https://doi.org/10.53656/phil2025-03-07

Philosophy of Education
Философия на образованието

PHILOSOPHIZING WITH CHILDREN AND PHILOSOPHIZING CHILDREN'S EVERYDAY LIFE

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Abstract. The text explores the form and content of doing philosophy with children, which, while being an educational activity, differs from classical teaching as it is guided by ideas and standards of a different spirit. Children are acknowledged as capable of autonomous thinking. Philosophising with them, is a distinct engagement from teaching and studying any specialised knowledge, skill, or attitude, whereas it does not differ essentially from any other philosophical practice. As a staring point in philosophising with children, any moment of children's everyday life could become subject to philosophical reflection.

Keywords: philosophy with children, philosophizing, free thinking, creativity, philosophical community

In this paper I aim to demonstrate that within the context of philosophizing with children, any aspect of their daily life can be philosophized. The ideas that guide doing Philosophy with children allow for a sheer philosophical engagement with any subject and topic. The sufficient condition for this consists of children's ownership over a particular sense of wonder, as well as supporting them in caring for, sharing and exploring the matter of wonder. On such grounds, exploration an inquiry of the kind can grow up to become a discovery and creativity.

To begin, I will present a brief philosophical piece (i.e. an etude, a sketch), illustrating how a child's question may initiate a process of philosophizing and inspire an actual Philosophy with Children session. This question could arise in various contexts.

A philosophy piece: What is a Miracle?

How would you respond to a child request: "I want a miracle!"? First, assuming that the request is made within a Philosophy with Children session, it should be made clear that the facilitator's primary task is not to provide answers. Instead, the facilitator will first acknowledge the intriguing nature of the statement and will express some gratitude towards the author. Then, the facilitator will highlight that it

is not yet an explicitly formulated question.[1] Perhaps there is a question that lurks behind the statement: *Do I want a miracle? Should I wish for a miracle? Should I wish for just one miracle, or maybe for more? My mother tells me I am a miracle, but I did not understand what she means by it.* Here, the child is given an opportunity to forge her own question. Then, the facilitator will encourage all participants in the session, to provide additional questions and examples of miracles. This sharing of questions, examples, stories and experiences, will be handled with care so that a joint sense of wonder, as a root of a community of philosophical inquiry, starts to grow. Meanwhile, the facilitator will probably have in mind a classical philosophical approach, and will be careful not to miss questions such as "What is desire?", or "What is a miracle?" It turns out that often, in doing philosophy with children, we move beyond the everyday assumption that "children constantly ask questions" and concentrate on supporting them to master transition from making a statement, from describing (where some bewilderment, astonishment, is evident) to wondering, that is usually expressed in the form of a question. Once a question is established, the facilitator should congratulate the child for elaborating it, as recognizing a question as one's own and committing to its exploration is a vital intellectual achievement.

From this point, the session could develop as at least as an investigative inquiry into the topic of miracles, being an exploration of or deflection on existing notions, categories, concepts and ideas. It could also take a creative turn, leading to new and unconventional interpretations of the topic, or even a speculative exercise in "miracle-making." Put in more specific terms, a philosophical community may be a community of inquiry, but it could also grow out to be a community of authors and creators.[2]

Here, I'd like to draw attention to two key methodological considerations.

1. When we inquire and explore the initial statement ("I want a miracle!"), or for that matter, whether any question or statement is "childish", to what extent is it essential whether it is formulated by a child? Is it an essential characteristic at all? In the early days of the Philosophy with Children movement, authors like Gareth Matthews (1980) and Matthew Lipman (2003) emphasized that children's lack of experience differentiates their thinking from that of adults, but not their fundamental cognitive capacities. John Dewey (1897) had similarly highlighted that education should support children's innate capacity for thought. Every child, because of being human, is capable of thinking and hence – of philosophizing. "Teaching thinking", as philosophizing with children is commonly entitled, is not about teaching them something beyond their natural abilities, something alien to them, but rather about fostering their intellectual potential in an authentic way. Thinking cannot be "taught" in the sense of fixed procedures and algorithms. Of course, procedures and algorithms can be taught, but even if they are mastered, this mastery does not mean they make sense for the ones that practice them.

2. The extraordinary nature of the statement. I will first draw attention to the following peculiarity. Typically, objects of desire – what we wish for – are supposed

to fulfil some kind of lack, need, etc. But here, what is desired is a miracle. A philosophical engagement with the question might begin as follows: *How do we think about or imagine miracles so that we desire them?* Is it a proper notion or rather a reduction to interpret miracles as objects of desire? What is the role of trust, hope, and faith in relation to desire? Can I wish for a miracle in the same way I wish for some ice cream or a high grade? Ultimately, but also primarily – what is a miracle? Following well established and widely known classical notions, we could define a miracle as the suspension of laws created by a divine will. While this definition remains widely accepted, people imagine miracles in an endless variety of ways. Let's take a trivial example: if someone who hasn't studied for an exam manages to pass, they may interpret this as a miracle, yet at the same time... it may not be a miracle at all, but simply luck. (Lateva 2014)

Roald Amundsen's successful expedition to the South Pole is a compelling example of the tension between miracle and luck. In contrast, Robert Scott's parallel expedition ended in disaster, with all members perishing on the return journey. The stakes were high – achievement, recognition, and most crucially, the lives of the participants. Therefore, an explanation is needed beyond mere motivation or negligence. Writer and essayist Milen Ruskov recounts Amundsen's own words from *The South Pole* (1912): *"I can say that the most important factors are the expedition's equipment, the anticipation of difficulties, and the precautions taken to face or avoid them. Victory awaits those who have prepared everything properly—people call this 'luck.' Defeat is certain for those who fail to take the necessary precautions in time; this is usually called 'bad luck.'"* Amundsen's expedition went so smoothly and swiftly that when they returned to base camp, Henrik Lindstrøm, the expedition's cook, was astonished and asked, *"What about the Pole? Weren't you supposed to go there?"* Amundsen simply replied, *"We were there."* (Ruskov 2007)

It is clear we can philosophize, meaning we can strive to establish a universal notion of what a miracle is, by approaching it through a variety of representations, examples, stories. Regardless of their nature, we seek to uncover the universal characteristics of a miracle within them. In his monograph *Errors in Knowledge*, Bulgarian philosopher Lyuben Sivilov identifies three key characteristics of miracles:

– The first characteristic of a miracle is its authenticity. Its reality is not related to hallucinations. This characteristic situates the miracle within the realm of substantial experiences for humans.

– The second characteristic is its supernatural character – this allows people to distinguish between ordinary occurrences and phenomena that result from direct divine intervention in nature.

– The third characteristic of a miracle is its unknowability – the essence and the way it occurs remain a mystery. (Sivilov 1993)

Whereas the above are accurately identified and important, we should add at least one to them. A miracle is inherently good—more than that, it is an act of

benevolence. If we return to the classical understanding, the suspension of divine laws, if not done out of goodwill, would lead to nihilism and evil. Thus, we can briefly state that a miracle must necessarily be a benevolent act. According to Christian theologians, fantastical events that do not serve a benevolent purpose cannot be considered miracles. Even if a phenomenon is supernatural, if it lacks a charitable nature, it is not a miracle. (Lateva 2014) All of this can be argued without necessarily linking it to Christian theology. From a broader perspective, we might say that a miracle is any free transcendence of natural or spiritual laws that is benevolent and directed toward the well-being of every (human) creature. Moreover, a miracle is always a form of grace, a kind of "gift" that happens freely – it cannot occur by force, by demand, or out of self-interest regarding its outcome. In this sense, insisting on a miracle reveals an inappropriate attitude toward it. As we deepen our understanding of miracles, we might, in a way, desire them less – but we might hope for them.

Within these and similar coordinates, I believe that a philosophical reflection, discussion, and conceptualization of the statement *"I want a miracle"* – as well as the broader theme of miracles and the questions and challenges it raises— would unfold. Such an exploration would be philosophical in nature, regardless of whether it is done with children, adults, or those in the so-called "third age." At the same time, the facilitator's expectations and assumptions about the nature and direction of the emerging topic, should not dictate the participants' interests and engagement. The discussion could take on a different primary focus – any of the previously mentioned characteristics (authenticity, the natural and the supernatural, knowability and unknowability, benevolence/creation, etc.) could play a leading role. Alternatively, an entirely different topic could emerge and take shape during a session.

Do Children Think?

Now, please let us return to the first of the two abovementioned methodological considerations. How significant is it whether a statement is uttered by a child? I dare say it is not of primary importance. Of course, experience and maturity are certainly not irrelevant when it comes to creating and exchanging meanings, to communication in general. However, I would like to point out that as long as a thinking creature is capable of formulating and sharing some representation, astonishment, understanding, idea, of creating a statement, posing a question, judging, etc., philosophy (understood as philosophizing, as an endeavour where we explore how we have invented what we think; where we think about thinking itself[3]) can – if we allow it – place us in a free relationship with any such achievement, precisely as a meaningful achievement. If a person manages to ask, to bear the tension of exploring and investigating what this-or-that is, in this case – what a miracle is, or what desire is, etc., by this very act that person should be allowed to freely discuss

and examine these topics, and not, for example, to receive answers like – you'll get it, when you grow up; you're asking too much, etc.

Of course, philosophy can be understood differently, and it is by no means obligatory to think of it solely as "an endeavour where we explore how we have invented what we think; where we think about thinking itself", but it still seems undeniable that, however we understand philosophy, it is in any case, engaged with questions about the relationship of the human being to the world, to other people, to society. (Andonov 1991) These are universal questions, insofar as they are questions of any thinking mind capable of asking them. And when this happens, there are no age restrictions regarding this person. In this sense, in order to philosophize with children, we need to acknowledge their rationality. But what does it mean that children are rational? It means, at least, I would agree with D. Alexandrov, that "they too have wonders and questions about the world and people" (Alexandrov 2020) – because these are meaningful concerns. And because of this, we can provide opportunities for them to share, discuss and inquire these with other children, so that we can think together on all their concerns. The responsibility of philosophers in such a context is not so much in intervention and having/giving answers, but rather in caring for the development and growth of a community of inquiry and as a next step, a community of authors and creators. Philosophers can support each child's own progress in thinking, understanding, creating, and sharing meaning. Here it should be noted that philosophical work with children, from the perspective of such responsibility, care, and commitment, is not much different from working with adults.

In general, philosophising with children requires us to acknowledge and, even more so, to know the dignity of the human child, that it is indeed a human, that it is a person. To insist that a child is a person means nothing more than affirming that it is a rational being. V. Dafov notes that this idea is also part of the vast historical-philosophical heritage. "When a specific differentia is given to humans, from Aristotle onwards, we have this differentiation: rational and mortal." (Dafov 2012) Since a child is a human being, it is rational regardless of its age, physical and emotional development, etc. As the next step, for a child to be rational, nothing more is required than the rational ones to treat it as an individual, one rational being among many. When a child comes into (a human) being, it also comes into a rational being. Of course, there is the perfectly valid, not simply confusion, but objection – do children reason better than adults?! – Of course, judgment, the making of judgments, has its specificities in relation to rationality in general, in relation to thinking. But in its fundamentals, good reasoning is due to nothing else than the free exercise of the capacity for judgment. Kant's call in 'What is Enlightenment?' for societies to be let free is by no means a coincidence: "But that the public should enlighten itself is more likely; indeed, if it is only allowed freedom, enlightenment is almost inevitable. For even among the entrenched guardians of the great masses a few will always think for themselves, a few who, after having themselves thrown off the yoke of immaturity, will spread the spirit

of a rational appreciation for both their own worth and for each person's calling to think for himself." (Kant, 1992) Undoubtedly, in such liberating self-enlightenment, maturity plays a role, but one should not underestimate the role of authenticity, openness, and sincerity, or wholeheartedness. These, at least within imaginatively, seem to truly bring the childlike closer to the angelic and divine (see Dafov 2012: "If the children's thinking is not like ours, then it is angelic or divine. For these are the rational beings who are not mortal. This has been inherited in the tradition of Europeans, let us say, through the Christian idea.")

Therefore, even though at its inception, the philosophical and educational movement *Philosophy with Children* may had seemed too exotic or, even worse, like a passing trend; in fact, it must be given honours, for both preparing for and stemming from the universality of the idea of human beings as thinking ones. We should not overlook the significant detail that, according to Article 1 of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child is "every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier." In other words, every child is a human being but not a being that only becomes human upon meeting certain conditions. It would not be an exaggeration to say that, in its essence, the very idea of the child and childhood becomes possible and real only within the community of rational beings. And such a community is precisely what is being fostered in Philosophy with children.

Philosophising – and nothing

The movement *Philosophy with Children* has its origins in the work of the American philosopher Matthew Lipman. Since the 1970s and the first P4C (Philosophy For Children) programmes developed by him and Ann Margaret Sharp to the present day, the movement has expanded into a variety of approaches and methods. All of them, driven by the idea of respecting children in their dignity as rational beings, rather than as beings who are merely in the state/process of becoming rational.

The Bulgarian philosophical community became acquainted with this approach in the early 1990s. Among the pioneers in theorising and practising the approach are Alexander Andonov, Aneta Karageorgieva, Alexander Stoychev, Rumyana Tultukova, Veselin Dafov, and others – mainly members of the Philosophy faculty at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski." Thus, in Bulgaria, *Philosophy with Children* has been practised for over thirty years – at preschool, primary, and lower secondary levels (it is worth noting that teachers at the upper secondary level are also familiar with and freely utilise the approach in their work withing the high school philosophy and civic education curricula). Additionally, for the same period, a specialisation of the same name has been established and offered for philosophy students at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski." While no exact statistics have been kept, we can confidently say that two, if not three, generations of philosophers have encountered the key ideas of this approach. There is much to be said

about the somewhat symbiotic relationship between *Philosophy with Children* and some of the central engagements and commitments of the Bulgarian philosophical community.[4] My own academic experience evolves within the activities of the Centre for Philosophy with Children at Sofia University, as well as to conducting sessions using the *Philosophical Wondering* method, alongside other methods of philosophising with children (*Philosophy for Children* (P4C) by M. Lipman and A. Sharp; *Community of Philosophical Inquiry* by Catherine McCall, among others). These have been implemented as extracurricular activities in preschool, primary, and lower secondary education. A key element of the *Philosophical Wondering* method is that the children themselves, with the guidance of the session leader, are encouraged to come up with and suggest the topics for philosophizing.

I would like to highlight one aspect of this practice. Perhaps it is not a surprise that one of the most frequently asked questions regarding philosophy as an extracurricular activity for children is: *What exactly do they do in these philosophical thinking sessions?* According to A. Andonov, when viewed "from the outside", by an external observer, philosophy sessions with children may appear as though "nothing is being done" (Andonov 2001). Indeed, children do not work with learning materials structured according to external requirements, curricula and criteria. What unites these sessions – their focal point – is something accessible and understandable to all. Namely, that philosophical issues are discussed, and children develop philosophical skills, attitudes, and competencies. The sessions involve natural activities – children play, talk, sing, draw, and so on. The facilitators use this natural environment to build an age-appropriate community of inquiry aligned with the interests of the participants (Dafov 2018).

Among the key skills being developed are:

– Learning, research, and discovery skills.

– Communication skills – to explain, persuade, openness to different opinions, reassessment, etc.

– The ability to take responsibility for one's own behaviour.

– Actions based on critical thinking procedures.

– Research skills – observation, description, storytelling, etc.

– Creative skills – connecting different contexts, structuring and harmonizing meaning, developing criteria, etc.

– Actions aimed at creative achievements.

Some key competencies for which an enabling environment is created include:

– A disposition towards participation and expression in a learning, inquiring and projecting community.

– Active engagement in discussions and activities.

– Questioning appearances, asking questions, seeking answers.

– Managing and mastering contradictions (Dafov, Zhelyazkova 2018).

PwC sessions are most often organised as supplementary, meaning they do not

lead to the completion of an educational level, stage, etc. However, without the work and activities undertaken by children and teachers within the compulsory curriculum, and without a connection to family and extracurricular relationships, philosophy with children would, in a sense, be meaningless. Wonder and inquiry are rooted in the diversity of our daily lives and in our ability to engage with them freely and without dogma. At the same time, reflecting and philosophizing on astonishing topics and questions undoubtedly stimulates and elevates personal development and interpersonal relationships. Some of the expected enrichments facilitated by philosophical practice include:

– Demonstrating greater tolerance and respect for diversity and otherness.

– Openness in communication – explaining, persuading, being receptive to different perspectives, reassessment, etc.

– Developing an authorial and creative attitude towards one's own discoveries, inventions, and projects, as well as towards collaborative endeavours (Ibid.).

Instead of completing this paper with classical conclusion, I'd like to tell a real-life story that was inspired by Philosophy with Children sessions. When twelve-year-old Nasko's grandfather asked him, "What do you do in a philosophy class?", Nasko initially struggled to answer. As mentioned earlier – at a first glance, it seems like nothing. But later, while reflecting on the conversation with his grandfather, Nasko managed to establish a fundamental difference between these sessions and his other classes and organised activities. At the beginning of almost any lesson, training session, etc., just like in a philosophy one, he and his mates were invited to share experiences, impressions, and so on with his teachers. But usually, this happened strictly at the very beginning or even before that – before the moment when the teacher would say, "Now, let's proceed with our subject." So, according to Nasko, the lesson would truly begin only from that moment onwards. However, nothing like that happened in philosophy classes. Nasko's discovery took the form of realizing that philosophizing does not follow a preliminary stage of sharing experiences, and in a way, it does not require a special, distinct beginning. Philosophising stems from any life event, situation, or experience. To some extent, Nasko's observation echoes Aristotle's idea that people philosophize "out of wonder" (Aristotle, 2007). But I shared the story for a different reason. Namely, to demonstrate how encountering and recognizing such moments of reflection always brings joy. And a fundamental part of our work as philosophers—beyond simply noticing these moments – is to support the authors of such reflections, the discoverers, inventors, and creators, helping them recognize their achievements as truly their own and, so that in their own turn, they can take joy in them.

Aknowledgements

This study is financed by the European Union-NextGenerationEU, through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the Republic of Bulgaria, project № BG-RRP-2.004-0008-C01

NOTES

1. Two key skills that are fostered in Philosophy with children sessions, withing the context of the method "Philosophical wondering", are as follows: "skills for elaborating questions" and "reformulating with view of meaning". Cf. Dafov, Zhelyazkova (2018).
2. See Dafov (2024), on the conceptual transition from a community of inquiry to a projectising community,
3. This is one of the main (philosophical) motives of doing philosophy of children. Cf. Dafov, Zhelyazkova (2018).
4. See Dafov, 2018, esp. part I.2. "Projectivity and the Philosophy Department" – for a reflection on the notions of creativity and innovation and the history of the academic engagement with them by the Philosophy Department at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". See also Zhelyazkova Stoeva (2021) – for a review of doing philosopjy with children in Bulgaria.

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