

# 7 Guiding a Philosophical Discussion

## Philosophy and the Strategies of Dialogue

Philosophy is a discipline that considers alternative ways of acting, creating, and speaking. To discover these alternatives, philosophers persistently appraise and examine their own assumptions and presuppositions, question what other people normally take for granted, and speculate imaginatively concerning ever more comprehensive frames of reference. These activities in which philosophers engage are the outgrowth of philosophical training. Philosophical education is most successful when it encourages and enables people to engage in critical questioning and inventive reflection. Given this philosophical conduct as our educational objective, our immediate problem is this: what teaching methodology will ensure the production of the finest ideas and the most relevant and sustained questioning from students?

Conditions that satisfy these requirements include a teacher who is provocative, inquisitive, impatient of mental slovenliness, and a classroom of students eager to engage in dialogue that challenges them to think and produce ideas. The minimal constituents of an adequate environment in which to encourage a child to think philosophically are a questioning teacher and a group of students prepared to discuss those things that really matter to them.

Built into the very nature of philosophy is the methodology by which it is best taught—questioning and discussion. The methodology of encouraging children to think philosophically is exhibited in the discovery approach exemplified by the novels in the philosophy for children program. The teacher is an authority figure primarily in the sense of being the arbiter of the discussion process. But in addition to being a referee, the teacher should be viewed as a facilitator whose task is to stimulate children to reason about their own problems through classroom discussions.

It would be very unfortunate if the teacher in this program were to feel that there is a specific amount of content that must be covered every day, that must be extracted from each episode and eventually mastered by the students. On the contrary, a successful class is usually one in which students enter into an animated discussion that deals with something or other in the book, although

the conversation may range far afield from the initial logic. Such discussions are capable of creating lasting impressions on children.

The amount of information or knowledge children acquire is less essential to their philosophical education than the development of their intellectual judgment. It is less important that children remember certain data than that they learn to think effectively. It is here that "every difference makes a difference." That is, any difference, no matter how slight, in children's modes of thinking can conceivably modify their entire thought processes. For example, a child may, until this year, have been operating on the assumption that things are pretty much what they seem to be, and suddenly he or she discovers that some things are quite different from what they seem to be. The discovery that looks can be deceiving is capable of changing that child's whole life.

Since the stress in the philosophy for children program is on the *process* of discussion, and is not aimed at achieving one specific conclusion, teachers do not need to present themselves to their students as possessing a great store of information. It is better to appear to the class as a questioner who is interested in stimulating and facilitating the discussion. A teacher need not claim to be infallibly right or wrong. But the teacher may very well express interest in differences among points of view, or in confirmations or contradictions of particular opinions. It has been observed that in such an atmosphere of intellectual give-and-take, students hitherto withdrawn or reserved begin to put forth their opinions because they realize that, in such an atmosphere, each point of view will be respected and taken seriously. Such children are willing to take their chances with the ensuing discussion, and to develop reasons for their opinions.

Although one doesn't *teach* philosophical topics to children, it is possible to elicit from them the wondering and questioning characteristic of philosophical behavior at any age. Gradually the children in the classroom begin to discover that a philosophical discussion has a different style from any other type of discussion. It is not just a matter of getting things off their chests, or being able to indulge in self-expression. They begin to realize that they are able to compare notes, experiences, and perspectives with one another. Gradually they perceive pieces beginning to fit together into an objective picture of the way things might be. They begin to understand the importance of recognizing other people's points of view, and of giving reasons for their own opinions. There emerges a sense of the value of impartiality, and a need to think problems through rather than be satisfied with superficial or glib expressions of opinion.

Although philosophy for children may include some rigorous aspects such as the rules and principles of logic, you need not be perturbed if the discussion goes off in any meaningful direction the children care to take it, although, of

course, you should always exercise judgment as to the relevance of the discussion and as to whether the length of time devoted to any particular discussion is or is not disproportionate. Moreover, there is a big difference between a "bull session" and a philosophical discussion. A philosophical discussion is cumulative; it grows or develops, and through it the participants may discover endlessly new horizons. The art of the teacher here consists in skillfully eliciting comments from the children in such a way as to keep the discussion building, while yet involving the greatest possible participation from the class. The teacher's role throughout the discussion is one of a talented questioner. With an eye to encouraging convergent (and sometimes divergent) lines of discussion, with a recognition that a dialogue is often open-ended and somewhat unstructured, the teacher will recognize opportunities for the children to explore new vistas, just as there will be opportunities to indicate how ideas can fit together and reinforce each other.

Under suitable circumstances, a room full of children will pounce on an idea in the way a litter of kittens will pounce on a ball of yarn thrown in their direction. The children will kick the idea around until it has been developed, elaborated upon, and even in some instances applied to life situations, although the latter is seldom achieved without the teacher's artful guidance. Yet, when the discussion is finished, they may make such remarks as "time to get back to our school work," as if what they had been doing all along was not school, or learning, or discovery of their own intellectual prowess. They may take philosophy to be nothing more than fun and games, not realizing that it may be as intellectually formative as anything they might encounter in their school experience.

### Guiding a Classroom Discussion

A thoughtful discussion is no easy achievement. It takes practice. It requires the development of habits of listening and reflecting. It means that those who express themselves during a discussion must try to organize their thoughts so as not to ramble on pointlessly. Very young children may either wish to talk all at once or not talk at all. It takes time for them to learn sequential procedures that a good discussion requires.

One of the reasons that the process of discussion is so difficult for children to learn is that they are so frequently lacking in models of good discussion with which they can identify. If neither the home nor the school offers them examples of thoughtful discussion—whether of adults with children, or even of adults with adults—then each generation of children must in effect invent the whole process of discussion by itself, because no one ever shows it how. In short, it is useful to have an established tradition of discussion that each

child can automatically assimilate and identify with and engage in if dialogue is to enter meaningfully into the educational process.

One of the merits of the novels of the philosophy for children program is that they offer models of dialogue, both of children with one another and of children with adults. They are models that are non-authoritarian and anti-indoctrinational, that respect the values of inquiry and reasoning, encourage the development of alternative modes of thought and imagination, and sketch out what it might be like to live and participate in a small community where children have their own interests yet respect each other as people and are capable at times of engaging in cooperative inquiry for no other reason than that it is satisfying to do so.

Perhaps one of the most distinctive features of the philosophy for children program is that it suggests how children are able to learn from one another. This is a problem that is encountered today at every level of education: there are students in colleges, secondary schools, and elementary schools who try to "make it on their own" without really seeking to learn from one another or to assimilate the life experience of their peers even when, through discussion, it might be readily available to them.

While some children speak up readily enough but fail to listen to one another, others listen intently, follow the line of the discussion, and may then respond to it by making a contribution that goes beyond, rather than merely repeats, what has been said. The teacher should, of course, be aware of the possibility that the child who does not always listen may be developing a very unusual set of ideas, and needs to disregard the conversation for a while in order to do so. (The harm some children do to themselves by not listening is therefore likely to be considerably less than the harm other children do to themselves when, having failed to listen, they are constantly forced to cover the same ground that others have already gone over.) On the other hand, there are children who seldom speak up, but who listen intently and constructively to the class discussion. They are alert and involved, even though they fail to join in the discussion.

A discussion should build by way of its own dynamics. Like children in a playground building a pyramid by standing on one another, a discussion builds upon the contributions of each of its members. In asking questions, the teacher is not merely trying to elicit answers already known. Encouraging philosophical thinking is a matter of getting children to reflect in fresh ways, to consider alternative methods of thinking and acting, to deliberate creatively and imaginatively. The teacher cannot possibly know in advance the answers that children are going to come up with. In fact, it is just this element of surprise that has always been so refreshing about teaching philosophical thinking: one never is quite sure what thought will surface next.

It is, of course, important to keep the discussion going. As the children hear about each other's experiences and begin to learn from each other, they begin to appreciate one another's points of view and to respect one another's values. But when it appears that the discussion of one of the leading ideas of the episodes has ceased to be productive, the teacher must be prepared to direct the discussion tactfully to another topic.

### The Role of Ideas in a Philosophical Dialogue

You may well be wondering what is distinctive about a philosophical discussion. In what ways may a philosophical discussion be contrasted with other kinds of discussions? Here we may distinguish philosophical discussion from discussions of two other types: scientific and religious.

#### Scientific Discussions

A scientific discussion is generally concerned with matters of fact, and with theories about matters of fact. The questions raised in a scientific discussion are in principle answerable questions. They can be answered by discovering relevant evidence, or by consulting acknowledged scientific authorities, or by making appropriate observations, or by citing pertinent laws of nature, or by conducting relevant experiments. Discussions in a science class can be very intense and very lively, especially if there is some disagreement as to how certain evidence is to be interpreted, or as to whether a given theory explains all the relevant factual data.

By and large, the scientist is dealing with how some portion of the world is to be described and explained. Therefore, a science class may involve discussion of such questions as what are the causes of sun spots, what is the temperature of dry ice, how does the heart work, how does the blood circulate, what was the Stone Age, what causes earthquakes, and so on. In general, the issues raised by these questions can be clarified and grasped by adequate discussion and analysis of elementary scientific theories and available scientific evidence. So a scientific discussion is subject to the authority of empirical evidence, as such evidence is interpreted within the accepted framework of scientific understanding. In principle, therefore, the resolution of scientific disputes is always possible.

#### Discussions about Religious Beliefs

Many children in your class are already in possession of a set of religious beliefs acquired from their parents, from their religious schools, from discussion with their peers, and sometimes from their own observations. These beliefs may relate to the purpose of destiny of the world, the question of personal im-

mortality, the existence of a God, the expectation of divine reward or punishment, and so on. These are not generally the sorts of questions that can be decided by factual evidence one way or another. In no way is it part of the role of a philosophy teacher to criticize a child's religious beliefs, or to seek to undermine them even in an indirect fashion. The teacher simply cannot infringe upon the realm of children's religious beliefs without becoming guilty of indoctrination. On the other hand, there can be no serious objection to affording the child a view of the range of alternatives from which human beings throughout the world select their beliefs. After all, if it is not indoctrination to suggest to children who profess to believe in many gods, or in none at all, that there are conceivable alternatives to their views, why should it not also be possible to suggest to those who believe in a solitary supernatural being that there are many numerical alternatives?

It is always unfortunate when a teacher, out of self-righteousness or ignorance, attempts to modify the religious beliefs of children in the classroom. Such invasion of the child's intellectual integrity represents not only a lack of respect for the child but also a misconception on the teacher's part of the nature of science, the nature of philosophy, and the nature of education. Some individuals think that children's religious beliefs are unsound in light of what we know of science and philosophy, and can be corrected with a healthy dash of scientific or philosophical information. But there are no such facts that can dispel religious beliefs one way or another. To the extent that religious beliefs are matters of faith, it is a question whether they are matters that can be resolved by either science or philosophy.

It is, of course, quite possible for children to have religious discussions, just as they may discuss their families, their friends, their fears, their joys, and other private matters among themselves. An informal religious discussion among children typically involves a comparing and contrasting of their respective feelings and thoughts about religious matters. It does not usually involve the search for *underlying assumptions*, or the analysis of the meaning of concepts, or the search for clear definitions that often characterize philosophical discussions. In other words, religious discussions usually do not explore the assumptions on which religious beliefs rest, while a philosophical discussion cannot rest content unless it does explore its own assumptions.

To repeat, teachers must be very careful that this course in philosophical thinking does not serve as a tool in their hands or in the hands of the students to disparage the religious beliefs of some of the children in the class. The course optimally should serve as a tool by means of which children can clarify and find firmer foundations for *their own beliefs*. The teacher's role is twofold. It is not to change children's beliefs but to help them find better and more sufficient reasons for believing those things *they* choose, upon reflection, to

believe in. And further, it is to strengthen their understanding of the issues involved in their holding to the beliefs they do hold.

#### Philosophical Discussions

We have tried to show that science and religion represent very separate areas of human interest in terms of their relevance to the classroom. In other words, from an educational point of view, scientific discussions and religious discussions are separate things and should not be confused with philosophical discussions.

Philosophical discussions need not just take up where science and religion leave off. Philosophical discussions can frequently become involved in questions of science and questions of religion, as philosophical discussions may lead into any other subject. Philosophy may or may not be a party to the dispute over factual descriptions of the world of religious interpretation of reality. As an objective onlooker, a philosopher is no more party to these disputes than an umpire is one of the contestants in a game that he referees. If anything, the umpire represents the spirit of impartiality that tries to see that the game proceeds in the fairest possible fashion. In a somewhat similar fashion, philosophy is concerned to clarify meanings, uncover assumptions and pre-suppositions, analyze concepts, consider the validity of reasoning processes, and investigate the implications of ideas and the consequences in human life of holding certain ideas rather than others.

This is not to imply that philosophy is concerned only with the clarification of concepts: it is also a fertile source of new ideas. For wherever there is a threshold of human knowledge, those who think about that particular subject area can only grope and cast about speculatively in an effort to understand what is there. Gradually, as methods of investigation of the new subject area are developed, as methods of observation and measurement and prediction and control are perfected, the period of philosophical speculation is replaced by one of scientific understanding. In this sense, philosophy is the mother of all sciences, for as philosophical speculation becomes more rigorous and substantiated, as measurement and experimentation and verification begin to occur, philosophy turns into science. In this sense, philosophy is a source of ideas that precedes the development of every new scientific enterprise.

Now what does all this mean for the role of the teacher in guiding philosophical discussions? First, the teacher has to keep in mind the distinctions just made between scientific, religious, and philosophical discussions and must retain these subtle distinctions as guideposts in encouraging children to think philosophically. The teacher must be aware that what began as a philosophical discussion can easily turn into a dispute over factual information that can be settled only by looking up the empirical evidence that is available. It is

the teacher's role, once the discussion has taken this turn, to suggest where the empirical evidence may be found, rather than continue along speculative lines. For example, it is not a philosophical dispute if an argument develops in a classroom over the sum of 252 and 323. It is, however, a philosophical question to ask, "What is addition?" or "What is a set?" It is easy enough to look up in a book the exact year when Columbus landed in the Western Hemisphere. However, this in no way settles the question of "who was the first person to discover the Western Hemisphere?" a notion that is rich in ambiguity and in need of clarification. We assume that it takes *time* for light to reach the earth from the sun. But we do not have a science of time itself, and therefore, when children ask, "What is time?" they are asking a philosophical question, and there is no reason why, through dialogue with their peers and teachers, they should not be exposed to some of the alternative views that have been offered by philosophers if these views can be phrased in terms that they can understand.

Philosophical discussions can evolve out of a great many of the demands children make for the *meaning* of an idea. It is up to the teacher to seize upon these opportunities and use them as entries into philosophical exploration. If the child wants to know what the word "authority" means, or what the word "culture" means, or what the word "world" means, or what the word "respect" means, or what the word "rights" means, the teacher can take any of these as a starting point for getting as many views out on the table as there are children in the classroom, exposing the children to additional views that have been thought up by philosophers, examining the consequences of holding one view over another, and clarifying the meaning and the underlying assumptions of each view.

#### How Is Philosophy Related to Science Education?

It is sometimes pointed out that scientific "facts" are often presented in the classroom as if they were final and absolute. Such an approach is contrary to the spirit of scientific inquiry, for which no fact can ever be called indubitable. To deny the student the right to doubt the outcome of a scientific inquiry is to forestall the continuation of that inquiry. On the other hand, what the instructor needs always to make clear is that the "facts" that he teaches rest upon evidence that is always retrievable or in some fashion demonstrable. It is only when science is taught in such a way as to ignore the limitations of empirical procedures that it becomes indoctrination.

Therefore, the benefit to scientific education of philosophy for children is that it encourages the critical temper of mind that all scientists rightly prize. When students question the facts that they are given in science, their behavior is totally in keeping with the spirit of the scientific enterprise. Indeed the phil-

osophical frame of mind is essential as an antidote to scientific dogmatism, and as a source of fresh and provocative new ideas to be followed up by scientific investigations.

Many of the difficulties experienced by present-day programs in science education are due to the fact that not many young people appreciate what science is about. They find little in it to identify with; they do not understand the methodology; they have little sense of the difference between accurate and inaccurate ways of reasoning, nor do they have a general sense of the purpose of understanding things scientifically. It is difficult to see how students who have not been trained to value the difference between efficient reasoning and sloppy reasoning can function effectively with scientific materials. It is hard to see how students who have not been trained to draw proper inferences from what they perceive or from verbal formulations can ever be trained to engage in scientific experimentation.

In brief, we are suggesting that approaches to science education that should provide the student with a preliminary orientation towards the scientific enterprise itself should provide incentives that would motivate children to apply themselves to scientific pursuits, and should provide a set of working habits that would combine their creative and imaginative inclinations with their own desires to think in a disciplined and orderly way about the world. Putting philosophy in the curriculum could be a step in the direction of the achievement of these goals.

The questioning inherent to philosophy is a necessary precondition to the success of a course in science; if postponed until after instruction in science is well underway, it is often too late to maintain the high level of curiosity that successful scientific education must preserve. Philosophy for children, dealing as it does with so many of the questions that children naturally have about their own life experiences, creates conditions under which the scientific instruction they receive will continue to be relevant for them. Frequently it is the lack of such connections that endangers a more traditionally presented program. It is our thesis that philosophy can provide this continuity, and that science can be more effectively taught, in terms of the objectives of science educators themselves, when a philosophy for children program is present than when it is absent.

### Fostering Philosophical Dialogue

Discussions, Good Discussions, and Philosophical Discussions

Now and then, one will hear this sort of comment during a lunch-hour conversation among teachers: "We had a good discussion in class today." Such a remark leaves one with the impression that good discussions do not happen

very often. It is something like hearing the remark, "My Uncle Fud was sober last week"; one is left with the impressions that the weeks Uncle Fud is not drunk are few and far between.

But we tend to think of good discussions as pretty much a matter of luck. We're grateful for the good fortune that brings us a delightful classroom dialogue as we are grateful for a pleasant day in February—but we assume that we could no more promote the one than the other.

Yet this is a decided mistake. Good discussions can definitely be promoted—and so can good *philosophical* discussions. But first we must know just what it is we are trying to achieve. We must know how to distinguish mere discussions from good discussions, and must know what is distinctive about philosophical discussions.

One can have good discussions on any topic—in contrast to discussions that are aimless or superficial. A good discussion need not involve everyone present (some people learn more by listening than by talking; they are thoroughly involved participants, even though silent). A good discussion does not necessarily take place just because many participants are engaged in verbalization. Nor can one contentedly lay claim to having had a good discussion just because the class has been polarized, or because a few participants have squared off against one another.

A good discussion occurs in any subject when the net result or outcome of the discussion is discerned as marking a definite progress as contrasted with the conditions that existed when the episode began. Perhaps it is a progress in understanding; perhaps it is progress in arriving at some kind of consensus; perhaps it is progress only in the sense of formulating the problem—but in any case, there is a sense of forward movement having taken place. Something has been accomplished; a group product has been achieved.\*

In contrast, a mere discussion may evoke comments from various individuals present (one hesitates to call them "participants") but without achieving a "meeting of minds." Individuals may succeed in expressing the perspective from which they perceive the issue, but the perspectives never intersect so as to form parts of some larger frame of reference. A series of individuals may testify as to their beliefs, but they could just as well occupy independent universes for all the connection their testimonies have with one another.

Yet a mere discussion may be the soil out of which a good discussion springs, as a good discussion on any topic may be the soil out of which a philosophical discussion springs. The point is that we can tell what is a good discussion by what *emerges* as the discussion proceeds. A mere discussion is linear and episodic, like a mediocre picaresque novel in which a series of incidents is strung

\*See Justus Buchler, "What is a Discussion?" *Journal of General Education*, VIII, no. 1 (Oct. 1954), 7-17.

together, yet nothing ever *builds*. On the other hand, a good discussion is cumulative; each contribution is in effect a line of force or vector that converges upon the others and is orchestrated with the others. Whether there is complete agreement or disagreement at the close of the episode is relatively unimportant; what matters is that the contributions from each participant relate to and reinforce one another, as each participant learns from what the others have said (and indeed, learns from his or her own contributions), and as each successive contribution to the discussion reflects the successive increments of understanding that that participant has amassed.

If one listens carefully to the remarks of the leader of a "bain-storming" session—or of the moderator at an ordinary discussion—and then compares these with the questions or comments of a teacher of philosophy, one cannot help being struck by the difference. The person whose only aim is to extract comments or opinions from as many people as possible will often address questions such as these to the participants:

What is your opinion on this matter:

What are your beliefs on this topic?

Do you agree with what has been said?

In other words, questions such as those just mentioned merely seek to elicit opinions, but they do not promote reasoning. Each protagonist is not encouraged to formulate his views rationally, but to spew them forth, as it were, off the top of his head.

In a philosophical discussion, on the other hand, the teacher will be found asking questions such as these:

What reasons do you have for saying that?

Why do you agree (or disagree) on that point?

How are you defining the term you just used?

What do you mean by that expression?

Is what you are saying now consistent with what you said before?

Could you clarify that remark?

When you said that, just what is implied by your remarks?

What follows from what you just said?

Is it possible you and he are contradicting each other?"

Are you sure you're not contradicting yourself?

What alternatives are there to such a formulation?

To lead a philosophical discussion, one has to develop a feeling for which sort of question is appropriate to each situation, and for the sequence in which such questions can be asked. A teacher of philosophy may pause over a certain student's comment, pursue it, explore it, while judging that the next stu-

dent's comment should be allowed to stand on its own merits without further examination, because right then further analysis might be counter-productive. No recipe can be written for the perfect discussion technique, although teachers interested in finding models could do worse than read the *Dialogues* of Plato, where Socrates is portrayed as a master teacher of philosophy—that is, the master in the art of eliciting productive dialogue.

### Drawing Students Out

Getting students to engage in philosophical dialogue is an art. As with any art, some knowledge is a prerequisite—in this case, the teacher should possess an understanding of when it is appropriate to intervene in the discussion and when not to. There are times when the best thing one can do to guide a discussion is to say nothing and let things happen. In fact, the goal towards which a philosophical discussion should move is one in which there is maximum *student-student* interchange, as opposed to the start of such a discussion, in which *teacher-student* interchange is at a maximum.

### Eliciting Views or Opinions

We have repeatedly stressed the point that classroom discussion should begin with the interests of the students, and that having children read a story is a way of creating an experience that will mobilize and crystallize their interests. We are all familiar with the fact that our own interests tend to flag unless stimulated and directed; what is pedagogically useful in the work of art is that it animates those interests of ours that would otherwise lie dormant and inert.

Once the children have read the story, you may ask them what they found interesting in it, and as these comments are offered by the class, you may find it helpful to write them on the blackboard and check with students on the accuracy of written representations of their ideas. This series of "points of interest" then becomes the agenda for the class discussion. (Note that it is essentially the children's agenda, not the teacher's—although the teacher may find it advantageous to add to it if the pupils seem to have overlooked something the teacher thinks important.)

Now the first item on the discussion agenda is taken up. The teacher may ask for an expression of views. If such views are slow in being offered, the teacher may ask the person who suggested the item to elaborate on it, by asking such questions as:

Why did you find that particular incident interesting?

Are you familiar with incidents of this sort?

Which views do you agree with and which do you disagree with?

How did this part of the story help you understand the rest of it?  
Is there anything about this episode you found puzzling?  
Does this episode raise issues you think we ought to discuss?

Of course, the teacher will probably discover that there are numerous questions that are much more specific and relevant to the suggested item than the rather general questions listed above. In that case, the teacher should not hesitate to begin by asking those questions that are most immediately pertinent to the agenda item under discussion.

### Helping Students Express Themselves: Clarification and Restatement

Sometimes, in the course of teaching a class, the teacher may find that students have difficulty expressing themselves. Maybe they just cannot find the right words; maybe they are shy. In any case, the teacher may want, on such occasions, to try to evoke student participation by means of helping phrases such as the following:

You appear to be saying . . . .  
Could it be that . . . . ?  
Are you saying that . . . . ?  
This is what I hear you saying . . . .  
I get the impression that . . . .  
Could this be what you're saying, that . . . .  
As I hear you, you're saying that . . . .  
So as you see it . . . .  
Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't this . . . . ?  
Well then, from your point of view . . . .  
As I understand you . . . .  
Am I correct in assuming you are saying that . . . . ?  
Would it be reasonable to put your position like this . . . . ?  
I wonder if what you're saying could be put this way . . . .  
Would it help if I expressed your views this way . . . . ?

It will be noticed that these phrases are employed by the teacher to get the student to *clarify* what the child has said. They do not ask for the reasons or the implications of the child's remark; they are simply efforts to *restate* or to get the child to *restate* certain comments that need elucidation.

No doubt it is preferable that children clarify their own views rather than that the teacher perform this task for them. But there are times when students are stumped as to some better way of saying what they have said, and the teacher can help by offering to reformulate their remarks in some more comprehensible form.

The advantage to doing this is that it expedites discussion. The danger, clearly, is that what seems to be an innocent translation of the child's views into a formulation more readily understood is in fact an interpretation of the original view—an interpretation that can well be a *distortion* of what the child originally intended. We all have manipulative tendencies of which we may or may not be conscious, and one way in which these come out is in our efforts to get others to believe what we believe by the device of persuading them that what they are trying to say is precisely what we would like to hear them say. But a teacher's obligation is to help children express what they think, even though what they think may turn out not to be what the teacher would like them to think. If the teacher disagrees with them, there may be occasions for saying so, and for explaining why. But distorting students' views by subtle reformulation is manipulative and indoctrinational—which is another way of saying that it is inappropriate to philosophical dialogue.

### Explicating Students' Views

On the other hand, the teacher may wish to do more than simply help the students clarify their views by restatement. The teacher may want to explore not merely what they say, but the *meanings* of what they say. There is a difference between asking a student, "Are you saying that . . ." and asking the same student, "Are you implying that . . ." It is the difference between what one asserts and how that assertion is to be interpreted.

But before discussing what is involved in interpreting students' remarks, the teacher should give some attention to *explication*. Explication lies between undistorted restatement and interpretation. You explicate when you select and emphasize certain features of what a student has asserted. Or the students themselves can be encouraged to explicate what they have said. These are some of the comments that are cues for explication:

Is the point you're making that . . . . ?  
Which points in what you've said would you like to emphasize?  
So you think the following points are important . . . .  
Can I sum up your argument as follows . . . . ?  
Could you give us a quick summary of the points you're making . . . . ?  
Here's what I take to be the gist of your remark . . . .

### Interpretation

The discussion in the classroom may now turn on the *meaning* of what someone has remarked, or on the *meaning* of a passage in what the class has read. When we unpack meanings, we are engaged in interpretation.

What you say presumably has meaning to you in your frame of reference—in your life experience. But interpretation of your remarks may differ markedly from your own interpretation of what you said. In other words, you impute one meaning to your remarks, while other persons may impute quite another.

Now, in guiding a philosophical discussion, it is quite important to be aware not only of what is being said, but of how the various members of the class interpret what is being said. There are two ways in which meanings are drawn out of what has been said by inferring what is *logically implied*, and by inference from what is *suggested* although not logically implied.

#### Inferring Logical Implications

By studying logic, you can learn how to tell what can be logically inferred from given statements or groups of statements. Logic will be able to tell you, for instance, that from the statement, "No dogs are reptiles," you can logically infer that no reptiles are dogs, but that you cannot logically infer from it that all dogs are vertebrates, or that no reptiles are furry.

Logic will also tell you that from two statements in the following form:

All disk jockeys are human

All humans are mortal

you can legitimately draw the inference that "All disk jockeys are mortal." Logic can tell us, in other words, what is implied by what we say, insofar as what we say can be carefully formulated and arranged to suit the rules of logic. In the course of a classroom discussion, these strict conditions often do not obtain. We can study idealized instances—like Harry, in chapter I of *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, spotting an instance of invalid deductive inference—indeed, in that chapter, he spots no less than two such instances. In real life discussions, such possibilities of strict examination for logical inference are not too frequent. Nevertheless the mastery of logic equips the reader with powerful tools for the extraction of precise meanings from what has been read.

#### Inferring What Is Suggested

Interpretation is a matter of finding meaning through discovering what is suggested or implied by what someone has expressed. Note that people draw *inferences*, but expressions have *implications*. The implications of an expression are its meaningful consequences: some of these meaningful consequences are logically implied, and some are simply suggested.

For example, if a member of a class says, "Oh, no, Johnnie's not your pet at all—he just gets high grades because he's so brilliant!" the teacher would not

be wrong to suspect that what has been said is ironical, and that it is being *suggested* (although it is certainly not logically implied) that Johnnie is very much teacher's pet.

Or if someone says, "Yesterday, Frank moved up to a front seat. Today, the whole front row moved to the back of the room," surely it is being suggested that the students in the front row moved away *because* Frank moved up front—yet nowhere is this logically implied.

There are also non-verbal inferences to be detected. One's reading of these must range from catching what is suggested by an innuendo or a slightly unusual emphasis to picking up gestures or facial expressions among the class and interpreting their meanings as responses to what has been said.

Since interpretation is a matter of drawing out what is suggested or implied, at times a teacher can move a discussion along by suitably interpreting what has been expressed by the students to that point. The interpretations might be introduced by phrases such as:

From what has been said, I gather that . . .

If I'm not mistaken, your position can be interpreted in this way . . .

Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't you saying, in a nutshell, that . . . ?

As I read what you're saying, it seems to follow logically that . . .

Are you suggesting that . . . ?

Are you implying that . . . ?

Would I be distorting what you're suggesting if I put it this way . . . ?

I interpret your meaning to be as follows . . .

Couldn't your meaning be put this way . . . ?

Could you explain what you mean by what you just said . . . ?

If what you're saying is correct, wouldn't it follow that . . . ?

If what you're saying is correct, how can you explain the fact that . . . ?

In view of what you've just expressed, don't you think that . . . ?

In view of what you've just expressed, do you think that . . . ?

I think what you've just said is significant or insignificant because . . .

It seems to me the implications of what you've said are far-reaching because . . .

Would you object to this interpretation of your remarks . . . ?

#### Seeking Consistency

It is useful in the course of a philosophical discussion to raise questions about consistency. (By "consistency" is meant the practice of using the same term in such a way as to have the same meaning when the term is employed several times in the same context.) You may suspect that a person is not being consistent in his presentation of his views, or you may feel that the views of several



individuals in the classroom are inconsistent with one another. In either case, it would be well to explore such possibilities, using questions or comments like the following:

- Earlier, when you used the word \_\_\_\_\_, didn't you use it in quite a different sense from the way you are employing it now?  
 Are you really disagreeing with one-another—or are you saying the same thing in two different ways?  
 It seems to me there's a direct contradiction between those two views . . .  
 Just to elaborate on that view for a moment, wouldn't it be consistent to add that . . . ?  
 Of course your views are consistent; but you could still be wrong because . . .

### Requesting Definitions

There are times when the terms employed in a discussion get to be more confusing than illuminating. On such occasions, it may be well to pause for a definition—or else to abandon the troublesome terms altogether.

What happens, very often, is that a controversy among children can be traced back to the fact that they are using the identical term, but defining it in quite different ways. Once everyone becomes aware of this fact, they can decide whether to try to arrive at a common definition or to find alternative terms that would be more suitable.

Children may disagree over whether a movie was good or was not good, or over whether a platypus is a fish, a bird, or a mammal, and so on. In simple cases, such as the latter, it is obvious that a dictionary is the best recourse. But in other cases, the most controversial words are those that are very rich in alternative meanings. A teacher should try to get at the definitions that the pupils are implicitly employing—if such a step becomes necessary—by asking such questions as:

- When you use the word \_\_\_\_\_, what do you mean by it?  
 Can you define the word \_\_\_\_\_, which you just used?  
 What does the word \_\_\_\_\_ refer to?  
 If a thing is a \_\_\_\_\_, what are its chief features?

On the whole, a teacher should be cautious about requesting definitions, because doing so runs the risk of sidetracking the discussion into *merely* a dispute over definitions. For example, a class may be discussing the problem of war, and the dialogue is progressing nicely. Then the teacher interjects the question, "What do we mean by 'war'?" It is an excellent question—but it

must be asked at an appropriate moment, when the students are beginning to see the difficulties involved in the word, rather than at a moment when the dialogue is going along smoothly and productively because certain meanings of the word are being taken for granted.

On the other hand, there are discussions that seem to be unable to get off the ground unless one or more of the basic terms are defined at the very beginning. For example, a class may be talking about what happens in chapter 5 of *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, and find that it is essential to come to some understanding or consensus about the meaning of the word "education." In such cases, a teacher might well begin by asking for the key word or words to be defined.

### Searching for Assumptions

If one of the chief characteristics of philosophical dialogue is to discover what is *implied* (what follows from) what is said, another of the chief characteristics is the search for the assumptions underlying what is said. It is typical of philosophers to look for the presuppositions upon which every question and every assertion are based—and this quest likewise characterizes philosophical discussions—especially those that are most penetrating and profound.

Exposing assumptions does not necessarily cause students to give up those assumptions. But it may very well cause them to rethink whatever they say that is based on such assumptions.

Very often, disclosure of what a questioner presupposes reveals why the question seems unanswerable. Surely, if someone asked you how far it is from here to never-never-land, you would reject the question on various grounds, such as that it assumes that never-never-land exists, that the distance to it is measurable, that "here" is a specific location, and so on. Or, if someone asked you whether it was warmer in the winter or in the city, you would protest that the question assumed that the winter and the city could be compared in terms of temperature. Or if a question is asked, "How will the world end?" surely it is legitimate to inquire as to why the questioner is assuming that the world will end. Children can be presented with a model of critical scrutiny of questions and assertions to detect what the presuppositions are, and whether any of them are unwarranted. They can be such questions as:

- Aren't you assuming that . . . ?  
 Doesn't what you say presuppose that . . . ?  
 Doesn't what you say rest on the notion that . . . ?  
 Is what you've just said based on your belief that . . . ?  
 Would you say that if you didn't also happen to believe that . . . ?

If a child asks you something like, "How are bears different from mammals?" he may be assuming that the mammal is just another species of animal. In such a case, you may be able to correct his faulty assumption. But in another instance, you may discover that his assumption is correct, but what he has inferred from it is wrong. For example, a small child might assert that trees never die. Suppose you ask him what that belief of his is based on, and he replies, "Only living things die." Now in this case, his presupposition is correct, but he has drawn a faulty inference from it, due to the fact that he has made another—and, in this case, faulty—assumption: that trees aren't living things.

### Indicating Fallacies

If teachers take the lead in pointing out logical fallacies when they encounter them being made during a class discussion, they will find that the students themselves will begin to take over after a while, and will begin to correct each other in similar situations. For example, a teacher can point out fallacies such as these:

I wouldn't believe anything she has to say about history. Everyone knows her grandfather served time in jail. Fallacy of attacking the person who makes the argument rather than the argument itself.

Sure I believe what he says about politics. After all, he's the leading hitter in the National League, isn't he? Fallacy of appealing to an authority when the person in question is not an authority on that particular issue.

I kept thinking about his pitching a no-hitter. That's why he failed to pitch the no-hitter: I jinxed him. Jumping to conclusion—in this case, assuming that the thought must have caused what happened (the loss of the no-hitter) just because it preceded what happened.

There are, of course, many other types of fallacies in addition to these, and one of the objectives of a course in logic is to enable one to recognize a considerable number of such fallacies. If a teacher tolerates the commission of such fallacies by students, the teacher not only encourages sloppy thinking, but also fails to teach them what poor reasons are. After all, if they cannot always find their *best* reasons, that is still no excuse for allowing them to get away with offering their worst.

### Requesting Reasons

One of the dimensions of a philosophical discussion is the development of systematic presentations of ideas. For example, a theory is not usually a single concept, but a network of concepts. Similarly, what in philosophy is called an *argument* is a systematic presentation of ideas, in that it consists of a *conclusion* supported by one or more *reasons*.

Usually, children will put forth their beliefs or opinions without troubling to support them. The teacher should seek to elicit from them the reasons they are prepared to give in support of such beliefs or opinions. Gradually, other students will take over this role, and will demand reasons from their classmates. In time, many students will develop the habit of offering opinions *only* when these can be supported by reasons.

A reason may or may not be formally connected to a conclusion. For example, if a child says he does not believe there are little green men on Mars, she may offer as her reason that there is no evidence of such beings. On the other hand, she may argue (rightly or wrongly) somewhat along these lines:

Only earth inhabitants are humans.  
*Martians aren't earth inhabitants.*  
Therefore, Martians can't be humans.

This could be put into standard form as a logical argument, so that the student's reasons would serve as *premises* to support her conclusion. This class discussion would then likely shift to the controversial first premise.

In soliciting reasons for students, the questions can be fairly explicit:

What is your reason for saying that . . . ?  
What makes you think that . . . ?  
On what grounds do you believe that . . . ?  
Can you offer an argument in support of your claim that . . . ?  
Why do you say that . . . ?  
Why do you believe your view is correct?  
What can you say in defense of your view?  
Is there anything you'd like to say in order to prove your view correct?  
Would you like to tell us why you think that's so?

When one offers a reason in support of an opinion, it is generally because the reason is less controversial and more acceptable than the opinion it is meant to support. In other words, we appeal to reasons because they carry plausibility. Compare these exchanges:

Question: Why do you think potassium is a mineral?  
Answer: Because my science textbook says it is.

- Question: Why do you say that you don't try to get even when someone has hurt you?  
 Answer: Because two wrongs don't make a right.
- Question: Why do you think foreigners are secretive?  
 Answer: Because they always talk in languages I can't understand.
- Question: Shouldn't we get rid of our national anthem because it's hard to sing?  
 Answer: I think the reasons in favor of it—that it's beautiful and unusual—outweigh the reason you've just cited against it.
- Question: Why have you stopped listening to the radio while you drink?  
 Answer: Because I'm tired of hearing people talk about how excessive drinking can lead to alcoholism.

Some of the reasons cited above are fairly plausible, while others are not—or are, in any case, not more plausible than the belief they are supposed to substantiate. This is why, in soliciting reasons from children, you should try to insist upon good reasons—reasons with a high degree of plausibility. Naturally the teacher should help students distinguish between the positions they are taking and the reasons they cite in defense of such positions. But the etiquette of dialogue further requires the teacher to assist students in formulating the best reasons they can for their positions, whatever the value the teacher may place upon such positions. Thus the teacher, rather than criticize a student's weakest reasons, would do well to help such a student formulate better ones. Thus, for example, a teacher may deplore the hunting of animals. Yet suppose that, in a discussion of chapter 2 of *Lisa*, a student defends hunting on the grounds that it gives hunters an invaluable opportunity to develop shooting accuracy. Surely, in a case like this, what should be done is not spend too much time considering the weakness of such an argument, for much more is to be gained by considering what better reasons for hunting might be advanced—such as that the animals are predators, or that their overpopulation is a danger—even though one may still feel that the reasons against hunting outweigh those in favor of it.

#### Asking Students to Say How They Know

The single question, "How do you know?" can be very useful in eliciting from children a wide range of explanations. It may bring forth reasons for assertions, because some students interpret the question as demand for reasons. For example:

- "I think it's going to rain."  
 "How do you know?"  
 "Because the weather forecast is for rain."

It may bring forth a citation of evidence for the assertion—observations or data that are offered in support of what has been stated or claimed. For example:

- "I think it's going to rain."  
 "How do you know?"  
 "Well, there are those storm clouds out there to the north, the wind's beginning to rise, the barometer's droppings, and my ankle's beginning to hurt the way it always does when it's about to rain."

Or, the question, "How do you know?" can bring forth explanations that deal very literally with *how one knows*. For example:

- "I think it's going to rain."  
 "How do you know?"  
 "By reflecting on the evidence, and by taking into account my past experience."

Obviously, there is a difference between asking children why they believe what they believe—in effect, asking for reasons—and asking them how they know what they know. The latter is literally a request for them to explain the process of knowing, and to say why, when they feel sure they are right, they feel the way they do.

#### Eliciting and Examining Alternatives

If a child were to express the view that in order to become rich, one ought to be dishonest, surely you would want to show him that there are alternatives—that many people have become wealthy without being dishonest and that many people have sought other goals in life than wealth. Eventually the choice would still be his, but at least you would have helped him see the options.

It is not infrequent for children to insist that the way they view things is the only possible way for such things to be viewed. They have not considered any alternatives because they do not think there are any alternatives to consider. This is where you can liberate them from narrow-mindedness—by suggesting that there might very well be other possibilities to explore, and by helping them to identify and examine such alternative possibilities.

Thus, if a student insists that all objects must fall to earth, a teacher might ask the members of the class if it is possible for objects not to fall to earth. If a student expresses the view that there is no such thing as personal survival after death, the teacher might want to explore what alternative possibilities there are to that view. Likewise the child who earnestly believes that everything is wonderful (no less than the child who believes that everything is dreadful) probably needs to engage in a closer consideration of the options.

You can encourage children to realize that there are alternatives to their views by means of such comments as:

- There are some people who think that . . .
- Would you say that any other beliefs on this subject are possible?
- How else could this matter be viewed?
- Does anyone else have a different view?
- Suppose someone wanted to contradict your view—what position could they take?
- Is your view the only one people might take on this topic?
- Are there circumstances where your opinions might be incorrect?
- Are there other ways of looking at this matter that might be more believable?
- Are there other ways of looking at this matter that may be possible, even though false?
- Is it possible that other explanations than yours are possible?
- Couldn't it also be that . . . ?
- What if someone were to suggest that . . . ?

It should be remembered that the purpose of opening up alternatives to children is not to confuse or bewilder them, but to liberate them from narrow-mindedness or rigidity. The purpose is not to compel them to choose other convictions than those they already have, but to equip them to discover and assess their intellectual options.

### Orchestrating a Discussion

A teacher could learn all the model questions cited above, and could pose them one after another to her class, and yet a truly philosophical discussion might still elude her. For one thing, the question asked has to be precisely appropriate to the occasion. The occasion might be one that requires a clarification of some rather startling pronouncement made by one of the students that different groups within the class understand in different ways. This is not the appropriate moment to inquire into the long-range consequences of holding such a view, since the meaning of the view is not yet clear. Likewise, when the time is ripe to discuss the implications of a statement made to the class, it would be counter-productive to take up more preliminary considerations such as the definition of terms in the statement.

Knowing just which question to ask at which moment is largely a matter of classroom experience, philosophical insight, and tact. As teachers become more experienced, they develop a repertoire of questions and can quickly draw upon the appropriate one without much soul-searching or hesitation.

Moreover, the most experienced teachers are adroit at phrasing each question in a way that seems to be tailor-made for the point of the discussion that has just been arrived at. Children will quickly catch on to the fact that a teacher is using a prepared set of questions, and to canned questions they will soon begin to provide canned answers. The only recourse is to adopt a conversational style that enables a variety of questions to be posed in ways that are casual and improvisational, so that they do not seem to be mechanical interruptions in the course of the dialogue, but appear instead as welcome techniques for intensifying that dialogue. In so doing, the discussion will probably be raised to a higher level of generality. The aim should not be to make the discussion more abstract, but to make it more comprehensive. For example, a class may be discussing whether it is fair to define adulthood at different ages—one age for voting, another for theater admissions—or perhaps liquor ads for magazines but not for television. In these instances, as the discussion proceeds, a teacher may find it useful to ask, "What is fairness?" or "What is consistency?" In this manner, the students will begin to feel the profound satisfaction that can develop when they have come to grips with a subject and begin to comprehend what previously seemed baffling to them. For it is in this way that a philosophical discussion seeks to deal with what is most fundamental in human experience.

No explanation of the art of teaching philosophy can be adequate for the teacher-in-training. First, it must be admitted that philosophers themselves have never been very clear about what they do when they teach philosophy. We therefore lack a complete understanding on which an adequate explanation could be based. Second, even if we had such an explanation, it would be insufficient without a competent modelling by the philosopher coupled with the teacher's experiencing what it is to engage in philosophical dialogue. These three components—explanation, modelling, and experiencing—are indispensable in preparing teachers to teach philosophy on the elementary grade level.

The art of teaching philosophy to children is not acquired quickly. Teachers may go along for months without visible improvement in their performance and then suddenly find themselves doing it in a way that seems very natural. This experience in turn confirms the teacher's sense of the worth of the long struggle. It is also common for teachers to reach a certain plateau and then find it difficult to improve. They will be successful in eliciting children's views of their own experience, asking for alternative views, and giving illustrations. But they may not yet be proficient in moving to more philosophical levels of dialogue, such as are involved in drawing out inferences, generalizing, pointing out contradictions, asking for underlying assumptions, and stressing the need for intellectual coherence. Philosophers are experienced in

one is aware of the different positions being taken, such summarization would likely be redundant and superfluous. So it should be saved for those occasions on which it is needed.

#### Suggesting Possible Lines of Convergence or Divergence

As teachers become more adept at organizing discussions, they will find that their motives in asking this question or that will be determined by certain strategic considerations, such as that they would like to broaden the range of views being offered by students, or that they would like to steer some of the strands of discussion into greater convergence with one another.

To open a discussion up, and to encourage a greater divergency of views, teachers may find it useful to introduce distinctions at certain crucial points that allow for a sharpening of differences among members of the class. For example, in chapter 5 of *Harry*, Mark argues that all schools are bad. Harry, however, argues that only those schools are bad that are run by people who do not understand children, thereby offering a distinction that allows for more precise analysis than Mark's more sweeping claim. A teacher could, in like manner, seek to introduce distinctions that would increase the number of options open to the children in the classroom. Also, the teacher can introduce additional points of view into a discussion by such remarks as those just cited under the heading "Eliciting and Examining Alternatives."

At times teachers may want to show that certain views that have been expressed in class are not only different but in direct conflict with one another. To do this, they may resort to pointing out that the two views are *incompatible* because their implications eventually contradict one another. For example, suppose one person in the class asserts that "No girls are scouts," and another person asserts that "Some scouts are girls." Simply using the logic in *Harry* (in other words, by reversing the subject and predicate of the first statement), the teacher should be able to show the class that the two original statements are incompatible, because they lead to statements that are in contradiction with one another.

On other occasions, teachers will want to take the initiative in the classroom by showing *connections* that the students would not otherwise have noted. A teacher may want to point out that certain things they have thought to be distinct could quite reasonably be grouped together. Or the teacher may point out that two arguments that different members of the class have advanced are really saying pretty much the same thing—or are *convergent* upon the same general position. Thus a teacher's role may sometimes be to unify the class in spite of expressed differences, just as at other times that role may be to encourage children to appreciate making distinctions where necessary. There is no sure recipe as to which approach should be emphasized, but teach-

devising chains of questions that will provoke their students to search for more and more comprehensive explanations of their experience. Professional philosophers are adept at responding to student comments in such a way as to commend the student for the progress he has made and yet at the same time point out the inadequacy of what the student has proposed. The philosophers may appear to the class to be perpetually dissatisfied. Whatever the student's comment may be, philosophers will be sure to discover something perplexing about it and will raise questions about just that puzzling aspect of the remark. With the subsequent student comment, the same thing will happen: what is intelligible is confirmed, but what is puzzling is noted with wonderment, and a sense of the need for further inquiry is experienced by teacher and student. In this fashion, the area of intelligibility of the topic under discussion is continually broadened, but never with the sense that all the mysteries in that area have been dispelled. A good teacher of philosophy never reaches a point where there seems no further need for wondering. The world is inexhaustibly perplexing. It is this wondering behavior that is so difficult to explain or convey by means of techniques, strategies, or recipes. Wondering cannot be feigned; it has to grow out of one's own experience. But the best way to produce that experience is for one's teacher to model it and then for one to acquire it by contagion. Once one has contracted this disease and experienced the liberation from dogma that it provides, one cannot rest until one has infected one's students with the same experience.

The philosophy classroom cannot exist on a one-dimensional plane of continuous revelation. For philosophy, new revelations generally are accompanied by a fresh sense of even profounder mysteries. If this were not so, philosophy would have died out a long time ago. It would have lacked the provocation for that wonderment with which philosophy must always begin.

The suggestions offered above regarding ways of drawing children out so as to elicit and facilitate philosophical dialogue are largely tactical. That is, their value is fairly specific. A teacher, however, must keep more general pedagogical strategies in mind, in addition to developing a repertoire of dialectical tactics.

#### Grouping Ideas

For example, a teacher may find it useful to keep in mind the various suggestions students have made, and to assemble these into groups or clusters, each representing a specific position or pattern of argument. The teacher can be very helpful to the students in the class by then summing up each of these positions or arguments, for that will provide a sense of proportion or perspective which the pupils might otherwise have been incapable of attaining. Obviously, if the class discussion has polarized the class so explicitly that every-

ers would probably do well to consider their position as discussion leaders to be a *remedial* one, supplying that component—whether it be unity or diversity—that the discussion had signally lacked until that point.

#### Moving Discussions to a Higher Level of Generality

Elsewhere in this book we have referred to the tendency of children's questions to advance a discussion to a higher level of generality. Thus a child asked to add two numbers may first want an explanation of *number*, or a child asked about the size of his house may inquire in turn what *size* is.

In the novels of the philosophy for children program, there are frequent instances in which children stop to consider the concepts and terms that we use when we reflect, rather than continue to utilize such terms and concepts unreflectively. Teachers will likely find it useful to direct discussion to concepts or notions in children's ordinary language that are being taken for granted, but that are in need of analysis.



## Applying Thinking Skills to School Experience

# Philosophy in the Classroom

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Matthew Lipman

Ann Margaret Sharp

Frederick S. Oscanyan



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