# Philosophy for Children as a Paradigmatic Example of Rational Inquiry

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## I. What is P4C?

In a practical sense the Philosophy for Children (P4C) program generally consists of a group of students sitting in a circle and talking with minimal direction given by a facilitator. In a broader sense, P4C is a particularized embodiment of the philosophic impulse to rational inquiry and dialogue.

In a typical P4C session, students sit in a circle and pass a "community ball" to designate a speaker while discussing a question selected by the group. The students may be of any age from kindergarten through college age and beyond. An emphasis is placed on creating an "intellectually safe" environment in which students can freely discuss their experiences and opinions without fear of ridicule or rejection. The group is encouraged to dig deeper into their topics by applying an intellectual "toolkit." The toolkit consists of the letters W, R, A, I, T, E, C which indicate "**W**hat do you mean?" "**R**easons?" "**A**ssumptions?" "**I**nferences?" "**T**rue?" "**E**xamples?" and "**C**ounterexamples?" respectively. By applying these questions it is hoped that the group will come to a deeper understanding of the matter at hand. Questions are created and selected by the community, but general topics are usually suggested by group readings, recent events, or the discretion of the facilitator. Typically the facilitator attempts to not impose his or her own opinion onto the group but to prompt the community to apply the toolkit, maintain intellectual safety, and so forth. Typically, a certain amount of in-group vocabulary called "magic words" is employed (terms such as POPAT for "**P**lease **O**ne **P**erson **A**t a **T**ime" and so on) in order to improve the community's cohesion. Similarly, a community ball is typically created during the first meeting of the group by having each member of the group wrap yarn

around a central roll while talking. In this way, the community ball is symbolically a creation of the group as a whole that links the individuals in the group into a community of inquiry, which further adds to community cohesion.

Undiscussed so far has been the goal of all of this inquiry. To what end are these communities set up and topics discussed? Surely, says the P4C skeptic, questions in general can be divided into two classes: those to which the answers are already known and those to which the answers are not already known. If P4C communities devote themselves to the first class of questions, this seems like a waste of time, since the answers can better be determined through research into the existing literature, etc. If P4C communities devote themselves to the second class of questions, this also seems like a waste of time, since it is improbable that a group of students "shooting the bull" will be able to come up with original and correct answers to previously unresolved questions. Therefore, it seems as though the purpose of P4C must lie outside of the questions themselves. But in what?

## II. Why do we need P4C?

There are three general classes of answers that will be explored in this paper. First, P4C is an efficient means for achieving other pre-existing pedagogical aims, such as standards achievement and behavior control. Second, P4C is valuable as a means of introducing valuable ritual actions, which enhance life and build character. Third, P4C is a particular embodiment of a process of inquiry which is valuable for individuals educationally and generally.

### A. Value as instrument

One possible explanation for the value of P4C is that it possesses instrumental value as a means of achieving pre-existing goals. For example, Matthew Lipman found that the elementary level students he minimally instructed with philosophy did better on tests than their peers in the control group class at the same school. Similarly, anecdotal reports

maintain that P4C is an effective method of developing students' interest in reading, maintaining classroom order, and providing an outlet for grievances. Of course, the proper means of assessing these sorts of claims for the instrumental value of P4C is to conduct randomized trials in a variety of circumstances to measure the precise impact of P4C on various student populations. However, this paper is not equipped to bring such scientific tools to bear on the question.

What this paper can do is to ask whether it is in the spirit of P4C to treat inquiry as an entirely instrumental occupation. If the value of inquiry is outside of the inquiry itself and in the effects that inquiry brings about then P4C could theoretically be replaced as new and more effective techniques come into recognition. The goal of the program is in that case entirely external to the endeavor. The P4C method becomes entirely coincidental to the P4C effect. This method also leaves question about which particular aspects of P4C are most effective. Without understanding how P4C works (even if only instrumentally), it will be difficult to improve P4C.

The deeper problem with regarding P4C as beneficial entirely for its effects is that it ignores the benefits which are unique to P4C. The contention of this paper is that P4C bestows certain goods that cannot be obtained without a process similar to P4C in certain relevant respects (though obviously many superficial aspects of P4C are mutable).

### B. Value as ritual

What are the unique values of the P4C method? Sarah Mattice in "*Li* and P4C: A Case Study of Confucian *Li*" proposes that the value of P4C is that its method approximate the ancient Chinese rituals called *li* (禮) that are central to Confucianism. Furthermore, these rituals are central to the development of moral character. As she says, "Instead of just a way of teaching, we can now look at P4C as an extraordinary part of everyday life, as a ritual that can develop participants into good people." In Mattice's interpretation, the salient fact about P4C is that develops a community, and that out of this

community springs self-cultivation and harmony. Because P4C is a ritualized activity for the community, it allows for the internalization of certain implicit values in such a way that they become a part of the fabric of the individual members of the community. Pedagogically, P4C is valuable because, "once the formal ritual has developed sufficiently, once the participants have internalized it, they cannot simply turn it off when they leave the classroom." Thus, P4C is a means of imparting important moral virtues in such a way that they reach even recalcitrant students.

I see two questions for Mattice's analysis. First, as with the instrumental interpretation of P4C, the emphasis on the value of P4C as a ritual leaves open the possibility that we can replace P4C if we find some other equally means of effectively imparting values, through ritual or otherwise. For example, martial arts classes are commonly centered around the ritual performance of various physical forms and are thought to impart various virtues such as self-discipline, self-reliance, calm, etc. They also have the additional benefit of improving the body, which is usually neglected in schools compared to the mind. Once again, if we ignore what is distinctive about P4C alone, then P4C is just one way of attaining the same end and replaceable. Second, it seem as though there are two things at work in P4C: the rituals of inquiry and the inquiry itself. In placing emphasis on the former, Mattice is perhaps neglecting the latter. While the rituals of inquiry may play an important part in the functioning of P4C and the binding of values that P4C does, ritual is not all that P4C is. P4C is also a process of inquiry, and as such it is worth our inquiring into the virtue of inquiry per se, since P4C as a process of inquiry tends to bind most tightly those virtues that are associated with inquiry. Accordingly, without evaluating the value of inquiry itself, it is impossible to evaluate the value of P4C.

### C. Value as inquiry

Earlier, we gave an argument against the value of inquiry in P4C in the following form: Questions either have answers or not, and those that do have answers do not need further inquiry, and those that do not are unlikely to be resolved by group discussion by children. However, consider the assumptions at work in this argument. First, it is assumed that the point of inquiry is to develop a list of correct answers to questions, rather than to develop one's skill at answering new sorts of questions. Second, it is assumed that all question are either known to be known or known to be unknown, and that there are no questions for which numerous "answers" are on offer, but it is not clear which answer is the correct one. Third, it is assumed that children working in a group are unable to contribute to the resolution of problems by just thinking about problems. We will next tackle these assumptions in turn.

Assuming that the value of an inquiry is only in its answer may be justified in some contexts, but within the context of a pedagogical environment, this assumption is short-sighted in the extreme. In such an environment, the utility of everything needs to be measured on the basis of its usefulness to the student after leaving the educational context. Thus, in some cases, the student is well served by already knowing the answers to questions. However, in a large number of cases, what better serves the student is not knowledge of the answer to a particular question but lived experience using reliable means to derive answers to questions. Thus, for example, students are not only taught the times table up to ten; they are also taught how to use knowledge of the times table up to ten to find answers to multiplication questions involving any arbitrary numbers. Clearly, it would be impossible to teach students the specific answers to all multiplication problems. Therefore, we instead teach students the process required to find the answers when it is needed. Similarly, an inquiry of the P4C variety might be useful to students not only because it gives them some concrete knowledge about the subject of a particular discussion, but also because it gives them a toolkit (the WRAITEC letters)

that can be applied in order to obtain answers in a wider variety of fields, just as the basic knowledge of multiplication up to ten can be applied to any larger pair of numbers. This toolkit is not only valuable within a classroom setting, but as a means of practical inquiry the lived experience of P4C can play a vital role in making informed decisions throughout one's life.

Second, it was assumed that the answers to questions are either known or unknown, but this is a misapplication of the law of the excluded middle. There are a large number of questions to which there are many proposed solutions, but no clear means by which to determine which of the proposals is correct. That this circumstance holds is the reason that our political system favors pluralistic coexistence. For example, in the case of religion there may be one particular religion or formulation of atheism that is correct, but since it is not sufficiently clear which is correct, we leave it to each individual citizen to choose for himself or herself the system of beliefs that they deem most plausible. However, religion is not the only field in which this pluralistic account holds. Even in scientifically determined areas such as global warming, the existence of aliens, the origins of life, and so forth, it is the responsibility of the individual as an individual to weigh the proposed answers and determine which is correct. This is not to say that "anything goes" or that there is no truth to that or even that we cannot use socially controversial knowledge claims in public policy, but it means that there is no central authority that can compel any member of our society to believe something which that member does not find convincing. To impose the control of beliefs instead of allowing freedom of conscience is antithetical to our political structure for reasons both practical and theoretical. Though issues of space prevent the complete explanation of these reasons here, we will respond to the objection that children are a special case, and that unlike adults, due to their lack of informed judgment, children lack the prerogative to freedom of conscience. To this objection it must be countered, where is it that adults will derive their judgment if they do not first practice its use as children under the supervi-

sion of informed members of the community who can serve as aids to their reasoning process? Thus, while children cannot be given complete freedom of decision making, we must nevertheless provide children with the space to exercise some of their rational facilities if they are to be ready for the responsibility of its application as adults. (Note though that we will return later to some additional issue regarding children and freedom of conscience.)

Third, to assume that children are incapable of bringing novel solutions to bear on unresolved problems is shortsighted both pedagogically and practically. While of course educators must always be aware of the mental capabilities of their students, to never allow children to tackle a problem themselves is to hobble the development of their capacity for independent thought. Beyond this pedagogical point, since it is a natural for adults to underestimate the abilities of children for novel, creative solutions to problems, it is worth curbing our tendency to regulate the expression of children while they work out a problem for themselves. More than that if the inquiry is into some moral or sociological phenomenon, it is often the case that some children in the community have more experience with the subject of inquiry than others. By working together, the children with more experience can efficiently disseminate their knowledge to the other children in a way that has more impact than mere instruction from an authority figure. As a peer, the more experienced children are frequently able to relate what they have learned in a way that has more relevance for the development of other members in the community. This is to say nothing of the impact that joint inquiry has in developing the capacity of children to function in group environments, which may be necessary for their adult careers. Moreover, as future full members of society, children need to be able to question the structure into which the world has been organized, so that they are capable of knowing what parts of their inheritance are worth preserving and which parts have served their purpose and can now be changed.

Thus, each of the foregoing assumptions about the inability of P4C to work in its role as inquiry have been overturned. However,throughout this discussion of the various values of inquiry in itself, there has been another implicit assumption that children are the unique recipients of pedagogic instruction. However, the distinction between children and adults in this respect is far from clear. Individuals of all ages may have need for the corrective powers of inquiry, and the effects of communal collaboration can be honed even outside of a scholastic environment. That is to say, if P4C is of value because it is a concrete method of inquiry, then it should not be restricted to being "4C" exclusively. Rather, any field in which insight is to be gained through inquiry should be open to various modalities of applying "philosophical" examination of the P4C sort. Hence we can see that P4C possesses value not only instrumentally and ritually but as an expression of inquiry and that inquiry cannot be limited only to the young, but must make up a vital part of society at all its levels.

## III. What is dangerous about P4C ?

Though in the last section we praised P4C for its ability to inculcate the skills necessary for rational inquiry into learners of all ages, we did leave open a question about the relationship of P4C to freedom of conscience. Namely, we expressed approval of P4C as means of advancing the structure and values of society through the process of rational inquiry, but we neglected to consider the possibility that certain groups may feel that their social, moral, and religious values are already good enough, and do not need to be advanced, particularly by children, the members of society seemingly most prone to making an error in their rational calculation. In other words, P4C implicitly challenges the values of "conservative" groups in society. (Note, this does not mean "conservative" in the political sense, but in the sense of groups that seek to conserve the values of the part no matter what.) In this sense, P4C is deeply dangerous, since there is the possibility

that inquiry today will not (and perhaps cannot) produce the values that were created and treasured in the past.

In one sense, P4C can never have an answer to this objection to its existence. If inquiry has the good properties we ascribe to it, then it must also have the ability to change people's minds, and if it can change people's mind, it may change their values away from some currently held value. If P4C couldn't change the way people think, it would not be powerful. Thus, P4C truly is dangerous. However, if communities value truth over other values, then they should have faith that true inquiry will produce true results, which will presumably be those results already favored by conservative groups. In other words, truth will out, so truth has nothing to fear from testing. Thus, conservative values bearers should trust that the merit of their values will be discovered by future generations if their inquiry is conducted with an honest regard for truth. Of course, there is the possibility of error in one's inquiry, but the way to prevent error is not to inhibit practice but to promote it. Therefore, these communities more than others should promote P4C as means of strengthening the rational skills of students, for students need to be capable of truly good inquiry in order to understand the values that have been handed down to them in order to pass them on to future generations intact. It is natural that students, like all people, will spontaneously engage in inquiry about their world. There are two responses that are possible when spontaneous inquiry arises. One, the inquiry can be shut down and the student told not to ask that kind of question. Two, the inquiry can be sustained and the student showed how right reasoning produces some particular results favored by the community in question. The second option clearly does more to preserve the values of a group, since students who thoroughly understand their own values are more likely to rigorously defend them in the future.

So, in the final analysis we can say that the greatest danger of P4C is we do not practice it enough. If students only haltingly grasp the tools of inquiry, they will indeed be prone to error. However, by repeated, lived experience of a positive community of

rational inquiry, students will become able to understand and propagate society's core values in perpetuity.