Towards an Internal Evaluation of Worldviews

Wittgenstein and the Epistemic Challenges of Philosophy with Children

1. Introduction

A complex topic in the field of Philosophy with Children (PwC) which often gives rise to vehement discussion, is how PwC-practitioners should deal with the knowledge gap between adults and children (Hand, 2015; Haynes & Murris, 2011; McCall, 1989; Murris, 2000; 2013). According to Joanna Haynes and Karin Murris, 'the pedagogy of PwC assumes an epistemological shift in the role of the educator (…) and implies a changed balance of power between educator and learner' (2011, p. 286). This epistemological shift, however, often does not take place. Murris concludes that educational contexts still are often tainted by 'epistemic injustice' (Fricker, 2007; Murris, 2013). This conclusion leads her to ask how we can 'break down [the] distancing from children's ideas in educational practice, and support [the] process of reintegration of children into the psychological world of adults' (Murris, 2013, p. 254). If PwC wants to be 'considered as a democratic pedagogy', there still is dire need for 'a deeply responsive framework for practice, underpinned by a thoroughly explored and well-articulated epistemological perspective' (Haynes & Murris, 2011, p. 287-288).

It is my aim in this paper to help pave the way towards such a well-articulated epistemological perspective, and towards a responsive framework for practice. First, I discuss epistemic injustice in educational contexts and its causes. Second, I adopt Ludwig Wittgenstein's elucidating metaphor of 'hinge propositions' to discuss the epistemic varieties between adults and children, as I believe this metaphor is useful in helping us surpass these varieties and remove the causes of epistemic injustice. Finally, I provide a concrete rule of thumb for PwC-practitioners.

2. Epistemic injustice

Miranda Fricker defines 'epistemic injustice' as 'a kind of injustice in which someone is wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower' (2007, p. 20). She makes a distinction between two types of epistemic injustice, namely 'testimonial injustice' (which is the most relevant type for this paper) and 'hermeneutical injustice':

> *'Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word; hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences. An example of the first might be that the police do not believe you because you are black; an example of the second might be that you suffer sexual harassment in a culture that still lacks that critical concept'* (ibid., p. 1).

Whereas Fricker focuses mainly on prejudices related to gender, race and socio-economic status, Murris applies the concept of epistemic injustice to age.[1] Teachers often regard themselves as 'epistemic authorities' (Murris, 2013, p. 249) and tend to 'neutralise the epistemic value' (ibid., p. 253) of what children say. Drawing from her own experience, she provides examples of testimonial injustice occurring during philosophy classes with children, e.g. situations where 'teachers do not believe a child, *because* it is a *child* who is speaking' (Murris, 2013, p. 248). One example is a philosophical conversation with children recorded on video, in which a child said that 'in a world where people are drinking cups of coffee all the time and are always being nice to each other, it wouldn't be comfortable at all', to which the adults who were watching the video responded by laughing and smiling knowingly to each other. For Murris, this is a case of epistemic injustice, because none of the adults paid attention to the content of what the child said. As such, epistemic injustice makes it impossible for children to do philosophy to their maximal capacity, as teachers do not really take them seriously.

Not everyone in the field agrees on the severity of this problem. Michael Hand, for example, does not share 'Murris' anxiety' and quasi-humorously writes that 'it would, frankly, be alarming if an adult's belief that peace is worth striving for were to be shaken by a ten-year-old's reservations about niceness' (Hand, 2015, p. 329). He does admit, however, that 'we must be ready to abandon our stereotypes as soon as we know individual children well enough to do without them' (ibid. p. 330). Strikingly, in writing this Hand shows that he has not quite grasped Murris' central argument: the point she tries to make

> *'is not that a teacher's ideas about peace should be "shaken" by a child's "reservation about niceness" (...), but that the playful divergent nature of the enquiry opens up infinite possibilities for the kind of conceptual work of which the shape can neither be predicted, not controlled. If teachers do not immerse themselves in philosophical listening, then not only will children miss out, but the teachers will too'* (2015, p. 334).

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[1] Murris did dedicate a section of her article to epistemic injustice in relation to black children specifically, but this is of no concern for our present purposes.

Stereotypes should under no circumstances play a role when teachers engage in a philosophical conversation with children, especially *not* in the process of ‘getting to know individual children better’. Adults should not so much abandon stereotypes at some point, but should be trained to such a degree that stereotypes play no role whatsoever in the first place. This would be the ‘epistemological shift in the role of the educator’ and the ‘changed balance of power between educator and learner’ that Haynes and Murris so fervently demand (2011, p. 286).

If we want to train teachers to ‘immerse themselves in philosophical listening’, we first need to expose the exact causes of testimonial injustice in educational contexts. Two major causes are given by Murris. First, communication in educational contexts generally consists of ‘children presenting to adults what the latter want to hear, not necessarily what children themselves genuinely believe in’ (2013, p. 249), meaning that ‘to accept children as knowledge bearers would, for adults, have far reaching implications for educational theory and practice’ (ibid., p.253). The second cause is part and parcel with the popular paradigm of developmental psychology (Haynes & Murris, 2011, p. 288; Murris, 2013, p. 253,). Developmental theories state that ‘cognitive development is a linear, biological (natural) progression of stages’, inviting adults to treat children as ‘‘becomings’, not ‘beings’, as ‘persons in the making’, not ‘persons’’, which means that such theories are ‘condescending, as they encourage adults to distance themselves from children and from [their] own childhood selves’ (Matthews, 1994, p. 30). In order to avoid testimonial injustice, PwC-practitioners need to surpass these two predispositions when engaging in philosophical conversations with children, in order to ‘do justice to the intersubjective tapestry children are weaving, with meanings constructed that are dynamic and often ambiguous’ (Murris, 2013, p. 248). Our main question then is how we can prevent teachers of philosophy from bringing their ‘epistemological and metaphysical assumptions to their practice’ (Haynes & Murris, 2011, p. 290). I will now formulate an answer to this question. First, I explain Wittgenstein’s metaphor of ‘hinge propositions’ in section 3, and then I apply this metaphor to the problem of epistemic injustice in section 4, in order to provide teachers with an epistemological language and perspective that can help them to leave their assumptions at the classroom door.

3. Hinge propositions and groundless worldviews

In his notes that were published posthumously as *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein explores the possibility of absolute epistemological certainty, inspired to do so by fellow philosopher G.E.

Moore's articles 'Proof of an External World' and 'A Defence of Common Sense'. In these articles, Moore stated that he knew with certainty that propositions such as 'Here is a hand', 'I have spent my whole life in close proximity of the earth' and 'The earth has existed for a long time' are true, and that the fact that he knows such things with certainty suffices to conclude that there is an external world. Although Wittgenstein admired Moore for having written these articles, he disagreed with his views, because the truth of Moore's propositions cannot be proven by referring to some form of evidence, but needs to be assumed in order for any evidence to be reliable in the first place.[2] As such, Moore's propositions should be seen as belonging to 'our frame of reference' (Wittgenstein, 1969, §83[3]). In order for anyone to doubt anything, they must first assume at least *some* truths, be certain about at least some things, because 'a doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt' (ibid., §450). Wittgenstein uses the metaphor of 'hinges' to talk about the propositions that we must assume to be true, because they have to remain firmly in place in order for mental processes like certainty and doubt to make sense. Logic demands that the hinges of our thinking are not questioned, because that would destroy the whole point of investigating what is true and what is false.

Hinge propositions do not function in isolation, but 'form a system, a structure' (ibid., §102). A person's sum of hinge propositions can be seen as their 'worldview'. Here Wittgenstein adopts another useful metaphor, namely that of a river. Due to its usefulness here and in the conclusion of this paper, I will cite the passage in full here:

> *'The propositions describing the world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology.* (…) *It might be imagined that some propositions* (…) *were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid. The mythology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other.* (…) *And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alternation or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited'* (ibid., §95-99).

What this metaphor describes is quite simply the process of how our views on contingent matters change over time (i.e. 'the movement of the waters on the river-bed'), and how our entire worldview changes over time (i.e. 'the shift of the bed itself'). It was important for

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[2] For example, if I seriously doubted whether these are my hands typing on my laptop, and I wanted to give some sort of evidence to prove that such is indeed the case, I cannot come up with any evidence that is more certain than the fact I am trying to prove, namely that these are my hands.

[3] When referring to Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, I use the number of each remark instead of the page number.

Wittgenstein to distinguish between these two epistemic processes of change, even though, or perhaps precisely because, as he rightly observed, ‘there is not a sharp division’. Moreover, he was particularly interested in those cases where changes in a person’s system of hinge propositions occur. Referring to Moore’s proposition ‘The earth has existed for a long time’, Wittgenstein writes:

> *‘Why should not a king be brought up in the belief that the world began with him? And if Moore and this king were to meet and discuss, could Moore really prove his belief to be the right one? I do not say that Moore could not convert the king to his view, but it would be a conversion of a special kind; the king would be brought to look at the world in a different way’* (ibid., §92).

To give another example, we clearly see the difference between successfully convincing somebody of the fact that Canberra and not Sydney is the capital of Australia, and successfully convincing somebody that the world was not created through the will of God, but came into existence 13,8 billion years ago in the process of the Big Bang. In the former case, we can simply take an atlas and point out to this person that the capital of Australia is indeed Canberra, and then this person’s view on a contingent fact would be changed, whereas in the latter case, like with the king in Wittgenstein’s example, we could not really resort to such unproblematic evidence. Such a conversion to an altered worldview ‘would happen through a kind of persuasion’ (ibid., §262).

Clearly, human beings do not construct their personal picture of the world consciously. We learn many fundamental things that contribute to our worldview not by explicit instruction or asking questions, but in the process of learning other things. For example, if someone told a child that centuries ago people climbed a particular mountain, the child does not ‘learn at all that that mountain has existed for a long time’ but ‘swallows this consequence down, so to speak, together with what it learns’ (ibid., §143). The belief that this mountain is indeed old ‘may never have been expressed, even the thought that it was so, never thought’ (ibid., §159). This brings us to a crucial point, namely that ‘the child learns by believing the adult’ (ibid.), meaning that to a large extent our hinge propositions are dependent on what our parents tell us about the world when we are young.

Our worldview should be seen as an ‘inherited background’ (ibid., §94), in which ‘some things stand unshakeably fast and some are more or less liable to shift. What stands fast does so, not because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; it is rather held fast by what lies around it’ (ibid., §144). These truth-assumptions, which lie at the bottom of all our epistemic convictions, can be seen as the *a priori* Kantian categories (e.g. causality, time, space), or as the fundamental truths inherited from our parents (‘the world was created by God/the Big Bang’, ‘it is wrong to steal’ etc.), or as things we learn through experience and which get engraved into our frame of reference, or even as the sum of all of the above. Ultimately, however, such assumptions *show themselves* in how we act: ‘My life shows that I know or am certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, and so on. – I tell a friend e.g. ‘Take that chair over there’, ‘Shut the door’, etc. etc.’ (ibid., §7). Our judgements about whether things are true or false have their roots in our worldview, but ultimately this worldview *itself* is not rooted in some deeper layer of knowledge, but in our actions[4], or to use another of Wittgenstein’s famous concepts, in our ‘form of life’ (Wittgenstein, 1956). In other words, human knowledge is not transcendental, but should be seen as a natural phenomenon.

4. Implications for PwC: epistemic multiplicity

At this point, with Wittgenstein’s insights in front of us, we can return to Haynes and Murris’ call for a ‘deeply responsive framework for practice’ and a ‘well-articulated epistemological perspective’ (cf. supra), which can help teachers to leave their epistemological and metaphysical assumptions outside the classroom. In this section I will heed the call and use Wittgenstein’s ideas to suggest an epistemological perspective that will help PwC-practitioners to make the ‘epistemological shift’ and change ‘the balance of power’ in educational contexts.

Teachers should allow and even strive for what I call *epistemic multiplicity*: different worldviews among adults and children, and *between* adults and children, should be allowed to co-exist in any philosophical conversation, regardless of differences in age (and gender, race or socioeconomic status) between the participants in the conversation. Megan L. Laverty points out that:

> *‘if individuals are to reach a common understanding, then they must be responsive to others’ personalized use of terms, that is, their conceptual worlds. This is particularly the case in education. (...) Clearly, no two conceptual worlds are identical, nor are they entirely different; rather, moving points of connection, overlap and differentiation exist between them* (2010, p. 37).

What teachers need to be able to do, is recognize the ‘moving points of connection, overlap and differentiation’ between their own worldview and that of the child, and resist the urge to modify these points, but leave them as they are instead. Wittgenstein's ideas as expressed in *On Certainty* serve as an appropriate way of thinking about this. Since children have their own worldview, i.e. their own inherited system of hinge propositions, the teacher who corrects a child when it says something fundamental that does not correspond to the teacher's own system, is not just correcting an erroneous thought in the child, but is actually 'persuading' the child to change his/her worldview, as with Wittgenstein's example of the king. If a child said that Sydney is the capital of Australia, it would not be a problem if the teacher corrected this mistake, but if a child said, like in Murris' example (cf. supra) that 'in a world where people are drinking cups of coffee all the time and are always being nice to each other, it wouldn't be comfortable at all', the teacher should not laugh in surprise or smile to a colleague, but should recognize that such a statement hints at some hinge proposition in the child's worldview. This is not to say of course that the teacher is not allowed to find such a remark humorous, but it *does* mean that the teacher should not show this, and has to prevent the humorousness of the remark from playing a role in the ongoing conversation, because the humour is obviously not shared by the child. Here, the teacher should remember that all human knowledge, even his own, is ultimately groundless in an epistemological sense, and that someone's hinge propositions should not be judged *externally* (i.e. not by comparing them to the hinge propositions that constitute other people's worldview) but *internally* (i.e. by looking at how they underpin the worldview they are part of). Once again, Wittgenstein provides us with a good example in this respect:

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[4] Wittgenstein famously quotes Goethe’s *Faust*: ‘Im Anfang war die Tat’ (1969, §402).

> *'Suppose someone had told a child that he had been on the moon. The child tells me the story, and I say it was only a joke, the man hadn't been on the moon; no one has ever been to the moon; the moon is a long way off and it is impossible to climb up there or fly there.*[5]*–If now the child insists, saying perhaps there is a way of getting there which I don't know, etc. what reply could I make to him?* (…) *But a child will not ordinarily stick to such a belief and will soon be convinced by what we tell him seriously* (1969, §106).

If the situation described here by Wittgenstein occurred in a philosophical conversation with children, led by an adult teacher, the preferable method would be for the teacher to inform why the child has this particular belief, and to let the conversation run its natural course (let other children respond, allow other children to believe that someone has indeed been on the moon etc.). As Wittgenstein already points out, the right moment for correcting the child's error and

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[5] Obviously, when Wittgenstein wrote this, flying to the moon was deemed impossible. The fact that people have been to the moon now only proves that Wittgenstein's metaphor of the riverbed, in which some propositions are solid and others more fluid, is appropriate. For a long time, the possibility of visiting the moon was not part of people's worldview, but since 1969 it is.

'persuading' the child to our worldview will come sooner or later. It is crucial, however, to postpone this moment until after the philosophical conversation (or perhaps even after the educational context in general), because this way teachers do not distance themselves from children's ideas in educational practice, but instead allow these ideas to decide the course of the educational situation. As such, epistemic multiplicity will have a positive impact on the conversation.

Importantly, the desired 'process of reintegration of children into the world of adults' (cf. supra) may just as well be achieved by turning things around, i.e. by reintegrating adults into the world of children. In a way this is even more logical, since we actually have access to children's worlds, due to the fact that we have all been children ourselves, whereas children do not have such a point of entry into the world of adults. Therefore, I suggest that practitioners of PwC extend the concept of epistemic multiplicity onto their own childhood selves, meaning that they retrieve (some of) the propositions that constituted their own childhood worldview, and that they are able to switch between these and the hinge propositions that underpin their present worldview. Teachers need to be able to side-track the axioms of developmental psychology, and view all children, including their own childhood selves, as beings and persons in their own right, with worldviews that are equally groundless as their own adult worldview. I will formulate this piece of advice as a rule of thumb, that will help teachers to safeguard the epistemic equality:

> **Rule of epistemic multiplicity**
> *In a philosophical conversation with a child, always identify the child's hinge propositions and evaluate them* internally*, i.e. on the basis of how they function in the child's worldview, not* externally*, i.e. not on the basis of how they function in your own worldview.*

Finally, epistemic multiplicity can be seen as roughly similar to Murris' ideal of 'epistemic modesty', i.e. the acknowledgement that 'all knowledge is limited and that [educators] can (also) learn from children' (2015, p. 334). However, epistemic multiplicity differs from Murris' ideal in two respects. Firstly, epistemic multiplicity is not (or at least should not be) about modesty but more about curiosity: the given rule of thumb should not encourage teachers to downplay their own epistemic power, but to appreciate and even admire that of children, and perhaps even to actively juxtapose as many different worldviews as possible. Secondly, its purpose is not to make teachers see that human knowledge is 'limited' (as if there were more knowledge for us to gain, which in some mysterious way however is not available to us), but to make them think of knowledge as something that is shaped and therefore bounded by nature, in the same way that human bodies are bounded by nature. Our epistemic power is ultimately not grounded in some final form of knowledge to which we can (or cannot) gain access by thinking deeper and better, but is grounded in our actions as biologically determined species (cf. supra). In fact, this is the exact reason why children's worldviews ought to be evaluated in their own right: children are different from adults in an epistemological sense only *because* they are different in a *biological* sense. Epistemic multiplicity simply means that the epistemological differences between adults and children ought to be respected, *because* the biological differences ought to be respected. If we evaluate human knowledge from an adult point of view, we should not deny that there is a knowledge gap between adults and children. This gap however must not play a role in the context of PwC, because there we should evaluate knowledge from many different points of view (or from no point of view at all).

5. Conclusion

Philosophy with children as an educational approach is still 'in its infancy' (Haynes & Murris, 2011, p. 286), which partly explains why there is still so much debating going on between advocates and opponents, and even among advocates, of PwC. One thing that does not help, is that there is still a lot of confusion with regards to terminology: little to no agreement has been reached on whether children should be taught about the history of philosophy or should solely be invited to join in the act of philosophizing, or on the type of thinking that children ought to be able to do in order for it to count as philosophy, or even on what philosophy exactly is (ibid.; Murris, 2000). Even the debate on whether children are capable of doing philosophy at all, which goes back two millennia to Plato, still has not been settled today. In this paper, I have tried to show that children are indeed capable of doing philosophy, and that teachers can use Wittgenstein's concepts and insights to allow children to explore philosophy without being hindered by adult prejudices on what 'true' philosophizing is. This brings me to my final remark. I said that Wittgenstein's riverbed-metaphor (cf. supra) would be useful at the end of this paper, and this is where I would like to return to it once more. What has always struck me is how straightforward the metaphor is (like most of Wittgenstein's examples and similes), even though it helps to clarify such a complex thing as human knowledge. In fact, the metaphor seems almost like something taken from a classroom situation, something a teacher might say to his pupils. Considering the fact that Wittgenstein had been a primary school teacher before writing the notes published as *On Certainty*, and that he often refers to children and learning processes in these notes, it may well be so that he actually had something like this in mind. Perhaps Wittgenstein's metaphors may be useful then in explaining to children what knowledge is, why different people have different worldviews, and what philosophy actually help us to achieve in this respect. If we can make the concepts on which we base our practices of PwC accessible for the children themselves, why should we not do so? If we strive for epistemic equality, it is perhaps even our moral task to do so.

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