

A Philosophy for Thought: From the Classroom, from Childhood, from Philosophy Itself

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In this work, we will explain what could be called a “philosophy for thought,” although a redundancy emerges here because philosophy implies thought. From our perspective, the kind of thought to which we are referring comes from places such as the classroom, childhood, and philosophy itself.

We have observed from the exercise of teaching, from cases we have seen in Mexico at the preschool, primary, secondary, and preparatory levels, that the classroom is a difficult space for thought development. This is due to the prevalence of a particular style of informative interaction between teachers and students. Generally speaking, teachers are more concerned with informing students about the contents of the subjects they teach than about helping students think about those subjects. Thus, students develop memory skills rather than reasoning skills. Conversely, philosophy and childhood are privileged locations for thought. Paraphrasing Heidegger, while language is the dwelling of the being, philosophy and childhood are the spaces where language registers. If we accept that there is an interaction between language and thought, then philosophy and childhood are dwellings of thought. What we are suggesting is to convert these privileged places of thought into components of the classroom, where lessons to be learned are subjected to the logic of thought.

Indeed, philosophy among teachers has fluctuated from barely present to totally absent.¹ Several reasons explain this fact, but we shall refer to only two. First, given the advances of science and technology regarding childhood and teaching and learning processes, some people seem to consider philosophy as mere speculation without content, as an excessive burden to academic development processes. A second reason is the widespread belief that, in the upper levels of education, students expect to *learn* philosophy rather than *do* philosophy, so they focus on studying philosophical systems (from pre-Socratic to Hegel, or from Russell to Quine) in order to prepare themselves for the final exam or to prepare extensive dissertations about obscure but respected topics in order to get an academic degree.² In both cases, neither the professors nor those who create the curriculum wish to know anything about philosophy. The underlying supposition here is that philosophy can only have meaning in the faculties of philosophy and letters, where a self-consuming process occurs. In the university faculty, a philosophy is created that can only be consumed by the very students themselves. With this supposition in mind, philosophy has no space for action in the classroom, and even less so in basic education.

Another argument used to exclude philosophy from the school is that philosophy is embedded in the legal foundations that sustain the educational system, so the teacher’s educational practices in their classrooms are already imbued with this philosophy. This is true, but it is not true that this philosophy is founded in thought.

For this philosophy to be founded in thought, two things are required: to have a concept of childhood and to articulate philosophy for the development of thought.

Why speak, then, of a philosophy for thought? From among the multiple arguments that can answer this question we have selected one, which we believe is the most vital. It is based upon the “otherness” of children,³ a concept that is cancelled by the development of childhood sciences.⁴ At the same time, this argument suggests the need for a philosophy for thought, because this is the only path that allows us to find ourselves with the “otherness.” In this context, our proposed philosophy for thought, in its relationship with childhood, has as its starting point the studies of hermeneutics — and, more precisely, the hermeneutics of childhood. Hermeneutics has, as its basic objective, the recognition of the child as “another” — neither a small adult, nor the beginning or the future of anything, just “another” — with the same abilities of building his or her future and transforming his or her historical-social environment. But let us reconsider the argument of how it was possible to conceal the “otherness” due to historical-social conditions, and how it is possible for “otherness” to appear since it appeals to such conditions.

Recognition of the “other” was accompanied by profound socio-cultural changes, changes that formed the backbone of theoretical debates and everyday practices of recognition of “otherness.” To discover and to recognize the “other” has always implicated a meticulous dissection of the being — a dissection of his or her beliefs, knowledge, and worldview. This dissection always brought about two results — what appeared was incomprehensible for the cultural surgeon, and would then have to be cut and rebuilt as authorized by surgery, or it was no longer incomprehensible when it became encompassed within the categorical framework of the authorized view. Both results conceal “otherness.” But, the “other” ended up attracting dissection.⁵ Then, “otherness” is recognized. However, there are human groups whose “otherness” has not been recognized — children.⁶ True, for some time scientific research and dissection has classified that group, and has made it visible to us. These scientific researches, which revolve around the child in staggering spontaneity, provoke a view of continuity, which conceals the emergence of his or her “otherness.”

The child, as “another,” does not yet enter into the space of everyday life or the scholastic space. However, analytic “models” that conceal his or her “otherness” have been introduced. Such “models” include a psychoanalyzed, behaviorally uniform, and psycho-genetically standardized child.⁷ The contention of the “otherness” of the child is what makes this philosophy for thought necessary when considering childhood.

How is it possible to recognize the child as “another?” A feasible answer might be by taking into account a child’s inquisitive nature regarding his or her world. Children are able to ask questions because they lack many meanings that the adult culture has already internalized (because adults do not ask questions in astonishment and wonderment). From this perspective, we may submit the theory that it is impossible to ask questions about everything. Consequently, we ask questions only

in some places and regarding some things. Children are not that way — they ask questions about everything and they do it anywhere and at any time. In their questions, children exhibit abilities that imply thought. Recovering the child as “another” implies taking his or her questions and intellectual abilities seriously. A child’s intellectual abilities cover a wide area, but they only operate where there is a space that allows the formation of a community of inquiry. This community implies the development of four key skills — research, conceptual development, interpretation, and critical readiness. With these skills, a wide range of questions is possible. These skills allow the use of the logic of the question, which implies philosophical questions just precisely where we seek the meaning of what the world is asking us. For example, children display the following abilities:

- To ask: Although asking questions is part of a child’s routine life style, it is necessary to create a space where questions will blossom. In this sense, Gadamer is right when he says there is no method that teaches us to ask questions, that questions come to us like witticisms, suddenly and without any preparation.⁸ However, in order for witticisms to come, a space is needed for them to occur. The same thing happens with a child’s questions. Thus, a space is also needed where there is a connection. Additionally, to create this space for questioning is to accept the child as “another,” as his or her essence is to question.
- To give answers: Among children, this process occurs spontaneously. Among them, questions and answers pop up and blend into multiple forms of expression. You must dare to follow the logic of children’s questions and the multiple modes of expression of their answers in order to assume their radical “otherness.”
- To formulate a hypothesis: In the child, hypothetical thought is the main issue. With this type of thought, he or she builds worlds that are beyond adult comprehension. You could say that this hypothetical thought makes the radical nature of their questions possible. Not knowing this prevents the adult from assimilating the importance or radicalism of these questions.
- To seek similarity: Questions are asked to look for similarities among things. Through this process, children move from a far away space to something more familiar or from a familiar space to another that is more distant and is out of the question for adults. Children find similarities between their toys and various objects of the world, or they give life to objects. This process is part of the thought of similarity and is not part of emotional thought as maintained by anthropologists. Consequently, paying attention to the building of similarities is paying attention to the essence of childhood.
- To recognize the cause-effect relationship: This ability allows children to begin a process of understanding consequences and separating from their natural world. Understanding consequences means knowing that everything happens in their surroundings for some reason or cause. This

understanding helps children achieve intimacy with their world. While separating means accepting that, in the space of human relations, the relation of cause and effect does not apply given the complexity of human life.

- To achieve a perspective: This is an ability that is difficult to find in the adult world as our actions are carried out to solve situations from one moment to the next. Meanwhile, children operate with a perception of the world as a whole, and as this occurs, a multitude of perspectives open up, so that we can say that many perspectives are achieved, making it possible for them to have a wider view of the world. This is something the adult world does not take into consideration. Adults even refuse to take part in solving problems when several perspectives are necessary.
- To develop analogies: This is an ability that allows children to get to know about things that are not present but are similar to familiar things. In fact, this is a method used for learning about the world. Many questions are developed about the bias of analogies, but as adults do not recognize them, they arrive at the conclusion that they are trivial questions.
- To create models: Children often build models in order to learn about the world that surrounds them. These models are often expressed in terms of analogies or hypothetical thought. Their models do not attempt to miniaturize reality. They attempt to model reality in a different mold. Because of that, they are able to talk with their toys or with things in nature. We call this animism. We do not recognize that it is an ability peculiar to children, and that they use this ability to understand their world.
- To create metaphors: Children, in their close relationship with the world, are capable of concentrating information into few words. If we understand these words, we can see a wealth not accessible by any other means. For example, what do children mean when they say “it opened my mind?” In this metaphor, a great deal of information is concentrated about the readjustment, movement, expansion and many more things that occur in infantile subjectivity. We preconceive all this in a metaphor, assuming that it is something that reveals a world.
- To relate the part to the whole: Given the syncretism between the world and children, there is a peculiar relation between the sum total and its parts. This relationship creates certain perplexities in adults. For example, a young girl may look for her “favorite animal” in the zoo, while other children look for a bear, a giraffe, an elephant, or a monkey as their favorite animal. Evidently, for the young girl, the fact that her favorite animal was not in that zoo does not mean that it is not in some other zoo. Meanwhile, adults would say that there is a categorical error here because the whole is confused with its parts. Again, it is necessary to assume the child’s perspective in the question or responses about the world.
- To create opposing examples: For children, the use of questions is fundamental, since children express, with questions, the doubts created by

the use of language and its meaning. They clarify meanings with questions, which become clearer with examples, and these become even clearer with opposing examples. Consequently, both allow clarification of the meaning of words used in language. And they also help expand the world of sense and meaning experienced by the child.

- To reason: It is recommended to follow reasoning where it takes us, as with it, we attempt to get closer to the extremes of children's thoughts. Let us remember that children exhibit articulate thoughts of possible worlds, and if we are able to follow their reasoning of possible worlds, we are following the reasoning where it takes us. This is not easy to do, as adults live in a world where almost all answers are guaranteed, which does not allow adults to venture beyond these answers.

As we can see, it is not easy for the adult mind to accept children's "otherness." It is difficult for adults to see a cultural dimension that is not their own. Accepting the "others" is possible only if we accept them with their own culture. Furthermore, their culture is articulated in terms of thought, and for thought, and the essence of thought is the question. It remains to be seen how philosophy can be articulated from thought.

From here, it becomes necessary to see philosophy as an exercise of relationships with the "others," as all the interpretations we make about topics such as logic, ontology, and epistemology are always done with the "others." We bring those topics to life in the "others," not just in communication, but in the understanding of the "others" who listen and respond.⁹ In fact, we never listen to what the "others" say, except occasionally, in conversation. Philosophy is, therefore, a relational exercise, not a simple memorization of systems. Certainly for those for whom philosophy is a discipline of great dignity, to define philosophy as a space of relationships is to trivialize it, to diminish its dignity. Those who support this thesis are unable to see that very statement is something that philosophy builds for them as part of their subjectivity. Thus, we recognize that, as defined here, philosophy is a point of view among others. Not admitting it is to fall into the game of those who deny our definition.

The practice of philosophy brings forth personal, social, and moral questioning.¹⁰ Creating philosophy in an investigative community implies an intense personal activity that brings into play feelings, beliefs, lifestyles, and fundamental attitudes towards life, death, beauty, other, and others. We have seen how our students bring into play all beliefs available to them to take part in this relational space. And we have seen how they defend, with all their resources, whatever they believe is the solution to a problem. As we find in anything that students bring into play, the concepts of relations and dialogue are favored. And what is achieved in the end is building subjectivity in each of the participants. This subjectivity emerges, reemerges, and expands, as when we find that there are other points of view that are interesting to us.

Philosophy emerges from our discourse and dialogue.¹¹ It is not given in a certain place; it is not part of any lapse that one may just remember to solve. It is the

result of our disciplined ability to listen, to respect what the “other” says, and of our sensibility to correct or autocorrect tortuous, evasive, and illusive arguments. Once we have this, philosophy and thought come to us. From this perspective, philosophy is not limited to the faculties. It is not the property of a breed of experts. Rather, it is part of the world of each one of us. This is true if we maintain the ability to listen to what the “other” tells us, if we can correct or autocorrect evasive arguments — in short, if we can incorporate the thought abilities from childhood we described before. But it’s false if the space of relations becomes a space for mere conversation because when conversing, we never listen to one another, as demonstrated by our going from one topic to another without any problem. In this sense, dialogue is essential to incorporate philosophy into the space of human relations. In this definition, philosophy brings about the dwelling of thought.

Philosophy is a relational space, where anyone who enters into a relation with another does it through language. In this sense, through this relational space, one acquiesces to other meanings because, when we defend an argument, we are revealing our world. When we do it, we represent ourselves, with which we give another meaning to the world. If we agree that philosophy is a relational space, we have to accept that children also have their own relational space and that philosophy and its correlative thought are embedded in this space.

We have assumed that thought occurs in childhood and in philosophy, and that it is absent in the classroom. Naturally, we have to admit that there are spaces in the classroom where thought appears — the places where a child lives with other children, away from adult gaze. We have explained that to accept the child as “another” implies accepting the radical nature of his or her way of thinking. To this end, we have expounded on some of the abilities of children’s thinking. They are not abilities to be developed. They are abilities that require a space to develop. We have insisted on the need to recognize the “otherness” of children because this is a way to recognize a space in thinking that is peculiar to children.

This idea becomes complete with a different conception of philosophy. It is not an academic concept of philosophy because, from the academic angle, philosophy is trivialized. This idea is not accepted because it would imply delimiting philosophy by self-consumption. From our perspective, philosophy implies ways of life; it becomes incorporated in ways of life; and it exists in the perspective that each one of us has of our world. For this reason, philosophy has been defined as a space for human relations, where dialogue is central because it is only through dialogue that we develop the ability to listen to what the “other” is telling us, to hear the hidden meanings in the speech of everyone of us.¹²

To conclude, only this type of philosophy is related to childhood. And only this philosophy would allow us to recuperate the “otherness” of children. However, this philosophy also implies a new way of educating.

1. This absence is supported by the technical argument, repeated by educators and teachers, that “philosophy is part of the whole teacher training curriculum, so there is no need to introduce separate

philosophy courses.” Thus, there is an absence of philosophy, and the vacuum is filled by technical training offered to teachers, at least in teachers’ colleges.

2. Matthew Lipman, *Pensamiento Complejo y Educación* (Madrid: Ediciones de la Torre, 1988), 11.

3. “What Levinas proposes is to study the possibility of a subject based on taking care of not the self, but the “other”; in other words, a subject that gets out and transcends outwardly. We need to undo the modern subject to see if it is possible to conceive a subjectivity that is not defined as a relation with oneself (autonomy), but as a relation with the “other” (heteronomy), as an answer to and from the “other.” Levinas’ “humanism of the other” considers subjectivity as something that transcends outwardly and as a responsibility because the subject is the answer to the “other” and the responsibility of the “other,” who appears suddenly without notice. It’s the “other” that was not expected to come, but comes. Thus, the subject is a human subject as much as the self’s egocentric identity is broken and becomes transformed, broken by the presence/absence of the “other.” Joan-Carles Mèlich, *La ausencia del testimonio: Ética y Pedagogía en los Relatos del Holocausto* (Madrid: Anthropos, 2001). This subject that appears suddenly and questions us with his or her reality and humanity is the child.

4. Regarding this matter, Valirie Polakow says, “in this century of the child, I believe there is little to say regarding what happens or does not happen to children. We have psychoanalyzed and stereotyped childhood, but we have never asked ourselves if childhood, as an idea, is a relatively modern invention, created by adults who have grown up in a particular social and historical era.” Valirie Polakow, *The Erosion of Childhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2.

5. “That was finished: mouths opened by themselves; yellow and black voices kept on talking about our humanity, but it was to reproach us for our inhumanity. Without annoyance, we listened to those polite expressions of bitterness. First we felt proud admiration: What? They speak by themselves? Look at what we have made of them!” Jean-Paul Sartre, “Prologue,” in Frantz Fanon, *Los Condenados de la Tierra* (México: FCE, 1980). We feel a similar admiration — sometimes hidden and sometimes open — when children reply to adults, “How can you reproach me after...?”

6. But also native people. However, infants continue to be ignored. Not long ago, we submitted an advanced version of our research report, in which infants are the central characters. To our surprise, one of the attendees praised the fact that we had placed infants as the central characters in education.

7. Children who do not display a uniform behavior are sent to psychoanalysts. Children who are not learning are subjected to tests and other means to ensure they develop to the corresponding level. To this, here are two counterexamples: “There are no problem children, but children with problems” and “Ten in school and zero in life.”

8. Hans Georges Gadamer, *Verdad y método I* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sígueme, 1988).

9. Ann Margaret Sharp, “Philosophy for Children and the Redefinition of Philosophy: Total Immersion at Mendham,” *Analytic Teaching* 10, no.1 (1980): 16.

10. *Ibid.*, 17.

11. *Ibid.*

12. “Dialogue” is understood as the meeting of two or more subjectivities, where one of them expounds on his or her ideas on a certain topic. Questions arise in this space and with these questions, various investigative abilities are displayed. When this does not occur, a conversation, a debate, or something along those lines, ensues.