

The Passion of (Not) Teaching: An Agambenian Meditation on the Value of Philosophy with Children

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In its deepest intention, philosophy is a firm assertion of potentiality, the construction of an experience of the possible as such. Not thought but the potential to think, not writing but the white sheet is what philosophy refuses at all costs to forget.

— Giorgio Agamben¹

Before I thought everything needed a definite answer or a ‘correct’ answer, like math or science, but now I know that multiple answers that could completely contradict each other could also all be true. Things that didn’t have a definite answer often confused me, but now I can look at them differently

— Jamie, sixth-grade philosophy student

I learned not a lot.

— Anonymous, sixth-grade philosophy student

Practitioners of Philosophy for Children (P4C) know intuitively that there is something unique about engaging children in philosophical inquiry. More than anything, it is the excitement and aliveness that children exhibit when they are engaged in philosophical inquiry that suggest that there are significant benefits to this practice. The hard part — and the part where the views of advocates of P4C diverge — is to identify and articulate what exactly those benefits are. As it was originally conceived by Matthew Lipman in the 1970s, the main focus of the P4C program (and the justification for its inclusion into the school curriculum) was on the improvement of students’ thinking skills.² The fact that the demand for more critical thinking has today become ubiquitous in educational policy means that P4C (insofar as the development of thinking skills is still considered at least one of its goals) now has to compete with all kinds of strategies schools — presumably — already use to foster critical thinking, including some of the main features of P4C (for example, open-ended questions, dialogic pedagogy).³ This means that advocates of P4C either have to demonstrate that P4C is more effective in fostering critical thinking or that there are other or additional benefits to P4C that would justify its inclusion in the school curriculum. While benefits other than thinking skills have increasingly been proposed by advocates of P4C,⁴ the problem remains the same: it is not enough to show that such benefits meet certain educational goals — it must be shown that P4C is uniquely positioned to do so.

In contrast to any such attempts, it has been suggested that it is exactly the emphasis on specific goals and outcomes that contradicts the inherently noninstrumental nature of philosophical inquiry and thus undermines what could be seen as the truly unique benefits of P4C.⁵ These views could, in turn, be seen as part of a more general critique of the “learning society,” where learning has become a mere tool for maximizing educational outcomes.⁶ Assuming we share the concern for the instrumentalization of P4C (and of learning in general), the question is, How do we

accomplish the apparently paradoxical task of showing that it is precisely the non-instrumental nature of philosophical inquiry, its ability to resist being used for specific goals, that makes P4C a unique and valuable contribution to the school curriculum? Drawing on the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, this essay offers a conception of P4C that allows us to make this argument.⁷

PRELUDE: PHENOMENOLOGY OF AN ANSWER, DELAYED

Most teachers will be familiar with that particular feeling we get when a student asks us a question and we pause, trying to avoid a direct answer. In a foreign language class, for example, a student may ask for the meaning of a specific word in English. Instead of answering right away, we think of ways to explain the meaning of the word in the target language by using synonyms, circumlocution, emphasizing parts of the word, and so on. Independent of the subject and the nature of the question, there is something about the particular quality of that moment of silence that is created by a question that is not answered right away. That delaying the response to an answer can be pedagogically significant is well-documented and is associated with the concept of “wait time” or “think time.”⁸ Even small increases in the time the teacher takes to answer a question or to call on a student have been shown to have substantial benefits, ranging from an increase in the number, length and correctness of students’ responses to improved scores on academic achievement tests.⁹ But there is something about the nature and intensity of that moment of silence by itself that seems to suggest that it could be significant beyond its use as a pedagogical tool. Robert Stahl, for example, points in that direction when he describes the effects of what he calls “impact pause-time” (one of eight types of wait- or think-time he distinguishes). He writes:

Impact pause-time occurs when the most dramatic way to focus attention at a given time is to provide a period of uninterrupted silence.... One example of a desired result is creation of a particular mood or affective environment, such as when sudden silence may generate a feeling or mood of anticipation, expectation, drama, suspense, or uncertainty.¹⁰

Most teachers will be able to attest to the dramatic quality and potential impact of such a “period of uninterrupted silence.” Even the slightest delay in answering a question, a brief interruption in the teacher’s presentation, will almost immediately alert students to the situation. Where there should be words spoken by the teacher, there is nothing. Silence. What happened? Could it be that the teacher doesn’t know the answer? That possibility is inherently interesting. Did she forget what she was going to say, is she upset, or about to be sick? The longer the moment lasts, the more it increases in intensity. Something is not right. The sudden silence has thrown a monkey wrench into the well-oiled machinery of the classroom (fueled by the voice of the teacher). But there is drama involved for the teacher as well. There is of course the possibility that she actually doesn’t know the answer. But even if she does and has intentionally created that moment of silence, it will be hard for her not to be affected by that mood of “anticipation, expectation and uncertainty.” The students expect her to do something. Her job is to teach, and teaching is an activity that includes answering students’ questions. Not answering, falling silent, amounts to a refusal to teach. What accounts for this powerful effect of such periods of uninter-

rupted silence? How can not doing something, that is, a lack of action (an *inaction*) have such a strong impact? And what would happen if the answer was permanently delayed, the moment of silence infinitely extended?

In a certain sense, this is what happens in doing philosophy with children. Whereas in other subjects the teacher's answers can only be temporarily delayed, due to the nature of philosophical questions (open-ended, and yet containing an intimation of truth that drives and sustains the conversation), in P4C the voice of the teacher (representing reasonableness and truth) can be permanently silenced. What makes this scenario fundamentally different from any other situation in a school setting is that the teacher is perceived to not be teaching, creating, in turn, an experience for the students of an absence of learning.

THE STUDENT'S POTENTIAL: TO LEARN AND TO NOT-LEARN

So far, we have spoken broadly of the possible benefits of P4C for students. Asked to specify what we mean by "benefits," we could say that we want the student to learn, which is equally broad. A somewhat more specific response would be to say that we want to develop the student's potential. Like similar terms, such as "growth" or "personal development," "potential" appears to emphasize the particular abilities, talents, interests, and so on, of the individual student, implying that education should not just be externally imposed but should, we may say, originate in the student. In other words, referring to the student's potential implies that potential is something that the student already has. But how can something the student already has be potential? The fact that the student has certain abilities means that they are actual, not potential. So what we are really saying, it seems, is that, based on his or her actual abilities, talents and interests he or she is — in principle — able to achieve whatever we, as educators, have posited as desirable outcomes of the his or her education. A student's potential would then be what we, as educators, see in him or her, which means that it is, strictly speaking, *our* potential. The question is, What does it mean to speak of *the student's* potential at all? And what would it mean to develop it?

In *Potentialities*, Agamben refers to a distinction Aristotle makes between two types of potentiality. One is the potential to acquire a particular knowledge or a skill that has not yet been acquired, the second is the ability to apply already acquired knowledge or skills to perform a particular task. Referring to Aristotle, Agamben writes,

We say of the architect that he or she has the *potential* to build, of the poet that he or she has the *potential* to write poems. It is clear that this *existing* potentiality differs from the *generic* potentiality of the child. The child, Aristotle says, is potential in the sense that he must suffer an alteration (a becoming other) through learning. Whoever already possesses knowledge, by contrast, is not obliged to suffer an alteration; he is instead potential, Aristotle says, thanks to *hexis*, a "having;" on the basis of which he can also *not* bring his knowledge into actuality (*me energein*) by *not* making a work, for example. Thus the architect is potential insofar as he has the potential to not-build, the poet the potential to not-write poems. (*Potentialities*, 179)

Agamben focuses on Aristotle's second kind of potentiality that implies both the ability to apply and to not-apply a particular knowledge or skill. Before we look more closely at why Agamben believes that this is so crucial for an adequate understanding of potentiality, we need to determine which of the two types of potentiality apply to the student, and in what exactly the potential of the student consists.

Given that the student is a child, it is tempting to attribute to him or her the first kind of potentiality (that is, the generic potential to be able to acquire different kinds of knowledge and skills). But this is problematic. For Aristotle, the child's potentiality is different, in principle, because the child, according to Aristotle, does not yet have knowledge or skills to apply. But obviously the student already has certain knowledge and skills that he or she can apply (or not apply). If we use the distinction between the two types of potentiality at all, it seems that the student (as child), like the architect and the poet, would have to be seen as having both kinds of potentiality. In fact, all of them (child, architect, and poet), *qua* human beings, know certain things and have certain skills, and not others. With regard to what they don't know, they have the first kind of potentiality; with regard to what they know or can do, the second. The architect, for example, as a human being, could use the knowledge and the skills required to build a house in many different ways. As an architect (*qua* architect), however, his or her potential is to build houses, or to not-build houses. Accordingly, the student, as a child/human being, could use his or her knowledge and skills in a variety of ways. *Qua* student, however, his or her potential is not to apply the knowledge or skills he or she already has, but to acquire new knowledge or skills, that is, to learn. Based on what has been said so far, then, it can be concluded that the potential of the student is to learn, and thus to not-learn. We will now turn to the question of why Agamben believes that this aspect of being able to not-do something is so crucial for an adequate understanding of the notion of potentiality.

For Agamben, the question of potentiality is directly tied to that of human freedom. "*Other living beings,*" he writes, "*are capable only of their specific potentiality; they can only do this or that. But human beings are the animals who are capable of their own impotentiality*" (*Potentialities*, 182, emphasis in original). This means that our ability to do, to apply our knowledge and our skills, is inextricably tied to our ability to not-do something, to not-apply our knowledge or skills. "The greatness — and also the abyss — of human potentiality," he writes "is that it is first of all potential not to act." And, "Here it is possible to see how the root of freedom is to be found in the abyss of potentiality" (*Potentialities*, 182–183). For Agamben, to be free (that is, to have the potential to do and to not-do) means "to be able to be in relation to one's own privation" (*Potentialities*, 183).

As we have seen, the lack of the voice of the teacher is experienced by the students as a situation where no teaching occurs, and, thus, (by definition) no learning. Applying Agamben's understanding of potentiality, P4C can provide students with the experience of being deprived of learning, which, in turn, allows them to experience their potential to learn and to not-learn, the freedom to both acquire and to not-acquire new knowledge and skills. Rather than being stuck in the mode of learning, they experience the *impotentiality* to learn, and thus also first become (fully) aware of their potential to learn.

PASSION OF FACTICITY, PASSION OF (NOT) TEACHING

So far, we have established that P4C can create for students an experience of their own potentiality (to learn and to not-learn) and how this experience develops in them an awareness of learning that is made possible by the experience of not-learning. But

there is another aspect of the practice of P4C that is equally important. Obviously, the lack of teaching, the silence of the teacher, does not mean that there is silence on the part of the students. To the contrary, the silence of the teacher gives a particular quality to the conversation that allows the students to find their voice (break their silence). Instead of looking to the teacher (representing knowledge or skills of a particular discipline, and, ultimately, truth) for validation and/or confirmation, the students are left to their own devices, thrown back upon themselves (abandoned, as it were) in their search for truth. The effect of this is that they experience whatever is being said as equally valid. The absence of answers, that is, truth, means that they are left without a frame of reference that would allow them to compare or evaluate their individual contributions. Without a higher authority, without a body of knowledge or skills, however, all contributions can be experienced in their own right, so to speak. This also means that each student becomes more keenly aware of the differences between his or her own ideas and those of the other students. Without a focus on whether an individual contribution is true or not, the individual expressions of a student's ideas and beliefs are experienced as a reflection of his or her unique individuality. But this awareness of his or her own individuality also means a heightened awareness of the student of his or her limitations, due to his or her unique personal background and upbringing. P4C, then, makes students not only aware of their freedom (to learn and to not-learn), but also makes them realize the fundamental limitations to that freedom, that is, to use a Heideggerian expression, their facticity.¹¹

In "The Passion of Facticity," Agamben makes a connection between the notion of facticity and the passions (love and hatred) in Heidegger's work. For Heidegger, facticity means that we find ourselves always already in a world, that is, having grown up in (having been initiated into) a particular social, cultural environment that is constitutive for our world, and thus, of who we are. Because there is, within the limits of our facticity, an excess of possibilities, we exist in the "mode of the possible" (*Potentialities*, 200). At a more fundamental level, however, our "possibilities appear as radical incapacities in the face of the very being to which [each of us] is always already consigned" (*Potentialities*, 200). For Agamben, becoming aware of one's facticity means that "what man introduces into the world ... is not simply the light and opening of knowledge but above all the opening to concealment and opacity" (*Potentialities*, 203), that is, his facticity. Love, for Agamben, is about falling in love with our facticity, with who we, as unique individuals, are (and have to be) — a realization of the ultimate limitations of our freedom. "Love," he writes, "is the passion of facticity in which man bears this nonbelonging and darkness" (*Potentialities*, 204).

What P4C introduces into the school curriculum, then, is not only an experience and/or appreciation of the students to learn and to not-learn (the capacity of their own incapacity), but the experience of the *passion of facticity* — in the double sense of suffering and being passionate about (loving) — that is, suffering from the limitations that come with this realization and learning to love those limitations (their uniqueness). With regard to the students' education, in general, this means that opening themselves to the "concealment and opacity" (their facticity), allows them

to first fully experience the “light and opening of knowledge” that they encounter in the rest of the curriculum, to become free to learn.

It should have become clear by now what accounts for the drama on the side of the teacher during that silence that is created by a delayed answer, and even more so in P4C, where answers are permanently delayed. To allow students to experience their full potential (to learn and to not-learn), the teacher has to realize his or her potential (to teach and to not-teach). The drama of the teacher in P4C, consists in the fact that he or she has to manifest his or her impotentiality (to not-teach) in order to create for the students an experience of not-learning. In the process, the teacher suffers his or her own privation (by not teaching), facing, as it were, the “abyss of human potentiality.” This should be seen as an expression of passion, of love for the students, because it is aimed at fulfilling their potential: To become aware of their freedom to learn and to not-learn while, at the same time, learning to love their facticity, their uniqueness, which also represents the fundamental limit of their freedom. It is in this sense that the passion of teaching could be said to be most fully expressed by not-teaching.

INTERRUPTING THE SOVEREIGN DECISION

Seen in the larger context of a critique of the “learning society” and its sociopolitical implications (mentioned in the introduction), the conception of P4C proposed here may be seen as an example of an interruption of what Agamben calls the “sovereign decision” that constitutes all forms of power/sovereignty. The “sovereign decision” refers to the power of the sovereign to declare a state of exception (to suspend the law) — which places him both inside and outside of the law. Corresponding to the marginal figure of the sovereign (on the other end of the equation of power) is what he calls “bare life.”¹² “Bare life” (represented by the figure of *Homo Sacer*) is equally marginal, in that it stands for whatever it is that is included in the law as that which needs to be excluded. “Sovereignty,” Agamben writes, “. . . is the originary structure in which law refers to life and includes it in itself by suspending it” (*HS*, 28). Agamben refers to this as “a relation of ban” (*HS*, 28). Bare life, that which is excluded, banned from the law, is intrinsically tied to sovereignty because it is what makes it possible. He writes, “The ban is the force of simultaneous attraction and repulsion that ties together the two poles of the sovereign exception: bare life and power, *homo sacer* and the sovereign” (*HS*, 110). The question is, how can the relation of ban at the heart of sovereignty be overcome? Agamben’s response: “A critique of the ban will . . . necessarily have to put the very form of relation into question, and to ask if the political fact is not perhaps thinkable beyond relation and, thus, no longer in the form of a connection” (*HS*, 29). In other words, the only way to overcome the ban at the heart of the sovereign decision is to suspend the relation (between bare life and power) altogether, that is, to think “ontology and politics beyond every figure of relation, beyond even the limit relation that is the sovereign ban” (*HS*, 47).

How does this relate to the role of P4C in education and its possible sociopolitical implications? The relationship between teacher and students is one of sovereignty insofar as the teacher has considerable power over what happens in the classroom.

(For example, like the sovereign, he or she has the power to have students “suspended” — a form of ban). The relationship between teacher and students is defined by teaching and learning (the law of education). To teach (successfully), the students need to learn. Not-learning is excluded, banned, but at the same time included (by its exclusion) as that which defines what should be happening in the classroom, which is learning. What is excluded in the case of education is the student’s impotentiality to not-learn. In P4C, on the other hand, teaching is suspended (the teacher realizes his or her potentiality), which leads to a suspension of learning. This, in turn, allows the students to realize their potentiality. With this double/mutual suspension, what is being enacted in P4C is an inoperative, nonrelational kind of relationship, a not-not relationship. By withdrawing all relationships to learning and teaching, the sovereign decision is being interrupted.

But we can take this one step further. The teacher’s power is of course not unlimited. In fact, as an employee of the school or the school district, he or she is far from being a sovereign. So if we look at the teacher in relation to the school, the teacher in P4C, by not teaching, could be said to realize his or her own potential (to teach and not teach) vis-à-vis his or her own sovereign (by including what is banned from that relationship: not-teaching). This means that the double suspension in P4C not only interrupts the sovereign decision operative in the relationship between teacher and students, but that, by suspending the law of education (learning and teaching), P4C could be said to create, within the educational system as a whole, a “real state of exception,” thus enacting, at a small scale, what Agamben calls a coming community (*Potentialities*, 160).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The question that motivated this essay was, What are the unique benefits of P4C that would justify its inclusion in the school curriculum? The answer provided here is this: Whatever other benefits P4C may have, the unique potential benefit of P4C (conceived in a strictly noninstrumental way) is for the students to experience their potentiality (to learn and to not-learn), through the experience of not-learning. This cannot be done using the existing curriculum because not-teaching, and thus not-learning is, by definition, not part of (banned from) the curriculum. As it turns out, the unique benefit of P4C is not an outcome at all, but an experience: the experience of potentiality as such.

1. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 249. This work will be cited in the text as *Potentialities* for all subsequent references.

2. Matthew Lipman, Ann M. Sharp, and Frederick S. Oscanyan, *Philosophy in the Classroom* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980); Matthew Lipman, *Philosophy Goes to School* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

3. See, for example, the mission statement of the Common Core Standards: “The Common Core focuses on developing the critical-thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills students will need to be successful.” “What Parents Should Know,” *Common Core State Standards Initiative: Preparing America’s Students for College and Career*, <http://www.corestandards.org>.

4. For discussion, see Nancy Vansieleghem and David Kennedy, *Philosophy for Children in Transition: Problems and Prospects* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 7–8.

5. Nancy Vansieleghem, "Philosophy as the Wind for Thinking," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 39, no. 1 (2005): 19–37; Nancy Vansieleghem, "Philosophy with Children as an Exercise in Parrhesia: An Account of a Philosophical Experiment with Children in Cambodia," in *Philosophy for Children in Transition: Problems and Prospects*, eds. Nancy Vansieleghem and David Kennedy (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Karin Murriss, "Philosophy with Children, the Stingray and the Educative Value of Disequilibrium," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 42, no. 3–4, (2008): 667–668; Thomas Storme and Joris Vlieghe, "The Experience of Childhood and the Learning Society," in *Philosophy for Children in Transition: Problems and Prospects*, eds. Nancy Vansieleghem and David Kennedy (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Gert Biesta, "Philosophy, Exposure, and Children," in *Philosophy for Children in Transition: Problems and Prospects*, eds. Nancy Vansieleghem and David Kennedy (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).
6. Jan Masschelein, "The Discourse of the Learning Society and the Loss of Childhood," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 35, no. 1 (2001): 1–20; Gert Biesta, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Press, 2006); Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein, "The Governmentalization of Learning and the Assemblage of a Learning Apparatus," *Educational Theory* 58, no. 4 (2008): 319–415; Tyson Lewis, *On Study: Giorgio Agamben and Educational Potentiality* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
7. For a similar approach of using Agamben to argue for an alternative to an instrumental notion of learning see especially Tyson Lewis's *On Study: Giorgio Agamben and Educational Potentiality* (New York: Routledge, 2013), and "The Fundamental Ontology of Study," *Educational Theory* 64, no. 2 (2014): 163–178.
8. Mary Budd Rowe, "Wait Time: Slowing Down May Be a Way of Speeding Up," *American Educator: The Professional Journal of the American Federation of Teachers* 11, no. 1 (1987): 38–43. Mary Budd Rowe, "Science, Silence, and Sanctions," *Science and Children* 6, no. 6 (1969): 35–37; Robert J. Stahl, "Using, 'Think-Time' and 'Wait-Time' Skillfully in the Classroom," ERIC Document, Reproduction Service Number No. ED 370885 (Bloomington, Indiana: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 1994).
9. Stahl, "Using, 'Think-Time' and 'Wait-Time' Skillfully in the Classroom.
10. *Ibid.*, 7.
11. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1992), 82.
12. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). This work will be cited in the text as *HS* for all subsequent references.