In search of shared truth:
togetherness in philosophy for children

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Abstract: In the context of Philosophy for Children (P4C), this article examines the importance of togetherness as a fundamental aspect of philosophical practice in communities of inquiry. The paper reframes togetherness as a developed philosophical virtue that arises through co-inquiry, mutual recognition, and shared meaning-making, rather than as a merely social condition. This is done by drawing on the dialogical, collaborative, and intersubjective nature of P4C. The study makes the case that the pursuit of truth in philosophical communities is fundamentally communal, embodied in acts of reasoning together, caring thinking, and dialogical authenticity. It does this by drawing on the ideas of Matthew Lipman, Ann Margaret Sharp, Susan T. Gardner, Charles Taylor, Daniel Siegel, and Stefano Oliverio. Children learn to coexist reflectively and not just think through these dialogic interactions. They also participate in processes of self-creation and ethical awareness that are made possible by consistent engagement with others. Thus, togetherness is positioned as a transformative educational ideal that unites intellectual growth with emotional and ethical maturation, both as a method and as an end in itself.

Key-words: togetherness; community of inquiry; intersubjectivity; dialogical authenticity; philosophy for children (P4C);

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Introduction.
Autonomy within Communities of Philosophical Enquiry

As many writings in the field of philosophy for, ar with, children (P4C) state, these study are meant to become commuties *of philosophical inquiry* (CPIs),whose fundamental aim is to realise the potential for increasing the reasoning power and broadening the cognitive perspectives of members, but not as an end in itself, but as a means to acquire the capacity to become more autonomous or "free" - in the sense of becoming more self-regulatory (Gardner and Anderson, 2015, 392). But, warns analyst and practitioner S. T. Gardner, the concept of *autonomy*, understood as increased freedom, has its pitfalls: its meaning can be 'over-Kantianised' by interpreting it as an increase in the capacity for solitary rational thought, free from the input of others. On the other hand, "becoming freer" can be "under-Kantianised" by interpreting it as either a mere licence or as the ability to manipulate others according to one's own will free from any standards of rationality, hence free to do whatever one wants (Gardner, 2009). P4C encompasses a complex of specific resources and methods to harness and encourage children's curiosity and natural inclination towards interconnectedness, helping them to search for meaning, stimulate and develop their intellectual courage and help them to develop rigorous skills to enable them to construct sound judgements in everyday life and to increase their empathy, compassion, acceptance and tolerance. Many experienced practitioners have observed dramatic developments in the social-cognitive and social-emotional levels of CPI members:

> A range of cooperative skills ... [including the ability] to listen to each other, to think and build on each other's ideas, to respect each other's ideas ..., creates a space in which [members of CPI groups] can interact both gently and rigorously ..[an attitude that] enables them to listen, appreciate and challenge each other's thoughts and perspectives and often leads to a new appreciation of [dialogue partners] (p4c.org.nz).

The CPI is a group of people brought together to examine a topic of common interest through a dialogue-based investigative process. It is "a

context of discussion in which participants are challenged to justify their views on a regular basis"(p4c.com). The philosophical community of enquiry, the same authors continue, seeks to understand the issues at stake or the beliefs of the other participants. Argumentation is seen as a collaborative effort to arrive at the best answer to a question. It is subsumed under a system of practices usually organised into four categories: encouraging questions, developing concepts, encouraging dialogue and argument, and reasoning (p4c.com).

According to the founder of Philosophy for Children, Matthew Lipman, P4C's mission is "to help children learn how to think for themselves" by "improving reasoning skills, developing creativity, personal and interpersonal development, and developing ethical understanding". Where this type of innovative pedagogical activity is successful, the philosophical dialogue (which manifests itself, among other things, through the significant development of interpersonal skills and the ability and aptitude to think with others) (Lipman, Sharp and Oscanian, pp. 53, 78) contributes fundamentally both to shaping the collaborative dimension of participants' thinking and to increasing their autonomy. As a conclusion repeatedly drawn in his studies on the impact of P4C on the social competences of the young people involved, D. Spiteri correctly summarises that, thanks to deep dialogic critique and internalised knowledge reconstruction, communities of inquiry contribute crucially to enhancing the intercultural and intersubjective sensitivity of their members (Spiteri, 2010). According to Matthew Lipman, the main competing views on social learning oppose the collaborative-reflexive model to the standard constructivist model by arguing that the main objective of the former is the autonomy of the members, rather than their dependence on or reproduction of the authority figure of the educator or facilitator. Autonomy-in-relationship is based on the internalisation of values underlying the interaction, which gives it a deeply social and communitarian character.

Togetherness as an encouragement and intersubjective exercise of authenticity

The articulation of the relationship between togetherness and intersubjectivity outlined in the present study is partly inspired by the

correlations established between autonomy, interpersonal interaction and authenticity by Susan Gardner and Daniel Anderson (Gardner and Anderson, 2015). More specifically, I found it particularly useful their development of the concept of autonomy by combining Kant's notion of "solitary thinking" with the Habermasian notion of "thinking through dialogue" (Habermas, 1992), a dialogical perspective placed within an existential framework, supported in part by references to Charles Taylor and the well-known neuroscientist Daniel Siegel. As in Lipman's case (and following on from his perspective), but from a plane that integrates more diverse and newer perspectives (such as neuroscience), the realisation of autonomy - as a path to authenticity - is apparently paradoxical in character: we will suggest that the acquisition or learning to become authentic - learning to become one's own person - can only be done through interpersonal dialogue, and that strategies that focus on enhancing the right kind of *exchanges that produce authenticity* as a self-creative process are those that, along with processes that enhance reasoning skills, should be cultivated in communities of philosophical inquiry.

In terms of the criteria for authenticity, Gardner and Anderson list 5, only one of which is concerned with achieving authenticity (the others being predominantly the intrapersonal context of individual situatedness, becoming and propensity) in interaction with other persons: "An authentic person must recognize that he or she can *only* self-create in relation to objective *descriptives* that must be justified in the interpersonal space". Also, continue these two authors, the possibility of authentic self-creation is jeopardized if one does not emphasize "the limited degree of control that each person has over his or her *self-descriptive*" (i.e. self-evaluative predicates) through what he or she does and, consequently, who he or she is. Hence the danger of *self-help* literature that commercializes "the solipsistic and arrogant notion of the power of positive thinking: 'As long as I think I am worthy of esteem, I will have self-esteem'. Authoring self-descriptives is not and cannot be a private affair any more than private language is possible." *Evaluative predicates are joined with the help of the adhesion of reason* and are held together by the 'least weak' of the rational arguments supporting competing alternatives. In sum, who you are and the extent to which you have power over what you become "depends not only on what *you do*, but also on your *ability to reason* to the best description of

what you do" - preferably before you do it. And reasoning of this kind is, at its essence, "an intersubjective rather than an intrasubjective process" (Gardner and Anderson, p. 395).

In his book *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor argues that the modern emphasis on self-fulfillment that seems to underlie the current trend towards relativism, nihilism and lack of civic participation is only ostensibly an epidemic of narcissism, representing in fact a missed aim at a very high ideal, namely "authenticity". By failing to understand it, due to a serious conceptual confusion, modernity is in fact moving away from the goal of achieving it.

Inspired by, among others, Rousseau, Locke and Nietzsche, Taylor argues that, unlike earlier societies with their rigid demarcations of status, we are forced, whether we like it or not, to negotiate (with uncertain outcomes) our identity with others. Therefore, we cannot be authentic on the basis of "self-choice" alone (Taylor, 2003, p. 36). We all, according to Taylor, have to make claims about our identity - i.e. "evaluative predicates" - vis-à-vis what he calls "horizons of meaning" (Taylor, 2003, p. 37).
What Taylor argues is that both the critics of society who agonize over the new unbridled egoism and the enthusiasts of this narcissism hailed as a new form of self-fulfillment are unable to see the desperate and absolutely necessary modern struggle for self-creation (Taylor, 2003, p. 72). To combat this disease of modernity and all the psychological, sociological and political problems it brings with it, it is first to see that the struggle for an authentic self-identity is the challenge of the age*, which is* why Taylor calls for a description of the concepts involved, particularly those of authenticity and self-creation.

Returning to communities of enquiry, Anderson and Gardner point out that once we have such a description in hand, we owe it to ourselves to go further and devise educational strategies aimed at realizing the possibility of authenticity through self-creation as best we can. But since self-creation, whether authentic or not, occurs only through interpersonal dialogue (Mead, 1965; Taylor, 2003; Gardner and Anderson, 2015, p. 396), we need a more precise analysis of *the kind of* interpersonal dialogue that propels us towards, or away from, the goal we are pursuing". This "type of dialogue that enhances authenticity" is the *"language of freedom".*

In his book *The Developing Mind*, renowned neuroscientist Daniel Siegel argues that interpersonal communicative interaction - both early in

life and throughout adulthood - plays a central role in shaping the brain and, with it, the developing mind. Siegel pointed out that what is important in shaping our identity is not just that we are engaged in relationships *per se*, nor that do we engage in interpersonal communication *per se*. What is important is that we are engaged in *contingent communication*, by which he means that we respond to each other in a way that suggests that the other is seen as having an internal center of subjective life worthy of attention and that in communicating with the other we are trying to see each other's minds - what Siegel calls *mind sight* (Siegel, 2012, pp. 34, 105). An integrated sense of self requires, according to Siegel, integrative communication, that is, communication that integrates us with each other, which in turn allows integrative neurophysiological changes to occur throughout life.

Gardner (1996) recommended that those facilitating communities of enquiry be alert to the possibility of asking a 'second why' question to interrogate the motivation for the response given to the first why (when it is impulsive, unreflective, automatic or imitated). This is exactly the kind of language - more precisely the kind of question - that gives rise to the kind of justificatory reflection that focuses on self-creation, whereby the interlocutor is stimulated to reveal, through his or her unique perspectives, what he or she is trying to become, being seen as a *person*, in his or her uniqueness. Consequently, facilitators of communities of enquiry need to become much more interpersonally engaged than has been customary to date (Gardner, 1995, pp. 38-49).

What Gardner and Anderson propose is a consistent cultivation of the language of freedom:

> What we are suggesting here is that the language we use and/or allow ourselves to use in dialogue with others can either enhance a sense of responsibility and thereby activate the goal of autonomy and authenticity, or reinforce a sense of being a victim of circumstance*.* What should be the case in interpersonal exchanges, whether one-to-one or in a community, is that a description of an event that is offered as an explanation should be rejected as inadequate for the individuals after which it should be insisted that a justification in terms of (personal) reasons be offered instead (Gardner and Anderson, p. 398).

Stefano Oliverio on the togetherness dimension of philosophising in CPIs

As Stefano Oliverio suggests, the intersubjective dimension of the community of philosophical enquiry goes beyond the simple property of being, constituting both a *co-philosophy* and *co-philosophising* (Oliverio, 2017). The community of philosophical enquiry constitutes a different kind of collectivity, in which the traditional place of the master disseminator of knowledge is taken by the facilitator who teaches his students not what to think, but how to do so, "teaching the process, not ideas or knowledge already known". The most radical change brought about by the CPI is "the abandonment of the image of the solitary process of philosophical enquiry" and that of the philosopher as "the first reality of philosophy" who autonomously generates and then "transmits ideas of his own to a collectivity of addressees". Communication thus acquires a very different meaning, becoming "the chronotope [space-time] " of the enactment of co-philosophy, which, not by chance, "is also the chronotope of 'dialectics' as a privileged form of being-in-communication-as-dialogue" (Oliverio, 2017, pp. 94-95).

Thus, philosophical enquiry and reflection are placed between interlocutors, a typical way of working for the functioning of the CPI, whose facilitator has among his important tasks to help the community to identify those "shared elements" that function as pivots for philosophical-dialectical enquiry seen as a common work. By instrumentalising them, the facilitator ensures that the engagement of the members of the collectivity is not carried out directly with the structure of the concepts (as in Plato), but dialogically, with the other thinkers in the group.

In their works and lectures devoted to the pedagogy of the CPI, Lipman and Sharp have succeeded in recovering this meaning from the tradition of Antiquity. Oliverio summarises a number of ways in which Lipman's and Sharp's synthesis reconstructed philosophy as a communal, dialogical *activity.*

In the CPI, "the process of deconstruction/reconstruction that Socrates [and many other mentors of ancient Greek philosophical schools] exclusively assume is distributed among all members and has its source *among* them - that is, in their interactions" (Oliverio, 2017, p. 96). To this valorisation of antiquity the two pioneers of P4C added elements from

within the pragmatist tradition. Of these, Lipman and Sharp referred, in addition to Charles Peirce - the originator of the term *community of enquiry* - to James Dewey and George Herbert Mead, in particular their advocacy of an activist pedagogy drawing on the learning experience of children and adolescents

> The pragmatist side of the CPI concept emphasises the idea of community... CPI is ... the space of communication in the Deweyan sense, i.e. the space in which there is 'participation, sharing', through which the emergence of meaning takes place. This idea ... of community/communication is closely related to Mead's theory of mind and his idea of the social nature of learning and the dependence of the thought process on interaction (Oliverio, 2017, p. 96).

Building on Mead's idea that social relations are prior to thought and that meanings do not pre-exist dialogue, Lipman has taken fundamental steps towards liberating philosophical learning from the tyranny of the primacy of autarchic theory and affirming the priority of the community of inquiry (Lipman, 2003, pp. 84-85). And, inspired by Dewey, he illustrates the ways in which "the CPI, rediscovering the emergence of meanings from and within social communication, also reactualises the idea of dialectic as being-in-communicating-as-dialogue" (Oliverio, 2027, p. 97).

Secondly, this understanding of the CPI also offers a clarification of the possible contents of the philosophical enquiry practised by its members. More precisely, it does not cultivate an abstract intellectualist and rationalist play with concepts, but a common activity of giving meaning to a problematic or ambiguous situation, either by constructing or inventing new concepts, or by communicatively reconstructing and enlivening concepts as a sharing. From this perspective, the role of facilitator who stimulates participation, building bridges and triggering discussions - while managing to "fade into the background" - is the most important philosophical labour, in which communication is the first reality of philosophy (in the sense of *co-philosophising*).

Supported by the co-philosophical infrastructure, the epistemological stance of the philosophical inquiry community is that examination, facilitated by a philosophically educated person, analyses

and reconstructs positions or theories through dialogically distributed thinking, using, among other things, critical thinking, thought experiments, and the discovery of errors and underlying forms of argument. The discussions are not mere exchanges of opinions, but are aimed at obtaining the best answers/solutions to the questions/problems discussed, answers never provided or validated by the educator-facilitator. In contrast to the charismatic academic master, the latter becomes a role model not by offering solutions, but by procedural rigour, highlighting agreements or disagreements in the debate and observing the arguments expressed very carefully, without making value judgements. He/she actively listens but does not give answers, speeds up or restarts the discussion if it becomes dispersed and loses sight of the issue at hand, regularly summarises the conclusions of the discussion or the main points expressed and encourages asking for reasons/arguments for the positions expressed by the participants. Finally, the educator-facilitator carefully asks questions, with the aim of raising awareness and clarifying the issues discussed (Lobont, 2020, p. 32), questions that we will briefly nuance below. As we concluded in the recent study just referred to,

> In essence, the thinking inherent in such a structure is investigative (as a collective effort dedicated to finding solutions), cooperative - able to promote among its members a genuine openness to each other's arguments and motives and to regard each piece of knowledge gained as a fruit of communicative action - and individualised - able to recognise and respect the argued diversity of positions (Lobont, 2020, pp. 29-30).

Despite the many enthusiastic and often superficial (now clichéd) presentations of P4C practice co-philosophising is far from being a linear, quick and easy process. Often, young members of the CPI are able to criticise the ideas of others, but initiating new ideas, alternative views, or creating hypotheses are skills that require practice. Much less will they easily navigate the steps to authenticity through self-creation. Often P4C enthusiasts present simply sharing ideas as the end of the road. As evidence, from critical and creative thinking (where cognitive skills predominate) to caring and collaborative thinking (where social-emotional skills predominate), participants often share ideas with each

other, but do not yet listen carefully enough to others' suggestions for them to make a difference to their own thinking.

Convinced that the success of philosophical communities of enquiry hinges on the balance of these four types of thinking (Sharp, 2018), Ann Margaret Sharp gives a privileged, infrastructural place to *caring* thinking. Fostering caring thinking, says Sharp, requires much more than logic and reason. In CPI activities members become aware of a meaningful structure in the relationships in their lives, between themselves and others and between themselves and the world

> This deeper dimension of meaning is not something they are always fully aware of. The dimension lies not just in what they say to each other, how many problems they solve, what questions they decide to address, but in the aesthetic and intersubjective form of the dialogue as a whole - as they experience it. They discover themselves as co-operative researchers, people who feel, intuit, wonder, speculate, love and desire, but also think and write, encountering the whole vast range of human experience together with their peers and the teacher (Sharp, 2018, p. 213).

In turn, collaborative thinking seems to be, like creative thinking, hard to pin down (Lewis et al, 2018, p. 43). It has more to do with attitudes than with special skills or even inner monologue. A person can recognise, in his or her own case, a more or less collaborative attitude and can probably self-correct sufficiently in this respect. In this sense, collaborative thinking is related to aspects of emotional literacy that fall into the categories of 'managing feelings' and 'social competences', in other words, to the social-emotional side of thinking (Lewis et al, 2018, p. 43).

Conclusion.
Authenticity facilitator in the shared truth community

Continuing the few references previously made to the need to reform the role of the facilitator within the communities of inquiry, we would simply point out that, without imposing himself, the facilitator becomes a model not by prescribing rules but by obtaining the agreement that everyone expresses, listening to the argument of others without

making value judgements. He/she listens, does not offer answers, speeds up or resumes the discussion if it gets scattered and loses sight of the issue at hand, regularly summarises the conclusions of the discussion or the main points expressed and encourages asking for reasons/arguments for the positions expressed by the participants. He/she carefully asks questions with the aim of raising awareness and clarification of the issue under discussion, if only to leave them open for further exploration if the time or dynamics of the session in question do not allow for further exploration of the topic(s). However, even though becoming an equal member of the group, the educator/facilitator retains a capacity for elusiveness associated with his/her function, in the sense that he/she does not develop a spontaneous infantile egoism, but, as a role model, lays the foundations for the development of self-discipline and the capacity for self-regulation.

But even this is not sufficient and without risk. Referring to the general aims of communities of enquiry, Susan Gardner speaks of a processual development of developing a "cluster of skills and habits of mind that are usually fostered by chronic exposure to a community of enquiry", offering as examples of this *cluster* the inquisitive mind, "the ability to see complexity in the relatively mundane, a deep respect for others as potential contributors to a highly valuable product, namely truth, patience and perseverance, an appreciation of the difficulty of reasoning correctly, and that unique sense of integrity that balances empathic listening with courageous support of one's point of view" (Gardner, 1995, p. 38). Gardner's main concern is the danger that a philosophical enquiry at any level might move in circles or tangentially on the topic at hand, or remain superficial, lacking any genuine intellectual progress. Therefore, the author continues, one of the main responsibilities of a facilitator is to help the enquiry/dialogue move forward. Often this should be seen as a move, not without difficulty and controversy, towards a 'truth' not yet recognised. Gardner suggests that an alternative formulation to "truth" would be more constructive, since the outcome of philosophical enquiry might rather be "better understanding". Of course, better understanding can sometimes be misunderstanding, but good facilitators are always keen to identify and try to resolve, on the spot, misunderstanding, constantly trying to cultivate critical thinking and self-correction in the community, so that the chances of misunderstanding are reduced.

As with the notions of "freedom" and "authenticity", the conceptual confusions surrounding the notions of "thinking" and/or "reasoning" - placed by Gardner and Anderson 'mirror-image' the former - have disastrous consequences. Many people, perhaps even most, "assume that they are reasoning if they offer a reason - any kind of reason - after first promulgating a conclusion that they intuitively believe and/or wish to be true." Because they merely *believe* that they and their positions are "reasonable", they "utterly stifle any inclination either to doubt their own position or to seriously contemplate the merits of opposing views" (Gardner and Anderson, 2015, p. 398).

According to Gardner, this can be described as a pathological state. She argues insistently and repeatedly that we have a duty to teach children that what counts as reasoning *is not up to them* - given that it is governed primarily by objective norms - and that it must be conducted in the public arena, so that the value of the claims of all truth-tellers can be judged by their ability to survive counterexample and alternative comparison. This approach, set out in detail by Gardner in her book published in 2009 (Gardner, 2009), echoes the theoretical framework provided by Jurgen Habermas in his book *Theory of Communicative Action*. As a result,

> we are all engaged in the activity of self-creation, which can succeed or fail depending on the degree to which it approaches authenticity. If authenticity is the goal, then knowing what an authentic self looks like must become common currency. And since a specific kind of dialogue, which I have called "the language of freedom", seems necessary for authentic self-creation, this is the kind of language we should all adopt, whether in personal or pedagogical interaction (Gardner and Anderson, 2025, p. 400).

And togetherness, which we have avoided pinning down in a precise definition, cannot be far from authenticity, both as an intersubjective process and as a dialogically negotiated self-creative evolution. And communities of philosophical enquiry have already proved that they can be at the forefront of cultivating this habit of each member to experience of congregating minds and souls with his or her companions.

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