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challenging adult-centrism: speaking speech and the possibility of intergenerational dialogue

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abstract

This paper reflects on the role of philosophy in the school environment, paying special attention to the promise of intergenerational dialogue carried forward by philosophy programmes associated with Lipman's Philosophy for Children (P4C) curriculum and its current transformation into Philosophy with Children (PwC). There are two basic ideas that constitute the guiding thread of my reflections. Firstly, that philosophical interventions of that kind challenge adult-centric views of education and philosophy. Secondly, that such initiatives carry with them the promise of acknowledging children as equal participants in the process of philosophical questioning and meaning creation. In the first part of the paper, I argue for the importance of understanding the act of philosophizing with children as a disruption of adult-centrism. First, I reflect on a narrow future-directedness that seems to characterize the temporality of school. I suggest that Philosophy for/with Children (P4wC) interventions interrupt such a future-directedness inviting the students to immerse themselves into a dilated 'now' of multiple possibilities. Then, I reflect on the ways in which P4wC interventions challenge the assumption that philosophy is an adult preoccupation. Special attention is paid to the work of scholars who challenge our restrictive assumptions about what qualifies as philosophical thinking. In the second part of my paper, I turn to the work of Merleau-Ponty with the aim of sketching out some requirements for the possibility of a dialogue between childhood and adulthood. I suggest that Merleau-Ponty's reflections on childhood and expressive speech are invaluable in the context of P4wC because they invite us 1) to appreciate the alterity of children without reducing them to inferior 'others' and 2) to remain alert to the expressivity of children's speech.

keywords: adult-centrism; p4wc; community of philosophical inquiry; temporality; Merleau-Ponty; speaking speech; expressivity.

desafiar el adultocentrismo: discurso oral y la posibilidad de un diálogo intergeneracional

resumen

Este artículo reflexiona sobre el papel de la filosofía en el entorno escolar, prestando especial atención a la promesa de diálogo intergeneracional que llevan adelante los programas de filosofía asociados al curriculum de Filosofía para Niños (FpN) de Lipman y su actual transformación en Filosofía con Niños (FcN). Hay dos ideas básicas que constituyen el hilo conductor de mis reflexiones. En primer lugar, que las intervenciones filosóficas de ese tipo desafían las visiones adultocéntricas de la educación y la filosofía. En segundo lugar, que tales iniciativas conllevan la promesa de reconocer a los niños como iguales en su participación en el proceso de cuestionamiento filosófico y creación de sentido. En la

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primera parte del artículo, argumento a favor de la importancia de entender el acto de filosofar con niños y niñas como una alteración del adultocentrismo. Primero, reflexiono sobre una estrecha direccionalidad hacia el futuro que parece caracterizar la temporalidad de la escuela. Sugiero que las intervenciones de la FpcN interrumpen esa direccionalidad hacia el futuro, invitando a los alumnos a sumergirse en un "ahora" dilatado de múltiples posibilidades. Luego, reflexiono sobre las maneras en que las intervenciones de la FpcN cuestionan la suposición de que la filosofía es una preocupación de los adultos. Se presta especial atención al trabajo de investigadores que cuestionan nuestros supuestos restrictivos sobre lo que se considera pensamiento filosófico. En la segunda parte de mi artículo, recurro a la obra de Merleau-Ponty con el fin de esbozar algunos requisitos para la posibilidad de un diálogo entre infancia y adultez. Sugiero que las reflexiones de Merleau-Ponty sobre la infancia y el discurso expresivo son muy valiosas en el contexto de la FpcN porque nos invitan 1) a apreciar la alteridad de niños y niñas sin reducirlos a "otros" inferiores y 2) a permanecer atentos a la expresividad oral de los niños.

palabras clave: adultocentrismo; fpcn; comunidad de investigación filosófica; temporalidad; Merleau-Ponty; discurso oral; expresividad.

desafiando o adultocentrismo: discurso oral e a possibilidade de diálogo intergeracional

resumo

Este artigo reflete sobre o papel da Filosofia no ambiente escolar, dando atenção especial à promessa de diálogo intergeracional levada adiante pelos programas de filosofia associados ao currículo de Filosofia para Crianças (FpC) de Lipman e sua atual transformação em Filosofia com Crianças (FcC). Existem duas ideias básicas que constituem a linha orientadora das minhas reflexões. A primeira é que intervenções filosóficas desse tipo desafiam as visões adultocêntricas da educação e da filosofia. A segunda é que essa iniciativa carrega consigo a promessa de reconhecer crianças como participantes iguais no processo de questionamento filosófico e de criação de significado. Na primeira parte do artigo, defendo a importância de entender o ato de filosofar com crianças como um rompimento do adultocentrismo. Primeiro, reflito sobre uma estreita orientação-para-o-futuro que parece caracterizar a temporalidade da escola. Sugiro que as intervenções da Filosofia para/com Crianças (FpcC) interrompam essa orientação para o futuro, convidando os estudantes a mergulharem em um "agora" de múltiplas possibilidades. Em seguida, reflito sobre as maneiras pelas quais as intervenções da FpcC desafiam o pressuposto de que a filosofia é uma preocupação de adultos. É dada atenção especial ao trabalho de acadêmicos que desafiam nossos pressupostos restritivos sobre o que se qualifica como pensamento filosófico. Na segunda parte deste artigo, volto-me para o trabalho de Merleau-Ponty com o objetivo de rascunhar alguns requisitos para a possibilidade de diálogo entre infância e adultez. Sugiro que as reflexões de Merleau-Ponty sobre a infância e a fala expressiva são inestimáveis no contexto da FpcC porque nos convidam a: 1) apreciar a alteridade das crianças sem reduzi-las a "outros" inferiores e 2) permanecer atentos para a expressividade do discurso infantil.

palavras-chave: adultocentrismo; fpcc; comunidade de investigação filosófica; temporalidade; Merleau-Ponty; discurso oral; expressividade.

challenging adult-centrism: speaking speech and the possibility of intergenerational dialogue

introduction

This paper reflects on the role of philosophy in the school environment, paying special attention to the promise of inter-generational dialogue carried forward by philosophy programmes associated with Lipman's Philosophy for children (P4C) curriculum and its current transformation into Philosophy with children (PwC). As it is widely known, such interventions do not simply aim at introducing philosophical ideas to students, but rather encourage students to become members of a community of philosophical inquiry and thus active participants in the process of philosophizing.

Two basic ideas constitute the guiding thread of my reflections. First, that interventions of such kind challenge adult-centric views about education and second that such initiatives carry with them the promise of a genuine, non-hierarchical dialogue between childhood and adulthood. With the term 'adult-centrism' I refer to assumptions that associate childhood with an incomplete and imperfect modality of being, in comparison to adulthood (Kennedy, 2006, p. 64). Under the 'spell' of adult-centrism, children are thought of as inferior 'others' whose selfhood is dependent on what adults want them to be (Kohan, 2015 p. 48). As a consequence, children's thoughts and experiences are excluded from public discourse.

Recent developments in the field emphasize that P4wC should not be reduced to an educational programme that merely teaches students skills that are important for adulthood. Such a narrow understanding of the purpose of P4wC flirts with a developmentalism that does not do justice to all the possibilities opened by such a programme (Kennedy, 2006; Kohan, 2015; Haynes & Murrells, 2021). Following such developments, I argue that an important aspect of P4wC is that students are invited to develop their own voice (as children) in a way that opens the space for an intergenerational dialogue between adult and child.

In the first part of my paper, I present two ways in which P4wC disrupts adult-centrism. First, I reflect on the future-directed temporality of the school environment and the way that P4wC interventions disrupt this temporality by

challenging adult-centrism: speaking speech and the possibility of intergenerational dialogue

inviting children to immerse themselves into a dilated 'now' of multiple possibilities. Then, I reflect on the ways in which P4wC interventions challenge the assumption that philosophy is an adult preoccupation. That P4wC challenges such an assumption might seem obvious, given that it invites children to engage in philosophical thinking. However, as numerous scholars have noticed, it is important to critically reflect on our restrictive ideas about what qualifies as philosophical thinking, because such ideas often hinder us from carefully listening to what children have to say.

In the second part of the paper, I avail of the work of Merleau-Ponty with the aim of shedding light on the expressivity of children's speech as a positive phenomenon that can enrich philosophical dialogue. First, I discuss Merleau-Ponty's account of childhood as a complete state of existence that cannot be reduced to a developmental stage in the path to adulthood. I argue that Merleau-Ponty's thoughts can function as a principle that guides the facilitator in her interaction with children during a philosophical session. Then I discuss Merleau-Ponty's reflections on the expressivity of language and his notion of 'speaking speech'. I suggest that such reflections are important for two reasons. First, they invite us to think of language not merely as a tool that we use for everyday communication and task-completion, but as a way of articulating new meanings and transforming our relationship to the world. Second, they invite us to remain alert and acknowledge the expressivity involved in children's verbal articulations. With the help of Merleau-Ponty's insights, I argue that during a P4wC philosophical session, children are given the opportunity to articulate and bring into expression their own, distinct way of being-in-the-world. It then falls to the adult-philosopher to remain alert and open to that which is announced by children.

disrupting future-directedness

Questions of temporality have recently become central among P4wC scholars and philosophers of childhood. One common observation among such scholars and philosophers is that school tends to function as the space where children move from a child-like to an adult-like temporality (Kennedy & Kohan 2017; Mensch, 2020; Murris, 2020). This transition has been thought of as a passage from situational or

lived experience of time to a chronological experience of time that allows for “no lingering in the moment, no getting lost into the situation of play” (Weber, 2020). As Murris and Kohan observe, in school the present has no ‘substance’ because it functions merely as a limit of the past and future. What is important are “past experiences of schooling (reports, tests, previous learning)” and always in the interest of preparing students for the future: “the next school year, phase, stage, university, or even the labour market” (Murris and Kohan, 2021, p. 585).

My reflections in this section, build on the idea that adult-temporality exhibits as specific kind of future-directedness. Classical phenomenologists like Heidegger and Fink have shed light on this aspect of adult life which in its everydayness is guided by a concern to fulfilling futural aims and tasks (Heidegger, 2009; Fink, 2016).² This future-directedness, I would like to suggest, is also prominent in the school environment. It can be detected in the daily tasks that students have to fulfil such as assignments and exams, as well as the concern that is cultivated toward results, exam scores, future jobs, etc. But it can also be found in our overall understanding of the purpose of school, insofar as the latter is understood as an institution that prepares children for entering the adult world. As Kennedy puts it, school has traditionally functioned as “the point of transition between childhood... and the sort of habituated adult required for the purposes of the state and economy” (2006, p. 152).

In the context of being prepared for adulthood, students learn to perform tasks in a specific way. They learn how to write assignments in the way that one should write an assignment, express themselves in the way that one should express herself, answer questions in the way that one should answer questions and so on. Interestingly, this aspect of school is very close to a modality of being that Heidegger describes as inauthentic in *Being and Time*. In his existential analysis of human existence, Heidegger observes that in pursuing our daily concerns human beings most of the times find themselves lost in the ‘they’ (*Das Man*). This is how Heidegger describes inauthenticity: “we take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* take pleasure;

² For more on this topic see Petropoulos, “Heidegger and Fink: From the Futurism of Care to the ‘Now’ of Play” (2024, to be published).

challenging adult-centrism: speaking speech and the possibility of intergenerational dialogue

we read, see and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge...we find 'shocking' what *they* find shocking..." (Heidegger, 2009, p. 164).

To lose oneself in the 'they' is to act inauthentically in the sense that one does not own or take responsibility over her actions but navigates her life in accordance with what is socially and culturally expected (2009, pp. 165-166). Inauthenticity, marks for Heidegger an absorbed concern with our present tasks and reveals itself in the docile acceptance of readily available possibilities (p. 312; p. 344; p. 363; p. 386) Heidegger observes, however, that this inauthentic relation to the present is grounded on an inauthentic projection toward the future (pp. 386-387). It is a specific way of orienting ourselves toward the future that compels us to act inauthentically in the present.³ In other words, it is our projection toward a closed future with pre-determined goals and tasks that grounds our inauthentic acts in the present. Heidegger's account of inauthenticity is relevant, I think, insofar as it invites us to raise an important question about the school environment. Can it be said that schools train children to become inauthentic by imposing on them a specific kind of future-directedness?

It should be clarified, here, that Inauthenticity need not be understood as an entirely negative phenomenon. As O'Brien notes "inauthenticity in some measure is an inescapable fact of what it means to be a human being" (2011, p. 25). One cannot deny that for the most part, we learn how to do things by acting as others act. We learn to play the guitar by playing as one should play; as students, we learn to write essays by writing as others write, and so on. In this sense, it can be argued that inauthenticity is an unavoidable element of the school environment as it is part of teaching students, skills that they will need in their lives as adults. However, one is perfectly justified in problematizing this aspect of the schooling environment insofar as it dominates and excludes all other ways of being a student. As Biesta has noticed, qualification cannot be the only aim of education. Education is "not just about how we can get the world into our children and students; it is also – and perhaps first of all – about how we can help our children and students to engage with, and thus come into, the world" (Biesta, 2013, p. 5). To strike a balance between the need to

³ "Inauthentic understanding", Heidegger says, "projects itself upon what is feasible, urgent or indispensable in our everyday business" (2009, p. 386). Our everyday projects imply a kind of seriousness as they are always performed with the aim of fulfilling certain futural goals.

familiarize students with the existing world and the desire of allowing them to question and change this world, there need to be spaces in the school environment that create the conditions for a dialogical relation between children and adults (Kennedy, 2006, p. 165). Insofar as the school aims merely at preparing students for adulthood, it imposes on them a future-directedness that allows for no alternative experiences of the world. This in turn, obstructs the possibility of genuine dialogue between child and adult, which, I think, presupposes a non-instrumental relation between the two and an incessant struggle to confront and question adult-centric assumptions and dispositions.

With these thoughts in mind, I would like to suggest that, when applied in a school environment, P4wC creates a rupture to the confining future-directedness of schooling temporality. Philosophical inquiry in a school setting can be understood as an event that opens up a more flexible and porous realm of meaning, within which students can collectively experiment with ideas without feeling the burden of their everyday school tasks. P4wC scholars and practitioners have thought of the community of philosophical inquiry as philosophical ‘play-world’ or ‘play-space’ that allows students to suspend future projections and immerse themselves in the dilated ‘now’ of active philosophizing (See Kennedy, 2018; Petropoulos, 2021). This is not to suggest that one does not speculate about the future during philosophical inquiry. Quite the contrary, thinking about the implications of our ideas is part of what is happening when one philosophizes, what changes, however, is the attitude that one has toward the future. What guides the inquiry is not a projection toward a future goal that needs to be accomplished. In the community of philosophical inquiry, the participants start without knowing where they are going (Kennedy, 2018). Ideas and concepts are formulated in the present moment of philosophizing by way of interaction and dialogue.

The community of philosophical inquiry is a space wherein students are invited to develop their own voice, raise their own philosophical questions and answer these questions with their own style, without necessarily having to imitate adults.⁴ But it is also an invitation for the adults/teachers to suspend their

⁴ In other words, a community of philosophical inquiry can be thought of as a space where children are treated as subjects which as Murris claims is a prerequisite for allowing children to come into the world and become co-producers of meaning. (Murris, 2016, p. 27).

challenging adult-centrism: speaking speech and the possibility of intergenerational dialogue

preoccupation with fixed tasks and goals, and immerse themselves in the 'deep play' of philosophical inquiry. It is in this sense that P4wC carries with it the promise of intergenerational dialogue. However, one cannot be complacent here. Pushing forward this promise requires from the facilitator to remain alert to adult-centric assumptions that make us turn a deaf ear to children's contributions and thus exclude their thoughts and experiences. As we will see next, one such major assumption is that children are not equipped to do philosophy in the way that adults are.

disrupting fixed notions of rationality.

A common argument against the idea of children doing philosophy, is that children have not yet developed the rational capacities that would allow them to do so, which is to say that they are not mature enough to think philosophically (See Murris, 2000, p. 265). Kitchener, for example, takes on board Piaget's claim that children cannot philosophize (Piaget, 1933, p. 534). He specifically draws a distinction between concrete philosophical understanding and abstract philosophical understanding. He then claims that concrete philosophical understanding "occurs at a level below that of abstract philosophical understanding" and that the latter is what is typically identified as doing philosophy (Kitchener, 1990, p. 427). Having ranked abstract philosophical thinking higher than concrete philosophical thinking, he moves on to argue that whereas children below the age of 10 are capable of thinking about concrete scenarios they do not seem capable of engaging in higher order, abstract philosophical thinking. For example, while children can reflect and discuss the 'ship of Theseus', they cannot understand the ontological principle underlying this thought experiment and thus cannot reflect on the principle of identity as such (p. 427).

Murris responds to Kitchener's objections not by trying to prove that children are capable of higher-order thinking. She also avoids buying into the distinction between higher and lower thinking. Instead, she suggests that concrete thinking is precisely what is sometimes missing from what we call 'philosophy proper', and points out that philosophy becomes groundless when identified with disembodied,

abstract thinking.⁵ Murris suggests that the P4wC paradigm is partly a criticism of academic philosophy, insofar as the latter understands itself as the disembodied exercise of a thinking subject that shows no interest in concrete experiences (2000, p. 269; p. 275). In this sense, one could say that Murris aligns herself with philosophers like Merleau-Ponty who have challenged the tendency of philosophical thinking to downgrade concrete experience and argue for the need to bring rationality down to earth (1964b, p. 13).

Furthermore, the uncritical prioritization of rationality as the ultimate function of human existence has now been challenged by numerous scholars working in the fields of feminism and critical posthumanism. As Ferrando notes: “The emphasis on the human as a rational animal has been a powerful discursive tool to historically enslave, mistreat, and dominate some humans and most nonhuman animals.” (2019, p. 34). In critical posthumanist studies, specific emphasis is given to the binary logic that characterizes Western thinking, whereby one side of the opposition constitutes a ‘positive’ aspect and the other side a ‘negative’. Some prominent distinctions/binaries are that between mind vs body, reason vs emotions, culture vs nature and the list goes on. Such distinctions have consistently been used in the interest of excluding specific groups of people from public discourse, as they ascribe full humanity only to adult human beings, which quite often happen to be male, white and European. Rollo takes a further step and suggests that there is another arch-distinction of Western metaphysics that has not been scrutinized enough, namely the distinction between adult and child. He notes that the idea of a natural progress from the animal child to the human adult is “a historical and conceptual antecedent of the idea of European civilization, prefiguring its stories about maturation and progress from cultural ignorance to enlightenment.” (Rollo, 2018, p. 61). As Murris suggests, this hierarchical distinction between child and adult makes it possible to conceptualize children as not-fully-humans, ignorant, immature and uncivilized (Murris, 2016; Murris & Kohan, 2021).

⁵ Children’s capacity to focus on the concrete, therefore, can be thought of as a privilege: “Philosophers should not ask themselves ‘What is identity?’, but instead concentrate on how words such as ‘identity’ are actually used in everyday circumstances. An enquiry about the meaning of concepts embedded in their lifeworlds is exactly what young children do when engaged in philosophical enquires” (Murris, 2000, p. 266).

Those familiar with the work of Lipman and Sharp can easily discern that the P4C approach goes against this line of reasoning that dehumanizes children. As Lipman informs us, his disappointment with the critical skills of university students and faculty was what motivated him to write novels and manuals that introduce critical thinking to children (2011). Such a move is surely a decisive step in the direction of challenging the exclusion of children from the realm of reason and philosophy. As Reed-Sandoval and Sykes claim, from its very inception, the P4C curriculum challenged the marginalized position of children in our existing social order, showing that children's philosophical capabilities "are systematically ignored, under-served and marginalized" (2017, p. 220). However, several P4wC scholars warn against a tendency to identify philosophizing solely with the development and application of analytical thinking skills (Vansieleghem, 2005; Van der Leeuw, 2009; Vansieleghem & Kennedy, 2011). Such an identification, it is argued, suppresses other philosophical approaches, disconnects thinking from sensations and emotions (Weber, 2011), and excludes alternative discourses and ways of thinking (Vansieleghem, 2005, Kohan, 2015, p. 62). Furthermore, as Chetty has argued, a restrictive and ahistorical understanding of what counts as reasonable can often lead to the marginalization of minorities (2018) and bring about the silencing of alternative ways of expressing oneself (Chetty & Suissa, 2017).

Such critical reflections on the practice of doing philosophy with children indicate, that the promise of allowing children to develop their own voice gets betrayed when attention is paid only to the instrumental use of philosophy for the cultivation of analytical thinking skills. As Kohan claims, the rationalistic ideal of reason "systematically excludes children's thought and experience" (Kohan, 2015, p. 48). It is for this reason that Haynes and Murris emphasize the importance of remaining alert and ready to challenge discourses of developmentalism (2021). If the practice of philosophizing with children is understood solely through a developmental lens, then the adults involved in it are at risk of continuing what Kennedy calls the epistemology of schooling: "which understands the child as raw material for the production of an adult" (Kennedy, 2006, p. 160).

As indicated above, this critique of developmentalism usually goes hand in hand with an interest in dismantling the sharp dualism between childhood and

adulthood for the sake of bringing the perspective of the child into the discussion. But there is also an interest to do so, without saying that the child is the same as the adult, reducing thus the child to a miniature adult. It is from within this scope that Kohan invites us to appreciate the otherness of children instead of simply trying to include them into the adult world.

What might children expect from this “generous” inclusion in adults’ rationality? Their adaptation as “outsiders” to the center? A non-recognition of their “otherness”? A silence of their voices as children?” (Kohan, 2015, p. 49).

The idea here is that without challenging dominant practices, epistemologies and rationalities, the hope for inclusivity will always be betrayed. In this respect, without adequately reflecting on the practice of doing philosophy with children, we are at risk of continuing a marginalization of childhood which seems to be not just an accidental feature of Western philosophical thinking. A question that therefore emerges is the following: How are we to philosophize with children, without imposing our temporality and our ideas on their sayings? But also, how can we appreciate the alterity of children without turning them into an inferior ‘other’? What is at stake is a way of practicing philosophy with children that recognizes the alterity of childhood without however engaging in dehumanizing othering.⁶

the otherness of children

With the above questions in mind, I wish to turn to the work of Merleau-Ponty, and his discussion of expressive speech. But before saying more about this, I would like to quickly explain why I believe Merleau-Ponty can help us critically reflect on what a genuine intergenerational dialogue might require. Merleau-Ponty gives us some hermeneutic tools and principles that can help us take this decisive step toward the promise of intergenerational dialogue. This step requires a recognition that children dwell in the world in their own way, as well as an openness of the adult to this way of dwelling. In the lectures that he gave as chair of psychology and pedagogy at the Sorbonne, Merleau-Ponty invites his students to

⁶ We can here follow Waldenfels who claims that an openness to the ‘other’ requires a responsiveness that begins from acknowledging in the other that which “challenges us, calls upon us, or puts our own possibilities in question in an alienating, shocking, or amazing fashion...” (Waldenfels, 2011, p. 36).

challenging adult-centrism: speaking speech and the possibility of intergenerational dialogue

think about the child's way of being as a positive phenomenon and not simply as an adult in the making. Childhood for Merleau-Ponty is a complete state of existence (2012, p. 110), which means that children dwell in this world in their own fashion:

The child's consciousness is different from the adult's both in content and organization. Children are not, as was previously thought, 'miniature adults.' Thus, contrary to the negative account, the child's consciousness is not identical to the adult's in everything except for its incompleteness and imperfection. The child possesses another kind of equilibrium than the adult kind; therefore, we must treat the child's consciousness as a positive phenomenon. (2010, p. 131)

At the same time, Merleau-Ponty insists that we should not go to the extreme of reducing the child to an absolute other. "We must conceive of the child", he says, "neither as an absolute 'other' nor as the 'same'" (2010, p. 377). As Morris suggests, this methodological principle circumvents a double danger: 1) the danger of reducing the child to a modality of being that is beyond the reach of our understanding and therefore meaningless, and 2) the danger of projecting adult qualities to the child and thus treating the latter as a miniature and incomplete adult (Morris, 2017, p. 247).

This principle, I believe, can guide philosophy facilitators on the way that they deal with the contributions that children make during a philosophical inquiry. Identifying the child as a radical 'other', could render the child's contribution meaningless or insignificant in the eyes of the facilitator. In other words, the idea of radical otherness creates the problem of communication between 'us' and the 'other'. On the other hand, if the child is identified as a miniature adult, there is the risk of evaluating the child's contribution by adult standards. This brings with it the risk that the facilitator will consider a contribution interesting or relevant only to the extent that it resembles their own ideas or an adult-like perspective of the world. "This typical regard of adults causes short sightedness, because we only take care of what we can retrace in our actual experiences, not considering possibilities we have lost" (Meyer-Drawe, 1986, p. 49). For different reasons, in both instances children are not allowed to develop their voice and thus the possibility of genuine intergenerational dialogue is blocked.

In the previous part of this paper, I have tried to show that apart from its educational potential, P4wC carries with it the promise of genuinely including the

child's voice in philosophical dialogue. What is at stake concerning this tacit promise is to see the contributions of children as being valuable in their own terms and not valuable or interesting only to the extent that they move in the direction that an adult philosopher or teacher would want them to move. But how should we approach a child's contribution if we are to avoid reducing it to a beginner's first attempt to philosophize? I would like to suggest that one way of doing so is by acknowledging the expressivity involved in children's speech. Drawing on the work of Merleau-Ponty, I wish to suggest that expressivity should be acknowledged by the philosophy facilitator as a positive phenomenon that allows for the emergence of new meanings and can potentially open up new ways of relating to the world. To elaborate on this point, I will draw on Merleau-Ponty's reflections on language and the distinction between 'spoken speech' and 'speaking speech'.

speaking and spoken speech

Merleau-Ponty's reflections on language are an invitation to think of verbal expression as "a continuation and elaboration of bodily expression" (Kee, 2018, p. 419). Both bodily and verbal expression are for Merleau-Ponty ways in which humans relate to the world and others. With regard to verbal expression, he wishes to challenge the idea that speech is nothing but a tool that we use for the externalization of our internally formulated thoughts. Instead, he argues that speech can potentially give voice to our experience, and articulate our sense of the world, but also transform our thought and our sense of the world (Apostolopoulos, 2019, p. 46). In the interest of bringing forward the creative aspect of language, Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between an expressive and a habitual use of language. In particular, he distinguishes between 'spoken speech' and 'speaking speech'. Spoken speech refers to the habitual use of available significations which govern how we talk to one another, and which we deploy in trying to achieve our everyday tasks (Landes, 2013, p. 5). Speaking speech, however, refers to the expressive capacity of language which enables the expression of something as yet unarticulated in everyday language; something that might be unfamiliar both to the speaker and the listener (Halák, 2022, p. 420). Contrary to spoken speech which for the most part

challenging adult-centrism: speaking speech and the possibility of intergenerational dialogue

reiterates words and signs, speaking speech “opens a new field or a new dimension to our experience” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 188).

According to Merleau-Ponty, verbal expression is characterized by a paradoxical logic that involves using words whose sense is given, in an attempt “to catch up with an intention that in principle goes beyond them and modifies them...” (2012, pp. 408-409). As Landes suggests, the embracement of the paradoxical logic of expression by Merleau-Ponty, allows him to strike a balance between the idea of language as pure repetition and the idea of language as pure creation (2013, p. 128). The intention to speak cannot be reduced to the repetition of available signs, neither it can be thought as an act that creates meaning *ex nihilo*. However, Merleau-Ponty claims that the expressive aspect of verbal communication, tends to fall into oblivion because expressive words settle into fixed meanings through repetition and become readily available signs; like tools that we use in order to convey pre-formulated thoughts. This sedimentation of linguistic meanings, and the use of linguistic signs as readily available resources, is what brings about a tendency to understand language as an external vehicle that serves no other purpose than that of conveying pre-existing thoughts from one mind to another (Kee, 2018, p. 417).

Merleau-Ponty goes against this intellectualist take on the relationship between thinking and verbal expression. Verbal expression for him is not secondary to thought. On the contrary, he claims that verbal expression accomplishes thought (2012, p. 183.) One should quickly clarify here, that with this provocative claim, Merleau-Ponty does not wish to argue for a complete identification of thinking and verbal expression. He is not suggesting that only those capable of verbal expression are capable of thinking. What he rather wishes to do is to place thought back among the phenomena of expression (p. 231), by emphasizing how expression deepens and transforms our thinking. Merleau-Ponty’s claim, therefore, does not refer only to verbal expression but to all kinds of expression (bodily expression included). His specific claim about the accomplishment of thought in speech is an attempt to show that speech – just like other kinds of expression (e.g., gestures, artistic creations, etc.) – has the power to shape and transform how we experience the world and how we think. For Merleau-Ponty, there is no ‘inner’ self that thinks prior to expression (2012, p. 188).

To convey his point, Merleau-Ponty directs our attention to an experience that is familiar to writers “who begin a book without knowing just what they are going to include” (2012, p. 183). The most important achievement of the writer, he says, is not to record in writing a completed thought:

The operation of expression, when successful, does not simply leave to the reader or the writer himself a reminder; it makes the signification exist as a thing at the very heart of the text, it brings it to life in an organism of words, it installs this signification in the writer or the reader like a new sense organ, and it opens a new field or a new dimension to our experience (2012, p. 188).

Merleau-Ponty is alluding here to the process through which we often clarify or develop our thoughts only when we commit ourselves to an act of expression. The suggestion here is that the writer develops her thoughts through the act of writing. But the same also happens in acts of communication when we try, for example, to develop a new philosophical thought or argument. On such occasions we do not use language for the sake of externalizing a pre-existing thought. Rather, we develop our thoughts through our verbal expression, and as a result, we are quite often surprised by our own words (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p. 88).

The reciprocity of thinking and expression reveals itself also when we are at the receiving end of an act of expression. When we listen to another person expressing themselves, we do not translate the other person’s words into ideas or thoughts that we already find in our minds (Landes, 2013, p. 8). In genuine communication and listening, we understand more than what we are originally capable of thinking: “there is a taking up of the other person’s thought, a reflection in others, a power of thinking *according to others*, which enriches our own thoughts” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 184). In the case of a dialogue between two or more people, we could say that they all engage in a process of collective expression that opens new dimensions on how they experience the world and how they experience each other. The key to understanding what Merleau-Ponty has in mind is to think of words and sentences like works of art, in the sense that words have the power of revealing new ways of relating to our environment.

children and expressivity

Merleau-Ponty's distinction between speaking and spoken speech suggests that not every act of speaking is a gesture of expression in the sense that it gives birth to new meanings or new thoughts. Coming arguably close to Heidegger's idea of inauthentic communication as idle talk, Merleau-Ponty suggests that in certain circumstances, expressive language deteriorates. In fact, in the Sorbonne lectures, he describes the transition from the volatile language of the child to the more defined language of the adult as an impoverishment:

When we move from childhood to adulthood, it will not only be about moving from ignorance to knowledge, but after a polymorphous phase that contained all possibilities, it will be a passage to a purified, more defined language, but a much poorer one (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 37).

Merleau-Ponty describes the passage to objective language as a transition from ignorance to knowledge, but at the same time, he says that this transition signals a movement from a world of multiple possibilities to a world of restricted possibilities. I find this passage extremely relevant to the practice of doing philosophy with children. One might be willing to accept that familiarizing oneself with abstract concepts and ideas is an important aspect of engaging with philosophy. Indeed, the more experienced one is with philosophical ideas and concepts the more she can get out of the experience of philosophizing. However, Merleau-Ponty puts his finger on a certain lack that might accompany this path to knowledge. There is always the danger that the more dexterous we become in manipulating and using philosophical concepts, the more we risk limiting ourselves within a closed system of concepts and signs. From within this enclosed realm, there is the further risk that philosophizing is understood strictly as the practice of an abstract and disembodied rationality that shows no interest in concrete experiences (See Murris, 2000).

Contrary to such an understanding of philosophical *praxis*, Merleau-Ponty highlights the expressivity involved in philosophical language. In fact, he claims that it is in poets, philosophers, and a child's first words that one can find the manifestation of expressive speech. In the words of these three figures (the philosopher, the poet and the child) Merleau-Ponty finds the possibility of bringing into being a sense that exceeds readily available significations (2012, p. 203; p. 530). To put this differently, the words of these three figures carry with them the

possibility of giving expression to experiences that have remained unarticulated and possibly suppressed.

But how can we understand Merleau-Ponty's claim that children's words can be thought of as cases of expressive speech? One way of unpacking Merleau-Ponty's point is by thinking about children's drawings. In his Sorbonne lectures, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes how the affective and situational perception of children, reveals itself in their drawings, which depict the totality of the object from multiple perspectives at once (Weber, 2020). First of all, he challenges the assumption that children's flattened drawings are 'failed' or 'incomplete attempts to represent what they see. Instead of explaining children's drawings negatively – as the result of their not fully developed motor skills, he argues that a child's drawing gives expression to the affective relation that the child has to her environment:

The child's drawing springs from a mode of communication different from our own; one that is thoroughly affective... Their drawings are at one and the same time more subjective and more objective than those of adults: more subjective because they are liberated from appearance, and more objective because they attempt to reproduce the thing as it really is, while adults only represent things from one point of view: their own. Thus, we must admit that a drawing is an expression of the world for the child and never a simple imitation" (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p., 170).

The idea that a good drawing will abide to a geometrical perspective and portray an object 'realistically', betrays according to Merleau-Ponty, a distorted understanding of perception and our lived experience. In our active, embodied encounter with objects, landscapes, etc., we do not see things in the same way that a camera captures things. We do not stand still when watching things, we rather move our body and experience things from multiple perspectives. We also experience an object in relation to other objects and in relation to a background horizon (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 171).⁷ Influenced by Gestalt psychology, Merleau-Ponty argues for a holistic structure of experience which rests in meaningful configurations and cannot be reduced to the reception of mere sensory data (Carman, 2008, p. 19;

⁷ "When I see the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not merely the qualities that are visible from my location, but also those that the fireplace, the walls, and the table can 'see.' The back of my lamp is merely the face that it 'shows' to the fireplace. Thus, I can see one object insofar as objects form a system or a world, and insofar as each of them arranges the others around itself like spectators of its hidden aspects and as the guarantee of their permanence. Each act of seeing that I perform is instantly reiterated among all the objects of the world that are grasped as coexistent because each object just is all that the others 'see' of it." (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 171)

Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 148). He also emphasizes our affective relation to the world and others. The form of an object he says, cannot be reduced to its geometrical shape. Rather, the form of an object “speaks to all of our senses at the same time as it speaks to vision. The form of a fold in a fabric of linen or of cotton shows us the softness or the dryness of the fiber, and the coolness or the warmth of the fabric” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 238). How we perceive the world, therefore, is shaped by our embodied and affective experience (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 242; Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 156).

Merleau-Ponty invites us to appreciate the polymorphism of the child’s consciousness, which is in a way closer to concrete experience than the adult’s gaze (2010, p. 413). He suggests that in their drawings, children provide a more holistic view of reality, while the adult’s attempt to draw according to geometrical perspective is an abstraction which removes from the world those elements that cannot be seen from a fixed point of view (p. 169).⁸ The adult, therefore, “does not give us the situation with the thing as it is lived, but rather offers this situation projected onto paper as a simple ‘perspectival view’” (p. 418). Merleau-Ponty draws on modern painting (e.g., the plurality of profiles in Picasso’s paintings) for the sake of arguing that the ideal of geometrical perspective was invented in a specific historical period (i.e., the Renaissance) (p. 132), and it is “not something given in our perception which in fact involves many possible perspectives” (p. 386). Paintings like Picasso’s reveal multiple perspectives at once, and in doing so, they are closer to our lived experience of things even if they initially seem far removed from reality.

What is crucial, is that Merleau-Ponty finds the same expressive potential in speech. He argues that like their drawings, children’s words do not represent things, but rather express the relational and affective quality of their concrete experience. A word-sentence designating a train passing does not merely refer to the train as object but gives expression to the affective relation of the child to its environment (e.g., the train, the emotion released by its passage, etc). According to Merleau-Ponty a child’s word-sentence expresses a configuration of meanings (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 10).

⁸ “The child flattens in one drawing different aspects of the same object, aspects that the adult would declare incomprehensible” (Merleau-Ponty, 2010, p. 258)

The same can be said about words like ‘house’ or ‘friend’ that may carry with them much more meanings than we would initially think.⁹

Although it might be easier to discern this expressive element in a child’s drawing, Merleau-Ponty argues that expressivity is equally present in the articulation of words. Admittedly, it is more difficult to discern this expressive element in words, but this is so because words tend to sediment into fixed meanings, and it is easier to project a fixed meaning to the word ‘house’ when uttered by a child than it is in a child’s drawing of a house. If we ask five children to draw us a house, we will surely get different results, which might prompt us to reflect on the fact that each drawing is much more than just an attempt to ‘realistically’ represent a house. But the word ‘house’ uttered by 5 children in the same language inclines us to assume that they refer to the same thing, losing sight of the affectivity, relationality and multiple layers of meaning underlying the use of the word. The challenge, therefore, is to think of the child’s words like drawings and not to take words for granted as objects with fixed meanings.

Bringing this line of reflection back to the topic of P4wC, the challenge raised to the philosophy facilitator by Merleau-Ponty (albeit indirectly), is to think about the words of the students as drawings that can potentially reveal their own affective relation to their environment, i.e., their own way of experiencing the world. The community of philosophical inquiry functions indeed as such a place to the extent that it gives the opportunity to children to express and raise their own questions about issues that they consider important, and which are related to their experiences. Lipman and Sharp emphasize this aspect of P4C when they talk about a heterogeneous classroom that allows for a variety of styles and experiences and treats these diverse contributions as inherently worthwhile (Lipman and Sharp, 1978, p.86). To honour this aspect of P4wC, it is crucial to acknowledge in students the capacity to give expressions to new meanings, and the ability to articulate experiences of the world that may fall under the adult radar.

⁹ It should be mentioned here, that Merleau-Ponty is not suggesting that this expressive aspect of speech is completely absent in adults. In fact, he criticizes Piaget’s reflections on languages for eliminating from the adult use of language everything self-expressive (2010, p. 37). What Merleau-Ponty suggests is that expressivity gradually atrophies in adults as they get bogged down in using words as signs with fixed meanings. Expressivity remains alive in the words of poets, writers, philosophers or of the lover who first discovers her emotion (2012, p. 530).

Merleau-Ponty's discussion of speaking speech could be read as an invitation to think of the child not only as being intimately related to expressive language but also as having a privileged access to diverse possibilities and meanings; an access that fades away as we restrict ourselves to an objectified use of words and concepts. According to Merleau-Ponty, it is this access to the plenitude of being that the philosopher retrieves when she manages to bring into existence a new concept that carries with it new possibilities for thinking (2012, p. 203). Although Merleau-Ponty does not call for an identification of the child's expressive speech with philosophical thinking, he does imply that there is something child-like in the philosophers attempt to "reawaken a primordial experience anterior to all traditions" (2012, p. 530). This in turn can be understood as an invitation to think about children as agents of an expressive kind of speech that can help us uncover suppressed possibilities and meanings in the world that we are living.

Bringing this paper to a conclusion I would like to suggest that it is worth considering the community of philosophical inquiry as a space where students are encouraged to collectively practice what Merleau-Ponty calls 'speaking speech'. Acknowledging that children have their own way of dwelling in the world, appreciating their proximity to the expressive aspect of language, and alerting ourselves to the possibility that they may have a privileged access to diverse possibilities and meanings, are important steps toward the realization of the promise of dialogue between adulthood and childhood; a dialogue that does not demand from children to adjust their thoughts to adult expectations, but rather a dialogue where adults and children can learn from one another. For the latter to happen, however, facilitators might need to suspend their pre-conceptions and expectations and immerse themselves in the expressive 'now' of the child's philosophical inquiry.

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challenging adult-centrism: speaking speech and the possibility of intergenerational dialogue

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