

The Philosophy for Children: Attempting a Pragmatist Approach to Knowledge Relations Guaranteeing the Recognition of the Child as an Epistemic Subject

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The thesis defended in this article is as follows: based on pragmatic epistemological presuppositions, P4C offers a pedagogical space that could be described as a "sphere of recognition," ensuring that children can be genuine epistemic subjects, experiencing their "epistemic agency." Thus, P4C could be termed a "pedagogy of recognition," contributing to the epistemic autonomy of children and adolescents.

This article revisits reflections initiated during a presentation at the "Une école philosophique" Colloquium of ACFAS 2023. It outlines arguments that will be further developed in a subsequent article. Among the themes proposed for the colloquium was the exploration of the contributions of pragmatism and critical theory (recognition, emancipation, resonance) in considering philosophy with children and its place in schools. This work attempts to provide reflections in response to this issue.

Examining the contributions of pragmatism and critical theory to Philosophy with Children and Adolescents (P4C) and its place in schools leads to a reflection on the political implications of philosophical dialogue practice. The thesis defended here is that P4C offers a pedagogical space, termed a "sphere of recognition," ensuring that children can be genuine epistemic subjects, experiencing their "epistemic agency." Thus, P4C could be termed a "pedagogy of recognition," contributing to the epistemic autonomy of children and adolescents. To support this thesis, we will first clarify the concept of "epistemic agency." Then, our analysis will proceed in three stages. Finally, while this discussion is brief here, it aims to explore in a subsequent article how P4C bridges two philosophical currents, American philosophical pragmatism (Dewey) and critical theory (Honneth, Rosa), and how this pedagogical practice presents a demanding subversive response to the reproduction of epistemic injustices in schools.

1. Epistemic Agency: A Capacity for Autonomy at the Heart of Social Justice

The adjective "epistemic" refers to the notion of episteme and is related to knowledge, while the term "agency" refers, in turn, to the possibility for subjects to be "actors," that is, to be able to regulate and control their own actions. This refers to the ability to act on the environment around us, while being aware of this power to act. Linking the notion of agency to the adjective "epistemic" thus refers to the possibility of being an actor in one's activity of knowing, therefore the possibility of producing, using,

or transmitting knowledge (Catala, 2015). Critical theories have emphasized how this epistemic agency is not recognized in the same way for groups and individuals. It is not uncommon today to read in academic articles expressions such as "cognitive justice" (Visvanathan, 2016) or "epistemic injustice" (Fricker, 2007), which highlight the non-recognition of epistemic agency of certain agents or social groups in history. As an example for this article, we could briefly present the work of philosopher Miranda Fricker who introduced the notion of "epistemic injustice" in 2007. For this author, epistemic injustice is a kind of "diminishment" that affects a subject in their status as a knowing subject. Miranda Fricker emphasizes that this injustice can notably stem from a deeply ingrained prejudice in society. For instance, a prejudice related to gender, ethnic identity, accent, or age of a person could lead an audience to accord a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's words. Due to their social identity, they may not be able to hold a certain epistemic authority. For example, as a woman in a society where knowledge was predominantly held by men, her words would automatically be discredited. Thus, it is important to note that the ability to be recognized as capable of transmitting knowledge, or as being able to make sense of one's own social experiences, is linked to the social identity of the person. The epistemic authority of a person would thus also be socially constructed, independently of the argumentative qualities of the person.

Critical theories of recognition raised the idea that the desire to be "recognized" can be understood as one of the main motives of what we would now call the process of individuation, that is, the process of constituting a certain individuality. Being recognized in one's epistemic agency contributes to becoming a "subject." However, in a society, mutual recognition is not an obvious fact. The need for recognition is most often felt from the privative experience of a denial of this recognition, creating an injustice. Critical theories of recognition thus seek to account for the possible constitution of a "society of contempt" (Honneth, 2008). This reflection implies not limiting the concept of social justice to only formal principles of law or to the issues of economic injustices, but also integrating the subjective experiences of denial of recognition experienced by subjects and groups diminished in their epistemic agency. However, in order for epistemic sufferings and injustices to be made visible in a society, without creating a society of "victimization," it is necessary for the people who suffer from them to have the capacity to make sense of their subjective experience (1) and to be recognized in this capacity both in relation to themselves and to others (2). In practice, it can be difficult for a person experiencing epistemic injustice to realize that they are living through a situation of epistemic injustice if they do not themselves feel this capacity to make sense of their subjective experience, or if they do not have the space to express themselves and transmit their lived experience. Fricker gives a very telling societal example, which is that of rape within marriage, a practice long invisibilized socially and politically due to the legitimacy of "conjugal duty," in which the woman finds herself in a situation of epistemic injustice due to the lack of recognition of her experience by society.

For these critical approaches, epistemic injustice is one of the fundamental sources of the maintenance of inequalities inscribed structurally in the law, as these are made invisible by the dominant schemas of thinking that structure society and diminish the recognition of the quality of the speech of the persons whose epistemic agency is denied.

The originality of an epistemic approach to domination lies in making the possibility of constructing meaning a political issue. However, the school appears as an important place of meaning construction capable of reproducing epistemic inequalities, particularly through its official curricula and the formalization of knowledge it implements. In reality, the school can become a privileged place for the reproduction of epistemic injustice that reproduces social inequalities, just as it can on the contrary be an essential lever to fight against them, and thus become a place of "epistemic resistance" (Medina, 2012). This potentiality of the school makes it possible to consider pedagogical spaces of recognition.

Thus, what can this theoretical context tell us about the political implications of institutionalizing the practice of philosophy for/with children and adolescents (in French, PPEA) in schools? We would like to highlight to what extent PPEA could contribute to addressing epistemic injustices. To achieve this ambition, the discussion will be divided into three parts, presented very briefly and which will be further developed, as we have already specified, in a subsequent article.

2. The Pragmatist Presuppositions of P4C: Fostering Recognition of the Child as an Epistemic Subject

Many authors, such as critical educator Paulo Freire, have denounced the models of purely transmissive education existing within the so-called traditional models of education where the unilateral recognition of epistemic authority solely by teachers could constitute a serious obstacle to children's agency (Freire, 1968). Furthermore, due to their age or lack of experience, a social prejudice may be to consider them incapable of constructing meaning from their own reality. This prejudice could hinder their learning process and intellectual and moral autonomy. Conversely, one could also question the limits of an education that offers total freedom to children, without setting boundaries or limits and without imparting a certain awareness of their responsibility, as it could lead to relativism.

Faced with these two pitfalls and the associated risks, Philosophy for Children (PPEA) seeks to recognize the voices of children and adolescents by supporting the idea that they can become capable of engaging in philosophical dialogues within a collaborative research community. Philosophizing is not about providing children with an objective and predetermined reality about the world, but rather making them feel that philosophical reflection is a co-construction of subjects in search of meaning. The philosophical community of inquiry, as conceptualized by Lipman, is rooted in Dewey's pragmatism, which implies a strong link between education and experience (Juuso, 2007). Young people are in an active research position; collaboratively, they embark on a quest for answers to "philosophical" questions. This answer, neither given a priori nor completely created out of thin air, can never be fixed. They thus experience the vulnerability inherent in the human condition, capable of questioning philosophical problems without definitive answers, as well as the fallibility of their own point of view, while experimenting with the possibility of trying to construct a common

understanding. Therefore, learning philosophical dialogue is not anchored in a positivist paradigm of knowledge relationships.

However, as Mathieu Gagnon points out, "it is no longer necessarily about appropriating standardized content, memorizing well-defined concepts, or applying precise techniques, but rather working with uncertainty, ambiguity, and multiplicity by focusing more on processes than on products" (Gagnon, 2015). Indeed, "just as a swimmer needs landmarks to swim well (or to swim better), it seems to us that a thinker also needs landmarks to think well (or to think better). The community of philosophical inquiry is undoubtedly one of the privileged places for such learning, and that is why we believe that its implementation, in an educational context, must include a space explicitly dedicated to structuring and appropriating the landmarks specifically related to the art of thinking, among which are intellectual skills" (Gagnon, 2015). This attention to intellectual activity is at the heart of caring thinking as conceptualized by Lipman and Sharp (see Part IV), preventing the belief that any response is valid and thus avoiding staying entrenched in positions leading to relativism. However, it seems essential to start from the voices of young people and ensure that the practice provides an opportunity to develop in participants an empowering epistemic identity for children, which is only possible through open-mindedness, modesty, and trust from the adult facilitating the dialogue, while also ensuring careful attention to philosophical progress. Young people thus experience that their reasoning, even if fallible, can be heard, which can gradually foster their intellectual self-esteem. Moreover, this fosters the conditions for what could be termed the establishment of a sphere of recognition where children may feel acknowledged and authorized to express and think about the world as it could/should be, gradually allowing them to develop deeper communal reflection.

However, is taking children's voices seriously enough to assert that PPEA is a genuine sphere of recognition? Indeed, it could be argued that this practice of philosophical dialogue is never actually applied outside of a predetermined institutional and social context, itself constructed on power relations sometimes incorporated into children's habitus. In this case, it is essential for facilitators to pay close attention to the interactional dynamics of the workshop that could be sources of domination and thus avoid them. The question of the materials used can also be questioned, with some authors indeed denouncing the possibility of having materials that feed into certain prejudices (Chetty, 2018). Nevertheless, we are not trying to demonstrate that the practice of philosophical dialogue as such could spectacularly resolve the epistemic injustices that may occur in a society or at school. Indeed, as Edwige Chirouter points out, these workshops "can only have true meaning and effects in a global ecosystem that values recognition and emancipation on a daily basis" (Chirouter, 2023). However, it seems to us that it can represent an essential subversive force that finds a particular place in the school, itself a source of epistemic injustice. This is what we would like to demonstrate in the following part.

3. The Experience of Epistemic Positionality: Democratic Education of Epistemic Friction

If PPEA can be considered as "a sphere of recognition", it is also because it allows young people to experience their epistemic positionality. Therefore, we would like to assert in this second point that it is precisely because it enables this experience of epistemic positionality that PPEA can be subversive.

By "epistemic positionality", we mean the idea that each individual, being limited by their positional existence, their history, their origin, and their social experience, cannot position themselves in an overarching manner and hold ultimate authority over an "authoritarian" construction of meaning. Thus, experiencing this epistemic vulnerability allows one to relinquish the totalizing aim of constructing a universal from a singular perspective. Indeed, the essence of PPEA lies in the learning of dialogism. Each person, by expressing themselves, fully exposes their inherent partiality, which is inevitable, thereby allowing everyone to experience their limitations, conditioned nature, and perspectivism.

Through exchange, young people can experience epistemic crumbling (Medina, 2012). This crumbling is caused by the interaction of heterogeneous viewpoints and can lead children to develop a critical awareness of the multiple ways of making sense of and perceiving the world. If embraced, this felt epistemic friction can be an opportunity to better understand others, improve perceptual attitudes, and mental habits.

Thanks to the experience of this epistemic friction arising from the divergence of viewpoints among peers, children and adolescents will come to recognize their fallibility and epistemic vulnerability. This recognition enables them to doubt, question, and seek to problematize reality differently, offering alternative thoughts. This confidence in the critical and creative potential of friction between viewpoints is a constant element of pragmatist epistemologies, as friction is considered the starting point for changing habits, to overcome arrogance or laziness, or narrow-mindedness, and to foster the formation of a social imagination, constructed in relation to the thoughts of others.

Thus, for Medina, epistemic friction is the engine of a healthy democracy and presupposes the political conditions for recognizing pluralism. PPEA emerges as an experiential education of this necessity to experience friction to feel authorized and capable of thinking about the world and society. Therefore, while PPEA, in its implementation, cannot alone solve the issues of epistemic injustice existing in society, it nonetheless creates a pedagogical moment where the experience of epistemic friction contributes to an authorization to think about the world together, but from divergent viewpoints. It would thus be a democratic education that would enable the expected epistemic agency in a society that aspires to guarantee pluralism.

However, it seems essential to question how this made possible epistemic friction would not open the door to relativism where everyone, sticking to their positions, would no longer seek to understand others or live with them. To understand that PPEA is not the gateway to relativism, and

thus to better grasp its political implications, we would like to delve into the understanding of Lipman and Sharp's rationality and the concept of caring thinking. Indeed, it seems to us that the conditions of a real sphere of recognition and care lie at the heart of caring thinking.

4. The Political Role of Caring Thinking: A Mode of Thought at the Heart of the Experience of Dialogism and Epistemic Perspectivism.

As a final avenue, and still to further deepen the idea that PPEA can be considered as "a sphere of recognition" promoting the epistemic agency of children, we would like to emphasize the undeniably political role of the conceptualization of caring thinking by Lipman and Sharp. According to Lipman, educating for good judgment is not merely a technique, and he wants to denounce the belief in purely logical rationality. For him, rationality has a sensitive and emotional dimension because emotions actually play a role in redirecting our attention. This is what he wanted to capture under the concept of caring thinking, which "implies a double meaning, because on the one hand it means thinking with care and attention about what is the object of our thought, and on the other hand it means being concerned with care and attention about one's own way of thinking" (Lipman, 2003, p. 262). Later, his collaborator, Sharp, drew attention to the ethical dispositions that can give rise to this dimension of attentive reflection (Sharp, 2007, 2014). Sharp argues that research into what is important cannot be fully realized without an educational space that itself establishes a framework of benevolence among participants, where attention is also sustained for members of the philosophical research community. Her contribution suggests that the transition from simple to dialogical critical thinking requires learning in an appropriate and secure educational environment. It seems to us that the epistemic friction experienced in workshops can pave the way towards a desire to better understand the other, thus developing one's cognitive empathy, as these ethical skills are already incorporated into the workshop's implementation. Thus, the theorization of caring thinking by Sharp and Lipman invites us to consider that the epistemic formation of children and adolescents can only be truly conceived and understood within a secure framework where attention is also focused on ensuring the participation of all.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to open our discussion to another reflection that we have not explored in depth here but which lies at the heart of a doctoral research project. Sharp positions caring thinking as an ability to develop a consciousness characterized as relational and also based on an understanding of what is at play within interpersonal relationships: it is about "experiencing oneself not as an individualized and atomistic thinking subject, but as a thinking subject in relation to the other" (Sharp, 2007, p. 251). This relational conception of epistemic agency is notably experienced in the practice of philosophical dialogue through our fallibility and epistemic vulnerability due to our positionality. Sharp's remarks on relational consciousness seem essential to us because they offer an interesting alternative to discourses advocating for individualistic emancipation in an increasingly competitive world without consideration for the relationships that bind us. This implies that the

epistemic agency of children and adolescents could only be acquired within an educational space that deeply and attentively recognizes the relational dimension of the human condition.

This relational dimension of the human condition, in our view, serves as a lever for a paradigm shift in how we consider education about children's rights. Indeed, it is based on a relational ontology of human rights and thus holds essential political implications for redefining discourse on human rights with a universalist aim in a pluralistic and complex world. Our thesis delves into this topic further.

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