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Destabilizing stereotyped concepts in childhood: Some opportunities and risks of philosophy for children as an aid to PVE

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Abstract This article explores how the philosophy for children (P4C) pedagogical model might be well positioned to support the educational strategies associated with the prevention of violent extremism, through early intervention in children's concept development. Specifically, it considers how the stereotyping of concepts risks interfering with children's reasoning by engendering relationally problematic views that skew what they might consider valuable, resulting in epistemic rigidity and reduced opportunities to practice responsible autonomy. In response to such risks, the article proposes promising avenues for P4C facilitation, with an aim to cultivate flexible thinking in children and thereby support their evolving competence as emerging agents.

Keywords Philosophy for children · Prevention of violent extremism (PVE) · Values · Violence

> *Values like peace and the absence of violence cannot be effectively taught. They must be practiced, embodied, and lived…We can agree that peace is fine and beautiful and that violence is nasty and ugly, but these characteristics are weak and unconvincing unless they are woven into the justificational fabric.*
> Matthew Lipman, P4C co-founder (2003, pp. 121, 114)

Education aimed at violence prevention tends to affirm that thoughtless generalizations—especially prejudiced and discriminatory ones—about individuals and groups can lead to extremist thinking and harmful action. Yet, can the same be said of the stereotyping of concepts? If children do not learn to assess the oversimplified mental images of the values and ideas that play the leads in their reasoning about the world, how might they become vulnerable to radicalization? Operating on the assumption that violent extremists are made,

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not born, UNESCO recommends using educational strategies to build children's resilience to radicalized ideas, as part of the broader measures that comprise its agenda for the prevention of violent extremism (PVE). (For more details, please visit https://en.unesco.org/preventing-violent-extremism.) Among these strategies is open critical dialogue like the kind practiced in the Philosophy for Children (P4C) pedagogical model. In this article I seek to explore P4C's potential as an aid to PVE, particularly through early intervention into children's concept development.

P4C as a tool for violence prevention is not a new proposition: UNESCO itself has described it as such, alongside many theorists and practitioners who have appraised its capacity to sensitize youth to moral issues. (An extensive list of research published in the area of P4C and ethics can be found at https://philpapers.org/browse/philosophy-for-children-ethics.) But violent extremism is its own particular beast since it denotes a particular orientation to thinking that radically affects its adherents' relation to knowledge—how they learn and what they claim to know about the world. The resulting epistemic vantage points can drastically restrict what is deemed worthy of valuing, translating into dangerous means-end reasoning that might justify anything from hate speech to terrorist crimes. The proliferation of such thinking orientations is significant for contemporary experiences of childhood, not least because children, as a vulnerable population, have fewer (though no less meaningful) experiences from which to draw when they reflect on what seems reasonable to value in their present and for their future. Admittedly, "childhood" represents a highly heterogeneous group. Here, I focus on elementary school-aged children, while recognizing that even this more centred focus does not capture the variation between children on myriad fronts, from socioeconomic factors to neurodiversity to family constellations to personality traits. Within this narrowed range, I look at what P4C might be able to accomplish at the conceptual level to support PVE's commitments, specifically in response to what I call *stereotyped concepts*.

Concerning the argument I will be defending, stereotyped concepts risk interfering with children's reasoning by engendering relationally problematic views that skew what they might consider valuable, thereby resulting in epistemic rigidity—or the tendency to prioritize their own normative claims as if the concepts underlying them are hard and fast rather than rife with ambiguity. To counteract this rigidity, they must learn to determine which of their conceptions are overly simplistic and how to infuse these with more discerning shades of grey. In my view, philosophy is uniquely positioned to assist with this endeavour since, to quote P4C's co-founder, Matthew Lipman (2003), it "provides ideas for people to chew on—ideas that don't get used up because they are persistently contestable" (p. 106). In particular, as an autonomy-promoting dialogic pedagogy, P4C can help children destabilize the stereotyped concepts that might make them vulnerable to extremist thinking.

In terms of theoretical presuppositions, I portray children as emerging agents who deserve opportunities to exercise their evolving capacity for *responsible autonomy* in meaningful ways, commensurate with their level of maturity and experience, so they can progressively come into their own as active actors in their own lives and social settings. (I am not suggesting, however, that children are capable of or entitled to the same levels of autonomy as adults; hence the importance of the qualifiers "emerging" and "evolving" in my account. Yet, while total self-determination may not be possible or advisable in childhood because of developmental and legal restrictions, children in their various stages of growing up already exercise degrees of autonomy in meaningful ways that should be recognized to ensure they are treated as agents in their own right rather than merely as eventual adults.) By "responsible", I mean a notion of autonomy situated under the umbrella term "relational" adopted by feminist philosophers; one that involves, in the words of Marilyn

Friedman (2003), "reflecting on one's deeper wants, values, and commitments, reaffirming them, and living in accordance with them even in the face of at least minimal resistance from others", without ignoring "the importance of social relationships to the projects and attributes of the self" (pp. 99, 82).

To my mind, this relational dimension works on two levels that resonate with the principles of global citizenship prioritized by PVE. On the one hand, it acknowledges the effects of "complex intersecting social determinants, such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity" on agency development (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, p. 4)—and to these I would add ageist and adultist views; while, on the other, it counters the "interfering conditions" of coercion, manipulation and oppression that can "distort someone's attempts to consider her options in light of what matters…damage [her] capacity to care about what is worth caring about" (Friedman 2003, pp. 5, 19).

In my account, since children are *emerging* agents who occupy a precarious social position, they ought to be protected from experiments with autonomy that are oppressive or marginalizing. The hope is they can grow in their competence for responsible autonomy without pressure to believe that the lives they value are ones of cruelty, at one extreme, or of submissiveness, at the other. In this article, I make the case that P4C can offer this protected space if it can overcome some key threats. I will begin by contextualizing P4C as a potential aid to PVE and then present the challenge of stereotyped concepts. Next, I will explain how CPI facilitation represents an opportunity amidst risks, suggesting some promising avenues to move children away from epistemic rigidity toward greater flexibility of thought. I make no empirical claims about P4C and PVE but, rather, propose a theoretical basis for their potential alliance.

Contextualizing P4C and its potential as an aid to PVE

Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp originally designed the P4C program in response to a perceived lack of critical reasoning in the general population, particularly in young people's response to the Vietnam war. Over the past 50 years, the program has aimed to foster children's multidimensional thinking, or equal parts critical, creative and caring thinking: "a balance between the cognitive and the affective, between the perceptual and the conceptual, between the physical and the mental" (Lipman 2003, pp. 200–201). At its core, the P4C dialogical approach—called the Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPI)—consists of a group of children exploring a conceptual question they deem significant in their lives and about which they seek clarity and reasonable judgments through structured conversation. In terms of concept development, children are encouraged to learn to apply three criteria (or the "3Cs") to their questioning to ensure it is central (it matters to their lives and they want to explore it), common (it is relatable and answerable by everyone by virtue of their being human) and contestable (it is not easy to resolve or settle as many perspectives are possible) (adapted from Splitter and Sharp 1995).

The five-stage process begins with a thought-provoking stimulus—traditionally, a story rich in philosophical insights—then the children are invited to question and talk together. All the while, an adult facilitator helps them navigate their inquiry through valuable procedural prompts in service of their multidimensional thought. Lipman's original stages of dialogical inquiry included the reading of a philosophical text, the construction of an agenda of questions, the dialogue about the chosen question, the supportive activities to

deepen the inquiry, and the further responses, including metacognitive self-assessments and projects (Gregory 2007, p. 163).

Adapting the main tenets of pragmatic inquiry, notably the mobilizing of indeterminacy and reflection toward the formation of intelligent habits, the CPI strives to equip children with the means to tackle issues that matter to them in the form of philosophical concepts—from selfhood to truth, goodness to justice—by appeal to their combined knowledge and experiences, and by the use of specific thinking tools and attitudes. The similarities between the CPI and a pragmatic approach to inquiry are, therefore, not coincidental: as Lipman (2003) states, "Philosophy for Children is built unapologetically on Deweyan foundations" (p. 8). According to Lipman (1988), philosophy is particularly powerful at cultivating autonomous thinking because it "liberates students from unquestioning, uncritical mental habits, in order that they may better develop the ability to think for themselves" (p. 41). The CPI can thus be categorized as a form of Socratic pedagogy since it involves a collective truth-seeking endeavour intended to improve practical reasoning through deliberative techniques like scrutinizing hypotheses and articulating sound beliefs (Gregory 2008).

Further, Vygotskian social-constructivist learning theories were highly influential in Lipman's design of the CPI; notably, the idea that with proper scaffolding on the part of adults, children can achieve together what might be too difficult for them to do alone and, as such, benefit from a "zone of proximal development". In Lipman's words: "The quality of education is to be improved through a recognition that children are at their best when engaged in cognitive cooperation with their peers and mentors, while they are at their least effective when isolated from any form of cognitive community" (1996, p. 45). Learning to formulate philosophical questions immerses children in the joint effort of problematizing issues, not only in the Vygotskian sense but also in the sense of learning to see certain matters as problems for the first time because their dialogues with others have broadened the scope of what matters to them. During the dialogues themselves, the process of trying to answer the philosophical question creates live exchanges between children and their values, uncovering limitations of perspective and highlighting areas of commonality as well as conflicting considerations. From this description alone, it is clear that the CPI has potential as an aid to PVE: since it breaks the authoritative master-disciple paradigm by distributing power among inquirers and by requiring that they co-construct their positions, it is more democratic in style than many other pedagogies. As Lipman (2003) writes, "In a community of inquiry, there is a pooling of experience in which each is as ready and willing to learn from each other's experience as from his or her own" (p. 111).

Toward this end, the CPI nurtures in children a spirit of self-correction—or, the willingness and ability to rectify their errors or weaknesses without external direction. This orientation is characterized by specific features like open-mindedness, resistance to bias and mutual support, as well as by key dispositions like humility, acceptance of fallibility and comfort with uncertainty. This self-corrective spirit, which I will argue is the basis of epistemological flexibility, translates into multilayered opportunities for refining thought processes (procedures) and the judgments they yield (content). It enables what might be called "metacognitive awareness": for Lipman (1988), "Whenever one mental act is the subject of another, the latter act is metacognitive" (p. 82). Within a CPI, metacognition involves collaboratively developing knowledge about thinking strategies and their application—when and how they are likeliest to assist with a problem or challenge. With respect to PVE concerns, this metacognitive training may contribute to

children's growing competence as emerging agents who can responsibly act in the world and remain resilient in the face of adversity. In Lipman's words:

> To become aware of our own mental acts is to *lift ourselves by our own bootstraps* until we are functioning on a metacognitive level…If youth are not given the opportunity to weigh and discuss both ends and means, and their interrelationship, they are likely to become cynical about everything except their own well-being, and adults will not be slow to condemn them as "'mindless little relativists". How better to guarantee the amoralism of the adult than by teaching the child that any belief is as defensible as any other? (2003, p. 143, p. 15, emphasis added)

Last, but perhaps most importantly in terms of PVE: As an apprenticeship in thinking for children, the CPI strives to cultivate reasonableness, understood as "the capacity to employ rational procedures in a judicious manner" and in a way that is necessarily collaborative since it "refer[s] not just to how one acts, but to how one is acted upon; it signifies one's capacity to listen to or be open to reason" (Lipman 1988, p. 97). Lipman argues against an overly intellectualist view of rationality because it neglects the profound role played by emotions in shaping, directing, proportioning and enriching thought—a view that also aligns well with PVE commitments. When inquiring into the most reasonable idea, value or action with respect to a particular question, children in a CPI strive to collaboratively formulate judgments that are at once well-reasoned (meaning they result from strong argumentation, good evidence and sound criteria) and well-informed (that is, they are supported by multiple, diverse perspectives and accountable to the give and take of communal dialogue) (Gregory 2011). Of course, the above sketch represents ideal conditions of CPI practice; problems at the levels of content and procedure can occur, which can compromise children's early attempts at living autonomously in responsible and relationally sound ways. One problem that strikes me as particularly hazardous with regard to epistemic rigidity—and the extremist thinking it may enkindle—is the stereotyping of concepts.

The challenge of stereotyped concepts

The P4C program is considered an inquiry-based learning approach in the Deweyan sense because it is driven by children's problem-setting and problem-solving. For John Dewey, inquiry is a form of action in which individuals engage "as part of an existential struggle to cope with an objectively precarious but improvable environment" (Festenstein 2001, p. 732), and its greatest prospect for such action leading to unbiased, nuanced results lies in its collaborative spirit. Through inquiry, individuals with distinct skill-sets come to understand that cooperation is a far more efficient path to new knowledge than competition. They are far likelier to create better life conditions by aligning their skills and abilities, and by cultivating a sense of accountability for their work and indebtedness to others for the expertise they add to it. According to Dewey, then, because of its action-guiding and community-building features, inquiry ought to be a central part of children's education as a "tool to foster increasingly democratic ways of living" (Boydston 1990, p. 83).

Yet, while childhood can be perceived as an opportune time to practice responsible autonomy through inquiry-based learning, the mental constructs that children inherit from the world around them may jeopardize these efforts. Thus, even if they are inquiring collaboratively in an educational setting, the results are not necessarily reasonable in the ways articulated so far, and could even promote extremist thought or violent action. On this

point, I share the concerns expressed by social theorist Walter Lippmann in his 1922 treatise *Public Opinion,* which describes the chasm between the real world and what he calls the "pictures in our heads". (Although Lippmann was not a pragmatist, he was a known critic of Dewey's work, especially the feasibility of democratic citizenship through self-determination—which makes him a thought-provoking counterpoint within this analysis.) These pictures—or "pseudoenvironments"—combine both facts and personal interpretations to create mental images that do not necessarily correspond to the external world they purport to reflect, and become problematic when inappropriately applied to the real world. Though Lippmann (1922) does not focus on childhood or education, his insights can be interpreted to show how children, as emerging agents, may be distinctly prone to adopting both false judgments of fact and false judgments of value engendered by their pseudoenvironments. While children can learn to assess descriptive claims for factual accuracy, dubious normative claims may be harder to unravel (even with tailored training like the CPI) when they are rooted in what I am calling *stereotyped concepts*.

One of Lippmann's strongest theoretical contributions is his repurposing of the term "stereotype" to describe those "certain fixed habits of cognition which classify and abstract falsely; [and] usually, but not always, falsify the picture" (in a January 13, 1925, letter by Lippmann, clarifying his notion of stereotype, as quoted in Curtis 1991, p. 25). Among these habits is the tendency to define reality before experiencing it or to adopt a preexisting definition without assessing its merits: "In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world…we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture" (Lippmann 1922, p. 80). Lippmann also attacks the divisive impact of stereotypes on individuals for interfering "with the full recognition of their common humanity" (Lippmann 1922, p. 87), which echoes the main preoccupations of PVE advocates. Worse still, stereotypes create a near irresistible (if disingenuous) sense of ease when individuals are confronted with possible confusion or uncertainty—"they permit us to feel at home, to be members, to fit in. When the stereotypes are attacked, the whole world they represent is shaken" (Wright 1973, p. 44).

Interestingly, though contemporary interpretations of the term "stereotype" in sociology and psychology focus on widely held cultural beliefs about particular individuals or groups, Lipman's characterization as well as the very etymology of the word—literally, "firm impression"—also allow for the possibility of stereotyping a *concept*. The childhood pseudoenvironments regarding Santa Claus are a telling example: though the descriptive aspect can be corrected upon the realization that Father Christmas does not, in fact, exist, the normative aspect of deserving with regard to gift-giving may remain, even if in changed form. For instance, the claim that "children who are good should get presents"—with the correlating claim that "children who are bad should get nothing"—may persist, alongside stereotyped conceptions of goodness, entitlement, and reward. This may result in a firm yet potentially misleading set of values and motivations to act, including possibly extremist or violent views regarding who ought to be worthy of good treatment.

It stands to reason that stereotyped concepts may make children, as emerging agents, more susceptible to dubious normative claims and their accompanying actions since they tend to be less experienced and more impressionable than adults; they lack the critical awareness necessary to challenge the stereotyped concepts they inherit in their initial experimentations with autonomous thinking. As Lippmann (1922) points out, a stereotype "may be so consistently and authoritatively transmitted in each generation from parent to child that it seems almost like a biological fact" (p. 93), particularly when further entrenched in educational settings. Linking back to pragmatic inquiry, this concern evokes the methods of "fixing belief" that Charles Sanders Peirce considers highly deceptive and

erosive of reasoning skills. Especially relevant for our purposes, the method of tenacity involves willfully clinging to a belief regardless of its foundations, sheltering ourselves from external evidence that may change our minds—we "hold to it to the end, whatever happens, without an instant's irresolution" (Peirce 1997, p. 24). For its part, the a priori method leads us to accept as true any belief that is rationally defensible even if not empirically supported, letting us endorse "comfortable conclusions…until we are awakened from our pleasing dream by some rough facts" (Peirce 1997, p. 23).

Similarly, as Lippmann emphasizes, a stereotype can be described as an inadequate "habit of molding" that creates oversimplified and manipulated images to enable our "projecting on the world our own values and acting as if these projections corresponded to actual fact" (Curtis 1991, pp. 26–27). To my mind, such molding may morph into epistemic rigidity in children, which complicates the efforts of PVE education. To illustrate, let us consider the following case of stereotyped love, drawn from a CPI session with children aged 5 through 11. (This example is taken from one of the "philocreation" camps run by Brila Youth Projects [brila.org] in Montreal, Canada, as part of my ongoing P4C practice and research.) Though the group felt the concept of love satisfied the 3Cs of being central, common and contestable, when faced with a thought experiment involving a world without love, the group's immediate (and, as it happened, unwavering) response was to limit their conception to romantic, procreating relationships between grown men and women. Consequently, in envisioning this alternate reality, they hastily concluded that humanity would render itself extinct as there would be no "lovers" to populate the planet. Their simplistic concept of love did not include nuanced comparisons to related concepts such as liking, caring, cherishing, appreciating, etc., nor did it factor in criteria to integrate other forms and subjects of love, from platonic friendship to LGBTQIA+ lifestyles to passion projects.

Though highly engaged in their collective inquiry, the children were stereotyping a concept they seemed to greatly value in ways that narrowed who should be deemed worthy of it, as well as which of its expressions should matter. This limited definition paved the way for the dubious normative claim that only heteronormative married couples of the same race should count as true instances of love. The younger children, seemingly influenced by narratives passed down from their own families, proceeded to spend their lunch break trying playfully to marry off those adult facilitators who met the strict conditions of their stereotyped concept. Regarding PVE, the concern here is that as the children age into more opportunities to enact their evolving autonomy, they may believe they have reason to dismiss or disparage kinds of love that, by most current ethical standards, would be considered justifiable. Epistemologically speaking, how they might strive to learn about the world and what they claim to know about it could be mediated through this stereotyped concept, which could be relationally damaging, even violent. But if their very concept of violence is itself stereotyped—say, to designate only physical abuse—they might be blind to the harm their claims represent.

If this epistemic rigidity can even be considered "autonomous", it is irresponsibly so at best and certainly not relational. As I have argued elsewhere, children's "repertory of stereotypes" may run the risk of becoming the authoritative guide for their thinking and acting—with the characters, settings, and morals of their mental narratives seeming as familiar and comforting as a tattered security blanket (Fletcher 2016). They may cling to this repertory for the same reasons Lippmann suggests that adults hold fast to their biases, and this adherence to oversimplified conceptions and spurious claims may be reinforced by the adults in their lives, including their teachers. The danger of stereotyped concepts is two-fold: they may falsify the picture at the level of *content* and downplay complexity at the level of *procedure*. The possible result is an epistemic rigidity that undermines the

reasonableness required for responsible autonomy by posing a duo of concurrent threats. Indeed, children may threaten their peers' thinking through the dubious normative claims they reflectively endorse, while also being threatened by others' stereotyped concepts, which might negatively influence their own attempts at reasonableness. In such cases, they themselves may become (or fall prey to) the "interfering conditions" that obstruct responsible autonomy. So how does the challenge of stereotyped concepts affect P4C's potential as an aid to PVE? And how might it manifest as risks within the CPI experience?

CPI facilitation as an opportunity amidst risks

It is hopefully clear by now why P4C could be considered as an aid to PVE. By showing children *how* to think rather than *what* to think, the CPI enables them, as Lipman (2003) writes, to "both understand and practice what is involved in violence reduction and peace development. They have to learn to think for themselves about these matters, not just provide knee-jerk responses…and [to] acknowledge that working together for peace is inherently a social, communal matter" (pp. 105–106). Accordingly, the CPI represents an important opportunity—notably, thanks to the important facilitative role it bestows on adults and by virtue of its force as an equalizer for all those involved, young and old alike. Yet, with this said, given the epistemic rigidity that may result from stereotyped concepts, I want to address what I see as three major risks within the CPI, at the levels of content and procedure: (1) manipulative facilitation, (2) high-stakes moments, and (3) affect aliens. These elements represent risks because adult facilitators may either take up or miss opportunities for P4C to gain in potential as an aid to PVE.

Manipulative facilitation

The creation of a collaborative space for children to voice their perspectives is, sadly, not a uniformly prized proposition, not least because of the ongoing influence of contentious conceptions of childhood. This may be due to ageist and adultist views that ought to be challenged but could also stem from adults' genuine concern regarding what children can and should be expected to handle. To review: I propose that evolving responsible autonomy involves children reflectively endorsing what they believe they have reason to value as emerging agents; at times, however, these values are not only volatile but also questionable. Simply put, without careful guidance on the part of adult facilitators, the CPI experience could cause children to adopt ideas that are relationally problematic—that is, possibly damaging on ethical, political, and/or psychological grounds, as suggested in the example of stereotyped love. While it is important for children to have their own concerns and ideas—views they can explore and express so they can act in accordance with them as emergent agents—what happens if these are dangerous?

One could argue that this danger is precisely why it is crucial that philosophical inquiry be practiced collaboratively among children since sharing multiple frames of reference may lessen the chance that dubious claims would hold up to collective reasoning. Yet, the facilitation of a CPI is complex and demanding: by opening up a space for children to think autonomously, adult facilitators who lack training or sensibility may clear the way for epistemic rigidity to take root. Returning to the notion of fixing beliefs: in terms of reflection toward truth, children who lack procedural support from facilitators risk deluding themselves into believing that the narrow conceptions they hold are the real or right

ones, trapping themselves in relativistic or narcissistic thinking ("my view, my truth") and "inquiring what belief is most in harmony with their system", as Peirce (1997, p. 44) cautions against.

Worse still, in response to these problems, adult facilitators may become overly manipulative. Some benevolent manipulation seems unavoidable in P4C facilitation: by reformulating or emphasizing certain contributions, based on what seems most philosophically promising, facilitators inevitably influence the inquiry's course—neutrality remains a worthwhile but a moving target. Yet, there is an important distinction between facilitators' attending to the philosophical and their steering an inquiry toward values they themselves reflectively endorse or have subconsciously internalized—either intentionally because they think they know best or accidentally because they lack awareness of their own sway. It is not uncommon for teachers in a P4C training to say that they are interested in integrating the pedagogy because it will allow them to teach their values and they know "they have the right ones"; or for teachers to get overly caught up in the inquiry because of their own interest in it, confusing the roles of facilitator and inquirer. While bias cannot be completely avoided, such instances are a clear move away from an apprenticeship in thinking and toward the more perilous zone of indoctrination so feared by PVE proponents, where adults take or impose their own philosophical positions rather than help children develop the skills to do so on their own. Thus, how adults handle their facilitative role is crucial, especially the timing and character of their interventions when confronted with the next two challenging risks.

High-stakes moments

In a well-functioning CPI, lived experience is under a kind of nuancing microscope. Children critically examine aspects of life to pinpoint the subtleties that often get overlooked, enabling them to problematize their epistemological, ethical, metaphysical, aesthetic, logical, and political assumptions. This also allows them to determine how to conceptually refine the presumed definitions, criteria, and categories with which they assess the world, so that they may better understand and engage with their everyday realities. However, if the group is too homogenous in its thinking, children may be more prone to various fallacies—notably, confirmation bias—which may result in their adherence to stereotyped concepts and, by extension, to dubious normative claims. As Sharp (1993) observes, "What is involved in any knowing is always heavily dependent on what questions are asked, what kind of knowledge is sought, what assumptions are taken for granted, what perspectives are taken into account and the context in which the inquiry is undertaken" (p. 55).

What I am calling *high-stakes moments* capture the severity of instances involving stereotyped concepts, while underlining the important role of facilitation in safeguarding against epistemic rigidity, notably in light of PVE commitments. Specifically, a high-stakes moment designates a juncture within a CPI dialogue when something is said or intimated that challenges children's capacity for reasonableness, and thus calls for immediate intervention on the part of the adult facilitator. The moment is critical because the utterance or intimation, if left unaddressed, risks jeopardizing children's thoughts and actions as emerging agents by allowing stereotyped concepts (and their associated dubious normative claims) to persist unchallenged. Although debates abound within the P4C movement regarding adult involvement—when and how facilitators should interject rather than let children conduct the inquiry themselves—I want to argue that high-stakes moments

unequivocally demand intervention, while conceding that such moments are not always easy to recognize or deconstruct.

Let us consider an example from another CPI dialogue: During a series of outdoor workshops on the philosophy of urban life, a group of children played with the counterfactual exploration, "If you had a magic wand and could fulfill a wish for your city, what would it be?" (This example is drawn from another P4C project in which Brila participated—an urban initiative funded by the municipal government to gauge young people's experiences of living in Montreal.) An 8-year-old boy suggested that the group should find a way to divide the good people from the bad ones, then send the latter away so they would not threaten the city's character. Though the child's intentions were clearly not harmful, his recommendation revealed a stereotyped concept of goodness and an implied normative claim about the worthiness of certain individuals over others. He assumed there were two easily identifiable categories of individuals, making it therefore reasonable to want to populate his city with "good" people to ensure that it remained "good" itself.

Needless to say, such presuppositions have been at the heart of some of human history's greatest atrocities: the notion of a "perfect human" has inspired and justified the exclusion and even genocide of populations deemed "undesirable". The boy's utterance, therefore, represented a high-stakes moment because it risked triggering a set of prejudiced claims that could affect his ability to be reasonable and responsibly autonomous in his thoughts and actions. The stakes rose even higher, since his suggestion seemed to influence his peers' concept of "goodness": the others keenly nodded, agreeing it would be better to eliminate the "bad guys" from their beloved city. In such cases, when stereotyped concepts risk leading to prejudice vis-à-vis complex social determinants like racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, classism, and the like, the moment is one of high stakes.

Curiously, the notion of "baddies"—and the stereotyped concepts behind it—seems to surface time and again during CPI dialogues with elementary-aged children, often in their counter-examples for a type of individual who is assuredly unworthy of their valuing or good treatment. This was consistently the case at a local school engaged in its first year of regular P4C practice. Regardless of the inquiry question, students from grades two through four repeatedly referenced "thieves" as exceptions to people who deserve moral concern, seemingly without feeling the need to justify their stances. (This example is from one of Brila's local partners, a Montreal-based francophone primary school whose entire teaching faculty has been trained to conduct biweekly CPI sessions.) This tendency uncovered how children's stereotyping of the concept of thievery oversimplified and misconstrued the circumstances of thieves, revealing an epistemic rigidity that was hard to shake.

At times, these counter-examples turned into high-stakes moments that demanded intervention. The children determined that the consequences of being a thief should be extreme, from the removal of basic rights and the loss of human dignity to major suffering, such as execution by knifing. The strength in numbers produced radical dogmatic beliefs—rooted in racial profiling, appeal-to-fear fallacies and socioeconomic inequalities—that prevailed at the expense of a more generous appraisal of the conditions that might lead to criminality. (To be clear, the expectation was not that children know these conditions but that adult facilitators detect the lack of nuance in the group's conception and provide procedural support to add complexity to the criteria.) Such utterances, therefore, were high-stakes moments because they presented stereotyped concepts that begged to be unpacked lest the dubious normative claims expressed during the CPI dialogues translate into relationally problematic real-world action.

Affect aliens

Moreover, the possibility of high-stakes moments makes CPI facilitation a risky business in an additional sense, since the resulting dialogical atmosphere can generate powerful—though not always positive—phenomenological experiences in children, notably at the level of affects. For his part, Lipman (1988) recognizes that "the different opinions that are expressed are charged with personal feelings, and as more and more views are brought forth, these differences of feeling are accentuated" (p. 129). As I see it, while this accentuation can be extremely constructive, with children becoming more aware of what they value through their embodied, affective exchanges, it also risks becoming alienating, therefore requiring careful facilitation by adults.

Without such intervention, strong voices may monopolize and intimidate the community toward consensus on stereotyped concepts and related claims, when reasonableness would demand otherwise. This risks weakening the bond between co-inquirers; stronger personalities may eclipse more timid ones, "majority rule" judgments may hinder rigorous analysis, and prejudiced outlooks may be forcefully defended as more equitable suggestions get overlooked. Consequently, the desired CPI atmosphere of openness, cooperation and interdependence could be supplanted by one of coercion, hostility and one-sidedness, with inquiry "bullies" influencing a group's ability to share control of the dialogue—as examples of P4C practices with juvenile delinquents have suggested (Lee 1986, pp. 15–16).

One particularly effective way of portraying this risk is through the notion of "affect aliens", a term coined by feminist Sara Ahmed to designate individuals who are estranged by the prevailing affects of their context. Though her focus is on social exclusion among marginalized populations, her examples of "feminist kill-joys, unhappy queers, and melancholic migrants" (Ahmed, in Gregg and Seigworth 2010, p. 30) can be aptly translated to the realities faced by children whose differences may preclude their sense of belonging in a CPI, and reveal themselves in the form of resistance, warranted as it may be. Such children may find that what they deem as valuable and worthy of their reflective endorsement as emerging agents is perceived as wrong, incorrect, or unpopular in a classroom context that, say, privileges whiteness or heteronormativity. As affect aliens, their awareness of the group's epistemic rigidity might be quite basic, especially compared to that of the politicized adults that Ahmed references, but their phenomenological experiences are no less existentially profound. In a sense they are forced to exist on the margins of the dominant knowledge (in the form of stereotyped concepts) because these do not represent what they themselves find meaningful, so they cannot relate to the affects of curiosity, wonder or enthusiasm animating the group. In the case of stereotyped love, an obvious example would be children whose own family constellations drastically differ from the proposed criteria—their parents are an unmarried interracial couple, their sibling identifies as queer, their uncle is asexual and aromantic, their cousin practices ethical non-monogamy, etc.

As I see it, the CPI's status as an embodied, affectively charged experience increases the risk of stereotyped concepts' leading to high-stakes moments that produce affect aliens in children. Indeed, while powerful, the encounter of dialoguing bodies in a CPI is not always a harmonious one. Though the issue of aggressive speech has been tackled from multiple vantage points in P4C scholarship, the question of bodily hostility remains largely unaddressed. Though many losses may ensue, I want to highlight one that I see as crucial to the model's potential as an aid to PVE: children may be alienated affectively because what they say or

represent to the group is rejected or misapprehended not only verbally but also corporeally. They may sense the aggressive, antagonistic energy of the dominant speakers to the degree that it silences their speech but also affects their body—they cower, recoil, sweat, shake, feel faint and stutter. Their willingness or ability to talk may decrease, resulting in missing perspectives and an imbalance of contributions, which in turn damages the community's dynamic. Here, the risk is represented through the body rather than the philosophical position, which can itself count as violent to the extent that it may cause damaging levels of distress (see Fletcher 2014, in which I develop this argument and introduce the notion of "body taunting").

The bodily hostility that can produce affect aliens within a group may reveal a general unease with uncertainty—a way of resisting the emergent, unsettled, contestable truth environment of the CPI. Again, this points to epistemic rigidity: children may staunchly defend stereotyped concepts and their accompanying dubious claims because these are comfortingly familiar. As we have seen, philosophical positions in a CPI are deemed open to revision as long as there is life experience to inform and nuance them. In Sharp's words (1997), "We cannot engage in such creative transformation…if we remain wedded to the idea that there is one absolute truth, and only our world view contains it" (p. 73). Yet, if everything is open to question (even concepts perceived as incontestable), children who feel unsettled by the process may express their aversion through an *embodied* epistemic rigidity that betrays a kind of intolerance—a way of conveying fear or insecurity when facing alternative perspectives or having personal prejudices challenged.

This possibility is likely heightened in very socially diverse CPI groups since, as Kennedy (2010) writes, "The more knowledge-perspectives I am exposed to—whether of gender, class, sexuality, self-understanding, religious belief, aesthetic value and so on—the more alternative versions of truth I encounter" (p. 137). Further, a child may know better than to voice bigotry but not manage to hide its corporeal manifestation, particularly where the unfolding argument defies a preferred conception and someone deemed "other" or even inferior communicates it. Accordingly, multidimensional thought may also be impeded: some positions or people may no longer be taken seriously (lack of caring thinking); there may be reluctance to engage with and evaluate unfamiliar views and arguments (lack of critical thinking); and children may not see the need to look for missing perspectives, test possibilities and envision the implications of their ideas (creative thinking).

Such epistemic rigidity may be contagious among dialoguing bodies, causing greater estrangement within the group, as affectively alienated children disengage from the process. The long-term effects of hostility in and beyond the CPI could be quite dire, if Lipman (2003) is correct in his predictions: "[P]eople who feel that their powers are alienated, their hopes betrayed, and their energies wasted are likely to be people who fantasize violence as a way of siphoning off their own repressed bitterness and resentment" (p. 108). So, how might CPI facilitation address the risks of high-stakes moments and affect aliens without becoming overly manipulative? Is it possible for adult facilitators to be interventionist in ways that reflect PVE commitments while also helping children work through the stereotyping of concepts that can impede their evolving responsible autonomy?

Promising avenues for PVE-sensitive CPI facilitation

My own P4C practice and preliminary research data suggest that children who regularly engage in CPI dialogues that are procedurally supported by effective facilitation may be better positioned than their uninitiated peers to detect the dubious normative claims

resulting from their stereotyped concepts—as well as the unsound dialogic methods entrenching them. Such children may be more likely to see both the claims and methods as problems requiring careful examination because of the potentially nefarious impact on their reasonableness and, by extension, on their responsible autonomy. More specifically, these children may be quicker to judge as problematic any and all alienating high-stakes moments, having learnt to enact the self-corrective dispositions of humility, acceptance of fallibility and comfort with uncertainty that, in my estimation, form the basis of epistemological flexibility in a CPI. Given this possibility, I want to argue in favour of two promising avenues for facilitation—curatorship and *difficultating*—that stand a good chance of addressing the risks previously outlined and of thereby making CPI facilitation more sensitive to PVE commitments.

Facilitation as curatorship

To begin, on the argument I am advancing, adults should perceive their CPI facilitation role as a curatorship—one that seeks to look after the "tiny works of art" (2003, p. 143) that Lipman considers mental acts to be—so as to orient children's collaborative meaning-making away from extremist thinking toward more nuanced, complex concepts and claims. The analogy of a curator—from the Latin *curare*, meaning "to take care"—helps to emphasize the pivotal role of facilitators in designing a dialogical space of epistemological flexibility. Like curators carefully choosing and arranging an exhibition's artwork to suit a particular gallery, adult facilitators must be selective and discerning about the principles, procedures, and pedagogical materials they adopt to create an embodied, affective atmosphere conducive to a self-corrective group dynamic. (The notion of a curatorship through "aspirational eros" is explored in more detail in Fletcher and Oyler 2016.) Though philosophical questions and strategies may change, facilitators must continue to curate the same affects of doubt, curiosity and wonder, while modelling thoughtful engagement, in order to motivate children to persevere through challenging CPI sessions that may at times be plainly uncomfortable, so as to enable more responsible, relationally sound thinking.

What might this facilitation-as-curatorship aimed at fostering self-corrective dispositions look like in practice? By encouraging *humility* and *acceptance of fallibility* in children, adult facilitators can help them view their conceptual interpretations not as static but as revisable, increasing their willingness to adapt their methods as well as their claims, rather than doggedly preserve stereotyped concepts they now know to be flawed. If facilitators can curate a dialogic space in which the readiness to err and change one's mind is privileged rather than disparaged, children may begin to experience the normative claims arising from their stereotyped concepts as provisional beliefs in need of scrutiny and testing. In connection with PVE, as Lipman (2003) astutely notes, "Such a spirit helps to defuse the contentiousness that absolutism and fanaticism inspire, and thereby it undercuts the violence to which such contentiousness often leads" (p. 123). Further, by modelling *comfort with uncertainty* in their facilitation style, adults may help children better grapple with complexity and ambiguity, particularly when their stereotyped concepts are destabilized, so that they react with curiosity rather than evasion into familiar black-and-white frames.

In turn, by highlighting times when the group's inquiry strategies no longer suffice to tackle their identified problem, adult facilitators may help children see the benefits of *epistemological flexibility*. With the realization that they all struggle in their attempts to make meaning, they may better appreciate how their co-constructed inquiry efforts enable them to free each other from the safety zone of bias so they can generate stronger, more robust

conceptions and claims that pass the test of their combined reasonableness. This distinctive potential of facilitation-as-curatorship toward self-corrective dispositions echoes what Lippmann (1922) hoped could happen if we, as citizens, became less fearfully obstinate and gullible in the face of our stereotyping:

> If in [our] philosophy we assume that the world is codified according to a code which we possess, we are likely to make our reports of what is going on describe a world run by our code. But if our philosophy tells us that each man is only a small part of the world, that his intelligence catches at best only phases and aspects in a coarse net of ideas, then, when we use our stereotypes, we tend to know that they are only stereotypes, *to hold them lightly, to modify them gladly* (pp. 90–91; emphasis added).

Returning to the case of stereotyped love, the adult facilitator's careful curating of space could enable the group to envision the possible consequences of their normative claims about love to see how their concept might be nuanced. (It is worth noting that this curation may not happen on the first try, as adult facilitators could be taken off guard by a stereotyped concept and have to readjust accordingly.) The group may attempt to visualize what the world would be like if everyone lived according to their definition, realizing that this could change how people see and treat each other, and how they experience and express their own feelings. Throughout this self-corrective process, they may discover that what they actually esteem is loyalty, deep emotional bonds, and reciprocated trust, not matrimony and compatibility in the strictest sense—making room for considerations of friendship, collegiality, vocation, philanthropy, animal care, and so forth. With the concept of love suddenly seeming so rife with ambiguity and complexity, they may, as Lippmann (1922) put it, come "to realise more and more clearly when [their] ideas started, where they started, how they came to [them], why [they] accepted them" (p. 91).

Facilitation as "difficultating"

While the prospects of facilitation-as-curatorship seem promising, the self-corrective dispositions proposed will be put to the test in alienating high-stakes moments. In the face of such risks, how specifically should adult facilitators curate the dialogical space? Plainly put, the tall order is to maintain the opportunity that the CPI represents *despite* the significant risks—a challenge even for a seasoned P4C practitioner. In my view, one avenue available to them is to view their curator role not as streamlining inquiry dialogue but as complicating its perspectives and processes. If children hold fast to their stereotyped concepts to the point that alienating high-stakes moments occur, adults must push them to consider how the perspectives and processes under investigation might have problematic relational ramifications for what they claim to know about the world as emerging agents. Accordingly, to play on the etymological roots of the term "facilitation", beyond helping to make things easier—beyond *facilitating*—adults must also be *difficultating*. (My colleague and I came up with this term at the 2012 annual summer seminar of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, the research centre that Lipman and Sharp founded at Montclair State University. I have since used it regularly in my practice as a P4C facilitator and trainer to capture the subtleties of the adult's role in a CPI.)

This avenue I am proposing bears resemblance to some of the educational strategies embedded in Megan Boler's (1999) "pedagogy of discomfort", though her university context presents different demands than does P4C with younger inquirers. Of note, she argues that "learning to live with ambiguity, discomfort, and uncertainty is a worthy educational

ideal", one that requires courage on the part of learners and educators alike, to a great extent because of the difficult "emotional dimensions and investments" elicited when cherished values are called into question (pp. 197–199). For me, difficultating involves nurturing in children a *joyful discomfort* in their experiments of epistemological flexibility—but not in the sense of delighting in being made uncomfortable, which seems exacting if not incoherent as a proposal. I mean this, rather, in the Spinozan sense of joy as increasing the power to act: a joyful orientation toward discomfort that recognizes its hopes of enriching possibilities for autonomous thought and action (Spinoza, "Part IV: Of Human Bondage, or the Strength of the Emotions", in Curley 1996, 113–116). The idea is to curate a safe space to be discomforted, so to speak—a space of active wondering at the fidgety, hurly-burly quality of complex concepts and at the dizzying intensity of stepping outside comfort zones to grapple with them.

Toward this end, as "difficultators", adults must learn to identify high-stakes moments and intervene immediately with questions that probe the utterance or intimation to reveal its roots. They must cautiously but confidently anticipate the possible challenges to children's evolving responsible autonomy, to determine how the stereotyped concepts and dubious normative claims may be affecting the children's beliefs about what they have reason to value. In such cases, difficultating moves will seek to encourage epistemic flexibility in children in order to defuse the high-stakes moment. Evidence of success could include the inquiry's content growing conceptually murkier before it gets clearer, and children, as co-inquirers, seeming more primed to hem and haw or change their minds because they are less dogmatically convinced of their original stances. Of note here, since the goal remains the cultivating of responsible autonomy in children, although the adults must intervene, this intervention does not translate into adults doing the reasoning work for the children.

If reasonableness is to be a guiding principle, however, I also argue (perhaps more provocatively) that the manifestation of high-stakes moments should be welcomed in a CPI practice aiming to be PVE-sensitive. In everyday vernacular, a high-stakes situation is one involving serious risks if the parties do not succeed, thereby making it highly pivotal—the oft-used examples of poker games and business negotiations illustrate this well. However, if the parties *do* succeed, in the form of gaining money or power, the risks are deemed to have been worthwhile. Similarly, while high-stakes moments in a CPI may lead to significant losses, the possible gains should not go overlooked. In the examples above, for instance, the high-stakes moments sparked philosophical exchanges that motivated the children to question the stereotyped concepts at the root of their dubious normative claims.

Yet, I want to make another argument that is more controversial still. I argue not only that high-stakes moments in a CPI should be welcomed but also that they should somehow be genuinely provoked in order to create occasions for children to confront epistemic rigidity under the careful guidance of adults. Many people interested in P4C seem attracted to it because it offers opportunities to delve into positive concepts with young people, from peace and happiness to kindness and compassion. Chief among these practitioners is Frédéric Lenoir; the very name of his organization—La Fondation SEVE—is an acronym for *savoir être et vivre ensemble*, which roughly translates as "knowing-how-to-be and living-togetherness" (Lenoir 2016). I grant that such concepts can lead to beautiful dialogical exchanges among children, and I have witnessed many of these firsthand in my own practice. However, as someone who is concerned with the development of responsible autonomy in childhood and who greatly respects children's philosophical capacities, I find this softer route is often insufficient since it can prevent problematic thinking from surfacing. It overemphasizes the "making easier" aspect of facilitating, at the expense of the difficultating. In a sense, such a route imposes the criteria of centrality and commonality

on the concepts but risks doing away with their contestability—the hidden lesson is that these concepts should matter to all humans and there ought to be consensus regarding their favourable characterization.

Indeed, in my experience, when children are invited to inquire into concepts with clear positive connotations like peace and compassion, they tend to say what they think the adult facilitators want to hear. This results in what I call "ready-made responses" that are often informed by past lessons they have had on the topic. For instance, if a class is invited to share its thoughts about caring and goodwill in a school where both concepts are part of the charter of values, the canned replies that tend to arise obscure the genuine thinking errors that may be lurking beneath the surface. Conversely, when given the chance to explore more prickly or taboo concepts of their choosing, such as cruelty, revenge, discrimination, suffering or rebellion, children are less likely to have a blueprint to follow; for that reason, the philosophical provocation yields genuine, albeit perhaps disconcerting, thinking. It is as though the juiciness of the topics prompts a literal or implicit "Are-we-really-talking-about-this?" embodied reaction that opens the floodgates. Since such CPI dialogues represent uncharted conceptual territory for children, they seem more prone to say what they actually think rather than to aim at some textbook answer.

As a result, a flurry of high-stakes moments can ensue—all of which reveal stereotyped concepts and related dubious normative claims that risk jeopardizing children's evolving responsible autonomy. Yet, with these relationally problematic thoughts out in the open, a difficultating facilitator can really get to work, using high-stakes moments to diagnose the thinking tools and dispositions that need to be practiced with the given group. To my mind, therein lies the real potential of P4C as an aid to PVE: in a well-curated, supportive dialogic atmosphere, children feel safe enough with their discomfort to share their current convictions—the good, the bad and the ugly—and others get a chance to mirror back to them what seems reasonable to continue believing in light of what they know and of what the adult has enabled them to question through difficultating moves.

I worry that, without such provocations, facilitators may not have access to the thinking errors in children's conceptions. If that occurs, these may well continue to operate undetected, resulting in the kind of faulty reasoning and morally questionable stances that are apt to also characterize violent extremism. In fact, in the case of the thought experiment concerning a loveless world, the goal was in part to genuinely provoke high-stakes moments. Rather than have children wax poetic about love itself, the philosophical provocation was turned on its head so they could get a chance to complexify a concept with clear relational underpinnings as well as to question (and maybe even diversify) hegemonic understandings. In short, that CPI dialogue required a difficultating strategy to complicate, rather than oversimplify, children's thinking as emerging agents.

Last, but certainly not least, the risk of affect aliens also demands that adults oscillate between facilitating and difficultating to make the CPI more sensitive to PVE commitments. They should be especially attuned to the intersecting social determinants and interfering conditions that may already estrange some children in their everyday reality, so they can strive to prevent them from also becoming affectively alienated in their CPI experience. In terms of difficultating moves, this entails that adults highlight bodily hostility when they detect it. Further, when an inquiry does produce affect aliens through dismissive speech or body language, adult facilitators must curate a safe space for those alienated children. Such space allows them to share their discomforting experience of being subdued or ostracized, so it can become a reference point for the group's self-correction as it progresses away from epistemic rigidity toward greater flexibility. Especially germane to PVE commitments, the resulting meta-awareness at the embodied level—or what I call *bodily tact*—may also sensitize children to the importance of not only *what* they say but also *how* they say it. It even illuminate how the latter, if not done

mindfully, risks prioritizing certain speakers at the expense of others, as has historically been the case for those marginalized voices left out of philosophical inquiry.

Conclusion

In closing, the approach to P4C I have defended in this article requires that the meaning of concepts not be taken as given—that even the *value* of values be explored and negotiated—if the pedagogy is to enhance its potential as an aid to PVE. Through CPI dialogues curated for epistemological flexibility, what children may end up reflectively endorsing for themselves as emerging agents is an altered conception—one with more shades of grey than their original stereotyped portrait; one that does greater justice to the complexity of contemporary living across differences. If the aim is to cultivate responsible autonomy in childhood, there is a real tension in adults' wanting to teach values yet also engage in dialogic methods like the CPI. The confused results may be alienating for children and compromise their early attempts to live autonomously in relationally sound ways. In terms of PVE commitments, the dangers lie not in their ready-made responses but in the thinking errors they conceal. A child can speak poetically about peace and compassion, but it is only when she is pressed to take a stance on their strained relations with other concepts and contexts that she may come to realize the ambiguity that inhabits the perspectives and processes otherwise taken to be true and trustworthy. In so doing, the child may move away from dogmatic beliefs toward the "irritation of doubt" that Peirce (1997, p. 12) describes as essential to flexible inquiry: metaphorically speaking, what keeps her itchy for collective philosophical inquiry is not the intuition that peace is good and violence bad, but the discomforting frictions that arise when she is invited to scratch their surface.

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