

gert biesta and philosophical work with children

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This dossier was born from the need to foster and deepen the educational and philosophical value of the philosophy with children (PwC) movement, which includes the more classical philosophy *for* children program and many other forms inspired by it. Its gestation began with a keynote address by Gert Biesta, a prominent theorist in the field of philosophy of education, delivered to the 18<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of the International Council for Philosophical Inquiry with Children (ICPIC) in Madrid on June 30, 2017. Although Biesta has offered his views—both directly and indirectly--on the theory and practice of philosophy with children in the past, his address at the ICPIC conference represented a rare opportunity for significant dialogue between “insiders” and “outsiders” in the movement, and the chance for him to present his views directly and in person before an audience the majority of which may be described as deeply invested in the PwC project as both theorists and practitioners.

Immediately after the conference, a number of these theorists/practitioners were invited to write a response to his presentation—some based only on his power-point presentation, and others on the revised paper that he provided a bit later, which was based on that presentation. In this dossier we present Biesta’s paper—including his power-point presentation as an appendix—followed by thirteen responses from conference attendees from all over the world, and from different educational and philosophical perspectives as well. These papers are followed by Biesta’s response to those responses, and we finish with Marina Santi’s keynote address at the same

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conference, which was delivered one day subsequent to his, and which she has revised to respond to his more directly. The responses are all written in English, with the exception of the paper of Félix Garcia Moriyón, who chaired the Spanish organizing committee of the conference, and wrote his response in Spanish. As is usual in *childhood & philosophy*, the all papers are prefaced by abstracts in three languages: English, Spanish and Portuguese.

We are quite satisfied with the results of this project. Philosophy with children often generates either positive or negative passions, but rarely an intellectual disposition to put into question its aims and assumptions. Such “for” and “against” reactions often inhibit a critical perspective on philosophical work with children. A critical perspective does not presume to merely praise or condemn, but offers arguments that interrogate philosophy with children’s theory and practice at the deeper levels of its own philosophical and educational assumptions, and helps us to think about what we do in its name. As such, this dossier offers a number of arguments that are neither for nor against PwC per se, but rather consider it from different perspectives: pragmatism, analytic and post-analytic philosophy, structuralism and post-structuralism, humanism and post-humanism, phenomenology, feminism, and Latin-american theory and practice.

As confirmed by Biesta’s positive response to Walter Kohan’s comment in the brief question-answer period immediately after his keynote address in Madrid, it seems clear that he and thoughtful practitioners of PwC hold many opinions in common. For example, his call for a form of education that fosters what he terms decentered or “ex-centric” as opposed to “egocentric” subjectivity is at the heart of the PwC project. We would suggest that this educational desideratum of decentered, ex-centric subjectivity is a classical humanist one, and we don’t say that pejoratively, as we consider the so called post-modern critique of Western humanism in many cases to be contentious and unfair in identifying humanism with patriarchy, ethnocentrism, imperialism and species-ism. Philosophy for children is a very wide



movement, including humanist, post-humanist and anti-humanist positions. As a result, some of the responses in this dossier share Biesta's humanistic aspirations, and work to think PwC again through his ideas. Others argue that what he critiques in PwC does not correspond to its true principles and values, which in fact are very close to his.

Several post-humanist responses concentrate on what appears to be Biesta's central notion of a desirable education as fostering the "grownup" way of existing in the world, and find it lacking. Although in his response to Kohan's question about this term in the question-answer period in Madrid he made it clear that he had met children whom he would characterize as "grownup" and adults whom he would characterize as "infantile," thus delivering the term from any ageist connotations, for most practitioners of PwC it seems a curious term to use, carrying as it does the heavy baggage of adultism and developmentalism. Indeed, for many responders the notion of "grownupness" seems to invoke a studied ignorance of the transformative role of childhood in cultural evolution, and, as it seems to suggest in Biesta's formulation, positions the child in school as, if not a passive subject, and if not as a functional "intelligent adaptive system," then as a subject-of-adult-pedagogical-intentions. His critique of "child-centered" education, which he opposes to "curriculum-centered" education as two wrong alternatives to "world-centered education," and his suggestion that the issue of distinguishing power from authority is central to the educational process, while both well-taken, suggest that his notion of dialogue does not apply to the adult-child relation so much as to the self-world relation. One even picks up, Levinas' alterity-theory aside, hints of Freudian/Kleinian invocations of the "depressive position": school, as the "educational space where you learn you're not the only person in the world," is the place where you "grow out" of your primary infantile narcissism--where the ego forsakes its grandiose, id-infused claims. Freud, it should be remembered, described psychoanalysis as "a prolongation

of education for the purposes of overcoming the residues of childhood." Here, it would seem, "grownupness" is actually "growoutness."

Although a concrete vision of an actual functioning school is not really present in his talk, one gets the picture from Biesta's remarks of a somewhat conservative institution, where the dialogue in question is not between adults and children—where the majority of children are not manifesting "grownupness" and the majority of adults are, which places them in an asymmetrical situation that makes dialogue more difficult. This may ignore the special role that the form of gathering called "school" has for emancipatory futurity, a role based on the ongoing historical reconstruction of the adult-child relation as, on one important level, a relation of equals, driven by an awareness of the human dimension of natality, and full of a creative, potentially transformative tension. When the child is recognized as something more than an object of adult pedagogical intentions, and childhood as more than (and different than) something to grow out of, she becomes a bona fide interlocutor, and the cross-generational community of philosophical inquiry that is philosophy with children becomes a discursive location in which her voice is an important one, worth listening to carefully. It is a location, in fact, where philosophy—understood as care of the self in the form of the expression of and problematization of beliefs—lends it an urgency that is typically not present in academic discourses; in which the notion of philosophical community, in replacing the echo chamber of the solitary thinker, connects philosophy, not just with epistemological and ethical transformation, but with authentic democratic practice, and in doing so reconnects it with its roots in Socrates' Athens.

Philosophy with children attempts to answer these questions, among others: What does it mean to philosophize together as opposed to singly? Can we speak of children's philosophies (as did Piaget), and if so, how are they different from or the same as adults'? What relation, if any, is there between the ongoing practice of community of philosophical inquiry with children and the culture and politics of



school understood as an adult-child collective? That is, what is the ongoing, cumulative effect of community of philosophical inquiry on cultural, ethical and political sensibilities, and may we speak of a relation between the praxis of community of philosophical inquiry and the emergence of a “democratic sensibility”? This last question brings us within range of Biesta’s notion of “grownupness,” but without the tincture of “grownoutness” that it carries when the dimension of childhood agency – both actual and virtual – is not recognized. When it is, the school takes on the characteristics of a utopian community: a place where futurity is present in--in Dewey’s terms--the transformative interaction between impulse and habit, investigation and transmission, play and work; in bio-historical terms in the emergence of new adaptive (in the strong, bidirectional sense of that term) neural pathways; and in socio-political terms, in a form of collectivity dedicated to the present and future realization of the subjective and intersubjective goods that Biesta has identified in his address.

Disagreements aside, this dossier provides the international PwC community with a significant opportunity to explore – both educationally and philosophically-- the extraordinary potential of philosophical educational inquiry with children. In his response to the responses, Gert Biesta prefers to clarify or reaffirm the main aim of his paper rather than to engage in a detailed dialogue with each response, which would have been impossible in terms both of the timing and the volume of the responses. In fact, in this final installment of the conversation, Biesta repositions his presentation in terms of “an attempt to respond to Adorno’s question about the (im)possibility of education ‘after Auschwitz,’”. Building on the opposition “immanence vs transcendence” and taking sides with the latter, he attempts to justify why transcendence is educationally relevant in terms of our existence as subjects-- or to say it in other terms employed by him, the main question he tends to pose in his response is, what might it look like to be a free subject in educational practice and theory?

We thank Gert Biesta and all the participants of this dossier for their willingness to take part in this volume, and their alacrity in doing so, and we do share Biesta's final hope as to its outcome: "to have added some further ideas for the important conversation about the educational potential of philosophical work with children and young people".

In addition to this dossier, we have included in this issue an unpublished manuscript in Portuguese from two other highly relevant voices in the world of philosophy of education--J. J. Masschelein & M. Simons. The paper included here--"School experiences: an attempt to find a pedagogical voice" will certainly contribute to the present dossier and to the multilingual character of the Journal. In sum, we hope that our readers will find in this issue a rich trove of resources for continuing to think and rethink, not only the meaning and purpose of philosophy with children, but also of their place in this worldwide movement.

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