

Gabriele Münnix

### **Minds in Boxes – On P4C with Fables**

When any new thing comes in their way, children usually ask the common question of a stranger „What is it?“ [...] The next question usually is „What is it for?“ And to this it should be answered truly and directly: The use of the thing should be told, and the way explained, how it serves to such a purpose, as far as their capacities can comprehend it. And so of any other circumstances they shall ask about it, not turning them going, till you have given all the satisfaction they are capable of; and so leading them by your answers into farther questions. And perhaps to a grown man, such conversation will not be altogether so idle and insignificant, as we are apt to imagine. The native and untaught suggestions of inquisitive children do often offer things that may set a confiding man’s thought on work. And I think there is frequently more to be learned from the unexpected questions of a child than the discourses of men who talk in a road, according to the notions they have borroughed, and the prejudices of their education.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed we can observe – as Locke observed as early as 1760 - that children are without prejudices and not bound to conventional thinking and therefore ask more freely and with real intentions to learn about things they do not yet understand.

Quite in contrast to Locke’s attitude Rousseau in his *Emile* maintains – only two years later – that it is no use arguing reasonably with children, because they still have to learn reason, and one must never presuppose the aim in the beginning. But Locke holds that reasoning is an important part in the education of children, especially of „young masters“ („they understand it as early as they do language, and, if I misobserve not, they love to be treated as rational creatures.“<sup>2</sup>) Taking childrens’ questions seriously will encourage them to acquire more knowledge, and it will make them self-aware and capable of understanding arguments. But as we have heard the adults do profit from curious and inquisitive questions as well: It is a challenge to think by oneself anew beyond the usual ways of thought which we normally would not have questioned. This is important for the attitude with which adults should meet the curious questions of children: they do not need to have answers in every case, but they should be willing to think together with the next generation. Both sides will profit.<sup>3</sup>

This is why Lipman’s „community of inquiring“<sup>4</sup> can be so fruitful. As a boy in one of my philosophy courses for gifted children<sup>5</sup> put it: Thinking alone is like a car which runs out of fuel. But if we are thinking together and someone has got a new idea, the car can go on running again.“ In the beginning of our courses (children aged from 5-10) I usually read Jostein Gaarders story about a queer boy coming from somewhere in the universe to the

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<sup>1</sup> John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, (7) London 1712, p.186f (§ 120). For digital source see for instance [www.books.google.de](http://www.books.google.de)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.102 (§81)

<sup>3</sup> See also UNESCO’s publication on P4C „Philosophy – a School of Freedom“, [www.UNESCO.org/shs/philosophy](http://www.UNESCO.org/shs/philosophy)

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education*. New York 1991. For more basic literature see Ekkehard Martens, *Philosophieren mit Kindern*, Stuttgart 1999, and Gareth B. Matthews, *The Philosophy of Childhood*, Cambridge Mass. 1994, with a chapter on literature for children and the art of children. (!)

<sup>5</sup> These philosophy courses took place on behalf of the German Society for Gifted Children (DGHK), for gifted children from 5-10. But later on I was asked to do the same in social focal point schools where they had many nationalities in one class and parents were overwhelmed to answer their childrens’ questions. To my astonishment, the questions and the behaviour were quite the same!

earth telling that on his planet one has to bow in front of questions, not in front of the answers<sup>6</sup>. We normally then collected all sorts of possible questions and noted them on flip chart paper, only to classify three sorts of questions afterwards:

a) questions that we can answer quickly and mostly without thinking about them (What's your name? Where do you live? Do you have a sister or brother? Who is your best friend? etc.)

b) questions that we have to think about before answering them, but we know there must be a definite answer and we can find it out, for instance by asking others or by looking into books.(My son at the age of 5 once wanted to know, why it gets colder when we climb up a mountain, although we come nearer to the sun. And of course this is no philosophical question.)

c) questions that afford thinking with perhaps several possible answers that lead us into philosophical reasoning and the need to clarify our notions. („Am I still myself in ten years?“, my daughter once asked ).

The question is not trivial at all and refers to the roots of identity. It can be illustrated by the example of Theseus' ship in Hobbes. This legendary ship in ancient Greece was part of an annual ship procession from Athens to Delos and, in the course of time, planks, nails etc. were repaired and exchanged, until most of the material was new and could last for some more time to come<sup>7</sup>. Is it still the same ship? Is identity something ascribed from outside? Does identity depend on the material? Or is it the memories or a certain spirit that go along with it? Is it the same if people think it is and do not notice the ship has changed somehow? Do changes alter a person, or does (s)he stop to exist if (s)he is not the same any more? What is the core of identity, of my identity? In my view? In the view of others? etc. In which way do changes alter my identity? What is an „I“? Can I stay myself?

As one can easily guess now it is the third category of open questions that lead us into philosophy.

The originality of childrens' questions is often surprising. „Does my cat know it is a cat?“ „Can stones be happy, for instance when the sun is shining?“ These questions demand clarifying the underlying notions. What *is* happiness? What *is* knowledge? Which properties have stones and cats in comparison to humans? And which properties do they lack?

In order to stimulate these philosophical questions I followed a recommendation of Philip Cam, who, different from Matthew Lipman, wrote about P4C in the classroom and how to choose suitable stories.<sup>8</sup> Here are some of the criteria: The stories should contain much

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<sup>6</sup> Jostein Gaarder, Hallo, ist da jemand? (Hello, is anybody there?) München 1996

<sup>7</sup> The connection to the notion of identity for children is developed in more detail in Martens, loc.cit., p. 31ff

<sup>8</sup> Philip Cam, Thinking Together: Philosophical Inquiry for the Classroom, Sydney 1995. I quote from the German edition: Zusammen nachdenken. Philosophische Fragestellungen für Kinder und Jugendliche, Mülheim 1996, p.30.

dialogue, the figures should ask questions, look for explanations, name reasons, think about alternatives, and look for proof. And for the discussion of ethical questions Cam refers to the fables that have been known for illustrating moral dilemmas since antiquity<sup>9</sup>.

I have to remark now that in North Rhine-Westphalia, one of the federal states of Germany we have institutionalized P4C as a school subject in all types of Lower Secondary schools, beginning at the age of 10, and that there are even federal states that offer Philosophy at primary schools. We called it „Practical Philosophy“(PP), not to be confused with „Ethics“, but because we wanted to ensure that reflection always has to start from and go back to practical everyday life. With this step the frame conditions for „communities of inquiring“ change: teachers have limited time within the syllabus, have to give marks, and under the pressure of time have to structure more frequently than in outside school courses. We have built a curriculum with seven „question fields“, where like in a spiral you have to deal with topics on a higher level every two years, according to the age of the class. (The questions of self and others, of acting well, of truth, reality and media, of nature and technique, of state, law and economy, and of origins, future and sense, where the world religions have their place.<sup>10</sup>) Of course these guidelines require appropriate methods and media, and I myself was engaged in developing didactical methods of how to work with pictures and fables<sup>11</sup>, because for younger pupils the concentration on spoken words cannot be maintained for all 45 or even 60 minutes of a lesson. Methods have to be diversified in order to facilitate concentration, and you can even apply educational games.

As we all know in fables the animals stand for human qualities, for instance the fox for cleverness, and a goose for stupidity. Children are used to the behaviour of the fable animals, and they know they can transfer it to human behaviour.<sup>12</sup> You can even make children draw aspects of the fables, which in my experience will help to develop questions. Fables are not abstract, they stimulate imagination, and they illustrate metaphorically what can be drawn from them. After some time I invented my own „philo fables“, as the children called them, and embedded them into a frame story<sup>13</sup>. These philo fables always lead to philosophical questions and the possibility to discuss them, of course always in a language adequate to the childrens' intellectual capacities. The following competencies can be aimed at: defining notions, classifying things, recognizing logical connections and analogies, drawing conclusions, analyzing restrictions, asking helpful questions, making distinctions,

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<sup>9</sup> Cam, loc. cit., p.35f

<sup>10</sup> See Gabriele Münnix, *Praktische Philosophie*, in: Norbert Münnix/Dirk Warthmann (Hg.), *Fächer und fächerübergreifender Unterricht des Gymnasiums in der Sekundarstufe I*, Heinsberg 2000, p.183-211. Three of my schoolbooks at Klett („*Philosophie für Einsteiger*“) had appeared before the curriculum, and have a different structure, but „*Horizonte Praktischer Philosophie*“ finally appeared on the basis of these 7 question fields)

<sup>11</sup> For more examples see Gabriele Münnix, *Kein Bildnis machen? Urteil und Vorurteil als Thema des Philosophierens mit Bildern*, in: Eva Marsal / Takara Dobashi (ed.), *Ethische Reflexionskompetenz im Grundschulalter: Konzepte des Philosophierens mit Kindern*. Frankfurt 2007, p.369-386.

<sup>12</sup> Fables must not be childish at all, as can be seen in Günther Anders, *Der Blick vom Turm*, München 1968.

<sup>13</sup> Gabriele Münnix, *Anderwelten. Eine fabelhafte Einführung in die Philosophie*, dtv München 2009. A Korean translation has appeared, An English translation „*Otherworlds. A Fabulous Introduction into Philosophy*“ is forthcoming.

looking out for important consequences and possibilities, looking for alternatives and reasons, rendering judgments carefully, listening to others' arguments, etc..<sup>14</sup>

Here is an example which refers to new possibilities in the digital world:

### **Minds in Boxes<sup>15</sup>**

*"In the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium, ladies and gentlemen," Professor Great Owl proudly explained to his audience, "we shall finally succeed in avoiding wars. A gigantic step forward for history!" He started his guided tour through the think tank factory with a short talk.*

*"But how will that be possible?" a small sparrow asked. "I merely have a bird brain, but I would dearly like to know how that can happen. All along starlings and blackbirds have been fighting over the best nesting places, and swans over the control of the waters. And we've always had to fight for food. Life means fight, how should that ever change?"*

*"Indeed, it was awful and no longer worth living," Professor Great Owl took up the interjection." The swans thought nothing of the ducks, they considered them ugly and evil, and vice versa, Each animal species grew up with prejudices, and every annoyance, every fight, every defeat generated thoughts of revenge. There was continuous new annoyance, rage, fighting, revenge and new prejudices. All that could not easily be forgotten, and often accompanied a whole animal life. And it was passed on to the children as well!*

*That is exactly why we had the idea to rid ourselves of all those burdens! They are merely cumbersome. We want to clear our heads for the important tasks of the future on which we are working here in our think tank factory – one of several already existing in our country.*

*The employees of our think tank factory save their minds on discs. We store these discs in flat boxes, which can be stacked beautifully. Each employee has his own stack with his former consciousness. Here, for example, my mind has been filed. Autumn 3009, for example!" Professor Great Owl opened a box. "I just have to load this consciousness into my brain, thus! And immediately everything is back: the scent of pine cones, for example, of aromatic tree gum, musty dead leaves with scurrying mice, a tired, mild sun in the evening, and there, my frustration at this stupid owl, who always blinked so sluggishly and missed the best opportunities for turning her young into clever little owls. Impossible to bear! Then I was furious at a cuckoo who would not stop calling, who was so full of himself and had to draw attention to himself all the time. And I felt unspeakable fury for this idiotic, brainless bark-beetle ... There are, of course, always good memories, too, but unfortunately also paralysing, bad feelings from which nothing good can ever come. All this aggression grows and grows and, at some point, has to explode. Therefore, away with it! Let us dispose of these memories, tabula rasa, and let us start to think from scratch! Then we shall be prepared for the tasks of the future. So I file away my consciousness and become free for new experiences, and new ways of thinking."*

*Professor Great Owl opened another box. "Or spring 3011, for example! A magpie had robbed the eggs with my progeny. A mere moment of carelessness and everything was lost. Death to all magpies, I vowed at the time. But that is not so easily accomplished, even when you are full of hate ...*

*Together you arrive at better ideas. And we have enough problems in nature on which to work! So, away with memories we decided, and here they lie. We have to deal with important aspects of the future of birds, and every fight throws us back. This eternal mistrust was only an obstruction. The invention of the millennium, ladies and gentlemen! Freedom even from consciousness at last! It merely distracts"*

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<sup>14</sup> Cam, *ibid.*, p.23f

<sup>15</sup> Münnix, *Anderwelten*, p.182ff

*“But how do you know who you are?” the little sparrow asked sceptically. “If your memories and feelings are gone, what is left in your brains?”*

*“Well, logical thinking, of course,” Professor Great Owl said importantly. “And no feeling gets in the way to distract our thinking.”*

*“Well, I would not like to give away my feelings,” the little sparrow with the bird brain said.*

*“But everything is merely filed away, and we can reload it any time we want to remember!” Professor Great Owl reassured. As I said, everybody has his stack of discs with his stored consciousness, nothing is lost. However, among all the good memories there are always bad ones, and some of us do not want to go back. It suffices to know that you can retrieve it any time you want to.”*

*The sparrow looked doubtful.*

The following questions usually arise: What is mind? What does it consist of? Normally the children collect items such as: memories, holidays, anniversaries, gifts, friends, experience, thoughts, science, inventions, feelings (good: praise, joy, hope, love, trust, friendliness, braveness, success, bad: hate, fury, anger, hostility, scorn, distrust, insult, being laughed at, losing a parent, danger, being beaten).

Is it possible to dispose of all that? Would you wish to outsource something of all that? Which part? What stays behind? Should we strive for emptiness? (Surely this question is also interculturally relevant and will possibly be answered differently by Asian children which may open up the opportunity to discuss different views on „emptiness“.)

In the frame story two siblings Phil and Feli discover a strange old book containing 30 fables with empty pages in between and an initial motto saying „Do have the courage to use your own reason!“ which is of course – as philosophers know – a quote from Kant’s essay on Enlightenment. So before a text written in magic ink appears the siblings think they are to note questions or ideas to each fable on the empty pages. But when the secret scripture appears they can read about famous philosophers and their main thoughts and they realize that each of the fables illustrates a thought of one of the philosophers in the list. And they discover they can start to assign the fables to the philosophers’ thoughts.

In this special case it can be detected that it was John Locke who thought of human consciousness as a blank slate („tabula rasa“), an empty box before perceptions and experiences come in and fill it. But can mind really be totally empty? And how does knowledge come about?

Can we empty our minds from rubbish and store it away like we can store things on external hard disks? Can we really get rid of them? Should we strive for it?

In the frame story, after noting questions, Feli decides to continue the fable: (are there different ways to continue the fable?)

*“Ladies and gentlemen,” Professor Great Owl turned back to his audience. “This then is the glorious and important invention of which I have been telling you. And now I will lead you to one of our workrooms. Here you can see my co-workers. Starlings and blackbirds, owls and magpies are working*

together on improving the quality of water. Yes, and in the near future we shall even add fishes and frogs although we also have storks and herons among us. And they all have deposited their consciousness in these boxes. Do you see the stacks along the walls?" There was a peaceful, calm working atmosphere.

"This really is impressive!" the visitors said unanimously.

"It is real paradise! Do you need more co-workers? Where can we apply?"

But the siblings and their friend Jacob also discuss questions among each other, which will be developed in the classroom as well:

- Will there be no more prejudices left, if all memories have gone?
- Will there be no more quarrels?
- Would the world be a better place?
- What does mind consist of?
- What is the difference to consciousness?
- Which role do memories play? And emotions?
- If one can save data on a computer, such as pictures and texts: Can feelings be saved likewise? Are they data as well?
- Is thought without feelings better?
- Where are feelings and memories in the way?
- How can one deal with bad memories and feelings?
- Can you completely forget them?
- What are prejudices? How do they arise? Can you avoid them, and how?
- Could there be more peace and a better society? In which ways?

And at this point a teacher can even apply the method of thought experiments<sup>16</sup>, thus including the childrens' creative fantasy. (At this point it has to be noticed that in PP we try to follow Marten's recommendation to make even children – and later on, youngsters as well - acquainted with 5 dimensions of philosophical approaches<sup>17</sup>: phenomenology (describing what can be perceived from different points of view, in different languages<sup>18</sup>),

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<sup>16</sup> See Gabriele Münnix, The Power of Thought Experiments, in: Rolf/Münnix (ed.) Violence (Europa Forum Philosophie 64), p.141-153.

<sup>17</sup> See Ekkehard Martens, Methoden des Ethik-und Philosophieunterrichts. Philosophie als elementare Kulturtechnik, Hannover 2003.

<sup>18</sup>The descriptions may be culturally dependent: So Derogowski reports that East African persons in a picture would see a water can over a woman's head where Westerners would see a window in the wall above her head.

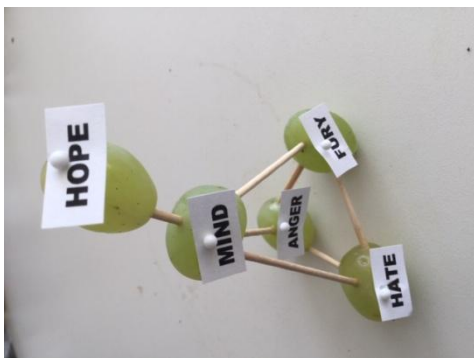
hermeneutics (trying to understand what we perceive or what others have said or written in which circumstances), analytical approaches (analyzing, not only language and notions, but also facts and figures), dialectics (finding arguments and counter-examples, discussing pros and cons) and creative thinking: Utopian thinking and thought experiments have a heuristic value and set free the creative powers of thought. Could everything be otherwise? )

But back to the fable:

What would a better society look like? Here is an opportunity to talk (sometimes indirectly) about childrens' experiences, for instance with mobbing, which already takes place in primary schools, or with being beaten, which is forbidden but still takes place in some families, independent of nationality.

A more analytic way is offered by the method of constructing a concept molecule which has been developed by Kristina Calvert.<sup>19</sup> This method of visualization of interdependencies also takes in haptic experiences, because the different notions are represented by styrofoam balls which have to be assembled to show and think about connections between the notions. Here some material has to be prepared: styrofoam balls, shish kebab sticks, post its and pins. The work can either take place in groups or in one group which will depend on the size of the class, because you will need concentration: Different notions around the notion of „mind“ shall be connected to each other in the way of a molecule. For younger pupils the notions in question can be selected before, whereas elderly pupils can act more freely and decide by themselves which notions they want to relate to each other. The outcomes at each table can be compared and discussed.

The model below can lead to the following discussion:



(For demonstration purposes this mini-model was constructed from grapes and toothpicks),

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(Jan B. Derogowski, Illusion and Culture, in: R.Gregory/Ernst H. Gombrich (eds.), Illusion in Nature and Art, London 1973, p.161-191)

<sup>19</sup> Charles and Cristina Calvert, Philosophieren mit Fabeln, Heinsberg 2001, p.20.

If we could really outsource our negative feelings such as fury, hate and anger, like storing them away on external hard disks: is not „hope“ still within the mind? And if „mind“ is more general as subjective „consciousness“, shouldn't we represent „consciousness“ by a big transparent container, where we can put our negative feelings and memories still within, but to the edge, letting hope and peace and positive feelings have a central place?

These are only a few examples of how to work with fables in P4C. According to the age of the children it may be an enrichment. And by the way: it is absolutely necessary for schoolroom philosophy with children, that teachers (who have to give marks as well) structure discussions, repeat results and let the children put down in their booklets not only further leading questions, but also interim results. And homework cannot only consist of reflecting on a given (simple) question, but also of inventing a story with given notions. The goal is to get children engaged in the adventure of thinking.

And to repeat Locke again at the end: „There is frequently more to be learned from the unexpected questions of a child than the discourses of men who talk in a road, according to the notions they have borroughed, and the prejudices of their education.“ Both parties may win.