Ethics for Children and Ethics for Adults?

Dieter Schönecker

For Emily

((1)) Is there a difference between ethics for children and ethics for adults? Unless we advocate a relativistic ethics in which case what is good and right would be relative to the age of the acting subjects we are prone to think not: what is good is good and what is right is right no matter how old you are. So it appears that the ethics we teach adults should be the same ethics we teach children. However, there are two problems. First, what ethics do we teach adults? Second, how much ethical receptivity do children possess?[1]

1. Philosophy for children and didactics of philosophy for children

((2)) Before I deal with these two questions, let me make some general remarks on philosophy for children (ethics for children surely is part of philosophy for children; so whatever I say about the latter applies to the former as well). Many sciences and humanities have their didactics. For example, the didactics of German literature is concerned with the question of which German literature should be taught at schools and colleges, and how it should be taught, as well as why and for what purpose. The subject of the didactics of German literature is not literature itself. In that sense, the didactics of German literature is not part of German literature; it is different from the activity performed by those who work in the field of Deutsche Literaturwissenschaft. Similarly, philosophy for children appears not to be part of philosophy but of didactics.

((3)) This becomes evident in light of the following questions that are basic for (the didactics of) philosophy for children: What should children learn in philosophy? How can they learn or do philosophy? Why should they learn or do philosophy? Obviously, the answers to these questions depend on what we mean by 'philosophy' and what by 'children'. In history, 'philosophy' has been the label for many different things. For present purposes I take philosophy to be what students learn in philosophy departments. What they study (and what philosophers in the 21st century do) is threefold: they think about certain questions and problems (and suggest answers) that are generally considered 'philosophical' (the fact that there are new problems, that some have disappeared, and that sometimes it is not clear what problems are 'philosophical', does not mean that there are no core problems); they learn what other philosophers in the history of philosophy have said about these problems (the fact that sometimes there is disagreement on who should be considered a philosopher does not mean that there is no agreement that Plato is a philosopher); and they learn how to read, argue, and judge clearly and distinctly (the fact that students in other disciplines learn that as well does not mean that there is not something particular about the way philosophers do that). Regarding the term 'children' in 'philosophy for children', it has to be clear, quite obviously, which target group we are referring

to. Depending on their age, sex, genetic inheritance, and sociocultural origin, different children have different talents, skills and interests. (For present purposes I take children to be no older than fourteen.) Even if there is agreement as to the basic principles and contents of teaching philosophy to children, the actual way that one teaches it would still be very heterogeneous, depending on those factors. (A six-year-old from a poor neighbourhood in Los Angeles will think differently about ethical or logical questions than a well-off twelve-year-old from Hamden, Connecticut; and, of course, it also matters where philosophy is taught to children: in private, in a group, in daycare or preschool, etc.). So even if one has differentiated adequately, the question concerning how to teach philosophy to children remains open. Thus, to know what should be taught and for what purpose still does not imply that we know what method and style we should use in teaching philosophy.

((4)) Now, the question of how to teach philosophy is not a philosophical question proper, but one of education (pedagogics). Of course philosophers may think about suitable methods and didactical elements for teaching philosophy to children. But in doing so, they depend on knowledge provided by pedagogics, which in turn is depending on psychological knowledge (and that again is increasingly dominated by anthropological, biological, and neurological research). So the answer to the question how to teach hinges upon experience (empirical knowledge). Given that philosophy is largely a nonempirical activity, it cannot be a primary concern and task of philosophers to reflect upon that question; and if they do it, they don't do it as philosophers. Under the condition that philosophy for children is something done by philosophers, the problem of how to teach philosophy to children cannot be solved by philosophers (alone). But then it cannot be a philosopher's job to renovate education (23ff.). (Besides, I cannot see what is typical of philosophy for children in what Lipman calls 'community of inquiry'. All the features of such a community are good for almost all kinds of teaching, not just for teaching philosophy; so the 'community of inquiry' really is a topic for general didactics or education, but certainly not for philosophy for children. Even if it were a philosopher's job to deal with such very general features of education, little would follow from that for the way we actually would have to teach. And the latter question (how to realize those general features in actual teaching) presupposes so much empirical (psychological) knowledge that it cannot be answered by philosophy.)

((5)) So if there is any need to 'renovate' education, this is not the task of philosophy proper; it's the task of the didactics of philosophy for children. However, Lipman does not only argue that education needs to be renovated; the same is true, he claims, for philosophy (14ff.). But is that so? What Lipman calls creative, critical, and caring thinking has always been part of philosophy. Caring thinking is ethics, and critical thinking is logic and theory of argumentation in a broad sense (I am not sure what creative thinking is, though). Therefore it is not about 'redesigning' philosophy, but about what and how we teach philosophy to children; it really is a matter of redesigning the didactics of philosophy. Thus it is part of the didactics of philosophy for children to decide whether we should

concentrate on contents (historical philosophers and philosophies) and/or on problems or on formal skills (Lipman obviously prefers the latter, which he calls higher-order thinking: I agree with that). Similarly, there is no 'wall' (20) between philosophy and thought-provocative concepts, but there is between the latter and the didactics of philosophy. In short: it is not about the remodelling of philosophy so as to ready it for children's uses (22), but about remodelling the way we teach philosophy; it's about didactics.

2. The normative drive of teaching ethics

((6)) All of this might seem to be just a matter of terminology. That it is not shows in Lipman's treatment of the ethical dimension (36ff.). The crucial question is: What would it mean to say that there is something like an ethics for children as opposed to an ethics for adults? But what is an ethics for adults? It is a matter of fact that ethics is a discipline represented by very different theories. There is deontological ethics, virtue ethics, consequentialism, cognitivism, non-cognitivism, relativism, objectivism, supernaturalism, etc. Which theory or theories shall we teach? When it comes to ethics for adults this problem seems at least partly to be solvable by the fact that one can present them all from a fairly objective perspective; adults are able to understand different theories and to come to their own conclusions. Fair enough. But what exactly is a 'fairly objective perspective'? I believe there is no way to be not in an ethical position; at least one will be in a position that has, nolens volens, ethical implications: first, one cannot present a theory without judging it; even presenting its pros and cons is impossible without weighing the arguments. Second, and what is more important: to say that one ought to teach ethics in a nondogmatic or even pluralistic way is itself an ethical position that is in need of justification, just like any other ethical position. One cannot help having an ethical stance. Thirdly, given the way the world and the discipline of ethics really is, I want my children to learn my values; if they don't learn mine, they learn someone else's. They cannot help having an ethical stance, either.

((7)) Different (metaethical) theories in moral philosophy lead to different (moral) practical results. We all agree that we want our children not only to reflect upon ethical questions, but also to act morally right: they shall be good people (this, of course, is what all parents want, more or less, not just parents that happen to be philosophers). But then again: what is morally right? My point is that philosophy for children needs to be normative. Of course, there is a pragmatic difference between dogmatism and openness to different positions and arguments. So I do agree that we need to take pains in being objective (and in that sense I would accept Lipman's idea of the 'ethical inquiry approach'). But there is a reason for this that itself needs to be legitimated and for the reasons given above there is a limit to being 'open'. In that sense there cannot be a difference between ethics for children and ethics for adults.

3. Small ethics for small people?

((8)) But Lipman argues that there is indeed a difference between ethics for children and ethics for adults (41). He points out that children of different ages have different ethical receptivities (as I would call them). How much ethical theory are children able to comprehend and, more important, how much ethical insight can they have at different ages and with different capacities? We need to make three points here: 1. The question of what ethical theories we shall teach partly depends on how much ethical theory and ethical thinking children can grasp (in this Lipman is right). But what do children understand? What do we know about the moral development of children of different ages and sexes in different cultures? As I said, this question is not a question for philosophy proper; and even if it were, there is little agreement about what the right answer would be. So moral philosophers interested in moral philosophy for children need to realize that they are dependent on a science that is not theirs and which is highly disputed. 2. As mentioned before, we face the problem that there are very different ethical theories (and values, consequently); but at least adults are able to understand different theories and to come to their own position. However, that certainly is not true for small children (if it is true for any children in the way I understand this term). They don't understand ethical theories as such (i.e. as a reflective position in a strict sense); what they do understand, though, are values and rules, and those we have to teach them. But this we have to do from a certain perspective (see above). 3. Lipman, however, appears to make a virtue from necessity. For from the fact that children of different ages learn and understand differently he concludes that in different situations different ethical theories can be used: "This should help to explain why this statement concerning philosophical ethics does not rule out, say, deontological ethics at the expense of teleological ethics: there may be a plurality of situations that call for one or the other of the two." (41) So when a child of a certain age is in a situation x, it may or must think and act along the lines of, say, consequentialism; if it is in a situation y it may or must think and act along the lines of, say, deontological ethics; or it may even somehow combine these different approaches. This calls for some kind of pluralistic, hyperpragmatic ethics which Lipman obviously seems to prefer: "Success in problem-solving, then, is the criterion that unites all the various approaches that can be integrated into a single, philosophical, primary school curriculum" (42); so in "philosophy for children, various strands from different ethical approaches are braided together in ways that conform loosely to the problem-solving paradigm" (43). But that makes little sense. First, I don't see how such different ethical approaches, some of which are clearly contradictory to each other (consequentialism and non-consequentialism), can be "braided together". Second, how do we state or declare an ethical 'problem-solving' as 'successful'? To solve an ethical problem could mean to find the right solution (and when we have found the right solution it is 'successful'); but to do so presupposes the application of a theory, thus an ethical position. But which one? Not all of them; for then again we would need an ethical position. The way out of this circle seems to be, thirdly, some kind of "discourse-based ethics" (5) (at least partly in the sense of Habermas, cf. 55). But this is an ethical theory just like any other (even if it takes the floor as a metatheory, as it were) and thus in need of justification as well.

4. Conclusion

((9)) It is probably true that in many cases different ethical theories lead to the same or similar results. But there are counterexamples (abortion, vegetarianism, euthanasia, just war, etc.), and even in basic values like solidarity or helpfulness there is a wide latitude for interpretation. So we cannot avoid taking a position (this is a problem of ethics itself, not of philosophy or ethics for children). Also, ethics for adults is not different from ethics for children (unless one advocates a relativistic position); there is no need to renovate philosophy or ethics when it comes to children. What is different is the way we teach philosophy. But this is a problem that cannot be solved by philosophers, at least not by philosophers alone. It presupposes empirical and, moreover, controversial theories and data. So there is not only no ethics for children as opposed to ethics for adults; in a strict sense there is no philosophy for children proper. There is only didactics of philosophy and ethics for children.

Note

Address

Dr. Dieter Schönecker, Universität Halle-Wittenberg, Institut für Philosophie, Schleiermacherstr. 1, D-06114 Halle/S

Ergänzungen: Matthews, Vielfalt, Gespräch

Helmut Schreier

Summary: Lipman's brief account of "Philosophy for Children" as his accomplishment, impressive and largely in accord with the movement's genesis as they are, is fleshed out from a German perspective by a reminder of the role of Gareth Matthews in spreading his message of "philosophizing with children" in Germany. The greater flexibility of Matthews' concept may have contributed to the wide variety of approaches and methods now available to educators in Germany. A speculation as to the further development along these lines is offered: The priority of more ordered richness in communication over philosophy.

((1)) Matthew Lipman verbindet seine Überlegungen zur Philosophie für Kinder mit einer knappen historischen Darstellung seines eindrucksvollen Lebenswerks. "Philosophy for Children" (P4C) ist schließlich der Name des von ihm gegründeten und geleiteten Unternehmens: Lipman war es, der mit seinen Romanen für Kinder die Fragen der Philosophiegeschichte von den siebziger Jahren an in viele Klassenzimmer und – so möchte ich annehmen – in das Vorstellungsrepertoire vieler Kinder hineingetragen hat; Lipman war es, der mit seinen Lehrerhandbüchern und seinen Fortbildungskursen das Projekt den Bedingungen des Schulunterrichts angepaßt hat, in der Absicht, den Schulbetrieb zu verändern; Lipman hat mit Hilfe von Agenturen wie ICPIC (International Council for Philosophical Inquiry with Children) für die weltweite Verbreitung der Idee gesorgt, und er hat mit seinen Zeitschriften und auf zahlreichen Konferenzen in aller Welt immer wieder ein Forum geschaffen und den Interessierten zur Verfügung gestellt, von dem viele der besten Köpfe angezogen und für die Sache gewonnen wurden. Als ihn der damalige Direktor der UNESCO-Abteilung für Philosophie und Ethik, Yersu Kim, auf einer Expertenkonferenz zum Thema in Paris im Frühjahr 1998 mit der Bemerkung vorstellte, Mr. Philosophy for Children sei selber anwesend, entsprach dies der mehrheitlichen Wahrnehmung der dort Versammelten. Mir erscheint dies Bild in drei vielleicht eher marginalen Punkten ergänzungsbedürftig.

((2)) In Deutschland haben die Bücher, Vorträge, Geleitworte von Gareth Matthews (Philosoph an der Universität von Massachussetts in Amherst) eine breite Wirkung entfaltet. Vielleicht darf die folgende Passage aus der Replik Detlef Horsters in dieser Zeitschrift auf die Kritik an seinem Grundsatzartikel zum Thema "Philosophieren mit Kindern" aus dem Jahre 1993 (Heft 3, 436) als repräsentativ für die Wirkung von Matthews gelten:
"Die Einwände von von Berg .... geben mir Gelegenheit, noch einmal deutlich zu machen, daß ich die Texte von Lipman nehme, um mit ihnen in der Weise umzugehen wie Matthews es uns mit seinen eigenen Geschichten vorführt. Insofern neige ich der Art mit Kindern zu philosophieren zu, wie ich sie von Matthews kennengelernt habe."
Matthews geht von den Fragen der Kinder aus, aber auch von den in Kinderbüchern enthaltenen philosophischen Problemen, um mit Kindern ins Gespräch zu kommen. Wenn er selber eine Geschichte konstruiert, so gibt er den Anfang mit der Problemstellung vor und entwickelt dann den Fortgang entsprechend den Aussagen der Kinder gewissermaßen als literarisches Protokoll. Die Philosophiegeschichte selbst mit ihren Phasen und Konzepten nutzt er als Steinbruch, gegenüber den verwunderten und vielleicht auf Verwundung hindeutenden, beunruhigten Fragen der Kinder ist sie sekundär. Eine Didaktisierung der Gespräche mit Kindern hat er nicht angestrebt, das Einschleusen des Philosophierens mit Kindern in den Schulunterricht hat er nicht versucht, institutionalisierte oder systematisch betriebene Formen hat er vermieden. Daß er in Deutschland m.E. anregender und nachhaltiger für die Verbreitung der Sache gewirkt hat als Lipman, könnte mit der freundlichen Offenheit zusammenhängen, die er verkörpert und die auch in seinen Schriften sich ausdrückt: Sie wirkt ansteckend, anstiftend. Und er setzt eine Prämie auf Flexibilität und Vielfalt. Andererseits ist Matthews auch immer wieder in Deutschland mit seinen Vorträgen persönlich präsent gewesen, seit er im Sommersemester 1976 an drei deutschen Universitäten (Freiburg, Köln, Münster) erstmals über das "Philosophieren mit Kindern" referiert hat.

((3)) Die von Lipman beschriebene Methode der Philosophie für Kinder stellt in gewisser Hinsicht den Stammbaum und Königsweg dessen dar, was man als Didaktik von P4C bezeichnen kann. Der Dreischritt ,Lektüre – Infragestellung – Diskussion' ist allerdings in dem Maße ausdifferenziert und ergänzt worden, in dem sich das "Philosophieren mit Kindern" ausgebreitet hat. Auf dem Lehrbuch- und Lehrmittelmarkt werden für diese Sektion Produkte unterschiedlicher Herkunft angeboten. Die Lektüre zieht phantastische Kurzgeschichten und Textcollagen mit ein, Bilder und Gegenstände sind als Ausgangspunkte verfügbar. Das Universum von Fragen wird

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