



Philosophy with Children and Jaspers' Idea of the University Resisting Instrumental and Authoritarian Thinking

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Abstract: Jaspers' vision of an ideal university stipulates an institution devoted to the search for truth by virtue of communication. I argue that such an institution requires students who are willing and able to collectively pursue open and free inquiry as well as academics who uphold this value. Such a desideratum as well as an overall capacity for participation in the university's mandate needs to be cultivated in students at an early age. While a desire for truth and open-ended inquiry requires that economic and instrumental considerations for education do not exhaust the students' reasons for seeking a university education, an interest in truth and learning for its own sake is best cultivated when one aims to foster children's natural curiosity about big questions, such as, for example, the beginning of the universe, personal identity, the meaning of life, or the nature of friendship. Furthermore, the capacity for participation in a community of learning and research requires that the virtues of critical thinking, intellectual empathy, and intellectual integrity are familiar to students—that their interaction with teachers and academic personnel is not based on their status as authority figures and disciplinarians, thereby following stereotypes of early schooling, but rather that they are also seen as being fellow inquirers and thinkers. These two Jaspersian goals of university education—(1) the open inquiry for truth and (2) communication as the method for such inquiry—are best supported if philosophical thinking is introduced to students at an early age.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; university education; idea of the university; public philosophy; philosophy for children; truth; communication; self-directed learning; curiosity.

Philosophy with Children

"If you are trying to do nothing, then you are not doing nothing, because trying is doing something," claimed the ten-year-old after our short thought experiment at Beale Public Library where I challenged the participants to do absolutely nothing for thirty seconds. Some children were perfectly still, some closed their eyelids, and none tried holding their breaths, which a few had tried in previous sessions. The story we read, Tim Egan's *Pink Refrigerator*, concerns a rat called Dodsworth who likes

to do nothing.¹ He owns a thrift shop, where he sells his daily finds from the junkyard. He watches TV and eats cheese sandwiches, and his motto in life is to do as little as possible...until he comes across a pink refrigerator that commands him to "read books," to "make art," and to "play music," and gives him the adequate means to do these tasks, such as books, paint, or musical instruments. Dodsworth's life is changed forever. The

¹ Tim Egan, *The Pink Refrigerator*, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007.

book ends with the main character finally coming to terms with the refrigerator's last communication "Keep exploring!" summoning the young readers to puzzle out how they themselves interpret this final message.

I have used this book as a prompt a few times in the Philosophy for Children (P4C) conversations my students and I offer in public libraries. In these sessions, I invite the children to ponder on the first sentence of the picture book: "Dodsworth likes to do nothing." Children enjoy getting a chance to think and converse about the concept of nothingness: what doing nothing means, what doing something entails, and whether doing nothing is possible at all. As they try to come up with examples to understand what counts as doing something, children grasp for a principle or a criterion of action. Some groups develop these thoughts to the next level, and inquire about the nature of agency, attempting to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary motions and even raise existential questions: can one be doing nothing with one's life even though one is going through motions of everyday life? Such reflections also lead to discussions on whether education and learning are valuable and what makes them valuable and finally they inspire heated debates that center on the question of whether Dodsworth's life is better after he meets the refrigerator and expands his horizons. As facilitator of the children's conversation, I echo their statements, compare their insights, and sometimes ask follow-up questions, but my goal is to let the children direct the course of conversation and take stock of the reasons and implications of their own claims and positions. In these sessions at the public libraries, all children between the ages six and twelve years of age are welcome and the only guideline consists in listening to one another respectfully.

P4C programs are opportunities for open-ended inquiry and public engagement of ideas made available to and practiced by young persons – the very persons that will populate the halls of university buildings a decade later. P4C conversations supplement an educational system that rarely offers opportunities of self-directed and collaborative learning. In its current state, the typical elementary school system has children participate day-to-day in largely subject-based course materials; teachers handle classrooms of thirty to forty students, which means that both the demands of the curriculum and classroom set up make it very difficult, if not impossible, to (1) foster the natural curiosity of children to reflect on questions that they find valuable or (2) have free flowing, open-ended conversations

where they take on the agency and responsibility of being a thinker. Current practitioners of P4C point to a key distinction in methodology between P4C approach to learning and the accepted framework in primary education. For example, Thomas Wartenberg speaks of the value of student-centered learning that he prefers over teacher-centered methods,² and Michael Burroughs critiques the one-way mode of communication where "the teacher speaks and the student listens."³ While young persons are being prepared for higher education, which besides acquiring vocational agency is increasingly also a condition of upward mobility, the rigorous curricula are aimed at grammar and reading comprehension (Language Arts) and, of course, Mathematics. Yet the question arises whether children are also being prepared to participate in a university community that values the collaborative search for knowledge as, for example, Jaspers had envisioned it.

Jaspers' Idea of the University

The ideals of a liberal higher education that are shared in the humanities, such as a holistic search for truth, the ideal of a communicative rationality, the need to combine theory and practice such that education is geared toward the whole person, are objectives that Jaspers emphasizes in his book *The Idea of the University*.⁴ Jaspers' ideal of a university includes two key elements: (1) universities are institutions that house research and scholarship as ways "in which truth becomes meaningful and manifest" and (2) communication constitutes "the living core of university life" (*IU* 4). For Jaspers, these two principles, truth and communication, are not separate or unrelated goals but instead necessarily complement one another:

To be genuinely true, truth must be communicable...We represent this original phenomenon of our humanity

² Thomas Wartenberg, *Big Ideas for Little Kids: Teaching Philosophy Through Children's Literature*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education 2009, p. 17.

³ Michael D. Burroughs, "Practicing Philosophy: Philosophy with Children and Experiential Learning," in *Experiential Learning in Philosophy*, eds. Julinna C. Oxley and Ramona Ilea, New York, NY: Routledge 2014, pp. 21-36, here p. 30.

⁴ Karl Jaspers, *The Idea of the University*, transl. Harold A. T. Reiche and H. F. Vanderschmidt, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1959. [Henceforth cited as *IU*]

thus: we are what we are only through the community of mutually conscious understandings. There can be no man who is a man for himself alone, as a mere individual...Abstracted from communication, truth hardens into an unreality. The movement of communication is at one and the same time the preservation of, and the search for, the truth.⁵

To be human is to belong to and participate in a community. Human understanding, thus, is always already situated and social and, consequently, the understanding of truth is also social and only possible in and through communication. An incommunicable truth is an abstraction, as truth "cannot be separated from communicability. It only appears in time as a reality-through-communication" (RE 79).

As an institution that is devoted to the search for truth through communication, Jaspers' vision for a university is thoroughly incompatible with instrumental and authoritarian thinking. Jaspers' understanding of truth does not correspond to an ascertainable and finished result; instead, truth is depicted as a process that involves a collective, open-ended and ongoing search for knowledge. This depiction resists reducing the purpose of higher education, the mandate of the university, to become a mere training for well-defined and pre-determined goals, such as proficiency for a vocation. While it is the truth-directedness of Jaspers' vision of a university that makes it resistant to the merely instrumental goals of higher education, the virtue and necessity of communication render Jaspers' ideal university to be an anti-authoritarian institution. In keeping with the goal of collaborative learning through communication the university houses a community of scholars, where distinctions of rank and authority do not trump creative and interdisciplinary engagement, and where expertise does not close off progress of thought. This model of university would require collaborative efforts by faculty, students, and administrators alike to create an inspiring environment for learning that is not limited to merely an acquisition of vocational expertise.

In the service of preparing a next generation of students who have the capacity to participate in this mandate, a desire for this form of higher learning must be cultivated in students at an early age. Being oriented toward free inquiry requires that economic

and instrumental considerations for education do not exhaust the students' reasons for seeking a university education. A desire for truth "for its own sake" is best cultivated by retaining children's natural curiosity about big questions, whether scientific ones, such as the beginning of the universe, or existential ones, such as the meaning of life, or political ones, such as the nature of friendship. Besides the goal for seeking understanding and an orientation to truth, children must also be ready for the complementary mandate of the university: communication among peers. The capacity for participation in a community of learning and research requires that the virtues of open debate, intellectual empathy, and responsible intellectual conversation are familiar to students—that their relation to their professors are not rigidly defined as submission to the expertise of authority figures and disciplinarians but rather as exchange and evaluation of ideas with fellow inquirers and thinkers. Higher education institutions are increasingly becoming driven by professional and vocational concerns rather than ideals such as the search for truth through communication, while it is also the case that the rapidly increasing interface of society with technology threatens to make obsolete the well-paying professions university students seek. One effective method to support the endangered foundational principles of Jaspers' ideal university, namely encouraging an open inquiry for truth and practicing communication as the method for such inquiry, is by introducing philosophical thinking to students at an early age.

Jaspers holds that a university should exemplify and generate Socratic inquiry and free thinking,⁶ and I would like to add that such interest in and capacity for inquiry can rarely be achieved in universities by mature students, that is, by adults, if the capacity for abstract and critical thinking has already been trained out of them or was not sufficiently cultivated at a time when they were children. Martha Nussbaum, who echoes Jaspers' ideals of universities, such as Socratic inquiry and collaborative open-ended communication, raises this concern in her work on higher education where she notes that "the abilities of citizenship are doing very

⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz: Five Lectures*, transl. William Earle, New York, NY: The Noonday Press 1955, p. 77. [Henceforth cited as RE]

⁶ Jaspers describes the ideal university education as Socratic in nature insofar as it requires an "equality of status" (IU 54) between professor and student, where the professor "resists his students' urge to make him their authority and master" (IU 50).

poorly in the most crucial years of children's lives, the years known as K-12.⁷ When considering the current times of rising economic urgency and student debt, it has become increasingly challenging for students to recognize the value of non-instrumental knowledge and non-vocational education. How will they be convinced of the value of collaborative and open communication rather than the currently practiced learning of expertise from an authority – the teacher? I argue that involving children in democratic education through participation in a "community of inquiry" which "attempts to follow the inquiry where it leads rather than be penned by the boundary lines of existing disciplines" prepares them to become freely thinking responsible adults.⁸ Thus, as future university students they can fully participate in the Socratic inquiry that Jaspers had envisioned as constituting the mandate of higher education since they will have learned from an early age to cultivate an authentic mode of relating to others.

Kindling Rather than Stifling Children's Natural Curiosity

The first condition of Jaspers' idea of a university is the search for truth—such that education is not treated as merely an instrument to future jobs or status, but that it cultivates and answers to a need that participants bring into the classroom. If the educational goal is to have free thinking adults who are open, creative, innovative, and willing to think radically by questioning their own established belief system, educators need to sustain children's natural curiosity about questions that matter, questions that have a stake in their lives.

According to Ekkehard Martens, Karl Jaspers was the first philosopher to introduce the concept of a "children's philosophy" and explicitly advocated for it by arguing that "since children, being new to the world and having not yet found a firm place in it corresponding to adult norms, are especially likely to engage in serious reflection about it."⁹ Jaspers

acknowledges a philosophical propensity in children in his *Way to Wisdom* which is a transcription of twelve radio lectures Jaspers gave in 1950,¹⁰ a few decades before the founders of the P4C movement made a similar case for introducing philosophy to school children. Remarkably, Jaspers addresses the natural curiosity of children in the very first of these lectures, titled "What is Philosophy?" and claims that in children we find a "spontaneous philosophy." Suggesting that the questions asked by children reveal "a marvelous indication of man's innate disposition to philosophy" (*WW*9), Jaspers gives a few examples:

"A child cries out in wonderment, 'I keep trying to think that I am somebody else, but I'm always myself.'" Jaspers comments that the child has come to realize "one of the universal sources of certainty—awareness of being through awareness of self." The child is "perplexed at the mystery of his I, this mystery that can be apprehended through nothing else" (*WW*9).

He also recites a story of a boy who hears the story of Creation: In the beginning, there was God and God made heaven and earth. The child wonders what came before the beginning, and Jaspers comments that the child has "sensed that there is no end to questioning, that there is no stopping place for the mind, that no conclusive answer is possible" (*WW*9).

Jaspers' culminating example of children's "natural philosophical attitudes" is an account of existential questioning by a little girl. Jaspers describes a little girl listening to her father while her father is explaining the reasons why the proposition is accepted that the earth is round and that it rotates on its axis. The little girl objects to it; stomping her feet on the ground, she says that the earth is still, as she and her father can clearly experience. Her argument is that she can see that the earth is still, and she only believes what she can see. Jaspers continues to recount that the father challenges his daughter by drawing an inference from her stated principle:

"Then you don't believe in God," says the father, "you can't see Him either." The little girl is puzzled for a moment, but then says with great assurance, "If there weren't any God, we wouldn't be here at all." [Jaspers explains,] the little girl was seized with the wonder of existence: things do not exist through themselves.

Philosophy for Children 18/4 (2008), 32-35, here p. 32.

⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, "Education for Profit, Education for Freedom," *Liberal Education* 95/3 (Summer 2009), 6-13, here p. 13.

⁸ Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 2003, p. 20. [Henceforth cited as *TE*]

⁹ Ekkehard Martens, "Can Animals Think? The Five Most Important Methods of Philosophizing with Children," transl. Hope Hague, *Thinking: The Journal of*

¹⁰ Karl Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy*, transl. Ralph Mannheim, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954. [Henceforth cited as *WW*]

And she understood that there is a difference between questions bearing on particular objects in the world and those bearing on our existence as a whole. [WW 10]

Jaspers concludes his reflection on children's natural propensity to philosophical insights and philosophical questioning by addressing a possible objection. He admits that one may think that children are merely parroting what they have heard from their elders, but since many adults do not engage in such questioning, this objection does not account for children's "really serious questions." Also, to think that children do not have the gifts of philosophical thinking since many adults lack the inclination for such questioning, Jaspers argues, overlooks the likelihood that children lose their interest as well as acumen regarding fundamental questions as they become adults. He gives a grim account of growing up into the complacency and dullness of adulthood:

With the years we seem to enter into a prison of conventions and opinions, concealments and unquestioned acceptance, and there we lose the candor of childhood. The child still reacts spontaneously to the spontaneity of life; the child feels and sees and inquires into things which soon disappear from his vision. He forgets what for a moment was revealed to him and is surprised when grownups later tell him what he said and what questions he asked. [WW 10-1]

Jaspers here laments that since children themselves forget their own philosophical insights and questions and cease to engage in such curiosity, adults tend to ignore their unique interest and capacity. Learned communities will attempt to resist or rectify this process of growing up that is equivalent to entering into "a prison of conventions and opinions, concealments and unquestioned acceptance" (WW 11). The educational challenge is finding a way to keep alive the spontaneous philosophical attitude of children well into adulthood—at least until their university years.

There is, however, a common challenge to this idyllic picture of childhood with regard to whether or not children are capable of learning through Socratic inquiry. Is not such inquiry best fitted to adults who have had the necessary training in basic disciplinary knowledge? While Jaspers speaks highly of the natural philosophical attitude of children, he apparently also restricts the viability of such an education to adult students. When he discusses Socratic inquiry in *IU*, Jaspers distinguishes between a type of education that is unique to universities namely their function

of being institutions of higher learning as opposed to other forms of training, such as monastic or military training. The latter types of education require a type of submission "to rigid training and leadership [that] keeps the individual from experiencing a genuine will to know...and...it blocks the development of human independence" (*IU* 52). Here Jaspers supports the earlier point that university education is inimical to authoritarian and static modes of thinking. Yet, at the same time Jaspers seems to imply that such free inquiry is inappropriate for children:

Education at a university is Socratic by its very nature. It is not...like the instruction one receives in high school. University students are adults, not children. They are mature, have full responsibility for themselves. Professors do not give them assignments or personal guidance. [IU 52]

This responsibility and freedom of thinking, however, is unlikely to be present in mature students who at the time of attending universities are adults, given the fact that it has already been trained out of them when they were children.

Jaspers' comments on children's capacities reveal a contradiction in his thought that is also manifest in institutions of learning: While children are taught to be excellent rule followers and encouraged to imitate and execute the training they receive, they are not left with much opportunity for reasoning or questioning ideas. Jaspers suggests that the reason children are treated in this manner is that it is widely thought that they are not yet mature adults who are to be held responsible for their ways of behaving. Consequently, they are trained by means of a predominantly passive mode of learning.

The inspiration to shift perspective from being merely a rule follower to becoming a free thinker, from perceiving educational practice merely as being instrumental for achieving extrinsic ends (grades, diplomas, jobs) to becoming participants in communities of inquiry is to be found in the natural curiosity of children. Nurturing children's natural curiosity fosters their intrinsic motivation to seek answers; and cultivating their intrinsic motivation to pursue knowledge encourages them to perceive higher learning as a valued source in their search for truth. However, it is not sufficient to merely encourage or sustain children's natural curiosity. Equally important is their participation in open communication and free inquiry—both within the familial and cultural framework as well as within the schooling one.

Practicing Community and Communication: P4C in Libraries

One of the vital functions of academic discourse is a search for truth that is based on free and open communication. Jaspers states,

the idea of the university requires the open mind, the readiness to relate oneself to things with the aim of getting at a picture of the whole in terms of one's special discipline. The ideal requires that there be communication, not only on an interdisciplinary but also on an interpersonal level. [IU 62]

Universities are valuable institutions for getting at truth precisely due to their capacity to provide a venue for interdisciplinary conversation, which allows disciplines to make note of each other's blind spots, unwarranted assumptions, as well as points of contact and collaboration. Truth and the responsible search for knowledge are ongoing projects, within which these contributions from disciplines and individuals are both corrective and collaborative. Especially given that communication for Jaspers is the way to truth and the "living core of university life" (IU 37), it follows that communication should be fostered as a virtue, practice, and goal in early elementary education.

When discussing the role of upbringing and tradition in one's development as a person, Jaspers emphasizes the significance of early education in family and community, as well as the cultural traditions. He comments that one is not born a human person but rather becomes one through belonging to a human community and that "human substance is a product of native endowments and history" (IU 109). However, when children's predominant mode of communicating is experienced in an environment of conformity and submission, their framework of learning will be shaped accordingly.¹¹ Encountering philosophical questioning with an existential import will allow children to address issues that matter to them, issues that are part of their daily lives, issues that generally are not part of the curriculum and thus most often get shelved or prematurely resolved. Participating in a community of philosophical inquiry gives them a venue to raise and address these issues. They come to value "research and understanding" and to see truth unfolding in a process

that is not reducible to memorization.

Jaspers' vision of a university, thus, presents university communities with a responsibility to bring non-instrumental search for knowledge and open communicative inquiry to young persons as future university students. Universities around the world (most prominently in Britain, Australia, and here in the United States in Hawaii, Seattle, and New Jersey) include P4C programs as part of their community outreach, where philosophy professors train and supervise undergraduate students as they conduct targeted sessions in elementary schools where elementary school aged children participate in open-ended group discussions. The conversations are prompted by picture books, stories, or thought experiments that address a broad range of philosophical questions, such as the nature of time or courage, our obligations to others and the necessity of work. By engaging children in philosophical dialogue, these programs aim to foster a community of philosophical inquiry: As part of a community of thinkers, pondering big questions together and sharing their views with one another, children become better critical thinkers, oral communicators and empathetic intellectual partners. In these conversations, children practice and come to appreciate the following skills: (1) think about and take a position regarding an open-ended philosophical question; (2) clearly articulate their positions; (3) provide reasons for their positions; (4) listen with empathy to understand each other; (5) consider whether they agree or disagree with others' answers; (6) verbally express their agreement or disagreement in a respectful manner; and (7) evaluate together diverse positions and insights.

As children participate in P4C conversations, they expand the horizons of their own thinking, both in terms of content and in terms of method. Letting children practice communication and thinking skills as a group enables them to internalize a wide range of skills into their own thinking. Hearing multiple examples and counterexamples in conversation widens the possible angles they consider in their own thinking. While they hear diverse perspectives, they also internalize the moves of the group as a toolbox for their own thinking. Matthew Lipman describes this dynamic as a form of "distributed thinking" that facilitates collaborative inquiry:

An...ecological service is performed by the community of inquiry, which provides models of reasoning and inquiry skills, as well as of concepts. (We speak of the

¹¹ One of the persistent topics of P4C discussions is figuring out the reasons for why one holds certain beliefs and values: Is it because teachers and parents say so, or because it is the right way of seeing things?

concepts as being appropriated and the skills as being internalized.)...Instead of witnessing each individual thinking by himself or herself, observers can note the existence of distributed thinking, in which each participant utters what the situation calls for at the appropriate moment but from a differing point of view. Thus the community of inquiry provides a perspectival context for shared inquiry and an epistemic context for the formation of a reflective equilibrium. [TE 157]

Offering P4C conversations at public libraries is one way to mitigate the instrumental and authoritarian habits of traditional learning that stifle the Jaspersian mandate of the university, that is, a search for truth through communication. In a collaborative effort with two students I began in 2016 to develop such a program at CSU Bakersfield to be held at a local public library.¹² It is one of the mandates of public libraries to provide a venue that is open to all, and oftentimes this service is provided especially to those who have the least access to such intellectual or educational resources. These libraries offer free resources and programs and house an ideal space for equal and free interaction and co-habitation that takes place exclusively in strictly public and open spaces. P4C events at public libraries bring the word and practice of philosophy to a wide and indiscriminate audience. Children hear for the first time the word "philosophy" and come to associate with it a free and open exchange of ideas where the aim is not to find a final answer to a question but rather gain a better understanding of the question and canvass the field of possible answers. These events aim to introduce open and critical and communal inquiry as a desirable and essential virtue into children's lives.

Doing philosophy with children brings the value of critical dialogue to their tradition and schooling, incorporating it to their very upbringing. The openness

and desire for inquiry that Jaspers finds in children is cultivated rather than stifled. To question and reflect is not a technique to be learned in a critical thinking class but is second nature. A community of inquiry values and practices critical thinking as an immanent development of thinking in communication. Children will not accept principles or claims as given or on authority, but they will develop both (1) principles of conversation as well as (2) content of opinions through a process of dialogic interaction. Since the gains are self-derived, as the understanding is collectively-achieved, they stay with the children. While such conversation may be vulnerable to mistakes in reasoning, self-correction is possible through continued interaction and minimally the method of collective inquiry and truth as process is affirmed and defended in this activity.

Jaspers' book begins with the claim that "the university is a community of scholars and students engaged in the task of seeking truth" (*IU* 1). He thus emphasizes truth as a process of collective engagement rather than an end result. P4C practice brings these elements together. The goal of engaging in conversation is not met by simply reiterating a memorized fact, but by gaining a better understanding of the subject matter, an understanding that is fostered by dialogue and exchange of ideas. As Jaspers says of the teacher of philosophy:

His ideal is that of a rational being coexisting with other rational beings. He wants to doubt, he thirsts for objections and attacks, he strives to become capable of playing his part in the dialogue of ever-deepening communication, which is the prerequisite of all truth and without which there is no truth. [*WW* 166]

I contend that this human experience is the foundation of public spaces and public freedom and must be cultivated early and widely.

¹² I want to acknowledge the enthusiasm, support, and commitment of my two students Emily Evans and Andrea Bridgewater for launching the P4C program at CSU Bakersfield.