Scratching Beneath the Phenomena: P4C as the Practice of Comparative Philosophy

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n their essay, "Saving the Phenomena," Ji-yuan Yu and Nicholas Bunnin argue for an Aristotelian method of comparative philosophy in which seemingly incommensurable systems of thought can engage in a constructive dialogue with one another. The practice of Philosophy for Children provides an opportunity to both teach and actively pursue a critical, philosophical inquiry in a dynamic dialectic with other people. In this paper, I argue that Philosophy for Children is a method of engaged comparative philosophy according to the Aristotelian comparative method of Saving the Phenomenon outlined by Yu and Bunnin. This essay is divided into two sections. In the first, I offer a summary of Yu and Bunnin's notion of Saving the Phenomena, along with a critique of the possible limitations of this method of comparative philosophy. In the second section, I describe Philosophy for Children as it is practiced by Thomas Jackson at the University of Hawaii and offer an explanation of how this practice can be understood as the dynamic application of Saving the Phenomena. By offering an arena in which both children and adults can engage in a creative, philosophical dialectic, philosophy for children can be understood as the active practice of the Aristotelian method of comparative philosophy.

Saving the Phenomena

Yu and Bunnin argue that the discipline of comparative philosophy can be understood according to the Aristotelian method of Saving the Phenomena. Aristotle's method is an outgrowth of the Socratic dialectic, but, unlike Socrates, Aristotle is not satisfied to let his dialectic end in *aporia* (no solution). For Aristotle, bringing such *aporiai* to light is only the first step; the philosopher must strive to reconcile the differences in the apparently conflicting views that lead to *aporiai*. This is done through a three step process in which one first establishes the phenomena in question, then analyzes the conflicts between them, and finally seeks to

reconcile the truth contained in each into a coherent and systematic whole¹.

The word "phenomena" comes from the Greek phainomena and refers to the commonly held beliefs of individuals in a particular context. Within the genus of phainomena is the differentia of eudoxa, which "includes views which are not commonly accepted but are held by a small number of wise people or even by a single wise person." Saving the Phenomena thus has two spheres of inquiry: it can examine either commonly held beliefs or those views endorsed predominantly by the wise. For Aristotle, comparative philosophy begins by bringing together views from two (or more) philosophical traditions to see if there is a common ground of "similar theoretical or practical concerns." It is important to note, however, that this is not mere eclecticism; the goal of Saving the Phenomena is to reconcile the truth contained in different traditions, not to simply make empty, superficial comparisons.² Comparative philosophy as a discipline is often criticized for lacking a philosophical purpose. Aristotle circumvents this objection by providing a practical value for comparative studies. By analyzing and comparing various philosophical traditions, we can discover the relative strengths and weaknesses in these traditions and seek to ameliorate our own philosophical views.

"Establishing Comparable Phenomena"

The first step in Saving the Phenomena is to determine whether a comparison is possible between two points of view or philosophical systems. Although two phenomena might seem quite similar, it is necessary to determine

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"Articulating Differences"

After one has established that two systems contain similar comparable phenomena, one must seek to articulate the differences between these phenomena. It is at this stage that one must systematically elucidate the *aporiai*, the "difficulties and contradictions that are presented to us by the phenomena." By clearly stating the tensions between the traditions, one can seek either to resolve these tensions or to explain why it is important that they cannot be resolved. Often, the differences between two traditions are more interesting and more consequential than the similarities. There are three reasons for this. First, by articulating the differences in two traditions, we avoid the construction of straw-man fallacies or stereotypes. We strive to understand each tradition on its own philosophical terms and within its own socio-historical context, rather than interpret all traditions according to our own philosophical schemes. Second, by articulating the differences among traditions we are provided with multiple perspectives on a single philosophical issue. Third, this articulation of differences prompts us to scrutinize our own views on the issue and question our implicit assumptions that might otherwise have gone unexamined. Such a questioning goes both ways; each philosophical system brings to light the "elusive presuppositions" of the other.⁵

"Saving the Truth in Comparable Phenomena"

After articulating the differences between phenomena and using these differences to examine the implicit assumptions of each tradition, one must "save the truth" of the phenomena by synthesizing the *eudoxa* into a coherent, systematic whole. This final stage reconciles *aporiai* by appealing to a more fundamental level of truth reflected in both traditions. Though each tradition might *approach* this truth, neither can convey the full meaning alone. It is only through the dialectic between multiple, alternative traditions that we may uncover this truth. It is this final stage of Saving the Phenomena that makes comparative philosophy more than just a historical discipline; by acting as a means through which traditions might criticize and inform one another,

comparative philosophy becomes a *constructive* discipline capable of contributing new insights to the field of philosophy. Saving the Phenomena is more than just a simple synthesis of the valuable parts of two traditions. It is a "process of reworking and creating" in which the philosopher uses his or her own unique insights to add to the synthesis of traditions.⁶

Problems With Understanding Comparative Philosophy As Saving the Phenomena

Although Yu and Bunnin's analysis of Saving the Phenomena is an extremely valuable comparative methodology, its emphasis upon the pursuit of a single, fundamental Truth is potentially problematic. The notion of creativity that is so strongly emphasized at the end of the article makes little sense when Aristotle thinks there is *one* right answer to be found. While Aristotle's methodology apparently encourages the pursuit of an Ultimate Truth, Yu and Bunnin seem to suggest that the goal of comparative philosophy is not to achieve one right answer, but to engage in a creative dialogue between traditions.

In his article, "Rationality and Traditions," Eliot Deutsch offers an understanding of truth in comparative philosophy that solves this conundrum. Like Yu and Bunnin, Deutsch argues that comparative philosophy is a process of understanding another tradition on its own terms:

We inevitably bring our own "prejudices" or predispositions to interpret and judge what is initially alien to us, as these are informed by our cultural and personal experience and then, through letting as far as we can the other tradition speak to us in its own terms, develop a negotiating process, as it were, between our prejudgmental forms and patterns and the content and conceptual structures of that tradition. We aim then to alter our prejudices in the light of that negotiation or encounter.⁷

This approach to comparative philosophy parallels Aristotle's method of Saving the Phenomena in that by coming to genuinely understand another tradition, we are forced to critique our own views and creatively evolve. However, unlike Aristotle, Deutsch does not suggest that the goal of comparative philosophy is to produce a single, fundamental Truth. Rather, it is possible that there might be *many* right ways of approaching the same problem.

Often, there is such a fine line between relativism and pluralism that dynamic pluralisms such as this are abandoned because they lack criteria through which one can distinguish the good views from the bad. As a result, many philosophers, like Aristotle, end up endorsing a hard-line view of truth that excludes all non-compatible claims. Deutsch, however, offers a way out of this trap by suggesting criteria through which a dynamic pluralism might be founded through the elimination of invalid philosophical

systems. He argues that there are exclusionary principles that apply to truth such that we can exclude certain epistemic practices as fundamentally irrational and incapable of producing truth-knowledge. The law of non-contradiction is one such exclusionary principle; without it, it is impossible for rational discourse to take place at all.⁸

Deutsch draws a distinction between two kinds of exclusionary principles. The first are foundational exclusionary principles, which, when followed, wholly prevent an irrational system from engaging in rational discourse. A system that violates the law of non-contradiction cannot participate in rational discourse because if everyone were free to contradict themselves at any time, dialogue would be impossible. The second type of exclusionary principle is operational: these principles define what constitutes sound reasoning within a particular, historically-embedded epistemic tradition. Modern Western philosophy holds that a belief system must be coherent, falsifiable, and sharable, but these exclusionary principles might not be held by other, nonwestern traditions. To be a member of a particular community of inquiry, one must follow that community's rules for rational inquiry, rules that are delineated by operational exclusionary principles.

Deutsch argues that the process of criticizing and evaluating beliefs takes place in two stages. The first stage determines whether the belief is rational according to the negative criteria of foundational and operational exclusionary principles. If the belief is determined to be potentially true by the first stage of analysis, it passes into a second stage in which the *positive* criteria for truth that are held by the particular community of evaluators are applied to the belief to determine the degree to which it may be said to be true.¹⁰ Stage One of Saving the Phenomena, in which both traditions are examined to see if a comparison is warranted, and Stage Two, in which the traditions evaluate the validity of one another's arguments, can benefit from this notion of exclusionary principles. If one of the traditions in question violates the foundational exclusionary principles, a comparison is rendered impossible because the violative tradition does not qualify as philosophy. Once a comparison is deemed possible, operational exclusionary principles dictate whether the precepts of one tradition might be adopted by

These exclusionary principles lead to a dynamic pluralism in which rationally invalid theories are rejected, and yet multiple rational theories can participate in a constructive dialogue with one another. Deutsch's notion of exclusionary principles allows us to engage in comparative philosophy without the demand that such comparisons result in a single Truth. These principles allow us to explore a creative pluralism without the danger of sliding into relativism. The relativist assertion that comparative philosophy is impossible because all critiques are made on the basis of one's own culturally-embedded concept of truth is refuted by the notion of universal exclusionary principles that can be used as a basis for constructive criticism and dialogue between tra-

ditions.¹¹ Exclusionary principles allow us to enter into discourse, but do not suggest a single, *right* way to approach a particular philosophical problem. In such a pluralism, the "process of reworking and creating" that Yu and Bunnin describe becomes possible. As I demonstrate in the next section, it is just this kind of creative, dynamic, and pluralistic comparative thought that is at the heart of the practice of Philosophy for Children.

Philosophy for Children as Engaged Comparative Philosophy

In this section, I argue that Philosophy for Children can be understood as the practice of engaged comparative philosophy in the manner outlined in Section I. First, I give an overview of Philosophy for Children as it is practiced by Thomas Jackson in the Hawaii Philosophy in the Schools Program. To elucidate the concept of a community of inquiry, I draw from David Bohm's understanding of dialogue. Second, I explain how Philosophy for Children's notion of inquiry can be understood as a dynamic practice of comparative philosophy.

Philosophy for Children as a Reflective Community of Inquiry 1. Community

Thomas Jackson states that the practice of Philosophy for Children¹² involves the formation of a "reflective community of inquiry."13 This consists of three main components: community, reflection, and inquiry. Jackson defines a community as "an intellectually safe place," by which he means an environment in which people feel free to share their ideas without fear of being mocked or verbally assaulted for expressing their beliefs. Without such safety, it is impossible for a philosophical discussion to take place, since the participants in the discussion will, out of fear of reprisal, be unwilling to contribute new, original, and creative ideas that deviate from the accepted norms of thinking. Thus, an intellectually safe place is one that contains the following four characteristics. First, all of the members of the community must have respect for one another as persons. Second, it must be okay for a member of the community to ask any question or make any statement he or she feels is relevant to the discussion. Third, there must be an appreciation for a diversity of viewpoints, no matter how unconventional these views might be. Fourth, listening to others is just as important as speaking—every member of the community must pay attention and respond to what the other members are saying, rather than simply trying to put forward his or her own opinion.¹⁴

2. Reflection

A community must be reflective in the sense that it exhibits an "[e]xplicit, 'metacognitive', reflective, consciously

articulated awareness of the standards and criteria that are at work in the community." By metacognition, Jackson means the constant self-awareness of the ways in which one is thinking. The community must continually critique its own ability to act as a community and to conduct a successful inquiry.

3. Inquiry

The type of inquiry pursued in Philosophy for Children is "co-inquiry." No individual in the group has the one, right answer to the question the group is pursuing. Rather, the answer develops progressively as the whole group contributes to the discussion. However, the fact that everyone's point of view is heard and respected does not mean that everyone's point of view is right. This is why Jackson has developed the Good Thinker's Toolkit ¹⁶ as a methodology for conducting productive inquiry. The Toolkit allows the members of the community to examine each point of view in detail according to the principles of sound reasoning.

A Philosophy for Children Session has two main goals: (1) to function well as a reflective community and (2) to have a successful inquiry. The success of the inquiry is judged on the basis of whether or not the community "scratched beneath the surface" of the issue, which can ∞ cur in three different ways. First, the community discovers the complexity of the issue and is able to articulate the problem it is discussing to a greater degree. Second, the community is able to make connections between several different ideas or viewpoints that are raised. Third, an answer emerges to the problem that is discussed. The Good Thinker's Toolkit is used specifically to assist this process of scratching beneath the surface, facilitating inquiry by offering a methodology through which constructive inquiry might take place.¹⁷ The Toolkit allows the community to criticize specious arguments and identify valid points of view among the many that are being compared.

David Bohm's notion of dialogue is a helpful means of understanding the kind of inquiry that takes place in a Philosophy for Children session. Bohm understands inquiry as dialogue, which he defines as a creative stream of shared meaning that exists between the members of a community. Bohm contrasts this understanding of dialogue with "discussion," by which he means an adversarial argument in which each person struggles to prove the superiority of his or her own point of view. Whereas dialogue is about inquiry, discussion is about winning; in a discussion, only the best orator is victorious, while in a dialogue, every member of the community wins because the group's efforts towards inquiry produce an answer from which the whole community benefits. 18 This reflects the importance of community in Philosophy for Children. The goal of dialogue is not to debate a particular issue, but to scratch beneath the surface of that issue through a progressive, unified inquiry.

Why is it important to engage in a dialogue with other persons in the first place? Bohm argues that the power of a

group is in its collective focus upon a specific issue. He compares this power of focus to a laser beam. Ordinary, incoherent light consists of waves that are all moving in different directions, and is thus not particularly powerful. A laser beam, however, consists of light that is coherent, in which all of the waves are focused in a single direction to achieve maximum strength. A community of thinkers, when focused upon a single inquiry, can attain a level of philosophical power that is far beyond the capabilities of a group engaged in disjointed, argumentative discussion.¹⁹

Bohm argues that the most basic component of dialogue is the questioning of assumptions. We all have "basic assumptions" about the nature of the world and how we ought to act in it, and we naturally defend these assumptions "with an emotional charge" when they are challenged. Bohm calls such basic assumptions "opinions," and he differentiates between two different kinds of opinions. The first are rational opinions, which are based on evidence and solid argumentation. The second are unexamined opinions, which are formed by the socio-cultural environment in which an individual lives. These assumptions are not supported by evidence or argument, yet they are an integral part of our self-identities, which is why we defend them so rabidly when they are questioned. Such fanaticism leads to heated discussions and thereby prevents genuine dialogue from taking place.²⁰ The questioning of assumptions plays an essential part in a Philosophy for Children session. Community members use the [A] card to bring assumptions to light and then employ the remaining six cards to determine whether these assumptions are rational (based on evidence and argumentation) or simply based on opinion alone. By exposing irrational assumptions as soon as they are raised, the community can remove them from the discussion and thereby maintain its focus on rational inquiry.

For Bohm, the purpose of dialogue is to first bring the assumptions of the group out into the open and then examine them from a neutral point of view:

Then what is called for is to *suspend* those assumptions, so that you neither carry them out nor suppress them. You don't believe them, nor do you disbelieve them; you don't judge them as good or bad. You simply see what they mean—not only your own, but the other people's as well....

This is part of what I consider dialogue—for people to realize what is on each other's minds without coming to any conclusions or judgments.²¹

On the surface, this view seems potentially problematic because it gives no criteria for judging which assumptions are bad and which are good. In Philosophy for Children, there is a distinction drawn between inquiry and simply having a conversation. Both involve a dialogue between members of the community, but only the former contains within it the means to determine which beliefs are valid and which are not. If we only lay our beliefs on the table, we make no pro-

gress—the session is nothing more that an airing out of our various assumptions. To truly have inquiry, we must scratch beneath the surface to determine which of these assumptions are true and whether the arguments that are derived from them are valid. Bohm does not offer any such criteria for judging the truth-value of people's assumptions. However, this is not to say that he does not have such criteria in mind. What is important here is that when an assumption is raised by a member of the group, it is not immediately dismissed as ridiculous, no matter how unconventional it might be. Often, another person's point of view only appears outlandish because we are so set in our own ways of thinking we are unwilling to consider alternative views. We must consider each point of view raised by members of the community as if it were true—we must give it our full

respect and attention—and then use the community's criteria for truth to determine whether, in fact, this is the case.

Philosophy for Children as Engaged Comparative Philosophy

Philosophy for Children can be understood as the practice of engaged comparative philosophy according to the modified form of Saving the Phenomena I have outlined in Section I of this paper. As Yu and Bunnin argue, Saving the Phenomena takes place in three stages: Establishing Comparable Phenomena, Articulating Differences, and Saving the Truth in Comparable Phenomena. A Philosophy for Children session examines phenomena according to this same procedure, though in practice there is a dynamic interplay between stages as the dialogue progresses. Table 1

Level of Inquiry (Scratching Beneath the Surface)	Saving the Phenomena	Philosophy for Children	Examples from an Actual Philosophy for Children Session
The Surface	Phenomena (eudoxa)	Belief ·	Killing animals is wrong!
Level 1	Establishing Comparable Phenomena; Application of Foundational Exclusionary Principles	Framing the question. Establishing multiple points of view in response to the question	QQ: Why is killing animals wrong? Question: Is killing animals wrong? Multiple Points of View: • Killing animals is always wrong • Killing animals is sometimes wrong
	clusionary Principles	Toolkit used to analyze multiple points of view for truth and validity.	(A): What assumptions are you making? Are they justified? (R): Are there reasons for your assumptions or are they just opinions? (T): Is your point of view true? (E): Can you give examples to support your point of view? (I): Are you making valid inferences? (C): Are there counterexamples to question certain assumptions or inferences?
Level 3	Saving the Truth in Comparable Phenomena; Creative Dialogue Amongst a Pluralism of Beliefs	beliefs, now justified by	Killing animals is sometimes wrong for certain types of ani-mals and/or under certain cir-cumstances, but it is not always wrong.
Table 1: Philosophy for Children as the Practice of Comparative Philosophy			

compares the stages of Saving the Phenomena to Philosophy for Children's understanding of inquiry as scratching beneath the surface.

The inquiry of a Philosophy for Children session often begins at the level of the "surface" with the statement of a particular belief. At this level, the belief is, as Bohm says, an unquestioned assumption about a particular issue. In the right-hand column of the chart, I use an example drawn from one of my recent sessions, in which we discussed the morality of killing animals. The session began with a statement made by one of the children that it is wrong to kill ani-

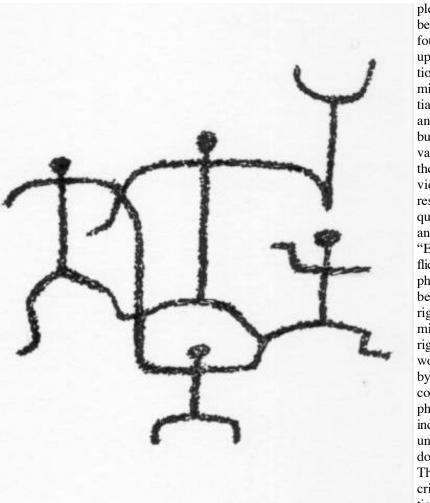
mals (a belief also held by many adults, including animal rights activists and vegetarians). Here, a particular phenomenon is established to begin the inquiry.

Now, the dialogue moves into the first real level of inquiry. The statement that has been given is rephrased as a question. Often, a statement is rephrased as QQ, or a question within a question. "It's wrong to kill animals!" becomes "why is it wrong to kill animals?," but this type of question is not yet sufficient to begin an inquiry since it relies upon the assumption that killing animals is wrong. The QQ is stripped down to a single question, free from assumptions. that frames the issue at hand: "is it wrong

to kill animals?" At this point, other members of the community respond by stating their own points of view on the issue. This stage reflects the establishment of comparable phenomena that specifically relate to the issue. Foundational exclusionary principles are used to weed out those points of view that immediately violate the most basic laws of reasoning. The multiple points of view, in this case, can be grouped into three categories: (1) killing animals is always wrong, (2) killing animals is sometimes wrong, depending upon the animal and the circumstances, and (3) killing animals is never wrong. Since Hawaii represents a

true melting-pot of different cultures and traditions from both East and West, the children in the community provided a multitude of different *eudoxa* on the issues. Once these basic *eudoxa* have been established, the dialogue moves down into the second level.

At the second level of inquiry, the toolkit is used to critique the views established in Level One. This represents the level of Articulating the Differences in Saving the Phenomena. Here, the toolkit functions as a set of operational exclusionary principles to discard those aspects of a particular point of view that are problematic. Some points of view



might be completely dismissed because they are found to be based upon false assumptions. Others might be only partially dismissed and the community builds upon the valid aspects of these points of view to construct a response to the question. As Yu and Bunnin state. "Each of a conflicting array of phenomena cannot be completely right, but each might be partly right. A view would be rejected by Aristotle if it contradicted all the phenomena or was incompatible with universally endorsed beliefs."22 This process of critical examination leads to the third stage of in-

quiry.

At the third level, the community draws from the various points of view that have been critically examined using the toolkit to construct an answer to the question posed at Level One. This level is comparable to the third level of Saving the Truth in Comparable Phenomena in that it looks to establish a creative synthesis of the valid points of multiple systems of belief. It is important to note that, as mentioned earlier, the goal of scratching beneath the surface can be achieved in three ways: (1) the community finds that the issue is extremely complicated and that none of the phe-

nomena examined answer the question, (2) although a single answer does not develop, connections are established between different points of view, and (3) an answer to the question is formulated. Oftentimes, multiple points of view are creatively synthesized into a single response to the question. However, it is not necessary that only *one* answer be given. As Deutsch argues, it is possible to have a dynamic pluralism of beliefs, none of which violate the exclusionary principles of philosophy. Thus, it might be possible that two or more "right" answers to the question are given at the end of the session.

One might object that, although Philosophy for Children and Saving the Phenomena share a similar method of inquiry, Philosophy for Children is not comparative because it does not draw from both Eastern and Western philosophical sources. However, this objection is founded upon a misinterpretation of both comparative philosophy and Philosophy for Children. There are two things that make a particular philosophy comparative: (1) its methodology and (2) its subject matter. As I have shown above, Philosophy for Children shares a similar methodology to established forms of comparative philosophical inquiry. If this were the only similarity, we could say that Philosophy for Children is a method of comparative philosophy, though not necessarily East/West comparative philosophy. This is why subject matter is important. The Philosophy for Children program in Hawaii can be said to pursue comparative philosophy for two reasons. First, Hawaii is a true melting pot of cultures from around the globe, including many Eastern and Pacific cultures. Every Philosophy for Children session thus includes viewpoints from children of a variety of backgrounds, and these points of view enter into a dynamic dialogue with each other through the process of inquiry. Second, the University of Hawaii at Manoa's Department of Philosophy focuses primarily upon comparative philosophy. Thus, the teaching assistants and professors that engage in the Philosophy in the Schools Program are trained in East/ West comparative studies and can bring such content into the Philosophy for Children sessions. It is important to note that this is not necessarily a Hawaiian phenomenon; any facilitator can do this, regardless of his or her location. Eastern concepts can be discussed by children in New Jersey as well as they can by kids in Honolulu. Eastern philosophy can be used as a source for eliciting "Plain Vanilla" discussion questions in each session just as easily as Western sources. Thus, because it parallels comparative philosophy in both methodology and subject matter, Philosophy for Children can be understood as a practice of comparative philosophy.

In Conclusion

The inquiry of a Philosophy for Children session progresses in a manner similar to Aristotle's three-stage process of Establishing Comparable Phenomena, Articulating Differences, and Saving the Truth in Comparable Phenom-

ena. However, unlike Aristotle, Philosophy for Children allows for the development of a creative dialogue amongst a pluralism of beliefs, similar to Deutsch's understanding of comparative philosophy. Thus, Philosophy for Children can be understood as an engaged method of comparative philosophy according to a modified form of Aristotle's Saving the Phenomena.

Notes

- Yu, Ji-yuan and Nicholas Bunnin, "Saving the Phenomena: An Aristotelian Method in Comparative Philosophy," *Two Roads to Wisdom: Chinese and Analytical Philosophical Traditions*, Ed. Bo Mou (Chicago Open Court, 2001), p. 293.
- 2. Ibid. 295.
- 3. Ibid. 303-5.
- 4. Ibid. 306.
- 5. Ibid. 307-8.
- 6. Ibid. 310-12.
- 7. Deutsch, Eliot, "Rationality and Traditions," *The Empirical and the Transcendental: A Fusion of Horizons*, Ed. Bina Gupta (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), pp. 242-3.
- 8. Ibid. 245.
- 9. Ibid. 246-7.
- 10. Ibid. 247.
- 11. Ibid. 248-9.
- 12. Although it goes by the name "Philosophy for Children," this methodology can be readily used by adults to conduct inquiries into a variety of different subjects. I have used many of Jackson's techniques in teaching undergraduate ethics courses at the University of Hawaii with extremely positive results.
- 13. Jackson, Thomas. *Philosophy for Children, Philosophy in the Schools Project: A Guide for Teachers* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2001), p. 2.
- 14. Ibid. 2-3.
- 15. Ibid. 3.
- For an explanation of the Good Thinker's Tool Kit and the Plain Vanilla procedure, please see Thomas Jackson's article in this volume.
- 17. Jackson, 19-25.
- 18. Bohm, David, "On Dialogue," *Thinking: The Journal of Philoso-phy for Children*, 14.1 (1998), p.2.
- 19. Ibid. 4.
- 20. Ibid. 2-3.
- 21. Ibid. 6.
- 22. Yu and Bunnin, 299.

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