The Philosophical Child

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Acknowledgments

In 2008 I began writing a blog, *Wondering Aloud*, about my philosophical encounters with children and the potential of many children's books to inspire philosophical inquiry. Since that time, I've been contacted by many parents, asking where they can find more resources to help them engage in philosophical questioning with their children. Their dedication to supporting their children's efforts to develop their philosophical selves motivated me to write this book.

From the beginning, the University of Washington's Department of Philosophy (particularly the former chair of the department, Ken Clatterbaugh) has been exceptionally supportive of the Northwest Center for Philosophy for Children and my work. I feel fortunate to be part of an institution in which academic philosophers value the importance of encouraging children's philosophical thinking. I am especially indebted to my colleagues at the Northwest Center, Sara Goering and David Shapiro, who help make my work so much fun and whose careful appraisals and editing suggestions made this book much better than it would have been without them. I am also grateful for the students who take our courses and whose reactions to ideas about philosophical sensitivity and the philosophical self have helped me to refine my own thinking.

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My two earliest mentors in this field were Gary Matthews and Mat Lipman, both of whom recently died. My work has benefited in every way from their work. I read Gary Matthews's book *The Philosophy of Childhood* when I was a graduate student, and it transformed my life. Gary encouraged me to start working with children and, over the years, was unfailingly supportive of the work I was doing. He was the kindest of men. Gary and Mat were pioneers in this field, seeing long ago the need to bring philosophy into children's lives and allow philosophical

reflection to flourish outside the academy. They taught me about the importance of listening to children's questions and respecting their ideas. I miss them both.

Finally, this book is indebted to and inspired by the teachers who have invited me into their classrooms and the children who have shared their thoughts and ideas with me. I have learned so much from you.

ONE

The Philosophical Self

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight
    To me did seem
    Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
    Turn wheresoe'er I may,
    By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more. . . .

—From "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," by William Wordsworth

> "Thinking about philosophy makes me scared and thrilled at the same time, and I can't stop."
>
> —Tiffany, age ten

When my oldest son, Will, was around five, we loved to read Arnold Lobel's *Frog and Toad* stories together. One evening we were reading the story "The Dream" from *Frog and Toad Together*. In the story Toad has a dream about starring in a play, and in the dream his best friend, Frog, sits in the theater watching. As Toad performs, Frog starts shrinking until finally he can no longer be seen or heard. Toad screams for Frog and, waking up, finds Frog standing right by his bed. "Frog, is that really you?" Toad asks. Frog assures him that it is. Toad, utterly relieved, spends a "fine, long day" with Frog.

Will and I began talking about dreams, about some of the dreams he'd had, and about how real the dream in the story had seemed to feel to Toad.

"Do you ever have dreams that feel so real that you wake up and for a little while you're not sure if it was a dream?" I asked.

"Yes!" Will responded. "And then sometimes I wonder if I'm dreaming when I'm actually awake. I mean, could we be in a dream right now?"

"What makes you ask that?"

"Well, how do you know you're not?"

"Do you think there are differences between the way dreams feel and the way being awake feels?" I asked.

"Dreams usually feel weird. Like things happen in them that would never happen in real life."

"But not always, right? You said sometimes a dream feels so real you're not sure later it was a dream."

"Yeah, so it could be that I am dreaming right now."

These are the kinds of questions four- and five-year-old children ask all the time. We can respond by offering practical answers—for example, explaining in scientific, psychological, or other terms the differences between dreaming and being awake—or we can think about the question and respond in a way that invites mutual exploration.

Will wasn't seeking a scientific or psychological explanation of dreams; he wasn't looking for an explanation from me at all. He was asking a question—about whether we can know the difference between dreaming and being awake and be sure that we are in one state and not the other—and it was my responding in a spirit of inquiry, rather than trying to provide answers, that mattered.

PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING IN CHILDHOOD

Parents often don't approach children's questions as if they have the potential to open up philosophical lines of thinking because we tend to assume, usually without really thinking about it, that children aren't capable of philosophical exploration. Do children ask philosophical questions? How can you tell? What does it mean to think philosophically? Are children able to do so? Why should we care?

Historically, there has been almost no examination by philosophers or others of the emergence of philosophical thinking in childhood.[1] Philosophy, unlike mathematics or literature or science, commonly has been considered a discipline only for adults, at least in the United States. Most people, if they are introduced to philosophy at all, first encounter it in college, and then, more often than not, this entails an introduction to the great philosophers, but does not engage students in the process of self-questioning and searching for meaning that characterizes philosophical thinking. Thus adults, generally unfamiliar with philosophy, tend to suppose that it is "too difficult" or "too abstract" for children and that children are incapable of appreciating philosophical issues. As a result, we easily miss children's philosophical questions and musings.

> Nine-year-old Alvy Singer is taken to a psychologist by his mother because, she tells the doctor, "He's been depressed."
>
> Alvy: "The universe is expanding."
>
> Doctor: "The universe is expanding?"
>
> Alvy: "The universe is everything, and if it's expanding, someday it will break apart and that would be the end of everything!"
>
> Mother: "Why is that your business?"[2]

Although we acknowledge the significance of childhood and adolescence in our lives, this does not seem to lead adults to take young people's experiences very seriously. Childhood sorrow, teenage relationships, young people's perspectives about the world around them—rarely are any of these viewed by adults as lasting or meaningful in the way adult experience is considered to be. Although, when we reflect back, most of us acknowledge the impact of the events of childhood and adolescence, the experiences and feelings of young people often are minimized as fleeting or trivial. When we become adults, we appear to forget what it was like to be children or teenagers.

The most common response to young children's deeper questions is to treat them dismissively or condescendingly. How often do adults remark on a reflective or provocative comment made by a child by pointing out how adorable or amusing the comment seems? (Meanwhile, a similar comment made by an adult elicits a more thoughtful response.) For the most part, adults fail to notice the profoundly serious questions that often underlie children's remarks. Children typically are underestimated, and

in no area is that truer, I think, than in their capacities for deep and sustained reflection about the world into which they have been born.

Philosopher Gareth Matthews wrote eloquently about the ways adults frequently fail to perceive what he calls the "moments of pure reflection in children's thinking," and he speculated,

> Perhaps it is because so much emphasis has been placed on the development of children's abilities, especially their cognitive abilities, that we automatically assume their thinking is primitive and in need of being developed toward an adult norm. What we take to be primitive, however, may actually be more openly reflective than the adult norm we set as the goal of education. By filtering the child's remarks through our developmental assumptions we avoid having to take seriously the philosophy in those remarks; in that way we also avoid taking the child and the child's point of view with either the seriousness or the playfulness they deserve.[3]

We tend to assume that children's thinking is always less mature than that of adults and therefore what they say can offer little or nothing to what we already know. But childhood is more than the stage of "adults in training," and children's perspectives can enrich the way all of us understand the world. Every stage of life involves its own way of seeing the world and cannot be simply reduced to preparation for the stages that follow. The insights of childhood are often lost when we reach adulthood. Listening to children can provide adults with access to those insights, which can enlarge and expand our own thinking.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL SELF

Where does the word "red" come from? What does it mean to be fair? Why do we dream at night? Can trees think? Are numbers real?

Philosophical wondering begins in childhood. Aristotle maintained that "all human beings by nature reach out for understanding."[4] If we look back, many of us adults can remember that it was in childhood that we began (and, for too many of us, soon stopped) wondering about philosophical questions. During those early years, children are wide open to the philosophical mysteries that pervade human life, often lying awake at night thinking about such issues as whether God exists, why the world has the colors it does, what the nature of time might be, whether dreams are real, why we die, and what is the meaning of life. Almost as soon as they can formulate them, most children start asking what we call "big questions." Brimming with curiosity about aspects of the world that most adults take for granted, children demonstrate a natural human capacity to explore the most basic elements of human life and society.

This is the beginning of what I call the philosophical self: the part of us that understands that many aspects of our existence are profoundly mys-

terious.[5] Walk into any kindergarten class, and you'll see children alive with wonder, eager to explore almost any facet of their lives. Virtually every parent is familiar with the experience of listening to "why" questions—question after question—from young children who are taking in so many things for the first time and to whom the world, a familiar blur to us adults in the press of everything on our minds, is a series of fresh and vivid encounters.

We traditionally recognize as important the development of children's physical, intellectual, moral, social, and emotional selves, but pay little attention to the cultivation of young people's philosophical selves. This aspect of the self is sensitive to the strangeness of the human experience, and is manifested by a propensity to ask reflective questions about our own experiences and the thoughts we have about them. The ability of human beings to think in the abstract—to be conscious of what we do, say, and think as we are doing, saying, and thinking—forms the foundation of the philosophical self. This capacity leads us to question the meaning of the world in which we live and to look for the questions inside the questions with which we begin.

Young children's questions are often profoundly philosophical. In *Philosophy and the Young Child*, Matthews recounts the experience of one of his college students, who, as part of Matthews's class, had a conversation with a seven-year-old boy, Michael, about one of C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* stories. As part of the conversation, Michael described his worry about the possibility that the universe is infinite. Responding to the student's question about why this was important, Michael was quite articulate. "It's nice to know you're *here*," said Michael. "It is not nice to know about nothing. I hope [the universe] doesn't go on and on forever. I don't like the idea of it going on forever because it's obvious it can't be anywhere."[6] Michael thus demonstrates a spectacularly lucid awareness of the philosophical puzzles raised by the possibility that the universe is infinite. Some adults might respond by imagining that Michael must be an unusual child. Maybe so. But in my experience, many children reflect on these kinds of questions quite naturally, beginning early in their lives.

WHAT IS A PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTION?

Young children's "why" questions are not just questions that ask for explanations of how ordinary things work (though obviously children ask plenty of those as well); often they also express genuine puzzlement about the nature of human existence. For example, when a child asks, "What is time?" this is a different question from "How does a clock work?" Part of being human is reflecting on the oddity of the situation in which we find ourselves—alive on this planet for a span of limited

years—and consciousness of the mystery of our lives is a natural feature of the human condition.

How do you identify when a child is asking a philosophical question? I don't have a straightforward answer to this question. And I think that's a positive thing, as I'll explain.

There is no clear and settled definition of philosophy as a discipline. Even philosophers disagree about what philosophy is. Typically, people start by noting that the word "philosophy" comes from the Greek, meaning "love of wisdom." In ancient times, philosophy was understood as the search for wisdom. Of course, what "wisdom" means is itself a philosophical issue.

I like to think of philosophy as rooted in questions, particularly the questions that shadow our ordinary views about the world and the way we live our daily lives—questions that seek to unveil the often unexamined assumptions behind what we think and say and do. Philosophy is, at its heart, not a body of knowledge, but a way of thinking and living. Its approach is to seek the limits of accepted answers and to articulate questions that have not yet been asked.

Philosophy demonstrates that some of the simplest questions we ask are also the most difficult to answer. As Bertrand Russell once observed, "The value of philosophy is, in fact, to be sought largely in its very uncertainty."[7] Philosophical inquiry can illuminate the uncertainty in what we sometimes take for granted. For example, parents sometimes say that it's important for children to grow up to be fair, caring, tolerant, or responsible. But when asked what any of these character traits really mean, they are frequently stumped. What exactly is fairness, anyway? What does it mean to be responsible? What does tolerance involve, and should our children always be tolerant (do we want them to be tolerant of bullying, for example)?

There are no limits to the questions that can inspire philosophical exploration. Although some questions are more likely to lead to inquiry than others, philosophical questions can be asked about almost every facet of life; they are not restricted to any particular subject matter. What characterizes philosophical inquiry is not its content but rather the approach with which a question is being explored. For example, someone might ask whether something is just; a philosophical approach might be to respond, "What is justice?" Philosophical inquiry focuses on general, abstract questions that are not likely to lead to settled and incontestable answers. So, a question that can be settled by reference to empirical facts ("What are you cooking for dinner?") is less likely to lead to a philosophical conversation. Of course, there are many hybrid questions—for example, "What is the mind?" or "What does it mean to be alive?"—that involve philosophy, science, and other disciplines. In general, though, philosophical inquiry cannot be resolved fully with facts about the world and tends to involve issues that remain unresolved.

When a child asks a question, in many ways it is our response to it, and then the child's response to us, that will lead to philosophical inquiry (or not). A philosophical conversation can be triggered by an apparently simple question, if the exchange that develops is a deeply questioning one. I've learned not to judge immediately the philosophical potential of the questions children ask. There've been many times, in discussions with my own or other children, that a child has raised an issue I initially assumed was not philosophically interesting. When I checked this assumption and really listened to what the child was asking, often by following up with questions of my own to discern what the child was thinking, I discovered that the questions being asked were in fact quite profound.

For example, in a conversation last year with fifth-grade students, the children chose to discuss the question, "Why were the children [in the story we were reading] interested in talking about dreams?" My initial reaction was to see this as a question with less philosophical potential than some of the others that the students had posed ("What are dreams?" "Why do we dream?"). However, it turned out that the student who'd asked the question had been puzzled about why, at times, an issue will be interesting to someone, and that person will want to discuss it, but at other times this will not be the case, and whether this has something to do with our ability to articulate what we're thinking. The other students' responses and questions led to a productive discussion about if and how people are able to communicate what they really think to other people.

SUPPORTING DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN'S PHILOSOPHICAL SELVES

How can parents support the development of children's philosophical selves? That is the subject of this book. Over the years parents have asked me to suggest ways to introduce these topics and engage their children in philosophical conversations about them. Many parents welcome the idea of being able to talk with their children about some of the great questions surrounding our lives, but are unsure how to go about it.

How do you respond when your child is wondering about, for example, why people have to die? Or what infinity really means? Our natural inclination might be to try to provide some explanation that resolves the issue temporarily and is somewhat comforting to a child who is feeling bewildered by the world. But comfort or a mollifying explanation may not be what the child needs or wants. After all, many aspects of life simply *are* difficult to understand or accept. We want our children to be able to confront those aspects with skill and confidence. Part of developing into a person with the ability to do so is learning how to think for

yourself about difficult and unsettled questions—in other words, learning how to *do* philosophy.

To do philosophy means examining your own questions and ideas in a reflective and open way, without being constrained by the views of the "experts" (none of whom have resolved any of these questions anyway). This is not to say that learning about the history of philosophy is not useful for having philosophical discussions. However, that knowledge can also be an impediment for thinking imaginatively about a philosophical problem. Particularly in the university setting, students can feel pressured to demonstrate their philosophical sophistication (that is, their familiarity with the relevant philosophical work on a particular topic and an understanding of which questions the academy considers interesting and which less so) rather than encouraged to explore all the possibilities.

Listening to your children's questions and comments, without feeling compelled to jump in and provide answers, is crucial. Taking time for thinking aloud together, without an agenda for where the conversation is going to lead, creates a space for philosophical inquiry. I've found that an excellent resource for inviting a philosophical exchange with children, an approach illustrated in much greater detail in later chapters, is to take advantage of the philosophical suggestiveness of many children's books. Like many parents, I spent a lot of time reading to my children when they were young. One of my happiest discoveries was recognizing that many children's stories are deeply philosophical. It seems that children's authors are aware of children's philosophical propensities in ways that most of the rest of us are not. Books by Arnold Lobel, Leo Lionni, Eleanor Estes, E. B. White, Natalie Babbitt, William Steig, and many others[8] all raise philosophical questions in ways both familiar to and engaging for children.

As you're reading picture books and other children's literature with your children, it's a natural next step to ask your child what questions the book makes him or her think about. If a story seems to you to raise a particularly interesting issue, you can point it out by asking your child questions like the following: What do you think makes someone a friend? Do you think you'd want to live forever?

As you start to have these conversations with your child, you will find that your child is likely to start seeking out opportunities for this kind of exchange. This is most likely to happen when children observe that you also think these questions are intriguing and that you are comfortable with and interested in talking about them.

Last year, in the first philosophy class of the year in a fifth-grade classroom, we began by talking about what philosophy is and why anyone might be interested in it. In the middle of our conversation, one student raised her hand and declared, "I have a question."

"Okay," I said. "What is it?"

"I want to know why we work hard and worry about money and what we're going to do when we grow up, what we'll do for work and food and shelter, when one day we're just all going to die. I mean, what's the point? What does it mean to be alive?"

Her question and the clarity with which she expressed it took my breath away, although it was not the first time I had heard this kind of question from a ten-year-old child. I replied that this was the kind of question that had led me to philosophy and that I had thought about this question all the time when I was her age and continued to be preoccupied by it. Other students volunteered that this question gripped them too. One student commented, "I have two questions that I have thought about my whole life: What happens when you die? And what's the point of living when one day you're going to die?" This led to a two-session dialogue about the meaning of life and death. For our second session, I compiled a list of questions the students had expressed:

Why does the fact that we will all die lead us to question whether there is any point to life?
Does life have meaning? If so, where does meaning in life come from?
Would life have meaning without death? Would it be better without death?
Why do people die?
Why is death a hard subject for people to talk about?
Is there a part of you that never dies?
Is anything ever *completely* dead?

We analyzed whether it matters that life has some ultimate meaning—that is, if right now your life feels purposeful to you because you spend your days doing things you love to do or helping others, or because of some other reason, does it matter that in the end human life in general could be meaningless? As we talked about these questions, many of the children revealed that these questions were ones that really mattered to them and that they thought about frequently. I noted what a relief it seemed to be for them to be able to discuss these issues.

Later, discussing these class sessions with some adult friends, several mentioned that they had also pondered these questions as children and felt very alone with them. They had sensed that these were not questions they could raise with their parents: they were too scary, too abstract, or too difficult, and they had understood from their parents' signals that their parents didn't want to talk about these things with them. In some cases, it can seem problematic to children to broach subjects like death and the meaning of life with their parents, particularly if there's been a recent death or other emotionally difficult event in their lives; children often worry that raising these issues will upset their parents. My friends unanimously wished that they had been able to talk about what they were thinking and wondering with their parents; they believed that it

would have helped them feel less anxious, alone, or confused if they had been able to explore these questions with the adults in their lives.

THE RECIPROCAL GIFTS OF EXPLORING PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTIONS WITH YOUR CHILD

People sometimes joke, when I tell them about these kinds of conversations with children, that the kids must be having an existential crisis. In many ways it's true, but it's not a joke. Young children do experience anxiety about questions involving identity, the meaning of life, and the nature of death, as, of course, do adults. One way to address children's worries about these issues is by thinking about these difficult questions with them. One reason it can be challenging to do so is that we don't really want to think about these questions, because we share the anxiety our children sometimes feel.

I think that adults can tend to shy away from addressing fundamental questions with children because these issues remain unresolved for us. At relatively young ages, most people stop thinking in a sustained way about philosophical questions. Children absorb the message that the concrete details of life are more important than these abstractions and that there is no time for focusing on questions of philosophy, that these kinds of questions are trivial (or too difficult) and will get us nowhere, or that religion can answer them all for us. Whether or not you are a religious person, there will be philosophical puzzles to explore. Many, if not most, of our deepest questions are not resolved by the existence or nonexistence of a divine being, and there are many philosophical issues connected to the nature of God and the practice of religion.

I have talked to dozens of undergraduate students and adults who recount the experience of engaging in philosophical questioning at young ages, perceiving that the people in their lives were not particularly interested in exploring these questions with them, and eventually losing motivation for further reflection. As a result, most children don't cultivate this capacity, and, for many adults, it remains undeveloped. For most parents, then, philosophical questioning, at least in their adult lives, is relatively new territory.

Taking seriously children's philosophical concerns demands that we return to thinking about these questions ourselves. There is a reciprocal gift, therefore, in talking with children about these questions—we help them to see that their concerns and curiosity are shared, and we get to spend some time thinking about these larger questions that are central to human existence. We do this not by instructing children about philosophy, but by *thinking about these questions along with them.*

WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT DEVELOPMENT OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL SELF?

Helping children to think in a philosophical way about their questions nurtures their philosophical selves. I think that this aspect of children's development should matter to us for three primary reasons.

First, cultivating childhood amazement and curiosity about life can give our children's lives greater depth and meaning. Starting to explore these kinds of questions with them allows for the emergence of a critical consciousness about the way things are. When we try to answer all of our children's questions, we fail to make a space for them to gain experience with questioning and analyzing their experiences and perceptions. Looking for ways to help them think about these kinds of questions without settling them (at least in any final way) can help them to develop their critical capacities and keep alive their sense of wonder.

Second, engaging in philosophical inquiry with others allows children to recognize that there are many different perspectives and ways to understand the world and enables them to learn how to examine critically their own views and the reasons they give for them. By definition, questions of philosophy do not have one settled answer. The experience of understanding that there are many ways to see the same thing—all of them unique and valuable—is a powerful one. Philosophy teaches us that any view must be taken seriously, no matter how outlandish it seems, if good reasons are offered for it. Especially at this time in human history, when greater and greater presumed certainty about knowledge, identity, moral beliefs, and the conditions for a good life leads people to commit extreme acts of violence and oppression, it is imperative for children to understand that there exists a multitude of ways to understand the world and that some elemental questions about human life remain unresolved.

Finally, reflective discussion about large, complex questions cultivates analytic and critical-thinking capacities that are essential in contemporary life. The ability to evaluate in a critical way the information that comes to us—especially for our children, to whom more and more information is presented more and more rapidly—is crucial to discerning what matters and what doesn't, what is reliable and what isn't. For example, teenagers frequently think that if information is presented on a website, it must be true. Young people need to develop facility with asking questions about what is presented to them and the confidence to examine information in a critical way. Because philosophy focuses on the assumptions that underlie our thinking and behavior and involves questions that cannot be settled in a final way, it teaches us to evaluate claims based on reason and analysis rather than on fixed beliefs and prejudice.

our children's questions in ways that make a space for a philosophical conversation, our role must shift.

Because philosophical inquiry involves questions without final answers, these discussions do not require adults to be the "repositories of wisdom." Indeed, that role is counterproductive in a philosophical conversation; what we are after is a wide-ranging and open exchange of ideas. This requires that we listen to our children's questions, acknowledge their difficulty, and respond with open minds. We are no longer the experts but instead become co-inquirers with our children, seeking with them to better understand the philosophical dimension of human experience.

What does it mean to be a co-inquirer with your child? Fundamentally, it means that instead of reacting to a child's question with an answer or advice, you respond by reflecting on it. What is my child asking? Listen for questions that invite philosophical inquiry ("Are numbers real?") and then respond not by immediately attempting to answer the question but by eliciting from your child what prompted it ("I was just thinking about numbers—you can't see or touch them, but are they real?"). Think about the question yourself. You might respond with something like "Why do you think we have numbers?" or "What do you think it means for something to be real?"

Ask yourself, when your child asks you a question, whether she is searching for meaning, trying to understand a concept or idea in some deep way, or seeking a practical answer (i.e., "How do you tell time?" is probably not an invitation to discuss the nature of time, but "What is time?" might be). Try not to prejudge whether what your child says is "philosophical" or not. The question asked often doesn't, on first hearing, indicate the kind of inquiry to which it might lead.

Some time ago, I read a blog post in which the writer was discussing the difficult questions kids sometimes ask and advocating giving short answers to them. For example, the child asks, "Why do I like pink?" The answer, the writer suggested, might be to remind the child of the way we associate favorite colors with things we like, like sweets or feminine clothes, and thus help her to understand why we like certain colors.

My response to this kind of question would be altogether different. I would be more likely to ask myself, "Why *do* I like pink?" I might then ask the child questions like the following: Why do you think you like pink? If you like pink, do you have to like white and red? Does pink always look the same to you? Are there different kinds of pink? How do you know something is pink and not, say, red or purple? Do we always feel the same way about a color, or do our feelings sometimes change? And so on.

When children examine questions philosophically, they are joining a dialogue that has been going on for thousands of years, but this fact is not generally of particular interest to them. They are not looking to under-

stand the history of philosophy or to take in a philosopher's complex argument on a particular subject. They just wonder about various questions and ideas, and we can wonder along with them. In some ways, children are the ideal beginning philosophers because they do not have to grapple with long-held and often unexamined assumptions about what they know about the world. They assume they know very little and feel little need to prove that they know more than they do.

While adults bring a greater conceptual sophistication and life experience to our philosophical conversations, children bring a fresh perspective and openness to exploring all possible views. What we might characterize as their naïveté becomes a strength as they examine many possible answers to the endless puzzles of philosophy. Unafraid to think about a question imaginatively, without worrying about making a mistake or sounding silly, they share their thoughts with relative unreservedness. This allows for what Gareth Matthews has called the "free exploration of possibilities."[9]

For example, when we talk about what we know about the world, it might seem foolish to suggest that the tree in front of our house might not exist. How do we know it's there? We see it. But are we sure everything we see is really there? Don't our senses sometimes mislead us? Alternatively, isn't it possible we are dreaming right now, that we'll wake up and find there's no tree near our house? Or that (as in Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" or the film *The Matrix*) everything we see is only in our minds, and we are being fooled in believing that we are really experiencing the physical world? The more you think about this, the more you might consider the possibility that the tree really isn't there.

Although I am a trained philosopher, in my philosophical conversations with children, my role is not to be the expert. In fact, knowing too much philosophy can get in the way. I have often had to put my own philosophical background aside when talking with children. It's true that children's philosophical explorations don't often appreciate philosophy's historical and intellectual complexity and history. But who cares what John Locke thought about personal identity when a child is trying to understand what features of herself are central to her identity? I am always careful to avoid technical language and reference to the "philosophical experts" when talking with young children about philosophy. It is their questions and ideas in which I am interested, after all. The point is not to teach them philosophy but to do it with them.

It's therefore not necessary to have any background in academic philosophy in order to think about philosophical issues with your child. Philosophy belongs to all of us. The fact that some think of philosophy as a narrow discipline, reserved for professionals who devote themselves to thinking about questions unrelated to the practical aspects of life, is a shame. Whenever you think about how to justify an action, doubt the reality of something, or support a claim that something is true, you are

engaged in philosophical thinking. Philosophy begins with our everyday lives and pushes us to examine them more deeply. The development of a more philosophical approach to life is the cultivation of a more questioning and critical consciousness.

THE EMOTIONAL DIMENSION OF PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING

The excitement of doing philosophy, as opposed to studying it, has always been a significant part of the appeal for me of having philosophical conversations with children. Only a few of the philosophy classes I took in college and graduate school spoke to the burning personal interest I had in these questions as a child and adolescent. Academic philosophy can be fascinating and engaging intellectually, but it rarely takes into account the emotional dimension of philosophical inquiry.

When we are young and start thinking about some of life's big questions, we feel them as much as we appreciate them cognitively. To my mind, one of the most vital elements of philosophical wondering, one that is too often absent from the work and discussions of professional philosophers, is the emotional significance of these questions. Philosopher Jacob Needleman has noted that it's "not possible to approach the questions of philosophy with the scientific/scholarly mind alone."[10] To ask what makes us who we are, for example, is not just an intellectual exercise. It is a calling into question of the way we think of ourselves, our relationships, and our futures. What we think about this most fundamental of questions illuminates the kinds of people we are.

Likewise, when we ask what we really know about the world, we are challenging the core of our everyday life, in which we assume that what we perceive is what exists. It is possible, though, that everything I perceive about the world might have very little correspondence with how the world really is. My senses allow me to experience the world a certain way, which is much different, say, from the way a butterfly experiences the world. But what the world is really like, in itself, might not be anything like how it appears to me (or to the butterfly). Reflecting on this issue is not, it seems to me, an academic exercise. As one of my elementary school students once put it, "Philosophy can change the way I think about everything."

Indeed, philosophy is all about changing the way we think about everything—not necessarily *what* we think but *the way* we think. An approach to living in which few answers are accepted unchallenged, philosophical inquiry aims at pushing us to remain alive to the puzzles and mysteries that swirl unperceived around virtually our every move. The meaning of our everyday lives and all the endeavors in which we're engaged are philosophical. Honest engagement with these ideas makes the world a far richer place.

WHERE IT CAN LEAD

I've welcomed the opportunity to be a co-inquirer with my three children. Responding to their questions by seeking to discern what they are really thinking about, and then trying to analyze the issues with them, has provided opportunities for us to help each other address what are sometimes very difficult, and sometimes just entertaining, questions. I never come away from a philosophical discussion with children without having discovered some new way to think about an issue, even if I have discussed it dozens of times.

My sons are now all teenagers. Our philosophical exchanges over the years have created another dimension in my relationships with them. Here was an area in which we were all deeply interested, none of us sure of the answers to most of the questions. That allowed us to engage in discussions in a more equal way than was true of many of our communications. Looking back, it seems to me that the many philosophy discussions I've had over the years with them have helped us create relationships with each other characterized by an open and inquiring give-and-take, which really comes in handy (along with a sense of humor) now that they've entered a more emotionally, socially, and intellectually challenging phase of life.

Now our conversations take place not over picture books at bedtime but in the car on the way to one of their activities. I pay attention to their questions and try to respond in an open way, reflecting on what it is they are thinking. Virtually anything can inspire philosophical conversations, and I look for spaces that invite them. (Indeed, particularly as they've gotten older, sometimes the boys will look at each other or me and say something like "Okay, Mom, we're not going to have a whole philosophical discussion about this!")

Because we have had many philosophical conversations, I believe that my children are able to talk with my husband and me about issues that are arising in their teenage years (e.g., drugs and alcohol, curfews, driving, college preparation) more calmly and thoughtfully (well, at least some of the time!) than would have happened otherwise. There is an ease about our communication that seems to reflect the fact that my husband and I have been attentive to their questioning, respected their autonomy and points of view, and encouraged them to develop confidence in their own abilities to evaluate problems and information.

This does not mean, however, that every interaction I have with my sons is philosophical or that the kind of equality that we have cultivated within these conversations has blurred the lines between parent and child. It's important to balance being a co-inquirer with your child with your role as a parent. That is, the kinds of discussions I am describing are not necessarily the kinds of discussions you want to have with your children about everything. Almost anything can be approached as a phil-

osophical issue. But there are times when a philosophical conversation is desirable and times when it does not, because you, your child, or both don't have the time or inclination for a philosophical exchange.

We have raised our sons to be questioning, critical thinkers. "Why should I do this?" or "Why can't I do this?" are not infrequent questions in our home. At times those questions can lead to interesting discussions about ethics, community, and moral obligations. And at other times, they lead simply to "Because I'm your mother and the adult, and that's my decision." Sometimes, what we say goes, even if they want to start a philosophical conversation about it. (And we can still have the conversation, even if it's clear that our decision stands.)

Those boundaries are not easy to sustain. (Of course, they are a challenge to sustain even without philosophy.) But if you are clear and straightforward about when a philosophical conversation is appropriate and when it isn't (which can be a philosophical issue in and of itself!), you can develop the kind of dialogue I've described without losing authority within the family. I can have an open exchange with one of my children about, say, what it means to be a good person, and within that exchange, my child's point of view is as valuable as my own. However, that does not mean that I can't then say to the same child, even minutes later, "No, you can't stay out until 2 a.m. tonight."

What's most important to me about engaging in philosophical discussions with children—my own and students in pre-college classrooms—is helping them to think more clearly about questions I know they are already thinking about and that matter deeply to them. One of the primary tasks of growing up is making sense of the world and one's place in it. To do this effectively requires being able to take control of one's life, making decisions and acting in such a way as to live the best life possible, and cultivating a sense of the challenges and rewards of seeking true understanding.

HOW DO YOU BEGIN?

> "Allowing for the immense difference in knowledge and experience, [children] go about their business of understanding the world and what happens to them in it, very much as we do ourselves."[11]

Initially, it can be hard for a parent to respond to a child in a way that invites philosophical exchange. What are some ways parents in which can respond to children's questions so as to open up philosophical conversations? What are some of the classic philosophical questions children ask? What can you do to encourage such discussions with your child?

To get started, I think it's useful to know a little about some of the subfields into which philosophy is traditionally divided. Again, it is not that a limited number of topics qualify as philosophical. But your sensi-

TWO
Philosophical Sensitivity

Wait for the playground to empty.
Then call out those companions from childhood:

The one who closed his eyes
and pretended to be invisible.
The one to whom you told every secret.
The one who made a world of any hiding place.

And don't forget the one who listened in silence
while you wondered out loud:

Is the universe an empty mirror? A flowering tree?
Is the universe the sleep of a woman?

—From "Become Becoming," from *Behind My Eyes* by Li-Young Lee*

we lose a job, or we are faced with some other substantial loss or disappointment that we recognize how crucial it is to contemplate questions about the meaning and significance of human existence.

It can be devastating to realize that we have been going about our lives without examining them very deeply, without really trying to understand the workings of our own minds. Even if we spend our entire lives focused on self-understanding, we can only know just a fraction of our minds. I do think, though, that ongoing reflection and self-questioning can give us a keener awareness of who we are and why we do what we do. The considered scrutiny and search for hidden assumptions fundamental to philosophical thinking requires that we develop a kind of philosophical mind, one that is continually engaged in analyzing our own way of thinking. This pushes us to become clearer thinkers, which, in my view, is the most essential skill we have to exercise more control over our lives.

If we desire that our children build on their natural inclinations to reflect on the fundamental questions behind daily life and develop skill at evaluating their own thinking, and if we want to be engaged with them in this enterprise, we have to pay attention ourselves to what we have left unexamined. This requires that we cultivate what I am calling "philosophical sensitivity"—the capacity, latent in all of us, to engage in questioning and reflection on these larger issues.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHICAL SENSITIVITY?

Philosophical sensitivity involves the development of our ability to identify and ponder fundamental questions about the human condition and to be unwilling to stop at whatever answers we find. My conception of this is based in part on Aristotle's idea of an innate faculty that we can develop over time and with training. Aristotle proposed the idea of a capacity for moral perception, which, when cultivated, enables us to recognize easily the significant features of complex ethical situations.[1] Aristotle contended that these skills, fostered through experience and education, help us to see the morally important aspects of our experiences and understand what matters most in a particular moral decision.

Similarly, sensitivity to the philosophical dimension of experience is a way of perceiving the world, a capacity that can grow over time with training and experience. Philosophical sensitivity heightens our awareness that the way things appear to us does not necessarily reflect the way things really are. Development of this capacity allows us to notice the philosophical facets of questions, beliefs, and situations, which we might otherwise miss. It brings together reason and imagination: an ability to utilize logic and analytic capability and the imagination necessary to en-

vision unfamiliar possibilities and find ideas for exploration in the simplest things.

For example, the activity of fostering and maintaining friendships plays a key role in children's lives. We encourage our children to have play dates, to make friends, and to learn how to be a "good friend." But what is a good friend? Often it becomes important to children to "have a lot of friends" (particularly at this time, when amassing "friends" on Facebook has become a serious undertaking for many young people), but we don't ordinarily engage with them to explore questions like what makes someone a friend, what constitute the elements of a genuine friendship, and why friendship matters.

Philosophical sensitivity begins with an interest in these sorts of unsettled questions, which haunt virtually every aspect of our lives. Contemplating them awakens our natural affinity for seeing the background perplexities just beneath the surface and generally leads to recognizing related questions. The more we examine this dimension of existence, the more philosophical puzzles leap out at us in everyday life. Over time, paying attention to the unresolved, deeper issues that underlie our experiences helps us to cultivate a more nuanced ability to recognize them. As this capacity is nurtured, it becomes almost second nature.

Educator Howard Gardner has articulated a conception of existential intelligence, which I think is related to philosophical sensitivity. Gardner defines this orientation as having the tendency to "pose and ponder questions about life, death, and ultimate realities."[2] Existential intelligence, as he characterizes it, is

> the capacity to locate oneself with respect to the furthest reaches of the cosmos—the infinite and the infinitesimal—and the related capacity to locate oneself with respect to such existential features of the human condition as the significance of life, the meaning of death, the ultimate fate of the physical and the psychological worlds, and such profound experiences as love of another person or total immersion in a work of art.[3]

In other words, someone with existential intelligence is unusually mindful of her place in the midst of an infinite universe and has a heightened awareness of questions about the human condition, such as the meaning of life and death and the purpose of consciousness.

Philosophical sensitivity is the cultivation of the capacity to recognize and reflect on what Gardner calls existential questions (those related to life, death, and reality) as well as other philosophical issues such as knowledge, ethics, art and beauty, justice and freedom, and so forth. This propensity to ask general and searching questions about the most basic elements of life and to always question the established answers can, if nurtured, help us to perceive more readily the often hidden layers of meaning and mystery in everyday experience.

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