

ON THE PHILOSOPHICAL NARRATIVE FOR CHILDREN

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Abstract

Given the obvious differences between telling a story and setting out a philosophical theory or a carefully reasoned argument, the philosophical narrative is, on the face of it, an unlikely genre. It is rendered even more problematic when we come to the philosophical narrative for children, with philosophy and children being, in the eyes of tradition, an equally dubious combination. The philosophical novels of Matthew Lipman and others constitute an existence proof that such a genre is possible, of course, but the mere fact that the attempt has been made does not nullify the claim that the form is disfigured or misbegotten. Indeed, without further examination, who is to say that the philosophical narrative for children is not a mongrel as both philosophy and literature, or that it can be called philosophical only by courtesy? In what follows I remark briefly on what makes writing philosophical and then apply those remarks to the philosophical narrative for children in order to explore both the difficulties and allure of the genre.

Key Words: Philosophical Novel, Thought Experiments, Allegory, Argumentation

La novela filosófica para niñas y niños: una idea nueva

Resúmen:

Dadas las diferencias obvias entre contar una historia y el establecimiento de una teoría filosófica o un argumento cuidadosamente razonado, la narrativa filosófica es, a primera vista, un género improbable. Aún más problemático es el caso de la novela filosófica para niños, siendo considerados filosofía y niños, a los ojos de la tradición, una combinación no menos problemática. Las novelas filosóficas de Mathew Lipman constituyen, ciertamente, una prueba de que dicho género es posible. Sin embargo el mero hecho de que el intento haya sido realizado no anula el reclamo de que la forma está desfigurada. Inclusive, sin un exámen más detenido ¿quién puede decir que la novela filosófica no es sino un engendro de filosofía y de literatura? ¿O que una novela escrita para chicos pueda ser llamada filosófica sólo por cortesía? En este trabajo destaco lo que hace filosófica a una escritura para luego aplicarlo a las novelas filosóficas para niños con el objeto de explorar tanto las dificultades como las posibilidades de este género.

Palabras llave: Novela Filosófica. Experimentos de Pensamiento, Alegoría, Argumentación.

A novela filosófica para meninas e meninos: uma ideia nova

Resumo:

Dada as diferenças óbvias entre contar uma história e o estabelecimento de uma teoria filosófica ou um argumento cuidadosamente raciocinado, a narrativa filosófica é, a primeira vista, um

gênero improvável. Ainda mais problemático é o caso da novela filosófica *para crianças*, sendo considerados filosofia e crianças, nos olhos da tradição, como um conjunto não menos problemático. As novelas filosóficas de Matthew Lipman têm constituído desde há muito tempo uma prova de que tal gênero é possível. No entanto, o mero feito de sua possibilidade não anula a ponderação de que a forma está desfigurada. De fato, sem um exame mais detido, quem pode dizer que a novela filosófica não é senão um mestiço como a filosofia e a literatura? Uma novela escrita para crianças pode ser chamada de filosófica somente por cortesia? Neste trabalho destaco o que faz uma escritura filosófica para logo aplicá-lo às novelas filosóficas *para crianças* com o objetivo de explorar tanto as dificuldades quanto as possibilidades deste gênero.

Palavras-chave: Novela Filosófica, Experimentos de Pensamento, Alegoria, Argumentação.



ON THE PHILOSOPHICAL NARRATIVE FOR CHILDREN

Introduction

Given the obvious differences between telling a story and setting out a philosophical theory or a carefully reasoned argument, the philosophical narrative is, on the face of it, an unlikely genre. It is rendered even more problematic when we come to the philosophical narrative for children, with philosophy and children being, in the eyes of tradition, an equally dubious combination. The philosophical novels of Matthew Lipman and others¹ constitute an existence proof that such a genre is possible, of course, but the mere fact that the attempt has been made does not nullify the claim that the form is disfigured or misbegotten. Indeed, without further examination, who is to say that the philosophical narrative for children is not a mongrel as both philosophy and literature, or that it can be called philosophical only by courtesy?

In what follows I remark briefly on what makes writing philosophical and then apply those remarks to the philosophical narrative for children in order to explore both the difficulties and allure of the genre.

What Makes Writing Philosophical?

Given the wide variety of what is normally taken to be philosophical writing, any answer to this question is bound to be controversial. Even so, there are a number of features that broadly characterise the philosophical—features that can be applied to writing in a philosophical vein. They have to do with the nature of philosophical subject matter and the way in which that subject matter is treated. As I will explain, philosophical subject matter tends to be both general and substantial. The natural and human sciences also deal with substantial matters in general form, of course, but those that are philosophical resist resolution through empirical methods, and hence they are

¹ For a brief description of Lipman's philosophical novels and other IAPC teaching materials, see http://www.montclair.edu/media/montclair.edu/cehs/documents/iapc/Curriculum_Brochure.pdf

primarily addressed through reasoning and analysis. Partly because the matters with which philosophy deals cannot be settled empirically, they tend to remain open to further inquiry and disputation. Let us look at these features.

Philosophy deals with general questions, issues and problems concerning what exists, what we can know, what we should value, and how we should live. Such questions and problems underlie all the sciences and humanities, as well as political, social and religious practice. Consider the question '*What is a good life?*' for example. It is a general question for political, social and religious thought. So long as it displays the other features described below, writing on that topic is bound to be philosophical.

Philosophical subject matter is intellectually or humanly substantial. It is *of moment* and lies at the heart of intellectual and cultural life, regardless of whether it is recognised as such. I say 'regardless' because these matters tend to be taken for granted in other disciplines as well as in social life, and writing that opens them up to examination is likely to be philosophical. To recur to our example, '*What is a good life?*' is a humanly significant or substantial question, and philosophical writing that explores such a question cannot help but examine whether what people tend to assume is a good life really is good.

While many general and substantial questions and problems can be addressed through scientific or empirical investigation, philosophical questions and problems are not able to be answered or solved through such methods or simply by appeal to the facts. This need not mean that collective experience or scientific knowledge is of no relevance to them, of course, or that we can never hope to find ways of rendering these matters more empirically tractable. Again, '*What is a good life?*' is a question that cannot be answered simply by appeal to empirical facts, even though we might quite properly appeal to them in considering how we should live and what we should value.

The lack of quantitative empirical methods for addressing philosophical questions and problems results in stress being placed on careful reasoning and analysis. Thus, philosophy has done much to develop the fields of logic and conceptual analysis, providing us with general-purpose tools for reasoning and the exploration of ideas. Writing that is philosophical is therefore likely to contain a good deal of reasoning and



argument and to devote much attention to the articulation of ideas. Philosophically speaking, one cannot address the question of the good life without exploring various conceptions of the good in relation to life, and engaging in reasoning and argument about such ends as happiness and human flourishing.

Finally, the questions of philosophy are ones that every generation must attempt to answer for itself on pain of accepting hand-me-down and possibly outmoded ideas. Irrespective of the fact that the methods of philosophy can seldom provide definitive answers, and its results are likely to remain contentious, this does not imply that one answer is bound to be as good as another, so that we may as well abandon the effort. As we saw, such questions are substantial and it matters what answers we give to them. What we think of as constituting a good life matters, for example, even though whatever we do think about it is not settled for all time and must perennially be readdressed in light of changes in our knowledge and understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live, as well as material changes in our circumstances. It is therefore a mark of philosophical writing that it acknowledges the open character of the questions and issues with which it deals and holds itself open to criticism.

The Philosophical Narrative for Children

Let us begin by clearing up a possible confusion about what a philosophical narrative for children is meant to do. Inasmuch as we are interested in it from an educational point of view, it is common to think of it as a stimulus material—as a provocation to philosophical thought. With some justification, it can then be pointed out that there is no reason why writings that stimulate philosophical thinking need be philosophical. After all, a variety of texts may be used to help raise philosophical questions and issues, including children’s literature, news items, films, poetry, and so on, which are not typically in themselves philosophical. I take it, however, that a crucial difference between the philosophical narrative and other stimulus materials lies in the fact that the philosophical narrative not only aims to provoke students to raise

philosophical issues or questions for discussion, but is also constructed in such a way as to show them how to go about answering such questions and issues. As an educational aid, it provides a model of philosophical practice through which children can learn how to explore recognisably philosophical content in philosophical ways. Needless to say, that support is also an aid to a teacher who has little by way of formal philosophical training.

Now we come to the difficulties involved in constructing narrative material for that purpose. The intersection between philosophical writing and storytelling is a place where collisions are just waiting to happen. Consider the following: Philosophical writing proceeds by addressing general problems or issues through questioning, theorising, reasoning, argument and analysis, which are directed toward a conclusion. A story, by contrast, involves characters drawn into a plot which, at least conventionally, unfolds through a series of conflicts or incidents to some kind of resolution. There are at least three significant differences here. (1) The basic form of philosophical writing is reasoning, whereas the basic form of a story is narrative. (2) The principal device for reasoning in philosophical writing is an argument through which the writer examines propositions or ideas, while the corresponding device in a story is a situation or an event involving characters, through which the writer normally explores human predicaments. (3) The conclusion of a story is not a conclusion in the philosophical sense. A philosophical conclusion is a statement supported by reasoning and argument, whereas the conclusion of a story is a state-of-affairs that finally results from the actions of characters and the circumstances in which they act. As I said, it would seem that the two forms are on a collision course.

Thought Experiments

To see that this may be more appearance than reality, let us begin by considering a widely used philosophical device, the thought experiment. To carry out a thought experiment is to construct a scenario from which a conclusion can be drawn. While a thought experiment takes the form of a scenario, it can also be construed as an



argument.² Consider, for instance, the following thought experiment offered by John Locke in his discussion of personal identity:

...should the soul of a prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the prince's past life, enter and inform the body of a cobbler, as soon as deserted by his own soul, every one sees he would be the same *person* with the prince, accountable only for the prince's actions; but who would say it was the same *man*?³

Here is a scene involving two characters and an action. It is the kind of scene that can be found in fiction. A close parallel is to be found in children's literature in the story of the frog prince—a prince who has been transformed into a frog and can be changed back into his old bodily self only by the kiss of a princess. In conformity with Locke, every child sees that the frog is the same person as the prince, although no longer the handsome young man that he was. Locke's argument clearly proceeds from his "let's imagine" or "just suppose" proposition to the conclusion that the soul alone does not account for the identity of the *man*, while it does account for the identity of the *person*. Here is a rendition of the narrative as a formal argument:

- (1) This individual has the soul of the prince in the body of a cobbler, whose own soul has just departed. (Supposition for the sake of argument)
- (2) The soul is the source of actions for which an individual can be held accountable.
- (3) This individual can be held accountable only for the prince's actions. (1,2)
- (4) Accountability for actions resides with persons.
- (5) This individual is the same person as the prince. (3,4)
- (6) A man's identity is tied to his body.
- (7) This individual does not have the body of the prince. (1)
- (8) This individual is not the same man as the prince. (6,7)

It is worth noting that the argument arrives at its conclusion at line (5) by means of what are, in Locke's presentation, the merely implicit premises (2) and (4). Similarly, his conclusion at (8) depends upon premise (6), which stands behind Locke's final rhetorical question in the passage quoted above. Whether the argument therefore

² See John D. Norton, "Are Thought Experiments Just What You Thought?" *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 3 (1996): 333-66.

³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Chapter 27, "Of Ideas of Identity and Diversity".

assumes much of what it seeks to prove, I will leave aside. The point of the exercise is to show that a thought experiment such as Locke's, which takes the form of a scenario, or narrative sketch, can be used to cloak an argument. In Locke's case, it is a narrative (events involving characters that lead to a resultant state-of-affairs) that is used to forward an argument about the basis of personal identity.

Use of Allegory

That a thought experiment can present an argument in the form of a scenario suggests that there is room for rapprochement between philosophical and narrative writing. Other devices help to confirm this suggestion. Consider the use of allegory. Allegory is an extended metaphorical device in which the events or scenes depicted have a parallel meaning that may be moral, political, or even abstract. Allegory is widely used in literature and art, including the allegorical novel, short story, painting and poem. Perhaps the best-known example in children's literature is Aesop's fables, in which cautionary tales involving mostly animal characters are used to draw moral conclusions. Philosophers have also employed allegory to dramatise their ideas, as in Hobbes' use of the leviathan to represent his commonwealth, or Boethius' use of an allegorical Lady Philosophy and Lady Fortune in *The Consolation of Philosophy* to represent philosophical truth and the caprice of good and evil. The most famous of all allegories in the history of Western philosophy is, of course, the cave scene in Plato's *Republic*. There Plato uses the allegory of the cave to dramatise the distinction between appearance and reality and to point to what he takes to be the true path to knowledge. In the scene, prisoners are imagined to spend their lives chained up in a cave, constrained so that they can only face the wall in front of them. Behind them, puppets are moved in displays that are visible to the men only by the shadows they cast on the wall because of a fire located at the back of the cave. Plato then imagines what would happen if someone were released, shown this apparatus, and then taken up out of the cave and shown the world beyond the shadows, gradually becoming accustomed to the light and eventually being able to look even directly upon the sun, the great source of



illumination. And he imagines the ridicule that would be heaped upon such a one, when they eventually return to tell the others what they have seen. The story is an allegory, as Plato explains:

Now the cave or den is the world of sight, the fire is the sun, the way upwards is the way to knowledge, and in the world of knowledge the idea of good is last seen and with difficulty, but when seen is inferred to be the author of good and right – parent of the lord of light in this world, and of truth and understanding in the other.⁴

It would be no great difficulty to pay homage to Plato's cave in the setting of a philosophical narrative for children. One can keep even closer to Plato's own way of working by having the scene depicted within a dialogue. For Plato is the progenitor of the dialogical form of philosophical writing, pressing it into the service of inquiry rather than plot as in the drama and Homer. In that vein, here is part of a discussion between two stray dogs, taken from *Philosophy Park*, which I wrote as a history of philosophy in story form. The passage closely shadows Plato's original text:

"That sounds very deep, Scruffy. Yet it seems to me that, if we accepted your comparison, it would turn out that all the things we see about us aren't *really* real. Only things like the ideal dog and the perfect circle are real."

"That's right, Mutt. I might just as well have pointed to those dogs that spend their lives stretched out upon the sofa with their eyes glued to the television. Do you know the kind of dog I mean?"

"I do, Scruffy. I have also heard of children who spend most of their waking hours glued to screens like that."

"Right, Mutt. Now imagine a pack of dogs that was brought up in a darkened room and chained up so that their eyes were always fixed upon the television."

"So that they never saw anything but what was on television?"

"That's exactly what I mean. The dogs would mistake the images on the television for the real thing, wouldn't they?"

"I suppose they would, Scruffy."

"Now suppose that one of the dogs was taken from the room and shown the outside world, so that he saw the actual things that were only pictured on television."

"Hot dog! I think that at first he might be very confused. Yet after a while he would discover that what he had taken to be the real world was only the world as it appears on television, and that the images that

⁴ Plato, *Republic*, Book VII.

appeared on the screen were not the things themselves. I'll bet he would be amazed at his discovery."

"No doubt he would be astounded to find out the truth, Mutt. Now let us suppose that he was taken back to the darkened room so that he could tell the other dogs what he had discovered. How do you think they would respond?"

"They would probably think that he was mad, Scruffy. They might even turn on him if he kept whining on about all of them being deluded into thinking that the pictures on the screen were the things themselves."

"It is as you say, Mutt! And aren't we like the dogs chained up in the darkened room? We think the images that light casts upon our eyes show us the world as it is in reality. So if someone were to say that we see nothing but appearances, and that the world in reality is something quite different, they would be thought to be as mad as that dog."⁵

The allegory of the cave is one of the most famous passages in the history of philosophy. It uses a narrative device for philosophical purposes, to give force and vividness to the proposition that what most of us take to be knowledge is nothing but appearance and that to come to know things as they really are we need to become unfettered from the passing show and venture upon philosophy. To invite an extended comparison with epistemological and metaphysical propositions through their concrete embodiment in narrative is to attempt to curry philosophical conviction through the use of a literary device. Whether or not such a move is philosophically questionable, philosophers of the stature of Plato have availed themselves of it. It once again suggests that there are ways of combining narrative with philosophical writing.

A Double Act

Argumentative use of scenarios and the introduction of theories in allegorical form illustrate ways in which literary devices can be pressed into philosophical service. Yet, even were we to multiply such examples, it still would not show how the overall form of a philosophical treatise and that of a story or novel can be made to work in tandem. A novel needs to succeed as an extended narrative and a philosophical treatise must work as an extended argumentative examination of general and intellectually or

⁵ Philip Cam, *Philosophy Park* (Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research Press, 2013), 30-1.



humanly significant theories or ideas. To match the requirements of narrative to those of philosophy looks to be a difficult juggling act. We are in danger of ending up with a malnourished literary creation, with a thin narrative skin draped over its all too visible philosophical skeleton, or else with the philosophy so well concealed under an ample narrative as to be imperceptible to the unpractised eye.

It is not easy to show how to successfully perform this juggling act in a page or two. The best thing may be to illustrate how it can be done by means of an example. I will take just one topic in my philosophical novella *Sophia's Question*,⁶ that of fate, which runs through the story, and briefly indicate how the topic is embedded in the narrative and explored philosophically.

As the story opens, Sophia is given an old bracelet by the kindly shopkeeper, Mr Weismann, who tells her to ask her grandmother about three mysterious charms hanging from it, which her grandmother later explains are the Fates. In the ensuing dialogue, Sophia expresses puzzlement about the very idea of fate while curiosity also begins to stir in her mind about the connection between Mr Weismann and her grandmother. The scene is now set for the coming together of these narrative and philosophical elements, combining philosophical puzzlement about fate with what eventually turns out to be a family secret concerning young lovers thwarted by circumstance. The connection is underlined at the end of the first chapter where the philosophical and narrative puzzles are set side by side:

While Grandma was away in the kitchen, Sophia kept thinking about how it could possibly be that the whole world ran like a machine, with one thing destined to follow another, and yet people could freely decide to do one thing rather than another. It didn't seem possible that both things could be true. Either people were wrong to think that sometimes they freely decided to do things, or else it wasn't really true that everything in the world was bound to happen just as it did.

While Sophia was wondering about this, she was also aware of a mystery of a very different kind, which Grandma didn't want to talk about. What had happened so long ago that involved Grandma and Mr Weismann? How was he connected to the thread of Grandma's life? The thought occurred to Sophia that perhaps fate had come between them. If

⁶ Philip Cam, *Sophia's Question* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 2011).

so, then maybe her two puzzles were in some way connected. These were things that Sophia was determined to find out.⁷

Fate is threaded throughout the story providing opportunities to amplify the theme both philosophically and dramatically. There is a fatal accident involving Sophia's friend Emmanuel's dog Rufus and a palm reading with a fortune-teller. There is the drama in Sophia's nightmare:

How strange! Her grandmother and Mr Weismann were hanging on a chain. Only the links between them were broken as if they had been pulled apart by some very great force. Further down the chain, along from her grandmother, was a third little figure that Sophia couldn't quite make out.

"That's you, my dear," her grandmother said.

"Me?" she replied. "What am I doing there?"

"It's no accident, Sophia," her grandmother explained. "It was bound to happen."

Curiously Sophia discovered that she wasn't looking at herself anymore, but was fastened to the chain. And there was Emmanuel looking at her from a distance. He didn't say anything. He just stood there, his face sad with grief.

"Emmanuel, what's wrong?" asked Sophia.

"Rufus," he cried. "Rufus, Rufus."

Suddenly a large mechanical dog came marching towards her wielding a giant pair of scissors.

"So you don't believe in fate?" it howled.

"Oh, yes, she does," yapped another mechanical dog, knocking her over.

"No!" cried Sophia.

"We'll show her," snarled the other dog. "We'll show her."⁸

And there is philosophical discourse in Mrs Thule's classroom regarding the extinction of the dinosaurs:

"Yes," agreed Tony. "Once the comet hit, they were headed for extinction as surely as two plus two is four."

"Mrs Thule."

"Yes, Sophia, what do you want to say?"

"Even if the dinosaurs were headed for extinction for the reasons Robert and Samantha gave, that isn't like two plus two makes four. It's completely different."

"What do you say to that, Tony?" said Mrs Thule.

⁷ *Ibid*, 10.

⁸ *Ibid*, 19-20.



“What’s different about it?” replied Tony defensively. “Two plus two has to be four. There are no ifs or buts about it. Just like the dinosaurs had to die. Dinosaurs plus comet equals extinction. No ifs or buts.”

“But the extinction of the dinosaurs is not at all like two plus two makes four,” protested Samantha. “It could have been that the comet missed the earth, or wasn’t so big, and that the dinosaurs survived. But two plus two makes four no matter what.”

“What will be, will be,” said Tony. “That comet was always going to hit the earth, just like it did, and the dinosaurs were going to be headed for extinction, no matter what.”

Mrs Thule looked thoughtful for a moment and then said something about getting off track.

“But Mrs Thule,” said Sophia, “who is right, Tony or Samantha?”

That was when Mrs Thule said that she wasn’t sure who was right, and that she had never thought about whether things happened in nature with the same kind of certainty as we find in arithmetic.⁹

As we can see in these examples, the narrative or literary and the philosophical or discursive modes take their turn, but nevertheless work in tandem to create the hybrid form of a philosophical narrative for children.

Supplementary Materials

Any teacher who has used Lipman’s philosophical novels for children, or more recent materials in the genre that he did so much to develop, will be familiar with the accompanying teacher’s manuals that provide discussion plans, activities and exercises based around the text. The production of these support materials amounts to a recognition that the educational burden cannot rest on the narrative material alone. This is not so much a limitation of the form as a mark of its distinctive role as philosophical writing. While the philosophical narrative for children is an exploration of ideas, it is not like most philosophical writing in that it does not attempt to argue to a conclusion. Rather, it opens up philosophical problems and issues and explores them just far enough to allow students to find their way into the discussion. So any suggestion made, argument put, or conception developed in the text, is bound to be tentative and likely to be opposed by other suggestions, arguments or conceptions. It is the aim of the

⁹ *Ibid*, 5-6.

teacher's manual is to provide support for the further exploration of these matters and to foster the skills required to do that proficiently.

The passage just presented on the fate of the dinosaurs can be used to illustrate the point. At the outset, Tony suggests that the extinction of the dinosaurs was predetermined with the kind of inevitability that we find in two plus two makes four. Against this, Samantha argues that, unlike two plus two equalling four, what happened to the dinosaurs was contingent upon a number of facts that might have been different. Sophia initially disagrees with Tony, but as she listens to her classmates she becomes uncertain and calls on the teacher to settle the matter. But Mrs Thule says that she isn't sure who is right, and goes on to admit that she had never thought about whether things happen in nature with the same kind of certainty as we find in arithmetic.

Here the text contains contrary suggestions about a specific case which are followed up by a general statement of a problem. While few students are likely to be ready to tackle the general problem head-on at this point, enough has already been seeded into the text to permit a discussion that may begin with the fate of the dinosaurs, but then extend to consideration of other cases through which students can at least get a grip on the concept of fate. Such a discussion is supported by the following discussion plan, which comes from the *Teacher Resource Book* that accompanies *Sophia's Question*:

Discussion Plan: Fate

One or more of the following questions can be used to stimulate discussion on the topic of fate.

1. Were the dinosaurs bound to become extinct one day?
2. If fortune-tellers can read your palm, does that mean whatever is going to happen in your life is already determined?
3. If you are unlucky, is there anything you can do about it?
4. The *Titanic* ocean liner hit an iceberg and sank on its ill-fated voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. Was that going to be its destiny all along?
5. If a coastal village is destroyed by a tsunami, should we accept such a terrible event as governed by fate?



The results of this preliminary discussion can be built upon by relating them to such things as freedom of the will and the concept of accidents, that have their starting-point in other incidents in the narrative and are supported by their own discussion plans.

Having worked our way through these matters, the narrative returns to the fate of the dinosaurs in a follow-up lesson prepared Mrs Thule in which students are asked to classify things that will be so no matter what, won't be so no matter what, and might or might not occur. Candidates supplied by her students for what will be so no matter what include '2 + 2 = 4' and 'a square has four equal sides', while candidates for the opposite are '2 + 2 = 5' and 'a circle that is square'. Problems begin to emerge when a student suggests that 'living things die' is something that will happen no matter what – and that brings the class back to the case of the dinosaurs.

This time Samantha allows that the dinosaurs were doomed to extinction once the asteroid hit the earth, but demands that Tony supply a reason for saying that the latter event was not just unlucky, but inevitable. To which Tony replies: "It had to happen because everything that happens has a cause which makes it happen. That's how nature works." Mrs Thule puts this causal principle up on the board and calls it an assumption. This doesn't satisfy Samantha, however, who complains that if we accept what Tony says, then there would be nothing to place in the middle column – nothing that either might or might not happen.

While the discussion goes on from there, the stage has already been set for a discussion of what is possible, impossible, or necessary – of what might, cannot or must be so. Once again, the *Teacher Resource Book* supports such a discussion with a discussion plan:

Questions for Discussion: What must, might or cannot be

Use any one or more of the following questions to stimulate discussion.

1. Is it possible that $2 + 2$ could have been 5?
2. Is a square circle impossible in the same way that it is impossible for a person to be forty meters tall?

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3. Could something live forever?
4. If an asteroid hits the earth, is that something which was bound to happen?
5. Does everything that happens have a cause which makes it happen?
6. If everything has a cause which makes it happen, does that mean everything must happen just in the way that it does, and nothing else is possible?

And there is a follow-up activity involving small group deliberation leading back into whole class discussion, based on how small groups of students respond to the gaps in the following sentences, which are to be filled with 'must', 'might' or 'can't'.

Activity: Must, might, can't

A brother _____ have a brother or a sister.

A piece of paper _____ be both purple and green all over at the same time.

All living things _____ die.

Some number _____ be the largest number.

Three things _____ be called a heap of things.

A year _____ contain 365 days.

Your mother's father's wife's daughter's child _____ be your cousin.

Two prime numbers _____ be separated by one or more even numbers.

An ocean _____ be bigger than a sea.

Some dog _____ have been the very first dog.

The insights generated through such discussions may expand into matters barely touched on in the narrative, as well as help students to discover things that were there all along. The depth of these insights partly depends on the teacher's skill in conducting discussion, of course, as well as the teacher's own background knowledge. Background knowledge is obviously something useful for the teacher in interpreting the narrative, and the *Teacher Resource Book* therefore supplies notes on the main topics, as in the following note on the topic of necessity, possibility and impossibility.

Mrs Thule engages her class in an activity in which they distinguish between what must be, what might be, and what cannot be the case.



These are the basic modalities of necessity, possibility and impossibility. Necessity and impossibility are related. If something is necessary, then it is impossible for it not to be so, and *vice versa*. If water is necessary for life, for instance, then it is impossible to have life without it; and if it is impossible to have life without water, then water is necessary for life. Possibility covers everything that lies in between, being neither necessary nor, of course, impossible. It is possible that the next throw of a dice will be a six, for example, but while certainly not impossible, it “ain’t necessarily so”.

If Mrs Thule’s lesson wasn’t introductory, the class might have gone on to distinguish between different kinds of necessity, possibility and impossibility. Tony’s ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’, for instance, is a logical necessity, akin to Rosie’s conceptual necessity that a square has four equal sides—just as ‘ $2 + 2 = 5$ ’ is logically impossible and you can’t conceive of a square with five sides. By contrast, even if the dinosaurs were destined to become extinct, that wouldn’t be a logical necessity. It would be an empirical one, alike in this respect to David’s ‘all living things die’. What’s possible or impossible may also be a practical matter. As things stand, it may not be possible to take a holiday on Mars, for instance, but it isn’t inconceivable, and there’s nothing in the laws of nature to prevent it— in that sense, it presents a distant possibility.

From all of this, we can see that, as the narrative unfolds, we encounter a set of related problems concerning fate, freewill and determinism, and possibility and necessity. Each of these problems is embedded in the text in such a way as to provide the beginning for a discussion. Since that discussion is for the students to continue, it is not carried to conclusion in the narrative. Instead, support for the discussion is supplied by supplementary materials in the form of discussion plans, activities, exercises and notes for the teacher. As an invitation to philosophical inquiry, the philosophical narrative for children is philosophically truncated or incomplete. It does not set out to argue for a thesis, or to propound an idea, but merely to raise issues and problems and to supply just sufficient exploration to open them up for students to discuss. As I have argued, that is not a defect of the form, but a product of its educational role. And it explains the necessity of supplementary materials to support the teacher and the students in taking up from where the narrative leaves off.

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