

**FINDING AND FOSTERING THE PHILOSOPHICAL IMPULSE
IN YOUNG PEOPLE:
A TRIBUTE TO THE WORK OF GARETH B. MATTHEWS**

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Abstract: This article highlights Gareth Matthews's contributions to the field of philosophy for young children, noting especially the inventiveness of his style of engagement with children and his confidence in children's ability to analyze perplexing issues, from cosmology to death and dying. I relate here my experiences in introducing philosophical topics to adolescents, to show how Matthews's work can be successfully extended to older students, and I recommend taking philosophy outside the university as a way to foster critical thinking in young students and to improve the public status of the profession.

Keywords: adolescents, critical thinking, philosophy for children.

Most adults would not consider philosophy appropriate subject matter for young people, much less for children. This presumption could rest on multiple beliefs. One might worry that philosophy is simply too complex or abstract for a young mind to comprehend, given its ability to induce headaches and its tendency to use terms like "primordial temporalizing of temporality" (from Heidegger's *Being and Time*) and "synthetic a priori judgment" (from Kant's *First Critique of Pure Reason*). Or one might have a faint notion that philosophy is corrupting in some fashion; if Socrates, father of Western philosophy, could be put to death for corrupting the youth, and Plato expressed concerns about the wisdom of introducing anyone to philosophy even by the age of thirty, then perhaps, one might think, we ought to learn from the message of their experience.¹ Others are likely not have thought about the possibility at all, because the history of the American public educational system simply does not

¹ In book VII of the *Republic*, Plato worries that those introduced to philosophy too early are prone to "treating it as a kind of game of contradiction. They imitate those who've refuted them by refuting others themselves, and like puppies, they enjoy dragging and tearing those around them with their arguments. . . . Then, when they've refuted many and been refuted by them in turn, they forcefully and quickly fall into disbelieving what they believed before. And, as a result, they themselves and the whole of philosophy are discredited in the eyes of others" (539b-c [1992, 211]).

include philosophy. Yet in the face of growing evidence that children and young people can think philosophically and may benefit from being encouraged to do so—and the work of Gareth Matthews provides us with a good start on both the theoretical and practical dimensions of this evidence—we ought to rethink our justifications for presuming this mismatch.

In this article, I discuss how Matthews's work in philosophy for children and the philosophy of childhood has shaped my own work in the area, and has provided both a theoretical grounding and important practical guidelines for others interested in philosophy for children. His work has been an inspiration to me, and his fine books—such as *The Philosophy of Childhood*, *Dialogues with Children*, and *Philosophy and the Young Child*—have helped me to introduce many students to this delightful area of inquiry. What I have to say in this article will describe, demonstrate, amplify, and perhaps in some respects extend his valuable contributions to the area. I focus on three topics in particular: Matthews's unique method of introducing philosophy to children, extensions of Matthews's work with young children to adolescents and high school students, and the value of getting philosophy for children accepted more widely. First, though, let me show how one can come to see the linkage between philosophy and children.

Making the Connection: Philosophy and Children

Matthews's recognition of the links between philosophy and childhood began with his discussions with his own children and relied on his finely tuned philosophical ear. In discussing how the family cat got fleas, for instance, his four-year-old daughter wanted to know not simply that their cat probably got fleas from another cat but rather where that cat got fleas, and the same for the next cat, and so on. She noted, "But Daddy, it can't go on and on like that forever; the only thing that goes on and on like that forever is numbers!" (Matthews 1994, 1). The typical parent might express exasperation, but Matthews noticed a cosmological argument for the first flea in development.

Matthews's work was thus sparked by his ability to hear, in the lively and creative language of children, the buds of philosophical thinking. He critiques the common models of child cognitive/moral development (e.g., from Piaget and Kohlberg) that focus on rigid stages of maturational development, and that often presume, for instance, that very young children are incapable of reasoning or of unselfish behavior. Matthews considers how these theorists may be guilty of framing their studies to get the kinds of answers they expect, or perhaps of misinterpreting what children mean by their comments (see Matthews 1994, chaps. 2–5). At the same time, he recognizes that some advocates of philosophy for children may likewise see the world through the lens of their own theories,

interpreting everything children say as naturally and deeply philosophical, the equivalent of what one can expect from the historical figures of philosophy. Wonder and puzzlement are certainly the beginnings of philosophy, but not the end of it. As Matthews puts it, children's philosophical comments often "have a freshness and inventiveness that is hard for even the most imaginative adult to match. Freshness and inventiveness are not the only criteria for doing philosophy well: discipline and rigor should also count heavily. And children can be expected to be less disciplined and less rigorous than their adult counterparts. Still, in philosophy, as in poetry, freshness and inventiveness are much to be prized" (1994, 17). But with other advocates for philosophy for children, he notices that the circumstances of childhood seem to invite philosophical puzzlement. Young children face a daunting task of figuring out how the world around them works, and how they are situated within it. They are faced with rules and norms they have not yet internalized, and they want to understand the justification for them. Best yet, they have not yet been socialized to think of philosophical questions as unanswerable and therefore not worth consideration.

Matthews noticed not only that children often think philosophically and face real philosophical issues but also that good children's literature (e.g., *Frog and Toad Together* and *Many Moons*) can remind college-level students how philosophical thinking was part of their childhoods. If a college-level student is frustrated with the problems of philosophy and is wondering why people think such questions are interesting or worth analyzing, she can be helped to see that she too may have faced such concerns in her childhood, though likely in simpler language. Thus, Matthews notes that "in important part, philosophy is an adult attempt to deal with the genuinely baffling questions of childhood" (1994, 13).

Introducing Philosophy to Young Children

Matthews's method for introducing philosophy has been to start his discussions with young children by offering them a story beginning.² This story beginning might come from a previous discussion with those children, or it might be born from a particular philosophical topic that Matthews thinks the children will find interesting, ranging from questions about identity to language to ethics to the nature of time, and beyond. A simple example is the first chapter of *Dialogues with Children*—called "Happiness"—in which we observe a short bit of verbal sparring between brother and sister over an offhand comment about how "Aunt Gertie's flowers are happy again" following a good watering. The older sister offers a skeptical retort that flowers can't be happy because they can't feel at all. Matthews invites his students to consider how the dialogue might

² See *Dialogues with Children* for a wonderful collection of these story beginnings.

be continued. What would the characters be likely to say about the flowers' abilities, our ability to know them, and the nature of happiness? How could they best represent their distinctive positions? What kinds of dialogue would help the characters to clarify their points and move forward in their understanding of the topic at issue? Following the discussion with the students, he writes a completion of the story based on their ideas and arguments, and shares the completed story with them.

This style of introducing philosophy is quite appealing. Beyond the delights of talking philosophy, it offers the children an extra incentive to participate in the discussion, as they may well be presented with the reward of seeing their own words in the continuation of the story. Furthermore, rather than trying to demonstrate to them that children like them can have philosophical discussions, by offering them an already complete story it *involves* them in the storyline—they *are* the children who demonstrate their abilities. It invites them to participate in philosophical problem solving, rather than asking them simply to look in on an old debate.

I have often used the story beginnings in Matthews's *Dialogues with Children* to help college students draft lesson ideas for their sessions with students from fourth to twelfth grade.³ Students of all ages are drawn to, for example, the Ship of Theseus problem when it is presented in very simple words.⁴ At a California State University—Long Beach open-house day for elementary students, my students and I had a group of third graders debating this problem for a full hour, with rapt attention from each member of the group of about twenty students. Some parts of the group were ready to postulate the existence of something like the spirit of the ship, a nonphysical feature that could survive replacement of all its physical parts, so long as the replacement occurred gradually. They quickly made comparisons to human beings and human spirits. They recognized, however, the problem of what happens to the spirit of the ship if all the physical parts of the boat are destroyed, for instance, by a bomb or a mass of termites. They were also drawn, as Matthews reports his students were, to the idea of one essential feature for identity—the keel or the mast or the nameplate—but they noticed significant difficulties with defending that view. They were able not only to debate the merits of possible positions on identity regarding ships but also to see how this

³ These experiences took place through the California State University—Long Beach Center for the Advancement of Philosophy in Schools (CAPS) project that placed college-level students in partnership with local teachers to lead weekly philosophy sessions in student classrooms.

⁴ The Ship of Theseus problem looks at identity over time through the case of a ship that has one board after another replaced until none of the original boards remains. We can then question whether the ship is the same ship or a new one. We are also asked whether our intuition about the ship's identity changes if we find that someone has picked up all the old, discarded boards and put them together again in the original shape.

problem might affect issues in their lives. Is a Lego building that has been taken apart piece by piece and then exactly reconstructed still the work of the child who made the original? If you replace all the parts in your car over time, is it the same car, and should it really be called an “old” car? Their teachers remarked afterward how nervous they had been bringing a group of third graders to a session on philosophy, but they left asking for more references for philosophical materials suitable for children. Their students were fully engaged with subjects the teachers would have previously considered too abstract for them.

In addition to this enticing method of raising philosophical issues with children, Matthews should be commended for the range of topics he has discussed with children. I resoundingly concur with him when he says that children can be much more sophisticated in their thinking and their subjects for concern than adults often assume. In *The Philosophy of Childhood*, he discusses two much-loved children’s books that raise the issue of death, *Charlotte’s Web* and *Tuck Everlasting*. In these books, readers are helped to explore, respectively, the natural cycles of life and death, as well as socially mediated interference in them and the downside of breaking out of those cycles.

Although I haven’t had the opportunity to discuss these books with children, I was invited to a fourth-grade classroom—consisting mainly of students studying English as a second language, who were considered to be a “difficult” class—and was told that the class was reading *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*. In this story, an eleven-year-old Japanese girl is dying from leukemia, the “atom bomb disease.” A Japanese legend holds that any sick person who can fold a thousand paper cranes will get his or her wish to be healthy again. I had the students read aloud part of the story, and then asked them about what they found most interesting in that passage and how they would formulate questions about those issues. They had questions about the bomb and war, why anyone would do such a thing to another group of people, and so on, but their main concern was with death. They wanted to know why Sadako had to die, and this soon developed into the larger question of why anyone has to die. Rather than being shy about this topic, they were curious, and eager to float views they had heard from others as well as views they considered their own. Then, in discussing the thousand paper cranes, they pondered why Sadako would try to make them: Did she really believe she would be saved? What might the connection be between the cranes and being healthy again? They pondered whether she might be making the cranes as a way to appease other people, to show them hope, even if she had none herself. They also considered whether making cranes might be as good as anything else we can do when we face death, especially if it makes a grandmother feel hopeful. And then they thought more about the fact that we *all* face death eventually. They questioned whether what we do with our lives is the equivalent of making paper cranes—keeping

ourselves busy, providing hope to ourselves and others, and trying to make something beautiful in the process. The level of sophistication was impressive. I helped them, of course, in keeping track of what ideas had been thrown out, and in formulating their concerns in ways that linked them up to previous comments, but the students themselves raised the concerns and offered and evaluated possible answers.

Though we often shy clear of difficult or sensitive topics with children, probably because we ourselves find them perplexing and uncomfortable, in many cases children find such subjects quite alluring. We fail them if we presume they cannot handle the subject matter, and thereby withhold any avenue for them to demonstrate that we are wrong in this judgment.

Extensions to Adolescence

Matthews's work with children has mainly focused on the very young, whether they are his own four-year-olds or the ten-year-old fifth graders who offer their views in the stories presented in *Dialogues with Children*. Why so? Because they are fresh and still inspired, less likely to have been corrupted by the system or to have forgotten how to ask big questions. Just as college philosophy students may experience some reluctance or difficulty in giving up common assumptions, so Matthews has suggested that older students (e.g., those in high school and perhaps even middle school) may already be too old and trained against profound questioning to welcome the puzzlement of philosophy. He notes, for instance, that in his experience "spontaneous excursions into philosophy are not at all unusual for children between the ages of three and seven; in somewhat older children, though, even eight- and nine-year-olds, they become rare, or at least rarely reported. My hypothesis is that, once children become well settled into school, they learn that only 'useful' questioning is expected of them. Philosophy then either goes underground, to be pursued privately, perhaps, and not shared with others, or else becomes totally dormant" (Matthews 1994, 5). Matthews sees his own work with fifth graders as an attempt to show that even if philosophical thinking is no longer as spontaneous for ten-year-olds, a bit of creative discussion can help to nurture it.

Though Matthews doesn't exactly claim that the philosophical spirit is extinguished by the time one gets to middle or high school, his focus on younger children might suggest that he thinks it would be much more difficult to reignite (or perhaps less fun to do) at that age. Here I disagree (as does Stanley Cavell in his contribution to this symposium). Indeed, some philosophical topics, such as issues in autonomy and identity, seem quite well suited to adolescents, who are, after all, trying to figure out their place in the adult world. Adolescents are faced with the daunting task of simultaneously conforming to their peer group and carving out a unique identity. Similarly, they want to be part of the adult world but also

want to rebel and declare their independence from it. Though they might, I suppose, also be helped by the study of psychology or sociology of identity, in philosophy they find a way of grappling with identity that pushes them to the verge of the unanswerable. The greatest philosophical questions have no clearly right answers, and so adolescents are free to articulate their own perspectives on how a life identity is made, and to defend them to the best of their abilities. Much of my own work in philosophy for children has focused on this age group, although usually not under the banner of philosophy for *children*. Let me demonstrate how philosophy works somewhat differently with adolescents by describing several of my experiences.

First, because of the pressure for conformity in high school, and perhaps also because such ideas are not always well addressed in the standard high school curriculum, I found that high school students who attended voluntary summer programs in philosophy (at the University of Colorado Summer Philosophy Institute [described in Figueroa and Goering 1997] and at Stanford University's Summer Discovery Program) were thrilled to be united with their philosophical peers and felt they had been intellectually isolated at their own schools. In many cases, they nearly swooned when they first picked up their philosophy books and then again after the first session, when they discovered that all these other students were also eager to talk about, for example, identity and free will and determinism. They blossomed in the presence of respect for and genuine excitement about ideas.

In the Boulder philosophy camp—a weeklong, intensive, residential experience that included a fast-paced introductory survey of philosophical problems—students stayed up into the wee hours intensely debating whether we are free and in what sense, and what might preserve our identities over time. At 2 A.M. I had a girl come skipping down the hall to find me, shouting out that she'd figured out how to disprove Descartes on the indubitability of "I think, therefore I am." I might add that these students were not, in general, the top students from their schools. We explicitly asked for the philosophically inclined, rather than simply the students with the best grade point averages, and we told recommending teachers that we were interested in diversity. We had many students who were poor and/or who didn't get a lot of support for academic work at home. One student, we found out later, hitchhiked into town and slept in a city park the night before the camp started because he had no other way to get to us and wanted to make sure he arrived on time. This suggests that the philosophical yearning runs deep in at least some adolescent students, despite years of socialization that often treats philosophical discussion as a waste of time. (I should, however, recognize that some of the students who enrolled in the camp were recommended by excellent teachers who recognized a budding philosophical or skeptical spirit, and knew it was worth fostering.)

My experience also includes running a summer philosophy program at California State University—Long Beach, funded by a state of California workforce initiative and intended to reach out to “disadvantaged” high-school-age individuals who had significant academic difficulties, had already dropped out of school, or were under threat of being kicked out. Most of the students were African American, Cambodian American, or Hispanic American. Because the academic component was linked to a work initiative, the program was not residential, but we had the students on campus regularly for an intensive, three-week introduction to philosophy course. We included standard philosophical writing as well as poetry by, for instance, rapper Tupac Shakur. In discussing such issues as free will and moral responsibility, students brought chilling, real-life experiences from the street into their discussions. One of the teachers told me about a student who analyzed his own freedom in an episode when he pulled a gun on someone but didn’t want to use it. He pondered whether he would be forced to use it if the wrong thing happened but argued in retrospect that he could have controlled the circumstances himself by lowering the gun. He refused to believe that he was living in a fully deterministic world. The students also carefully analyzed the significance of friendships, gangs, and family for questions in ethics and character development. They recognized and helped us to recognize how the philosophical questions *matter*. And over the course of the program, they came to life in the classroom. The first day was difficult, and we wondered what we’d taken on. By the end, most of the students had bonded, were lively, and produced serious philosophical discussions.

One quiet student who had considered philosophy a bit suspect (but stuck with it because the workforce initiative required an academic component) kept his job and went on to community college the next year. He called his supervisor from the previous year and wanted to be reminded of the title of the book we had used in the course. He was taking a philosophy course at community college and wanted to look back at some of the entries from our text. We sent him a copy immediately. For a student who was at risk of not graduating and who did not appear to have any academic aspirations, we found this interest in books and ideas to be a sign of success.

I think in part these programs worked so well because they took the students out of their normal environment (where “cool” was defined by a lack of interest in such ideas) and allowed them to discover not only other like-minded kids but also adults who were willing to learn from them and with them, as well as to help them learn about philosophy and how to articulate their own views and arguments.

When we took philosophy into the regular classroom, where peer pressure is strong and getting a right answer (as opposed to discussing other possibilities) is rewarded, we initially found that we had to work much harder to bring students out philosophically. In Boulder, the

Philosophy Outreach Program of Colorado sent pairs of graduate students across the state to conduct one-day or one-session workshops on philosophy, as a way to advertise the summer program and also as a way to reach students who couldn't commit to a week in the summer. We chose topics that we thought would most easily grab local students (e.g., animal welfare and the ethics of hunting in a Western slope town in which the grocery store was lined with stuffed and mounted heads of elk, deer, moose, and the like) or that we knew teachers were already covering in their regular schedule (though not usually in a philosophical manner, e.g., talking about the state of nature and social contract theory in an English class reading William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*). In Long Beach, we had a more formalized system of pairing senior-level undergraduates and/or grad students with local teachers to lead weekly philosophical discussions in fourth- to twelfth-grade classrooms. The college students received college credit for their efforts. Because they attended weekly, we tried to make sure their discussions were well linked to materials the teachers were already covering, so that we enriched the students' understanding of the curriculum as opposed to adding an extra subject to an already busy schedule.

We knew that in their home classrooms students were very likely also trying to figure out how to define their unique identities, but we quickly realized that talking about this problem is intimidating, especially in front of other students. In many classrooms, students were initially quite reticent to speak out. But we found that if we started with a topic close to their hearts (what else but *love?*), and showed them that we were equally perplexed by the concept and struggling with it ourselves, they blossomed. So we led them through discussions from Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* and selections from Tolstoy's novella *The Kreutzer Sonata*, and got them arguing about what love is. Interestingly, after they had been drawn out on such a subject, they quite easily moved into other philosophical areas. Their comfort level with philosophy transferred across topics. In this sense, Matthews's comments about the importance of admitting our adult perplexity are significant. The students needed us to share our own confusion and passion for the issues, and to treat them as co-inquirers. Because of their unfinished nature, philosophical problems help to put even the "coolest" of teenage students into the ring.

The Value of Taking Philosophy Outside the Academy

Most of the children and young people I have had the pleasure of working with initially have only a very limited understanding of what the term "philosophy" means, if they have any at all. When I asked the fourth graders in Long Beach what philosophy was, no one knew. I endured some painful silence, and encouraged them to venture guesses. A brave soul in the back raised her hand and offered a possibility—"Is it a

disease?” I quickly agreed, in that it can infect you and be difficult to get rid of once you’ve been exposed to it, but I noted that it is not the sort of thing many of us really care to treat or to try to cure.

When we introduced the subject with fifth graders in Long Beach, we gave them some examples of the difference between a factual question and a philosophical question (“What time is it?” versus “What is time?”). Then we asked them to reflect for a bit and to write down a list of the philosophical questions they had wondered about. The lists produced were impressive: “What is God, and if he made everything, who made him?” “Why do people hate each other?” “What are numbers, and where do they come from?” And so on. We tried to convert the God questions into more general questions (e.g., “Does everything have a beginning?”) to avoid concerns about the place of religion in a public school, and the students were eager to enter into these discussions. With only a few minutes of introduction, then, students can be helped to see and to resonate with the kinds of concerns philosophers address.

The study of philosophy can help students to develop their thinking in order to make it both more critical and more creative. Students are challenged to question assumptions, analyze concepts, look at relations between claims and conclusions, evaluate arguments, consider analogies, offer examples, raise counterexamples, and consider the further implications of claims and arguments. Furthermore, they learn behavioral skills in the process as well. A good philosophical discussion requires patience, good listening, careful questioning, and an openness to consider new ideas and respond to them reasonably. Perhaps the most important benefit is that students deepen their understanding of such fundamental concepts as justice, ethics, identity, freedom, and knowledge.

Surprisingly, when we initially met with administrators at participating schools, many of them thought we should rename our program and lose the “philosophy” label. They preferred “higher thinking skills” or “critical thinking.” They worried that parents might be concerned about philosophy, because it sounds too much like religion or simply because it sounds abstract and they do not understand it themselves. We stood our ground, insisting that we would be happy to invite in any parents worried about the nature of our discussions and allow them to observe the classes, and that we wanted students and parents alike to get to know philosophy by its own name. We also made sure that participating teachers had a good understanding of what we meant by philosophy by hosting weekend workshops prior to the classroom sessions. It worked, and the program has made a name for philosophy in the community.

Although the United States has pockets of philosophy for children across the country,⁵ the idea has not taken off as successfully here as it has

⁵ The best known is Mathew Lipman’s Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) at Montclair State University in Montclair, New Jersey. Other programs or

in other parts of the world (e.g., in Brazil, Mexico, Norway, South Korea, Israel, and Australia, among others).⁶ One reason for this, I think, is that academic philosophy doesn't have such a public reputation in the United States. Major figures in American philosophy generally don't have the name recognition and cachet of European intellectual figures. Yet professional philosophers and graduate students could do much for the reputation of philosophy by presenting themselves outside the walls of the university, in the classrooms of children, and elsewhere, and by talking in simple terms about the profound questions of philosophy. Along the way, they may well gain much from it themselves, in the reinvigoration of their philosophical spirits. Talking philosophy with children reminds us of how pressing these problems can feel, how exciting they are to address, and how creative we need to be in order to answer them satisfactorily. In my view, a good philosopher not only works her way through complex concepts and arguments in the most recent journals but also knows how to step back from the minutiae to appreciate the grounding or frame of the problem. To the extent that this task is difficult for us, we stand to gain from philosophical discussions with young people who have not yet divided their worlds into more rigid disciplines and set patterns of thinking.

Having a figure like Matthews in the classroom no doubt did wonders for the public reputation of philosophy around his home of Amherst, Massachusetts—not only because of the stimulating discussions he has led with children but also through the example he presents of what a professional philosopher might be: academically rigorous and well respected, and at the same time able to talk clearly and openly with young children. His work serves as an admirable model of engaged scholarship and public commitment to philosophy.

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faculty members with an interest in philosophy for children can be found at Mount Holyoke, Western Michigan University, Michigan State University, University of Colorado—Boulder, University of Washington, University of Hawaii, California State University—Long Beach, Western Oregon University, California State Polytechnic University Pomona, and other universities.

⁶ For a more complete list, see the International Council of Philosophical Inquiry with Children (ICPIC) at www.icpic.org/

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