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in the end, it's our future that's going to be changed: enquiring about the environment with freedom and responsibility

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abstract
The environmental crisis—because of its complexity, urgency, unpredictability, and scale—requires a defence of the educational role of philosophy and an account of how to implement philosophical pedagogy in the exploration of environmental issues. This is the aim of this paper. As we face an uncertain future, all educators must consider what knowledge and "know-how" young people need, and what kind of people they need to become, if they are to survive and thrive in this changing world. Philosophical educators cannot assume the ongoing utility of their practice, nor can they expect that their practice should remain the same. In the context of the current crisis, the philosophical exploration of emerging environmental issues raises challenges for those who work in the spirit of Community of Enquiry and these challenges require both discipline and flexibility from practitioners and participants. This paper outlines some of the adaptations that I have used to try and respond flexibly to this predicament. But I also defend an issue on which I believe philosophical educators should hold the line—namely the importance of being non-directive on matters that are philosophically contentious. I defend the view that despite the existential nature of this emergency and its profound urgency, it is not the role of philosophical educators to convince or coerce philosophical learners to adopt particular views on the *philosophical* questions that this crisis raises. This is because all philosophical enquiry involves creating an environment of freedom and responsibility with respect to what participants believe to be right and true and what they do as a result. Participants in enquiry must be *epistemically free* to explore and evaluate philosophical questions as they see fit, but they must also be *epistemically responsible* for the evidence and arguments on which their provisional judgements rest. Equally, participants in enquiry must be *ethically free* to respond to philosophical problems in ways that express and cultivate their authentic character and commitments, but they remain *ethically responsible* for their true motivations, their professed values and for the real-life consequences of their words and actions, and their silences and inaction. This paper explores some ways to optimise freedom and responsibility in all forms of philosophical enquiry, drawing specifically on examples of my work with young people on philosophically contentious environmental issues. These examples also highlight some of the adaptations that I have developed to address the challenges that environmental enquiry brings.

keywords: environment; community; enquiry; freedom; responsibility.

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no final, é o nosso futuro que será mudado:
investigação sobre o meio ambiente com liberdade e responsabilidade

resumo
A crise ambiental – por causa da sua complexidade, urgência, imprevisibilidade e escala – requer a defesa do papel educacional da filosofia e um panorama de como implementar a pedagogia filosófica na exploração das questões ambientais. Este é o objetivo do presente trabalho. Conforme enfrentamos um futuro incerto, todos os educadores devem considerar que conhecimentos e "know-how" os jovens precisam, e que tipo de pessoa eles precisam de se tornar, se quiserem sobreviver e prosperar neste mundo em transformação. Educadores filosóficos não podem presumir a utilidade contínua de sua prática, nem podem esperar que ela permaneça a mesma. No contexto da corrente crise, a investigação filosófica dos problemas ambientais emergentes cria desafios para aqueles que trabalham no espírito da Comunidade de Investigação e esses desafios exigem tanto disciplina quanto flexibilidade por parte dos praticantes e participantes. Este artigo resume algumas das adaptações que tenho usado para tentar responder flexivelmente a essa situação. Mas também defendo uma questão sobre a qual acredito que os educadores filosóficos devem manter a linha aberta – a importância de não ser diretivo em assuntos que são filosoficamente controversos. Defendo a ideia de que, apesar da natureza existencial dessa emergência e de sua profunda urgência, não é o papel dos educadores filosóficos convencer ou coagir os estudantes a adotarem pontos de vista particulares sobre as questões *filosóficas* que essa crise levanta. Isso porque toda investigação filosófica envolve a criação de um ambiente de liberdade e responsabilidade, com respeito ao que os participantes acreditam ser certo e verdadeiro e ao que eles fazem como resultado disso. Os participantes da investigação devem ser *epistemicamente livres* para explorar e avaliar as questões filosóficas conforme lhes fizer sentido, mas também devem ser *epistemicamente responsáveis* pelas evidências e pelos argumentos nos quais seus juízos provisórios se baseiam. Da mesma forma, os participantes da investigação devem ser *eticamente livres* para responder aos problemas filosóficos de formas que expressem e cultivem seu caráter e compromisso autênticos, mas eles permanecem *eticamente responsáveis* por suas verdadeiras motivações, seus valores proferidos e pelas consequências reais de suas palavras e ações, e seus silêncios e inações. Este artigo explora alguns caminhos para otimizar a liberdade e a responsabilidade em todas as formas de investigação filosófica, baseando-se especificamente em exemplos do meu trabalho com jovens sobre questões ambientais filosoficamente controversas. Esses exemplos também destacam algumas das adaptações que desenvolvi para abordar os desafios que a investigação ambiental traz.

palavras-chave: meio ambiente; comunidade; investigação; liberdade; responsabilidade.

al final, nuestro futuro es lo que va a ser cambiado:
investigar sobre el medio ambiente con libertad y responsabilidad

resumen
La crisis medioambiental -debido a su complejidad, urgencia, imprevisibilidad y escala- requiere una defensa del papel educativo de la filosofía y una exposición de cómo implementar la pedagogía filosófica en la exploración de las cuestiones medioambientales. Este es el objetivo del presente artículo. Ante un futuro incierto, todos los educadores deben plantearse qué conocimientos y "saber hacer" necesitan los jóvenes, y en qué tipo de personas necesitan convertirse, si quieren sobrevivir y prosperar en este mundo

cambiante. Los educadores filosóficos no pueden dar por sentada la utilidad actual de su práctica, ni pueden esperar que su práctica siga siendo la misma. En el contexto de la crisis actual, la exploración filosófica de cuestiones medioambientales emergentes resulta desafiante a quienes trabajan en el espíritu de la comunidad de investigación, y exige tanto disciplina como flexibilidad por parte de los practicantes y los participantes. En el contexto de la crisis actual, la exploración filosófica de cuestiones medioambientales emergentes resulta desafiante a quienes trabajan en el espíritu de la Comunidad de Investigación, y exige tanto disciplina como flexibilidad por parte de los practicantes y los participantes. Este trabajo presenta algunas de las adaptaciones que he utilizado para intentar responder con flexibilidad a este asunto. Pero también defiendo una cuestión en la que creo que los educadores filosóficos deben poner un límite, a saber, la importancia de ser no-directivos en cuestiones que son filosóficamente polémicas. Defiendo la postura de que, a pesar de la naturaleza existencial de esta emergencia y de su profunda urgencia, no es función de los educadores filosóficos convencer o coaccionar a los estudiantes de filosofía para que adopten puntos de vista particulares sobre las cuestiones *filosóficas* que plantea esta crisis. Esto se debe a que toda investigación filosófica implica la creación de un entorno de libertad y responsabilidad con respecto a lo que los participantes creen que es correcto y verdadero y lo que hacen en consecuencia. Los participantes en la investigación deben ser *epistémicamente libres* para explorar y evaluar las cuestiones filosóficas como consideren oportuno, pero también deben ser *epistémicamente responsables* por las evidencias y los argumentos en los que se basan sus juicios provisionales. Del mismo modo, los participantes en la investigación deben ser *éticamente libres* para responder a los problemas filosóficos de maneras que expresen y cultiven sus carácter y compromisos auténticos, pero permanecen *éticamente responsables* por sus auténticas motivaciones, los valores que profesan y las consecuencias en la vida real de sus palabras y acciones, así como de sus silencios y su inacción. Este artículo explora algunas formas de optimizar la libertad y la responsabilidad en todas las formas de investigación filosófica, basándose específicamente en ejemplos de mi trabajo con jóvenes sobre cuestiones medioambientales filosóficamente controvertidas. Estos ejemplos también ponen de relieve algunas de las adaptaciones que he desarrollado para hacer frente a los desafíos que plantea la investigación medioambiental.

palabras clave: medio ambiente; comunidad; investigación; libertad; responsabilidad.

in the end, it's our future that's going to be changed: enquiring about the environment with freedom and responsibility

> Kai: I think we should also be part of this [climate action] because as Luca said… age doesn't matter, we can all be a part, whether it's planting trees in your garden… in the end, it's our future that's going to be changed.

1. why practise philosophical enquiry?

Philosophical educators have different motivations, but many share the view that a philosophical education is part of what it means to learn well and to live well. Over the years that I have worked in universities, schools, communities and charities, this has been my motivation and I have argued that philosophical education cultivates a suite of intellectual and moral virtues that serve learners now, and equip them to face the future (Sowey & Lockrobin, 2020). However, in recent years, as the horror of the climate and ecological crisis has become impossible to ignore, I have revisited these ideals with wilting optimism. It has become evident that educators who make ambitious claims about the value of a philosophical education must re-examine their foundations as we enter this period of turbulence.

In a crisis, what does it mean to learn well and to live well? One kind of answer rests on predictions we make about our students' future, and to make these predictions, we can look to some of the abiding features of human experience. Michael Hand argues that "children should be equipped by their education to deal effectively with at least those questions that feature prominently and pressingly in ordinary human lives" (Hand, 2008, p. 7). However, in an unpredictable future, it becomes more difficult to know which features of human experience will endure. If ordinary human lives are upturned, and current assumptions about the content and methods of education are challenged, we may need to ask new questions. And it may not be clear to today's educators, precisely what those questions ought to be. David Kennedy captures this concern when he

asks: "If children will inhabit a world that their parents can only imagine, how can adults prepare them for it?" (2010, p. 72).

Philosophical educators, like all educators, must think about the future and what their students need to learn in order to live in it. But this does not mean that education should be understood *exclusively* in these terms, nor that adults should think of themselves as the ones who are *solely* responsible for determining what this preparation must look like. Children are often viewed as incomplete, living in a transitional state of becoming fully human, a state that means they lack some of the necessary qualities of adulthood, and even personhood (Kennedy, 2006; Cassidy, 2007). Kennedy, Cassidy and others, dispute this deficit model of childhood and the assumptions about preparation and authority that it generates. Children are *already* serious participants in their own education and in the wider world around them, argue Cassidy and Mohr Lone (2020, p. 23). What is more, children and young people can bring this influence to bear when shaping their own education.

Many who philosophise with children—whom they see as intelligent actors capable of self-determination—will be sympathetic with this view, as I am. But anyone alert to the climate crisis cannot ignore the fact that an unstable future deeply disturbs young people's participation in the present by unsettling their feelings of safety, sense of purpose and hopes for the future. Equally, the continuing destruction of nature obscures young people's view of what a good education looks like. Just like their teachers, learners must struggle with the uncertainty and powerlessness that environmental disaster brings. When we encourage learners to participate in educational conversations about the environment, we risk adding to their burden.

2. why practise philosophical enquiry in an environmental crisis?

If in the next few decades, land becomes uninhabitable, populations are displaced, food is scarce and military conflicts escalate, all educators must reconsider what knowledge and "know-how" young people need to develop and what kind of people they need to become? Philosophical educators cannot assume

that philosophical enquiry has a role to play in this scenario, nor can they expect that their practices of philosophising with children should remain the same. The environmental crisis, because of its complexity, urgency, unpredictability, and scale, requires a defence of the educational role of philosophy and an account of how to implement it, which is what this paper offers.

The first part of this defence begins by establishing that there is a philosophical dimension to understanding the environmental crisis, despite the fact that it is often discussed in purely scientific— and some say "Scientistic"—terms (e.g. Blue, 2018). I maintain that environmental education in a crisis requires philosophical enquiry, but not for the reasons some may assume, namely that the truth of anthropogenic climate change and ecological destruction is itself a philosophically contentions matter. Evidently, some do still doubt the overwhelming scientific evidence on issues such as rising global temperature trends (NASA, 2023) and accelerating species extinction (WWF, 2023), on which experts sound the alarm. But while the reasons for this persistent doubt are intriguing and invite various forms of political, economic, psychological, social, and philosophical explanation, the *truth* of these claims is a matter that has been satisfactorily established using empirical methods. For this reason, it is generally not in the interests of science, philosophy, children, or the planet, to pretend otherwise. Philosophical enquiry is best equipped to investigate questions that empirical enquiry cannot. This is just as well, since beneath our growing empirical knowledge there is a deep reservoir of questions—about existence, meaning, knowledge, value and justice—that philosophy is well-positioned to answer. These are questions like: "What is wrong with extinction?"; "Is a situation ever hopeless?"; "Can we know what the future holds?"; "Do the lives of others matter as much as our own?" and "Can the burdens of climate mitigation be shared equitably?" (Lockrobin, 2020).

Having established that the environmental crisis raises philosophical questions, the second part of this defence involves establishing the need to address these questions philosophically with learners. While it might be interesting to do

so, both ardent environmentalists and those who are more ambivalent might reasonably ask whether philosophy is what we need in a genuine emergency.

I take the view that philosophy cannot and must not ignore these questions—and this is especially true for the philosophy that happens in public places, among learners whose motivations for engaging are to better understand themselves and the changing world around them. This is because children and young people want and need the philosophical skills and dispositions required to satisfactorily answer such questions, along with other questions that will arise out of unforeseen technological advancements and policy developments that today's educators simply cannot imagine. Community of Enquiry, practised regularly, cultivates these skills so that learners can arrive at their own provisional answers some of the time.

Those who work in this way will object that much of the time, philosophical enquiry does *not* supply clear answers, and often generates even more questions. This is undoubtedly true. Yet philosophy offers something even more educationally valuable to children and young people facing an uncertain future. The practice of philosophical enquiry shapes intellectual and moral habits that calcify into patterns of thought and feeling that position young people in a more epistemically and ethically resilient position. They become people who are disposed to raise questions about existence, meaning, knowledge, value and justice and they are people who appreciate that *even if* all the facts pertinent to the climate crisis could be known, taught and learnt, the thorny question of how best to live and learn in light of them would remain, questions that require curiosity, humility and determination to make progress on.

In summary, we ought to practise philosophical enquiry in an environmental crisis because this situation raises pressing philosophical questions which require philosophical skills to investigate, and moreover while investigating these questions, those who engage in enquiry develop intellectual and moral virtues that will equip them to face novel and unknown predicaments as people who can think together with others and for themselves.

3. how should philosophical enquiry be practised in an environmental crisis?

While we may accept that the environmental crisis has a philosophical dimension and that philosophy has a place to play in environmental education, the question of how it should be practised, is a source of further controversy. What I will call "environmental enquiry" generates certain challenges, for facilitators and participants, that require both flexibility of approach on one hand, and a renewed commitment to certain disciplinary principles on the other.

In this section, I summarise five of these challenges and explain the adaptations I have used to try and address them. While l defend the need for adaptability here, in section four, I outline my reasons for thinking that those who employ Community of Enquiry, should remain disciplined in another area of practice—namely that they should remain non-directive on issues that are philosophically open, in order to promote the freedom and responsibility of participants. In part six, I build on this description with contextualised examples of these ideas.

3.1 challenges caused by gaps in knowledge

The environmental crisis is intricate and multifactorial—to explore it philosophically requires the grasp of a range of information that will likely go beyond the general knowledge and personal experience of the participants in the room. Environmental enquiry must rest on some basic, accurate empirical knowledge of the scientific, geographic, economic, technological, historical and political landscape from which these philosophical questions arise. While one cannot hope to achieve a comprehensive view of these multifactorial issues, environmental enquiry *must be sufficiently informed* to allow them to adequately stimulate, facilitate and evaluate an educational encounter. In practical terms, this might mean that the facilitator has to research the issue they propose to explore, to increase their own knowledge and to provide a basic level of initial instruction for their students such that they can meaningfully participate in dialogue. It may also warrant facilitator interventions mid-enquiry to address grave misconceptions, or

substantial follow-up work afterwards to address gaps in knowledge revealed by the discussion.

3.2 challenges caused by polarisation and blind spots

While the science of global warming and biodiversity loss is no longer in doubt, the philosophical questions raised by this crisis are often so polarising that children may simply inherit the positions of their parents or peer group—for example around diet and travel—without necessarily encountering the most relevant considerations. Participants in these discussions may arrive with blind spots. Consequently, environmental enquiry *must be carefully balanced* to foster consideration of reasonable alternative views. Once again, the facilitator must tread carefully since, as Bleazby *et al.* note, unreflective attempts to remain "neutral"—or to advocate for the opposing argument—can unwittingly lead educators to legitimise unreasonable or unfounded viewpoints (2022, p. 3). The philosophically sensitive facilitator must retain a strong sense of the topography of the debate, understanding where there is genuine consensus and controversy, and anticipating the potential trajectory of new or neglected ideas. With this in view, they may need to intervene where relevant perspectives are not spontaneously raised by members of the community. For example, some participants debating the importance of personal choice in their immediate context, may not always consider the global impact of rich western lifestyle choices on poorer countries (United Nations, 2020). By raising this issue and inviting participants to consider its salience, the facilitator's intention is never to endorse a particular philosophical view, but to expose participants to a broader range of well-informed perspectives—something that is especially significant when considering global issues that affect people in profound and radically different ways.

3.3 challenges caused by powerful emotional responses

Philosophical discussion about the environmental crisis often raises powerful emotions, and even when it does not, it is hard to grasp its significance without attending to its emotional dimension—to the fact that it inspires fear,

derision, anger and hopefulness in different people. To meet this challenge, environmental enquiry *must be highly sensitive* – the facilitator must allow and even encourage emotional responses, and they must sharpen their skills of perception and good judgement through a combination of frequent practice and the creation of trusting relationships where children's emotional states can be read more accurately and expressed more easily. Generally, this sensitivity is in service of philosophical progress, if one accepts as I do that philosophical enquiry is not a rationalistic enterprise but a holistic way of thinking and being that aspires to caring and collaborative—as well as critical and creative thinking. But occasionally sensitivity must trump philosophical progress, for example where children are in such distress that it seems more constructive to support them in simply articulating their fears rather than appearing to interrogate them.

3.4 challenges caused by young people's limited power to act

This crisis is an urgent issue in which the timescale for prevention, mitigation and adaptation is measured in months and years (IPCC, 2018). While there is still a role for talk in understanding the situation, dialogue that disregards action is difficult to defend at this late stage. Consequently, environmental enquiry must examine individual and institutional actions and inactions, unpack their respective justifications, and determine which are feasible and consistent with one's beliefs and values whether pro-environmental or not. To put this in another way, environmental enquiry *must be appropriately empowering*. It should promote children's personal agency while acknowledging that, as individuals in a society of unequal power relations, this agency is limited.

3.5 challenges caused by the risk of indoctrination

Finally, the environmental crisis is a subject on which some educators have strong views which may tempt them to unduly influence the discussion. As I will go on to explain in section four, this kind of influence is unacceptable in philosophical enquiry because it impedes the ability of participants to think together and to think for themselves, which I take to be one of the central

educational aims of engaging in non-directive enquiry rather than directive instruction.

In typical P4C, one of the ways that facilitators avoid undue influence is by refraining from making substantive contributions. But I have previously endorsed the idea that in environmental enquiry, participants often require extra support to understand the scientific basis for certain claims or their economic, historical, political (etc.) context. Consequently, the facilitator's substantive interventions *are* warranted in some cases, but these interventions may blur the line between appropriate and inappropriate interventions.

In practice, philosophical educators influence the philosophical trajectory of an enquiry all the time, through their choices of stimuli, the facilitation questions that they do (or do not) ask and through their non-verbal cues. Generally, these interventions are symptomatic of the imperfect, interpersonal nature of dialogue and nothing to worry about. Yet occasionally, and especially in environmental enquiry, there is a risk of indoctrination which is defined by Michael Hand as the act of "imparting beliefs" to students in a way that "bypasses their reason" and is designed to "bully, seduce or cajole them into believing" (2020, p. 9).

Environmental enquiry risks being indoctrinatory in cases where facilitators *deliberately* bypass student's reason—perhaps motivated by passionate environmentalism or climate scepticism—and in instances where they *unconsciously* do so, as Michelle Sowey and I have previously argued (2020):

> Just because a teacher's view is rationally defended and the student comes to accept it as true, it doesn't follow that reason actually did the persuading. The teacher's status, power or privilege might be turning the gears; a classroom culture of naivety, deference or laziness might be at play; the student might be especially unconfident, reverential or teacher-pleasing.

Furthermore, given the urgency of the situation and the need to instruct students on some empirical matters, it is reasonable to suspect that facilitators may be more likely 'to use *all* the tools of influence available to them—rhetorical as well as logical, especially in defence of philosophical positions they hold firmly and where the empirical evidence offers some support (ibid). Consequently, environmental enquiry must take steps to avoid becoming indoctrinatory.

Together, these five requirements—that environmental enquiry must be informed, balanced, sensitive, empowering, and non-indoctrinatory—are risky. The risk is that when enquiring about the environment, the philosophical nature of the discussion is marginalised in favour of establishing the facts, balancing debates, exploring emotional reactions, planning practical action, or holding back, for fear of indoctrination. Even if we accept that the environmental crisis raises philosophical questions that require some form of philosophical education to unpack, these risky requirements raise doubts over whether some form of Community of Enquiry is the right way forward. One might wonder if some combination of direct instruction, debating, psychological therapy, activism, or hands-off facilitation might be more appropriate.

4. why does environmental education need philosophical enquiry?

I want to defend the valuable contribution that the Community of Enquiry makes to the education of young people growing up in the shadow of environmental disaster. My argument is part theoretical, resting on claims about the role of freedom and responsibility in the Community of Enquiry, but it is also empirical, drawing on anecdotal examples from my environmental enquiries with children. To this end, I hope I can avoid the charge that the use of ideal theory—common in the literature on P4C—blurs the boundary between the descriptive and the normative such that we cannot see how to make progress in non-ideal classrooms (Chetty & Haynes, 2022).

Environmental education is in part a matter of grasping various facts about earth systems, including the biosphere, climate and societies. These elements can be taught directively, via instruction as we see with the Carbon Literacy (2022) project for example. Instruction is a necessary part of environmental education, but an instructive approach on its own, is not enough, since—as I have previously stated—even if all the facts pertinent to the climate crisis could be known, taught and learnt, the thorny question of how best to live and learn in light of them would remain. This is a question that learners must answer for themselves, both in the present and in future situations that today's educators cannot imagine.

Despite our ignorance about the future, we can claim with some plausibility that to be adequately educated to inhabit today's world and to face the environmental crisis, young people must acquire the ability to determine—for themselves—what is true and what is good in the context of their own lives and learning. They must learn to do this cooperatively, with others who may think differently, but they must also do this without an epistemic or ethical authority—like a parent or a teacher—to adjudicate. This intellectual and moral independence is what "ordinary" life demands of people, but in *extraordinary* times, the need to think together and to think for oneself, when faced with novel and nuanced predicaments, becomes even more pressing.

5. what kind of enquiry best serves environmental education?

5.1. community of (environmental) enquiry

To cultivate the kinds of dispositions demanded by extraordinary circumstances, learners need an environment of freedom and responsibility, and this is what the Community of Enquiry offers. Philosophical enquiry practised this way, strives to equip learners to think with others and to think for themselves and to value their peer's experience and expertise while being led by the evidence and their own integrity, even when this leaves them at odds with the consensus.

5.2 non-directive environmental enquiry

Learners cannot think independently—either as members of a community or as individuals— if they rely too heavily on a directive teacher whom they regard as an authority figure with the final word on what is true, or what is good. This is especially true when the subject under discussion is philosophically contentious, as is often the case when talking about the environmental crisis. Learners must practise navigating uncharted territory using their individual and shared intellectual resources and drawing on their personal and collective values. They need to practise this way of being in the world, because an environmentally unstable future will throw up new predicaments that require this kind of intellectual and moral resourcefulness.

In a world changed by the destruction of nature, there will remain many authorities, for example on technological and ecological matters—but today's young people will also encounter philosophically contentious issues caused by new kinds of conflict, inequality, or competition, where there are no such authorities. For this reason, environmental education cannot be conducted via instruction alone. While instruction is an appropriate approach for the teaching of well-established factual aspects of environmental science, geography, politics etc., an educator cannot present philosophically contested issues in the same way. The instructors simply do not have the answers. A philosophical educator must also refrain from "directive teaching" defined by Hand (2020), in the context of moral education, as teaching with the aim of bringing it about that students understand and accept "the justification for subscribing to moral standards" (p. 5). However, Sowey and I have previously argued that the directive teaching that Hand envisages is incompatible with the Community of Enquiry on the grounds that there are multiple ways in which moral standards should be regarded as controversial by virtue of their justification, the meaning of moral concepts and their application in real-world contexts. There is a broader sense in which I would advise against directive teaching in a Community of Enquiry, even when the subject matter isn't narrowly focussed on moral standards. If they want their students to develop the freedom and responsibility to tackle the kind of challenges thrown up by the environmental crisis, philosophical educators must refrain from deciding in advance what their students ought to believe, feel or do at the conclusion of the enquiry, *even* where such conclusions seem philosophically uncontroversial to the teacher—such as the view that urgent action on climate change is needed—and *even* when the situation under discussion is widely regarded as desperately urgent.

Environmental Enquiry requires philosophical educators to renew their commitment to non-directive facilitation and to the preservation of the Community of Enquiry as a rarefied space where the usual power dynamic between teachers and students is suspended. For a brief period, in this space, learners can take on the freedom and responsibility required to address these

issues authentically in the present, while acquiring the skills needed to live with and act on those views in the future. To safeguard this space, there can be no direct instruction or directive facilitation about philosophical views or values, however obvious the teacher takes them to be.

The exception, of course, is in the establishment of basic rules for dialogue such as to listen respectfully etc.—since enquiry requires these rules to get off the ground. However, in time, they too can become the subject of discussion. Students might rightfully ask: "What constitutes respect?" and "Do we have to listen to *all* ideas?" The problem with placing rules permanently beyond question is akin to the problem with educators routinely intervening to endorse an idea, shut down a line of enquiry, push a preferred conclusion, or summarise the discussion in terms that they endorse. In so doing, educators deprive their students of the opportunity to do the valuable epistemological and ethical work themselves. Educators may believe they are helping their students, but this is misguided. Even if a teacher does possess a particular philosophically-derived truth about the environmental crisis, when they impart it, they take from their students a vital opportunity to do the work that will make them better thinkers and better people.

5.3 free and responsible environmental enquiry

The freedom that I endorse is in part, the freedom of the individual student, to question the views of adults or peers and arrive at one's own view. But as Peter Worley (2021) argues, the Community of Enquiry embodies a more ancient and collectivist sense of the individual than our modern usage of the term implies. The freedom to play with ideas, enjoyed by both individuals and groups in the Community of Enquiry, is regulated by some shared sense of reasonableness, as he articulates:

> [O]ne is free to speak, but one may be held to account, one may be free to defend a position, but a position may only be defended if it can be shown to be *defensible*. It is the community's duty to test a position's defensibility or search for a defence not hitherto thought of. (2021, p. 88)

In Worley's work, we begin to see how epistemic freedom implies a certain level of *epistemic* responsibility. But I am inclined to go further, arguing that

freedom and responsibility are relevant *ethically* as well as epistemologically. In what follows I outline what I mean by these terms pointing at some of the ways in which they overlap and must be balanced by the philosophical educator.

5.4 epistemically free and responsible environmental enquiry

Participants in enquiry must be *epistemically free* to explore, evaluate and answer philosophical questions in ways that fit the evidence, arguments, and their experience. They must not be excessively constrained by the facilitator's plan for the dialogue nor engaged in a game of guessing what the facilitator wants to hear. They must be free to share their personal experience (of how, for example, policies like city-wide congestion charges disadvantage cab drivers, often from ethnic minorities (Mahmood, 2020), without fear that it will be disparaged by the majority. To give various positions due consideration, enquirers must be free to adopt and reject multiple positions with a sense that even unpopular views might be insightful—such as the suggestion that countries should reduce international trade to curb emissions (Kantar Public, 2021). To see old problems in new ways, they must be free to play with ideas and make suggestions and offer solutions, for example on how to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). They must also be free to make mistakes, since by doing so they develop a sense of what it *really* takes to hold a reasonable position. To fully engage in philosophical dialogue, where issues remain perennially open, they must break free from the expectation that the questions under investigation are already settled.

On the other side of the same coin, participants in enquiry must be *epistemically responsible* for the views they accept or espouse and the evidence and arguments on which their provisional judgements rest. They cannot treat the fact that the last decade is likely to have been the hottest period in the last 125,000 years (IPCC, 2018) as a matter of personal opinion, nor can they disregard the testimony of fossil fuel workers who fear for their future in a low carbon economy (Sicotte, Joyce & Hesse, 2022). They must be amenable to reason, defending their

views and changing their mind when their own position is shown to be untenable. To make the right epistemic demands of themselves and others, they need to retain the sense that on every philosophical issue, their perspective is limited, and they might be wrong.

5.5 ethically free and responsible environmental enquiry

Equally, participants in any enquiry must be *ethically free* to respond to philosophical problems in ways that express and cultivate their authentic character and commitments. They must be liberated from what we might think of as "the script" on certain moral matters, for example the commonly-held, unsubstantiated ethical belief that climate mitigation is a solely matter of personal responsibility (Kymlicka, 2012, p. 72). To understand and articulate what really matters to them, they must be free to speak up for—or speak out against—the expectations of parents, school, church or state and they must never be compelled to espouse views that compromise their ethical integrity. Enquirers should be free to consider and share what they feel as well as what they think, so they can reconcile the two. To better understand the values of others, they must be free to listen to the stories of a wider range of others within and beyond their own classroom, including ethical vantage points that are ambiguous or controversial such as the stories of "super-rich preppers" who attempt to use their wealth to guard against the risks of climate breakdown (Rushkoff, 2022). While they consider different views on what matters in life, enquirers should be free to try on different views without committing to them, and they should be free to do this without the risk of knee-jerk moral condemnation. Finally, while Communities of Enquiry will have ethical guidelines, enquirers should be free to critique these norms.

At the same time, participants in philosophical enquiry remain *ethically responsible* for their true motivations, their professed values and for the real-life consequences of their words and actions, and their silences and inaction. They must go beyond "rationality", a concept "which is all too often rigid, exclusively deductive, ahistorical and uncreative" (Splitter & Sharp, 1995, p. 6) and become

more "reasonable"—a quality that Matthew Lipman regards as a combination of reasoning and good judgement: "to be able to reason and to be open to reason; to be able to make sound judgments and to be respectful of the judgments others have made" (1998, p. 280). Thinking and acting reasonably, can be useful when exploring any philosophical issue, but it takes on new significance in the exploration of complex issues —such as population control—where the risk that dialogue will cause harm, for example by perpetuating the class and racial interests of the majority (Chetty, 2018). Ethically responsible enquirers must appreciate that power is distributed unequally in Communities of Enquiry, as it is in the world, and they must be supported by the facilitator to take responsibility for addressing this. They must also appreciate that words are powerful too and that they are not free to say anything at any cost. This responsibility for the power of people and their words does not rest on individuals alone—just as the community regulates epistemic expectations, they too guard the ethos of the community. Within the dialogue, participants should care for each other, be charitable in their interpretation of what has been said and be willing to call out disrespect. They should also feel responsibility for calling into question the very norms that regulate their conversations including ideas such as "reasonableness" as Chetty does (2018). Ideally, this ethos of criticality, creativity, collaboration and care, should permeate other areas of life and learning, eventually calling into question the relationship between what people say in the circle and how they live beyond it. They should be curious, for example, about why their moral objections to unethical corporations do not translate into acts of lobbying or boycotting, as research on the subject suggests (Office For National Statistics, 2021).

5.6. summary

I claim that part of what it means to be philosophically educated, involves practising and internalising the dispositions of thought and action that life demands of a person, both now and in the future—despite its radical uncertainty. These abilities are *intellectual virtues* like open-mindedness, perseverance and humility, and *moral virtues* like courage, honesty, and fairness. Virtues are patterns

of thinking, feeling, noticing, desiring, valuing, and acting that take root in a person's life and become part of who they are, offering stability of thought and action and promoting resilience in times of upheaval and flux. While educators can exemplify these virtues in their conduct, defend them in school assemblies, demand them in school rules and policies, or promote them via directive teaching, they cannot *acquire* them for learners. This takes time, patience and practice and it is work that the individual must undertake for themselves. The natural mode for this patient educational practice is enquiry—which is a protected space where learners are free to explore what is right and true while assuming responsibility for the beliefs and values that they acquire as a result. Anyone will benefit from learning to navigate intellectual and ethical life independently and in cooperation with others, but in an environmental crisis, where old certainties break down, these abilities become indispensable.

6. what does enquiring about the environment look like in practice?

Next, I'd like to breathe some life into this theory via a particular example from my practice. In early 2022, I worked with my colleague Michelle Sowey on a project we called "Too Small to Make a Difference?", a series of sessions on environmental philosophy for young people in the UK and Australia, our respective homes. For us, the environmental crisis is an issue about which we have very strong views already, and so our task was to balance our commitment to the value of addressing the environmental crisis in a meaningful and impactful way with our commitment to the value of a philosophical education that safeguards freedom and responsibility. This work also required making some of the adaptations mentioned earlier, which I will discuss in what follows.

6.1 environmental enquiry must be sufficiently informed

We believe that in the interests of inclusivity, knowledge gaps should not disbar learners—or educators—from engaging in philosophical conversations. Yet we also appreciate that the environmental crisis is complex, and that participants in environmental enquiry must be sufficiently informed for the enquiry to be meaningful and productive. In developing "Too Small to Make a Difference?", we

recognised that we would need both to undertake more than the usual amount of preparatory research and to explicitly address participants' knowledge gaps before and during each enquiry session.

We chose a range of stimulus materials that included expressions of the scientific consensus on global warming trends and biodiversity loss (NASA, 2022), contested academic research on the historical efficacy of nonviolent direct action (Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008), news images and articles from respected sources (Harvey, 2019) and video campaign material from activist organisations (Natural Climate Solutions, 2019). Taken together, these materials plug some knowledge gaps without oversimplifying the situation or reducing environmental education to the transmission of factual information.

While my early work approached environmental issues more obliquely, taking as stimulus, abstract philosophical thought experiments such as the Tragedy of the Commons (Hardin, 1974) and allegorical children's literature such as The Giving Tree (Silverstein, 1964) and The Lorax (Seuss, 1971), this collaboration took the gaps in learner's knowledge more seriously. While the affective, aesthetic, and narrative qualities of stimulus remain vitally important, here our aim was to remove some of the knowledge barriers that make it difficult for learners to explore this issue in an ethically and epistemologically credible way.

6.2 environmental enquiry must be carefully balanced

We know that dialogue on any topic can be foiled by polarised thinking, but this is especially true in the case of conversations about the environmental crisis, where children can replicate the views of their parents and peers and can be limited by their experience, imagination and the online media they consume. To address this, we structured the sessions in such a way as to ensure that participants were exposed to a range of competing views on contested issues beyond those likely to be raised by the other children in the session.

While some philosophical enquiries introduce a single, ambiguous stimulus and allow the dialogue to flow from there, our approach has been more structured. We mapped out possible stimuli and questions in a loose, branching plan that anticipated some objections and replies. Rather than directing participants

towards any one conclusion—something that would impair their freedom and responsibility—this structure invited students to move in one direction and then in another with some momentum, while ensuring that they were free to circumvent the structure entirely, finding new lines of enquiry and following them instead. Our aim was to induce a shift from a state of confidence to a state of confliction, something that can be philosophically beneficial in any enquiry, but it is especially important in open public workshops (as in the project described here), which are likely to attract a group of like-minded young participants from pro-environmental families. Criticality can be hard to come by in such a context, and complacency can emerge, with participants sensing that they already have all the answers.

So, beginning with a claim made in an campaign video (Natural Climate Solutions, 2019), that tree-planting is one simple and natural solution to global warming, we then investigated some of the assumptions that underpin it, first querying the suggestion that *any* solutions are simple, and then exploring reasons why we might fail to solve environmental problems even if their solutions *are* simple. This enabled participants to confront the mixed messaging they receive about the crisis, which describes it as both intractable and resolvable at the same time. We went on to create space for children to question the claim that "the schoolstrikes have achieved nothing", an assertion made by the respected young activist Greta Thunberg (Harvey, 2019). Calling this claim into question reminded participants that *all* evaluative claims can be disputed, even those that are based on accurate scientific information and that are defended by trustworthy sources.

> When I asked: "Is the solution to the climate crisis simple?", Sasha (then aged 8) said yes.
>
> Sasha S: Yes, it is quite simple, just if everybody worked together to do all these things, then it will be very simple.
>
> Facilitator: Earlier, Rebecca gave us a theory about why, if it [the solution to the climate crisis] is simple, people haven't done it yet… she says: 'because they can't be bothered'. How do you respond to that? Skye?
>
> Skye: Well, I agree with that, because most people just think that if they don't do it, it doesn't make much of a difference, when actually, if *everyone* did it and it would make a lot more of a

> difference. [We] have to get everyone involved, [but] most people think that they can't make much of a difference if they contribute, so they don't, [that's why] they can't be bothered.

Here the children are epistemically free to evaluate claims as they see fit, but they are epistemically responsible for the evidence on which those judgements rest. To facilitate this exercise of freedom and responsibility, the participants are reminded of an explanation provided by one of their peers and they are invited to respond to the ideas and arguments already in the room. The reminder comes without any attempt by the facilitator to do the thinking for the participants. Stepping into the space this restraint creates, Skye accommodates Sasha's claim that climate mitigation requires collective rather than individual effort and then tries to make sense of Rebecca's claim that climate inaction is a kind of laziness or apathy. She does this by attributing people's inaction to a reasonable belief about what little difference one person can make. In this new light, the solutions can be at once simple and complex, thereby making some sense of what at first seemed paradoxical.

The next stimulus we offered was writer and activist George Monbiot's advice to young people to (i) vote for people who defend nature, (ii) share campaign videos and talk about the crisis, and (iii) join movements that fight for nature. We asked the participants which—if any—of these solutions they consider most viable for young people, and which of the solutions they believe would be the most impactful. We then invited them to respond to the implicit assumption that young people should do anything at all.

> Facilitator: Why think that young people should be doing *anything* to address the climate crisis? Is George Monbiot right to be telling young people what they can do?
>
> Daniel: Yes, he is right because young people still contribute to bad climates. For example, young people are several times more likely to play video games, which take a lot of power.
>
> Xanthe: Sorry.… I think that young people *have* to fix it, because we may not have got us into the situation, but if we start fixing it now, we will learn habits—good habits—and those habits will make a big difference. And also, I just wanted to say, we only have 12 years until climate change will be unstoppable!

> Luca: [Children do have to do something] not because they caused it. But because young and old people—[it] doesn't matter—all of us are people that can do the exact same tasks.

Here we see the children alert to the ways in which they can assume and reject ethical responsibility based on their prior acts and their power to make a difference. In establishing these positions, Xanthe and Luca respectfully dispute Daniel's suggestion that it is young people's environmental impact that makes them responsible, while maintaining that young people are indeed responsible due to their power to act. As Luca argues that age doesn't matter, his voice grows more ardent. These are not sterile discussions of hypothetical positions. While being ethically free to respond in ways that express their authentic commitments, the participants remain ethically responsible for their motivations and for the real-life consequences of their action or inaction.

6. 3 environmental enquiry must be highly sensitive

Luca ends this rousing contribution with a poignant and characteristically poetic remark in which he says: "But I still feel like a worm in nothingness that is completely powerless", to which I reply: "Thank you Luca and I hear that, what you said there about still feeling powerless".

While we appreciate that many philosophical dialogues arouse emotions, it became obvious that the environmental crisis is for many people a source of profound anxiety that we, as facilitators, can do little to assuage. Caught between a desire to protect our students from distress while also allowing them to express their intense feelings, we realised that environmental enquiry must not only acknowledge emotions, but also explicitly investigate them. With this in mind, the first and last question we asked participants in this workshop was 'How do you feel about what you've heard?' In doing so we signalled that this is a place where feelings are relevant and worthy of consideration and respect.

This affective engagement did not always arouse *difficult* emotions. We made sure to acknowledge that feelings of hopefulness and empowerment sometimes underpin pro-environmental thought and action too. We began our

sessions by inviting participants to recall a time when they felt powerful, and to reflect on what "powerful" might mean. To this, Kai (then aged 11) replied:

> Kai: I think that feeling powerful is when you feel in control of a situation for example, or maybe when you feel that someone's finally trusted you with something. For example, I felt powerful when I managed Grade 5 ukulele, which was quite a big achievement for me and I felt that *I could do* the ukulele: I actually *had* achieved something, when I got the distinction for it.

By sharing their feelings and understanding the influence of these feelings on thought and action, the participants enjoyed another opportunity to exercise their freedom and responsibility.

6.4 environmental enquiry must be appropriately empowering

There is a danger that philosophical enquiry amounts to nothing more than talk and young people are increasingly weary with dialogue for dialogues' sake, as Kai expresses:

> Kai: Yes, they [the government] are *talking* about it, they are thinking about it, they are planning to try to make a difference, they are realising that we're driving ourselves into a mass extinction of the world. But … words won't make a change without someone actually *doing* something.

It became clear that our work must address the need for action head-on. However, since philosophical enquiry is primarily a space for talk, it was not always obvious how—if at all—this talk might translate into action, or how we would know if it had. What we did know is that a free and responsible Community of Enquiry is not a place where children can be told to act in various ways by adults. While we agreed that we must not compel students to act, we also concluded that questions of action and agency must take centre-stage, since young people can also be oppressed by conversations in which they see no answers and feel they have no power at all (Léger-Goodes *et al.*, 2022). Our solution was to explore a wide range of possible actions, from stories of participants' own environmental work to a consideration of the responsibilities of governments and corporations.

After watching a video about the Fridays for Future School Strikes (Vice, 2019), we asked the children: "Should you strike from school every Friday?" In response, children explored the implications of various actions, with space to voice their misgivings and fears. Here we see again, the moments where knowledge, arguments and emotions interact.

> Facilitator: So, Luca, do you think that young people should give up their education for this cause?
>
> Luca: Basically, I don't think so because remember you're dealing with the government here. The government can *always* find an alternate solution. For example, just orphaning the kids, or something like that.
>
> Facilitator: Oh, I [saw] Kai's eyes widen when you said 'orphaning the kids', I wonder if you could say what you mean there, Luca?
>
> Luca: Basically, they would either fine the parents […] or they would send them to prison and then get the children away, sent somewhere else.
>
> Skye If eventually enough people contribute, then they can't put *everyone's* parents in prison, can they?
>
> Luca: Then they would find an alternate solution. They are still the government. They can do anything.

6.5 environmental enquiry must avoid becoming indoctrinatory.

In that moment I felt torn: I was tempted to relate to Luca—as one like minded individual to another—by endorsing his distrust of the government, a view that I privately sympathised with. However, I also felt the urge to act *in loco parentis* to subdue his concerns about the government's appetite for silencing protesting children, and to comfort Kai who looked worried after Luca's remark.

However, neither these personal-political or paternalistic interventions would have promoted Luca's freedom and responsibility. So, rather than intrude with adult speculations or corrections that would advance my agenda, I chose instead to try to help the participants unpack the various thoughts and feelings that lie behind the view that nonviolent direct action is too costly.

> Facilitator: Can I ask you Luca, do you think the government is *so* opposed to acting for the climate crisis that it would silence the parents to stop the kids?
>
> Luca: The government is never nice, it never lets us win, it really doesn't.

By asking this, we see the depth of the fear and mistrust that Luca has for those tasked with protecting him. By letting the children do this ethical and empirical work, rather than intervening to think *for* them, we also see them offer counter arguments and emotional support as they explore their own reasons for action.

> Kai: I think that, opposed to Luca, I think that the government wouldn't be so extreme as to punish the parents because of their children's independent act. And if they would have punished the parents, then wouldn't they have done it with Greta Thunberg instead of actually listening to her?

The session concluded with a visual stimulus that represented a spectrum of action and inaction which I labelled at one end "YOLO" (you only live once) and at the other, "Double Down". Here we saw children considering, with imagination and charity, the reasons that motivate various courses of action. When Luca was asked if he wanted to place himself somewhere on the spectrum, he declined, preferring to speak in favour of a range of positions:

> *Luca gestures at the "YOLO" end of the spectrum:*
> Luca: I am in between… we should enjoy your life as much as possible, not just because of climate change, because of the possibility of the world ending, but just because we only have *one* life… we have to enjoy as much as we can here on our time on this world.
> *Luca considers other descriptors on the spectrum: "business as usual" and "keep on plugging", before referring to "double-down" at the opposite end of the spectrum and concluding:*
> [But] I do agree that we should protest to stop climate change… climate change is indeed a huge crisis.

By intervening to provide factual information, promote balanced debates, attend to emotions, and empower learners to act—while trying to avoid indoctrination, it is not our aim to undermine the foundational practices of the Community of Enquiry, but rather to ensure that its participants can think about the environmental crisis with freedom and responsibility.

7. conclusion

The environmental crisis raises questions that have profound philosophical importance. As it intensifies, educators must reconsider what kind of people their students need to be, alongside the knowledge and know-how that might help them survive and thrive in a very different world.

I have argued that philosophical enquiry has an educational role to play in these uncertain times. No one knows what the next few decades have in store which makes it very difficult to say precisely what knowledge today's young people need if they are to cope politically, psychologically and practically. For example, they may need to know how to grow their own food, become more politically active or work with new green technologies. But the question of "know-how" is somewhat clearer; we can say something about the skills and dispositions that might be useful in uncertainty, we can say something about the kind of people today's children need to be. They need the ability to determine—for themselves—what is right and what is true in the context of their own lives and learning. They must learn to do this together with others who may think differently, and without an ethical or epistemic authority figure to think for them. They need the skills to arrive at their own well-founded *but provisional* views on these challenges and communicate these views to others, while giving due consideration to other perspectives and changing their mind where warranted. They need to navigate life with perception and good judgement, demanding evidence, assessing reasons, critiquing arguments, and offering creative solutions. They must also accept that their words and deeds have real-world implications and consequences. In the world that they inherit, the fundamental question of ethics: "How should I live?" may look quite different, but it cannot be avoided, nor can it be answered on another's behalf. To tackle it, and to live accordingly, young people must engage in enquiry, and not just instruction. To create the conditions for enquiry, educators must refrain from directing their student's efforts, so that they may think together and for themselves. For teachers most concerned about this crisis, this may seem counterintuitive, but I have argued that

they should persist in the knowledge that to truly equip their students to learn well and to live well, enquiry demands freedom and responsibility.

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