How Parrhesia in Doing Philosophy With Children Develops Their Touchstones of Reality

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Abstract: Parrhesia first appeared in Greek literature in the fifth century BC. Essentially, parrhesia refers to being granted the liberty to speak freely and openly without being deemed insubordinate to someone of greater authority and could otherwise lead to punishment or death. Parrhesia allows one to speak truth to power, essentially benefiting the one in power who lacks insight into the truth of a situation. In his book, *Filosoferen met kinderen op de basisschool: een complexe activiteit*, Berrie Heesen describes how doing philosophy with children is a form of parrhesia in that it encourages children to speak freely and openly. Parrhesia changes the adult/child relationship. Taken seriously by adults as full-fledged human beings creates a space for children to take themselves seriously while also being held responsible for what they think and feel. By giving reasons for their thoughts and feelings, and listening to those of their peers, children not only become critical listeners of others but also of themselves. They learn that what they think and feel matters – that they matter in the eyes of others and themselves, raising their self-esteem as well. In the process, children also develop their own touchstones of reality. Moreover, (self-) scrutiny is essential to feeling whole and grounded in who we are, giving us a sense of purpose and direction.

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press…" (The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, 1787)

Parrhesia first appeared in Greek literature in the Fifth Century BC. It took on many different meanings, but generally referred to the notion of speaking freely and frankly, to speaking one's own sense of truth which one is willing to risk in the face of those who have power. As Voltaire (though considered misattributed to him) so poignantly states: "If you want to know who controls you, look at who you are not allowed to criticize." In other words, it is not for you to question or criticize those who have power over you based on wealth, status, gender, etc.

In *Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia*, Foucault states that "…parrhesia is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth for which he is willing to risk his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In parrhesia, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy."[1]

Yet there was also a form of parrhesia devised to give one the license to speak freely without fearing for his/her life. Essentially, parrhesia *changes the dynamic* between sovereign and subordinate, thereby changing "the order of things." It is this that is at the

heart of parrhesia. To combat flattery as a result of one's status, for example, and when it behooved the sovereign to know the truth, parrhesia was a way for a person of consequence to learn the truth from someone in a subordinate position without being considered insubordinate which could otherwise lead to punishment or death. A sovereign who has power but lacks the truth will grant parrhesia to the one who has the truth but lacks power.

As I will show in this paper, granting parrhesia to children changes the adult/child relationship and grants children the freedom and therewith the power to speak freely. It empowers children to speak in their own voice and be heard. For example, when I was conducting a philosophy with children discussion group in a second grade class, I asked one of the boys whether he agreed with what his teacher -- who always joined our discussions -- just said, where upon he answered: "Oh no! I totally disagree with Ms. Toledo." I remember seeing her face as he pronounced his opinion and saw that she was delighting in his "audacity." It was the context of our discussion group, which had given him the space to express his ideas freely and openly.

There is another sense in which parrhesia is used which Plutarch discusses in his treatise: *The Education of Children*. Parrhesia requires strength and courage, yet one can also express strength through sheer arrogance; bold and ignorant arrogance which becomes nothing but "sheer vocal noise" by "putting [his] confidence in bluster."[2] What designates parrhesia in the negative sense is the lack of mathesis – learning or wisdom. For parrhesia to have positive effects, Plutarch believes, it must be linked to good education, to intellectual formation, and moral fortitude.

Self-scrutiny is a form of exercising or practicing parrhesia with one's self, be it to undercut self-ignorance as Socrates points out, or self-delusion based on self-flattery, as Plutarch points out.

For Socrates, overcoming self-ignorance was essential and why it is so important to "know thyself." The speaker's personal *relationship to truth* endows the individual with self-knowledge. It is precisely through one's relationship to truth about oneself that one is better equipped to engage in one's relationship with truth about the world. This cycle increases one's self-knowledge as well as one's knowledge of the world. The goal is the pursuit of truth, not to believe one is in possession of it. Gaining self-knowledge and gaining the ability to be truthful as well as gaining an increased understanding of the complex world we live in is what philosophy – love of wisdom – engenders.

David Bohm talks about becoming aware of our thinking in order to become less identified with our unexamined habits of mind or thought patterns that we have adopted, and in order to witness our thoughts and feelings instead of simply having them and reacting to them.[3]

Meta-awareness then, is a form of self-scrutiny whereby a shift takes place from "a more identified first-person perspective to a witnessing third-person perspective of the very contents of our mind and consciousness."[4]

As a third-person witness, meta-awareness (or self-awareness) serves as a touchstone for self-scrutiny.

The importance of self-knowledge then is to be able to acquire independence from societal forces, which can (negatively) influence one's relationship with oneself. In other words, independent thinking ultimately depends on self-knowledge.

In *Discourse and Truth: The Problematization of Parrhesia* Foucault states: "…, Socrates' basanic role – that of 'touchstone' - enables him to determine the true nature of the relation between logos and bios of those who come into contact with him."[5]

"This role, Foucault states, is characterized in the text as that of a "basanos" or "touchstone" which tests the degree of *accord between a person's life [or bios] and its principle of intelligibility or logos*: "Socrates will never let [his listener] go until he has thoroughly and properly put all his ways to the test [188a]. The Greek word "basanos" refers to a "touchstone", i.e., a black stone which is used to test the genuineness of gold by examining the streak left on the stone when "touched" by the gold in question. Socrates' "basanic" role enables him to determine the true nature of the relation between the logos and bios of those who come into contact with him."[6]

In the case of children, however, there is no discrepancy between how they live and how they think. There is no discrepancy between their logos and bios. Since children, especially young children operate from a bios-logos mode of being, their mode of questioning is also grounded in a bios-logos understanding of the world. In this way doing philosophy with children can also greatly inform philosophy, as we know it. Most of Western philosophy is logos-based, although one may want to make an exception for the existential philosophers who were more focused on integrating bios into logos.

In his book, *Filosoferen met kinderen op de basisschool: een complexe activiteit* (Doing philosophy with children in elementary school: a complex activity), Berrie Heesen shows how doing philosophy with children is a form of parrhesia (speaking freely) in that it encourages children to speak (up) freely, straight from their own experiences, their own thoughts and feelings.[7] In other words, because parrhesia fundamentally changes the adult/child relationship, the child no longer feels beholden to the adult world round it. They speak from their *whole being*, holding nothing back, saying everything as they see it. They speak frankly as they understand the world and what they understand the truth about the world to be. They speak from their sense of truth, their own 'basanos,' if you will, from which they can question the world around them. Their own sense of truth can change over time, of course, but they now have a locus within themselves from which they can enter and strengthen their relationship with the world.

It is often that as we mature that we tend to lose this close relation of bios-logos, causing a split between logos and bios, since it never got a chance to develop as a stronghold for seeing and questioning themselves (self-scrutiny) and the world around them.

It is my contention that in doing philosophy with children when they still have this close relation with themselves, allows them to not only maintain that close relationship of logos and bios, but to become aware of that relation through self-awareness and self-scrutiny, thereby developing and maintaining their ability for self-possession and truly independent thinking.

In my opinion, however, too many philosophy with children practitioners focus on the logos, the need for developing good thinking and reasoning skills. This alone will not give children the experience of finding their own 'basanos,' which lies within their bios-logos relationship.

As Darren Chetty points out correctly, I believe, providing children with a forum to express themselves freely may be easier said than done given the fact the "forum" provided operates from what he calls a 'gated' community of inquiry.[8]It is not enough to question certain thoughts and assumptions if it doesn't mean venturing outside of the 'gated' community. For Chetty the 'gated' community refers to an acceptance of 'reality' without "historicizing, examining and challenging prevailing notions"[9] of what constitutes reality, or as Bohm suggests are the "unexamined habits of mind or thought patterns" we identify with. As long as white supremacy is the accepted norm and constitutes our basic understanding of reality, we are operating within a 'gated' community. Moreover, once we start to question the norm of white supremacy we encounter what Haynes and Murris refer to as "no-go" areas.[10]

The question is whether doing philosophy with children could function as a forum whereby the adult/child dynamic is changed, allowing children the space to discover their own voice or "basanos," even within the 'gated' community.

Let me give some examples of my own experience doing philosophy with children and how it can fulfill the function of "basanos."

After a prompt has been given, such as reading a picture book, and posing a question about the story, children then discuss what the story means to them. The key to starting the discussion, for me, is to ask children an aporia question, a question that leaves them with a sense of aporia meaning *puzzlement* or *wonderment*; they are "at a loss," perplexed.

To start with an aporia question helps to bring them into a place of parrhesia, where they now have to speak from what they truly believe to be true in order to address the perplexity of the problem. They have nothing to go on except their own sense of truth, or "basanos" with which to wrestle with these puzzling questions.

Parrhesia, then, allows them to speak freely from their own touchstones of reality and becomes the basis for true independent thinking. What they say matters and this confirms that their voice is heard and taken seriously.

In the process of discussing these perplexing issues with their classmates, the children develop a deeper understanding based on what others have said. When children enter into dialogue operating from their own sense of truth, they also learn to listen to the sense of truth of their peers. What is said matters. This also creates a venue for true speaking and listening, effectively blurring the line between the two.

In doing philosophy with children, children learn to integrate others' perspectives and develop a broader view of the topic under discussion. The perplexity that ensues from listening to all voiced perspectives now has to find a way to be integrated into a broader sense of reality. They are not given over to the simple "I agree," or "don't agree."

Parrhesia not only develops a child's "basanos" but encourages self-scrutiny and self-reflection as well. In this way, children solidify their grounding in their logos-bios relation, which prevents a split between logos and bios to occur, as they become enculturated in their society.

Many of Plato's dialogues leave us with this sense of aporia, a philosophical puzzle or a seemingly insoluble impasse in an inquiry. What we thought we knew based on our logos, we have to admit we do not know. Yet, in the process, we may become increasingly aware of what it means to be courageous, for example, even though we cannot explain it rationally. We develop a deeper understanding.

Unfortunately, some philosophy with children practitioners focus solely or mainly on the logos – developing good critical thinking skills and improving children's ability to reason logically. I say unfortunately, because although these are valuable skills for a child to learn, it should not go at the expense of discovering and developing their own touchstones of reality.

Here are some examples of using aporia questions to prompt children to speak frankly about how they see and understand things.

After reading a picture book to the whole class, we would proceed to discuss the story with half the class (while the other half was doing desk work) in a circle on the floor. The discussion centered on questions that the story elicits.

"The Club," in *Grasshopper on the Road* by Arnold Lobel[11]:
Grasshopper is going down the road when he sees a bunch of beetles carrying signs that say that they love morning. The beetles are morning lovers and celebrate morning every morning. When they see Grasshopper, they ask him whether he likes morning and he says he does. The beetles are thrilled and make him part of their "we love morning club." They give him a wreath and a sign to carry, but things go terribly wrong when Grasshopper announces that he also like afternoon and night is very nice too. The beetles

are shocked and rip the wreath from him and take away his sign: nobody, nobody who loves afternoon and night can be in our club. And Grasshopper continues on down the road. It's morning and he sees the dew sparkle in the sunlight.

The question is, whether it's ok for the beetles to throw Grasshopper out of the club. The children have different ideas about this, some say 'yes,' because it's the beetles' club and they make up the rules. Others say 'no,' because they believe that the beetles should leave Grasshopper in the club; he does love morning, after all.

The aporia question is whether it is *fair* to throw Grasshopper out? Because even if the beetles have the right to throw Grasshopper out of the club, should they?
The children decide it's not fair, if the beetles didn't tell him about the rules to begin with. They made him a member of the club, because he loved morning and threw him out when he said he also loved afternoon and night. Grasshopper didn't have a say in any of this. Then again, others suggest that Grasshopper could have figured out that the beetles *only* loved morning, because their signs said they loved morning. They also figured that it was not fair to throw him out, being so rude and unkind to Grasshopper. Being rude is not fair.

Another aporia question is about *what would be fair*? One child proposed that one beetle might take Grasshopper aside and explain the rules of the club to him and then makes sure Grasshopper is treated with respect, whether he stays or leaves.

A third aporia question is about how do we *know* something is fair? In other words, what would be fair? How do we know what's fair or not? How do we even determine what's fair? Some say that being rude to Grasshopper is not fair.

In a third grade classroom, we were discussing the notion of fairness and after a collaborative discussion with her peers, one pupil questioned whether it was fair that she was asked to not only clean her own room but that of her brother as well.

She may conclude that it is in fact fair for her parents to expect her to clean his room as well – based on the values her family has. But she may also question these values on some other level. The point is not that when questioning her family's values she decides to no longer abide by them, but that she has the ability, *awareness*, if you will, to question these values in the first place. This gives her a sense of empowerment, a sense of being able to be in charge of her own thinking and developing her independent thinking.

Again, it is not a matter of agreeing or disagreeing with her parents' values per se. And she may well go ahead with abiding with her family's values. However, this does not have to entail a contradiction. What it does entail is that there are multiple ways of looking at things and multiple ways of considering what makes something fair or not in particular situations.

Maurice Friedman, renowned Martin Buber scholar, coined the phrase "holding the tension," referring to one's ability to counter-act dichotomous either/or thinking or any attempt to synthesize thought into unity or fusion.[12]

In this student's case, she also does not fall into the dichotomous either/or thinking rejecting *either* her family's values *or* her own sense of truth of what is fair.

She can "hold the tension" between the two 'realities' behind what is considered fair. She may still follow her family's rules without rejecting her own sense of truth in the process. "Holding the tension" allows her to respect her family's values while respecting her own touchstone of reality as well.

She is now in a position to hold on to her bios-logos relation while responding to the reality around her as she sees fit. She is in charge of her own thinking – becoming a truly empowered independent thinker.

Without developing the self-scrutiny developed by practicing parrhesia with herself, she would likely leave the prevailing reality unexamined.

Staying on the subject of fairness, one pupil considered that being rude was itself an act of not being fair. He applied the notion of fairness not just to whether it was fair or not to oust someone from the club, based on the rules of the club, but to *how* it was done. This example shows how reasons were not only presented to argue for or against allowing someone into the club, but also how they may apply to the larger picture of what it means to belong to a club in the first place. Are we entitled to treat someone we believe does not belong to our club poorly or even rudely? Is that fair?

Dragons and Giants in *Frog and Toad Together,* by Arnold Lobel[13]:
Frog and Toad want to find out if they are brave and looking in the mirror doesn't really tell them *if* they are brave. They decide to climb a mountain to find out if they are. While doing so, they come across a snake that wants to eat them for lunch, they are suddenly in the path of an avalanche of rolling stones, and at the top of the mountain a hawk sweeps over them. All these encounters terrify them. Finally, having reached the top of mountain, they run back down as fast as they can, back to Toad's house, where Toad crawls under his blanket in bed, and Frog hides in the closet. They stay there for a long time feeling very brave together.

The question is, are Frog and Toad brave?
Many children say that to be brave you cannot be afraid. Since Frog and Toad are afraid, they cannot be brave.

The aporia question is, whether you can be brave without being afraid? If you are not in the least afraid, what makes you brave? If you are not afraid of dogs, are you brave when you see them in the street?
Children are puzzled by this question and often don't find a way out of the dilemma until they come up with the idea that an element of danger plays a role in being brave and in

being afraid. The snake presented an element of danger, as did the avalanche, and the hawk. One child commented that if you are not afraid, you don't know the danger you are in.

Another aporia question is, whether Frog and Toad are brave when they decide to jump out of the way of the snake, the avalanche or the hawk? It seems to make Frog and Toad not brave. This raises the question of Frog and Toad being foolish rather than brave if they were not to jump out of the way.

A third aporia question has to do with the question how we *know* we are foolish or brave when dealing with that which is dangerous.

What makes these questions aporia questions is that they seem counter intuitive and contradictory. On the face of it, these questions don't seem to make sense. Children are puzzled and "at a loss," until they figure that what lurks below the apparent paradox, is an understanding of what it means to be brave in real life. Reason alone tells you that you cannot be brave and afraid at the same time. But life tells you that without being aware of the danger involved and the fear that comes with knowing the danger involved, you cannot be brave.

I proceed with asking the children to give examples of when they were brave – connecting our discussion to what it means to be brave as we think of it (logos) and in real life (bios).

Some mentioned that they had to be brave on their first day of school or when they had to stand up to a bully or when they first learned how to swim. In all these examples, children described how they had to overcome some initial fear, fear of failing, fear of the unknown, fear of someone acting stronger than they were. In this way, children become *aware* of how thinking and being are related.

It is also the format of discussing issues, which matter to them that gets the children **act**ively engaged. Their "will," as Dr. Montessori would say, is engaged with the external reality around them, and through activating the will, consciousness develops.[14]

Without an active sense of consciousness or self-awareness the child cannot exercise self-authority, and acquire self-possession. The child cannot "know him/herself." To be identified with his thoughts and feelings, rather than to be aware of them, creativity and insight are blocked as well.

When the connection with self is lost, as a result of "breaking the child's will," so is his ability for self (-willed) authority, self (-willed) scrutiny and true independent thinking. Alice Miller refers to this practice as "poisonous pedagogy": efforts to break the child's spirit in order to establish adult power "for your own good."[15]But when self-esteem is lost, so is one's ability to listen to the voices of others and to accept them as equal to oneself.

Montessori stressed the importance of *act*ively engaging the child's will in the learning process. Punishment and demanding obedience rob the child of her inner authority needed to guide the child in her activities. This creates dependency and ultimately a need for conformity. The child cannot act on his own volition. It is no surprise then when children lack self-esteem.

In doing philosophy with children, children experience that their thoughts and feelings matter; that they are essential in the learning process. And if their own thoughts and feelings matter, so do those of their peers, which deserve to be listened to and accepted as equal to oneself. In the process children learn to speak from their bios-logos relation, knowing that they will be taken seriously. Some opinions are better than others, and children are generally quick to admit that: "Oh, what Tracey said, made me change my mind" - self-scrutiny at work.

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