their likely responses to situations and to fellow humans (and fellow animals), and in empathising with them. Nevertheless, these questions may not be fruitful ones to pursue for long in a community of inquiry. If they are questions about fictional characters, then inquiry will be limited to what can be inferred from the text, and to what Cam calls “literary speculation”<sup>4</sup>. If they are questions about real people – if Susie and Henare are classmates, or community members the class has heard about – then these questions are empirical questions. There is a fact of the matter, and there are experts who, at least in principle, can give us the answers. Susie and

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

Help themselves, or perhaps their families, friends or counsellors, can provide the answer. And the same is true of the more general forms of these questions: “Why do people bully?”, “Why do people lie?” and “How do we choose what we treasure?” - these are all empirical questions, properly the provenance of psychologists and sociologists.<sup>5</sup> However, having said this, we might still think that these empirical questions are appropriate topics to explore with those who do not have access to the empirical studies, and that children might inquire into them perhaps in the same way that the ancient Greeks philosophized about the construction of the physical world. In the absence of the tools of science, these questions are open, and the answers are contestable. But they are still empirical questions, and the progress that can be made on answering them, just by students thinking together, will be limited.

Of course, the philosophical and the empirical are, in the best inquiries, intertwined. Philosophical inquiry without reference to experience and empirical research results in unhelpfully abstract discussion, and in conditional conclusions at best, such as: “If we have good reason to think that a tax on sugary foods might reduce their consumption, and if we have evidence that sugar consumption is harmful to human health, then we are morally obliged to lobby for such a tax”. The philosophical work supporting this conclusion is in formulating and defending an argument for moral obligations on individuals to lobby for measures affecting the health of the community and for not leaving these matters to the personal choice of each community member. But vital though this philosophical task is, (and nearly always missing from public debate) the argument is incomplete without the missing facts.

Looking at the other side of this coin, empirical inquiry without philosophical questioning is also less than ideal. Without examining the basic assumptions, central concepts and ethically loaded consequences of empirical research, empirical inquiry remains uncritical and unreflective. Philosophical and

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that if these questions are offered for categorisation in a Question quadrant activity, there is sometimes debate about whether these are open or closed questions. This is especially likely to happen if the students have already grasped that questions can be closed even if we don't know the answers to them, and perhaps might never know them. (Consider: “How many planets in our galaxy have intelligent life on them? and “What was Confucius wearing when he wrote the last line of the Analects?”).

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empirical inquiry, then, are strongly linked. But they are also distinct, and it is important that students’ communities of inquiry have as their main focus philosophical questions and issues, which cannot be answered solely by reference to the facts, but which individuals and societies must settle for themselves, through critical, collaborative endeavour.

What happens in a community of inquiry when “psychological speculation” questions are discussed? Usually, students will speculate about possible motivations, and then the inquiry simply grinds to a halt. Sometimes, if the question is about behaviour such as bullying, which members of the class may have engaged in, discomfort can develop, and moreover the teacher/facilitator might find it hard to keep her or his opinions out of the discussion, given what is generally expected that teachers should do to address and reduce bullying behaviour.<sup>6</sup> Often, if the question calls for sharing of personal values and experiences, as does: “How do we choose what we treasure?”, the resulting discussion will lack a critical edge, as, perhaps quite rightly, it seems odd to raise challenges and explore disagreements about personal choices in such matters. What happens then, is that robust critical philosophical inquiry does not take place. So, what can the facilitator do?

First, the original question must be honoured, by taking it seriously, and encouraging the students to answer it as well as they can. It is a standard feature of the community of inquiry that all student questions are so honoured, and that student engagement is thus preserved. But once this is achieved, the discussion can be moved into more philosophical territory.

What then is a philosophical discussion, and how can we move into one? Splitter and Sharp characterise the markers of philosophical discussion as follows:

- a) Using the tools of inquiry. (e.g. Giving reasons, clarifying, offering counter examples, formulating and testing criteria...)

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<sup>6</sup> Teachers often ask if there are P4C resources on bullying, thinking that philosophical discussion might be effective in addressing this behaviour. Given the success that P4C has in reducing bullying, just as an effect of engaging in communities of inquiry (see “Philosophy for Children’: a systematic review”, S Trickey & K J Topping Research Papers in Education Vol. 19, No 3, Sept 2004), it seems to me that there is no need to court the possible dangers of addressing this topic directly in a P4C session. Identifying, blaming and castigating purported bullies are possible and unhelpful outcomes. Additionally, engagement in inquiry can be reduced when students know or suspect that there is answer that they are supposed to come to.

- b) Focusing on common, central and contestable concepts
- c) Making meaning – making sense of what is puzzling, confusing, ambiguous or problematic<sup>7</sup>

This is a helpful characterisation, which focuses on three aspects of philosophical inquiry that are at the heart of the Philosophy for Children movement. I would like to add to these by suggesting that reference to some of the traditional areas of academic philosophy, and the questions that flow from these areas, can provide practical guidance for novice facilitators, and interestingly, connect also with the less academic conception of philosophy as “love of wisdom”.

Introducing the areas of philosophy to those new to the discipline is not difficult. If the areas are described in ordinary terms (How do we know?) before the formal terms (Epistemology) are introduced, and if examples are given of the classic questions (When are we justified in claiming that we know something? What makes a statement true?) as well as more everyday questions (Can you be mistaken about whether you are in love?). If practical activities are also used, such as those involving categorising questions into different areas of philosophy, then the stage is set for helping the novice facilitator move discussion into more philosophical areas.

Let's take the question: “Why do people lie?” Students will begin by putting forward possible motivations...

To get out of trouble

To protect someone you care about

To avoid embarrassment

Because someone is preparing a surprise

Because they are a pathological liar<sup>8</sup>

Etc..

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<sup>7</sup> Splitter and Sharp, *Teaching for Better Thinking*, Melbourne: ACER Press, 1995, pp. 130-132.

<sup>8</sup> If you use this sample question in a workshop, give yourself permission to put in “pathological liar”, even if the participants don't suggest it, as it lends itself so nicely to the “Go logical” move.

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And there the discussion dries up. So what now? Use some of the areas of philosophy to suggest substantive questions to invite the students into more philosophical territory! Here is how it is done.

*Go ethical*

Invite inquiry into values, right and wrong, good and bad... Move from what might be the case, to whether it SHOULD be. For example:

Are these reasons good reasons to lie?

Is that reason always a good reason to lie? Why or why not? If it depends, what does it depend on?

Is lying always wrong? What makes it wrong? Could there be times when it is good to lie?

Is lying ever necessary? Under what circumstances?

*Go conceptual*

Invite inquiry into the contestable concepts in the original question. For example:

What does “lie” mean?

Could lying be done without speaking?

Could someone lie by accident?

Is there a difference between a trick and a lie? What is it?

Between a lie and a white lie? Between a lie and a story?

*Go epistemological*

Invite inquiry into knowledge, evidence, justifiable belief... Move from what might be the case to how we might prove that it is. For example:

How could we test if this is the reason why someone lied?

What would count as evidence that this was the reason?

This leads naturally to...



### *Go logical*

Invite inquiry into the strength of the argument, and whether enough supporting statements have been provided to make the conclusion true, or highly probable. Move from exploring the content of the argument to assessing the form of the argument. For example:

Is there anything more we would need to know to be justified in saying we know why someone lied?

Is that now enough to support the conclusion?

### *Go phenomenological*

Invite inquiry into the common grounding experiences of human life. Move from looking for explanations of individual conduct or general human tendencies to exploring how these possibilities form part of the conditions of human life that we must all deal with. For example:

What would life be like if people lied all the time?

What would life be like if they never lied?

How is our experience of life affected by the possibility that people can lie?

The discussion that typically flows from these invitations will be characterised by greater philosophical richness, depth and rigour and will result in a greater sense of satisfaction with the inquiry. Of course, not every one, or even many, of these invitations would be offered by the facilitator, who, after the offering the students a new pathway of inquiry, should follow where it goes, for as long as the students find it fruitful. Once inquiry has been stimulated by one of these substantive questions, the facilitator will naturally follow up with appropriate procedural questions, to encourage more careful thinking, such as: "What reasons do we have for thinking (that is what would happen if people always lied)?", "What assumptions might we be making (about how people respond to surprises)?", and the ever-useful: "What would someone say if they disagreed with what we have said so far?". Although the approach I am offering focuses on the facilitator increasing their ability to ask substantive philosophical questions, this will not lead to sustained inquiry unless procedural questions are

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also asked at appropriate points. Without these, inquiry turns into a kind of philosophical “table tennis” with genuinely philosophical ideas flying backwards and forwards, but with no careful thinking and reasoning taking place.

Note that the area of Metaphysics has been left out above – this is because not every starter question will lend itself to being explored by questions prompted by every area of philosophy. Coming up with these questions, especially on the fly, takes a bit of practice, and while there are a few that can be used for almost any question or topic, such as “What does ‘x’ mean?”, and the questions under “Go logical”, most will have to be formulated in relation to the topic at hand.

Some general advice can be offered to novice facilitators on how to formulate these questions, and here I offer a rough sample, that might be built on, and adapted to be age-appropriate.

- When formulating conceptual questions, use words such as: criteria, counts as, means, central case/clear case, borderline case/less clear case, different from, similar to, connected to, necessary/needed for, sufficient/enough for.
- When formulating metaphysical questions, use words such as: real, exist, possible, category, cause, object, property/feature, capacity/ability.
- When formulating ethical questions, use words such as: value, should, ought, good, bad, right, wrong, acceptable, required, important, desirable, necessary, rule, character, consequence, relationship, legality, entitled, respect.
- When formulating epistemological questions, use words such as: know, perceive, understand, evidence, certainty/being sure, truth, doubt, belief, justification, mistake.
- When formulating phenomenological questions, use phrases such as: human experience, experience of life, effect on life.

Let’s try this with some more of our sample psychological speculation questions:

*“Why is Miranda so bossy with Pixie?”* can lead to: “What does it mean to be bossy?”, “What are some clear and less clear cases of being bossy?”, “Could we be

mistaken when we think someone is bossy?", "What's good, and what's bad, about being bossy?", "Are there people who are entitled to be bossy?".

"*Why is Susie a bully?*" can lead to: "Is hitting someone in the playground enough to make you a bully?", "If someone feels bullied, is the person who makes them feel that way necessarily a bully?".<sup>9</sup>

"*How did Henare choose what to treasure?*" can lead to "What does it mean to treasure something?", "Are there things we should treasure, or shouldn't treasure?", "Do only humans have the capacity to treasure things?", "How does the fact that humans treasure things affect human life?".

Although in this paper I have focussed on using these questions to move from psychological inquiry to philosophical inquiry, I hope it is clear that they can also be used in relation to many other kinds of non-philosophical questions. Moreover, novice facilitators can also be encouraged to use this approach to explore the different philosophical issues that might be connected to questions that are already straight forwardly ethical, epistemological etc. Most teachers, when offered a question categorisation activity, as suggested above, are delighted to discover that they have the ability to identify not just a particular type of philosophical question, but also to see those others that are connected to it. If we ask what kind of philosophical question this one is: "Is it OK to disapprove of another culture's practices?", then, in my experience, many novices will not only see that this is an ethical question, but will also wonder if it might not also be epistemological, or conceptual, or even empirical. This wondering should not be seen as a failure to properly categorise, but as evidence of a nascent awareness that each philosophical question suggests and leads to a range of other important and related philosophical questions, such as: "What does 'culture' mean?", "Are there different degrees of 'OK-ness'?", "Can we ever know enough about another culture to be justified in approving or disapproving of it?", "Under what conditions might we be justified in claiming that we do know enough about a

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<sup>9</sup> When the topic of bullying is raised by a student, my tendency is to deal with the concept of bullying, rather than the ethical evaluation of the practice. By doing this, it is much easier to stay in the area of the contestable, and to stay away from a situation where counseling is more appropriate than philosophical inquiry. But others may be more expert than me at walking this line, or employing the relevant skills.

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culture to judge it?” and to relevant empirical questions, such as: “What kinds of cultural practices do people in fact disapprove of?”.

Finally, how do these questions that “philosophize the discussion” connect to the idea that philosophy is love of wisdom? I acknowledged before that psychological speculation questions were part of a search for wisdom about our fellow humans and their motivations and responses, and about relationships. Now we can see how the questions that flow from the traditional academic areas of philosophy contribute importantly to this endeavour. For surely an important ingredient of wisdom about others is attention to the epistemological, conceptual and ethical issues which permeate our thinking about others. The wise person examines the grounds they have for their beliefs about others, and asks whether those grounds are reasonable. They form a continually evolving understanding of the meaning and proper application of the value terms they use to describe others, and apply those terms with care and appropriate nuance. And they engage in thoughtful evaluation of others’ - and their own - conduct, motives, frailties, strengths and challenges, and responses to the experience of human life.

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