EDUCATING THROUGH PHILOSOPHY: CRITICAL THINKING AND MEANINGFUL DIALOGUE

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Abstract: This paper highlights the value of philosophy as a tool for reflection and critical thinking, emphasising its epistemological dimension as a lifelong approach to inquiry and scientific reasoning. The central research question concerns the importance of educating through philosophy, fostering conceptual understanding, the pursuit of truth, the construction of arguments, and engagement in a philosophical dialogue within educational curricula that incorporate philosophy for children. Part of the argument focuses on highlighting the presence of philosophical education since antiquity. The conclusions indicate that children perceive philosophy as a distinct way of thinking, corresponding to concepts and justified beliefs. The framework of the paper's approach is based on ancient Greek philosophy, the Socratic method, the homo mensura protagorean principle, the intellectual movement of the Sophistic Enlightenment, and the Platonic dialectic. The study's primary contribution lies in promoting "inquiry into the meaning of concepts," a key benefit of the P4C (Philosophy for Children) initiative, which fosters critical and philosophical thinking skills of growing importance in the modern world.

Keywords: philosophy for children (P4C), epistemology, critical thinking, teaching philosophy, ancient Greek philosophy

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to highlight the value of philosophy as a tool for reflection and critical thinking, proposing that it be introduced in adapted (analytical) programs in the Greek educational system, starting at younger ages[1]. Part of this paper is based on a

postgraduate research project carried out within the Master's program 'Science Education and Modern Technologies' (Democritus University of Thrace). The findings of this research have shaped the theoretical framework informing the present study.

The main part of the paper emphasises the epistemological dimension of philosophy as a tool for reflection and critical thinking in a constantly changing world. The research question focuses on the value of philosophical thinking, understanding concepts, searching for truth, building arguments, and training in a Socratic, non-formal type of dialogue within educational programs in a broader context. The framework of our approach is based on ancient Greek philosophy, the Socratic method (midwifery-dialogue-the pedagogical value attributed to states of not-knowing-Socratic irony), the homo mensura protagorean principle (central to the Sophistic Enlightenment), and the Platonic dialectic (Kinney 1983, 230). Philosophy's most pivotal contribution to the issue at hand is its relocation of the search for causes from divine agents to human reason and agency. This intellectual move, initiated by Thales, Heraclitus ("*ἐδιζησάμην ἐμεωυτόν*", DK B101), and other Presocratics (Popper 1998), was later inherited and further refined by Socrates. The pursuit of self-knowledge is now recognised as a central philosophical and ethical value. It is precisely at this point that one finds a compelling rationale for the early cultivation of philosophical inquiry in children who are naturally inquisitive and full of questions about the world around them (Lone 2018).

If change—a central concept in Presocratic thought—is reflected in today's fast-evolving digital world and global context (educationally, socially, morally, politically), then philosophy offers a crucial tool for navigating this reality with reflection and critical awareness. The effectiveness of the changing world and the necessity of useful philosophical discourse are not new findings. Heraclitus (540-480 B.C.) approached the problem of change from an ontological perspective, intertwining philosophical thought itself with the dynamic processes of change and becoming (DK B51, DK B55, DK B80). The ontological problem of identity and alterity,

closely tied to the tension between unity and multiplicity (Popper 1998, 23), can be traced back to the Presocratic philosophers—particularly Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Democritus—whose foundational inquiries shaped the earliest metaphysical conceptions of being, difference, and plurality.

THE BACKGROUND FRAMEWORK

Philosophy for Children (P4C) was Professor Matthew Lipman's (and Ann Margaret Sharp's) innovative project (1970) that utilised philosophy (Goucha 2007) as a means of intellectual nourishment to help children develop critical and logical thinking, questioning, curiosity, and creativity (Vansieleghem & Kenedy 2011). He was "transforming" philosophy into a teaching subject (involving philosophical novels) focused on skills development for children and young people (4-16 years old). He believed that in this way, students "can improve the quality of life in a democratic society" (Lipman 1998, 277). A similar approach is Nelson's (Socratic) method (Vansieleghem & Kenedy, 2011). We try to point out that this transformation is not a new one. Socrates, Plato's teacher, was the first philosopher who contributed to teaching philosophy by asking special questions (midwifery), introducing a new type of dialogue, formulating the distinction between knowledge and ignorance (*Theat.*150c-e), and trying to distinguish what one knows from what one does not know (*Apol.* 21d). Therefore, the philosopher relied on critical thinking, on the dialectical ability of the interlocutor (Kinney, 1983, 230), on his ability to control the hypotheses to be investigated, and not to accept them without examining. Although the Socratic method is concerned with adults, the core aspect of this method applies to pedagogical contexts involving children. It guards against overestimating a person's capabilities, which leads to cognitive errors (Kruger & Dunning 1999).

Lipman aimed to encourage and improve the higher level of children's reasoning and thinking ("critical, creative, and caring thinking": including active thinking, affective thinking, and valuative thinking) (Daniel & Auriac 2011). He believed that children, based on their own experiences and knowledge, can think abstractly and understand philosophical questions (Millet & Tapper 2011), which provides cognitive, social, and moral benefits (Lipman 1995). P4C improves levels of understanding, which is such an important condition for survival in the modern multicultural reality.

The Epistemological Dimension of a Non-Formal Mode of Philosophical Discourse

The epistemological dimension is one of the timeless stakes of philosophy. What is knowledge? When do I produce knowledge? Is knowledge possible? Plato's *Theaetetus* gave us valuable answers based on the three definitions of knowledge that are examined by Socrates and his interlocutor, the young mathematician, Theaetetus. During this dialogue, the need to define the nature of the verb "know" is highlighted through a non-standard form of philosophical discourse:

1. Knowledge as perception (151e);
2. Knowledge as true judgment (187b-c-), 3. Knowledge as true judgment accompanied by *logos* (201d).

The 2nd and 3rd definitions refer to the critical nature of the judgment/opinion, which is also one of the goals of the P4C project (critical thinking, reasonable explanation to fight for my opinion). The young mathematician, Theaetetus, is called upon to examine the validity of the three definitions, applying some of the principles of the Socratic method. First, analyzed them into their constituent elements, then he devised the best possible line of argument in their defence, and finally, he assessed which of these definitions withstand critical analysis and can therefore be accepted. During the

examination of these definitions, the soul is introduced as a cognitive factor (189e-190a). Consequently, critical thinking, depth of understanding, and the ability to analyse and synthesise information (3rd definition) are qualities that characterise Theaetetus, but also the overall issue of the theory of knowledge over time, although we know that Platonic knowledge is grounded in noēsis, which has the Forms (Ross 1966) as its object.

Critical thinking is the bridge that connects the epistemological dimension of ancient Greek philosophy, and more specifically, the perspective of Plato's *Theaetetus*, with P4C (Daniel & Auriac 2011) and the problem-solving basis (Lipman, 1995). Through a non-formal mode of philosophical discourse, children can learn to think critically (Splitter 2010) and develop the skills of distinguishing, comparing, explaining, classifying, generalising, and engaging in processes of analysis (Menn 2002) and synthesis. Generally, these are some of the steps of Platonic dialectic (mainly in the *Sophist*). In Plato, the dialectic began (Robinson 1953) with a "Q&A" method (*Kratylos* 390c) (Kinney 1983, 220) through specific processes to find definitions (*Theaet.* 202c3), approach the depth of the concept, and finally reach the realm of the Forms (*Rep.* 508e-511e, *Phaed.*, 101e-102a). In his later dialogue (*Soph.* 248a-251d), Plato applied the method of division and integration in dialectic. The most important contribution of Platonic dialectic to the issue of the philosophy of education lies in the fact that it is simultaneously a speech act and a reasoning process. This dimension fits perfectly with the evolving physical and mental activity of children and adolescents (Yang et al. 2023).

The teaching objectives set for the P4C project are related to the cognitive, emotional, and psychomotor levels and contribute to the cultivation of students' critical, creative, and emotional thinking (Lipman 2006). According to him: "I didn't want to teach children logic in the way we taught (or pretended to teach) college students logic" (Lipman 1976, 17). So "thinking" and "teaching" are the key elements, but in the right way. Regarding them, both Socrates and Protagoras provide valuable insights into these foundational

elements from a distinct philosophical vantage point. Socrates' teaching is midwifery (Tomin 1987), which functions methodologically as a pre-preliminary of the Platonic dialectic (Kahn 1998). The attainment of wisdom is considered human's inborn in Socrates' midwifery process, which distinguishes the idol from the real thing[2]. The midwifery method of Socrates, directly connected to human nature, deals par excellence with the soul, giving the mark of its trade: freedom from the useless[3]. The protagoreian thesis of homo measura (man is the measure of all that exists)[4] essentially expresses what Lipman emphasised above: we have to teach children in a different way from college students. The measure is man (child) and his needs, and not the course of logic.

PROPOSAL

The inclusion of a P4C program in the analytical curriculum of primary schools in Greece is a feasible proposal that creates a new learning environment in the modern digital world (web, artificial intelligence, deep learning, machine learning, big data), shaping the conditions for a humanistic utilisation of information literacy: ethics, norms, self-awareness, solidarity, human rights. Stimulating critical thinking in children through a philosophical inquiry is one of the most unique contributions made to the field of democratic education (Goucha 2007; Weinstein 1991).

In the P4C project, justification and argumentation have great importance within the community of inquiry (Lipman 2006). At this point, we can recall the third definition of the knowledge of *Theaetetus*: "Knowledge as true judgment accompanied by *logos*". Justification has great importance if it is accompanied by *logos*. One of the meanings of the word *logos* is the analysis of the parts of a whole, which also gives the logic of this whole. And beyond that, the third definition focuses on the justification of opinions through the use of *logos*, as a reasonable argumentation expressed in the appropriate language (which is the first meaning of *logos*). Although

Plato's aim was not empirical knowledge, his third definition (in the *Theaetetus*) seems unable to fully detach itself from the problem of doxa (judgment/opinion) (Kinney 1983, 230). The epistemological proposed synthesis lies in the justification of beliefs — the grounding of opinion in a rational foundation, captured in the notion of *logos*. In this light, the Philosophy for Children (P4C) program developed by Matthew Lipman can be seen as a contemporary pedagogical expression of this classical philosophical concern: encouraging children to transform their opinion into reasoned belief through a special type, which, although it does not follow a formal teaching format, is meaningful, profound, and genuine. *Theaetetus,* Plato's main epistemological work, focused on the justification of beliefs (3rd definition of knowledge, 201d), which has been one of the leading issues in the Platonic theory of knowledge (Gettier 1963). Justified norms and beliefs are related to epistemological and ethical issues, too. And the justification of beliefs about "ethical dilemmas, aesthetic qualities, political tensions" (Laverty & Gregory 2007, 283) was one of the key issues of this research.

BIBLIOGRAPHY REVIEW

Many scholars argue that philosophy is exclusively associated with adult life because they believe that philosophy presupposes intellectual maturity and appropriate philosophical knowledge, two elements that children lack (Kitchener 1990; Wilson 1992). Wilson (1992) criticises the P4C program, arguing that it does not adopt a clear pedagogical and ideological background. Cannot be easily answered questions like "What is philosophical thought?" or philosophical truth (Wilson 1992, 17), although these were the original questions that occupied classical philosophy. A common mistake made by those who reject P4C is the comparison between academic philosophy and philosophy for children. Fisher (2001)

encourages children's engagement with philosophy, although he recognises the existence of their cognitive weaknesses.

We must point out that philosophy was not born in academic auditoriums or classrooms. Its natural space in the ancient Greek environment was human intercourse, and its method was grounded in a meaningful non-formal type of dialogue, in rational justification, and interpersonal engagement, not as a formalised procedure, but as a spontaneous and genuine mode of inquiry. Besides that, Plato highlighted philosophising as a form of dialogue (Abarejo 2024). So, when Trickey and Topping presented the results of ten research studies (1970-2002), which revealed positive effects on logical thinking, self-esteem, creative thinking, language expression, and cognitive ability (Trickey & Topping 2004) were correct according to ancient Greek epistemology.

Taking into consideration the global developments in the field of audiovisual and digital literacy, the cognitive dimension of philosophy (theory of knowledge/ epistemology) plays an important role from the earliest stages of human education, which starts from admiration (Pl., *Tim.* 47b; *Theaet.* 155d) and wondering which is "a part of life for most children" according to Lone (2018, 53). In Aristotle's view, this process starts from the simplest, those that are easily accessible to the human senses, to the most complex:

i. "*Διὰ γὰρ τὸ θαυμάζειν οἱ ἄνθρωποι καὶ νῦν καὶ τὸ πρῶτον ἤρξαντο φιλοσοφεῖν*", Arist., *Metaphysics* 982b 12-13 (Due to wonder, people began to philosophise)

ii. "*ἐξ ἀρχῆς μὲν τὰ πρόχειρα τῶν ἀτόπων θαυμάσαντες, εἶτα κατὰ μικρὸν οὕτω προϊόντες καὶ περὶ τῶν μειζόνων διαπορήσαντες*", Arist., *Metaphysics* 982b 13-15 (Initially starting with what they had in front of their eyes, the simple ones, and then moving on to the more difficult ones)

iii. "*φανερὸν ὅτι διὰ τὸ εἰδέναι τὸ ἐπίστασθαι ἐδίωκον*", Arist., *Metaphysics* 982b 20-21 (They sought knowledge for knowledge's sake)

iv. "*Πάντες ἄνθρωποι τοῦ εἰδέναι ὀρέγονται φύσει",* Arist., *Metaphysics* 980a 21 (All people by nature desire knowledge)

The ever-changing nature of the world has consistently concerned philosophy, both epistemologically and ethically, particularly at the level of applied philosophy. In this constantly changing world, critical thinking is directly connected to philosophy and is cultivated not through systematic philosophical logic but through an open, applied epistemological way of thinking (Battersby 2018).

The perception of the world's change, however, presupposes a sound evaluation of empirical knowledge. The things that are easily accessible to the human senses (as an empirical foundation of knowledge) and the significance of a meaningful dialogue (Socratic midwifery) are the basic conditions that could lead to the success of the P4C program (Maleki et al. 2016), although such a program cannot be defined with absolute clarity for childhood (Lone 2018, 54).

Conclusions

Children cannot "philosophise" in the academic sense of the term, but they can perceive philosophy as a different way of thinking that corresponds to concepts, to creative thinking (Lone, 54). Plato might argue that the conceptualisation of thought (*Theaetetus* 185e) from the logical part of the soul helps students understand the concept of justice as well as the contrast of justice and injustice. The world of concepts is, therefore, a problem, not only for children but also in general. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (*Met.* 987b 35-37) understood the importance of this issue (Hall 1963). The logical integrity of the concept is based on the intellect, according to Plato, and this guarantees the unity of the concept (*Republic* 533b1).

The "inquiry into the meaning of concepts" (Laverty & Gregory 2007, 282) is a basic benefit of the P4C project, which builds argumentative thought. Philosophy is the innate starting point for

conceptual development and ensures the conditions for searching for the essential and methodologically appropriate. This starting point suits the sensitive childish soul. Just remember the definition of dialectic in *Theaetetus*: dialectic is the dialogue of the soul with itself (190a), something very easy for children but not so much for great philosophers.

NOTES

1. Here it should be added that, within the Greek educational system, students are first introduced to philosophy—partially—in the third year of lower secondary school, with a more structured engagement occurring in the second and third years of upper secondary school.
2. *Theat.,* 150c 2: "*πότερον εἴδωλον καὶ ψεῦδος ἀποτίκτει τοῦ νέου ἡ διάνοια ἢ γόνιμόν τε καὶ ἀληθές*".
3. *Theat.,* 150 b-c.
4. *Theaet.*, 152a 2-4: "*πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον" ἄνθρωπον εἶναι, "τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστι, τῶν δὲ μὴ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστι".*

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