

## Picture Book Philosophy

**Thomas Wartenberg** explains his method of introducing philosophy to children.

Toad arrives at Frog's house with a batch of delicious, freshly baked cookies. The two amphibians tuck in, only to find that, to their dismay, they cannot stop. Frog declares that what they need is will-power – the ability, he says, to try to not do what you really want to do. He then tries to put the cookies out of harm's way; but none of his efforts are successful, as Toad points out. So the desperate Frog gives all the cookies to the birds. In response to Toad's complaint that they have no more cookies, Frog responds that they have lots of will-power. A disgruntled Toad tells Frog that he can have his will-power, as he departs to bake a cake.

This scenario is taken from Arnold Lobel's delightful story, 'Cookies' in *Frog and Toad Together* (HarperCollins, 1971). It is an excellent example of the sort of story that I use to initiate philosophical discussions with young children.

You may be wondering how such a simple story can stimulate children to philosophical discussion. Well, consider first Frog's definition of will-power: trying hard not to do something you really want to do. A number of questions immediately present themselves. For example, is it enough to exercise will-power to *try* not to do something? Don't you have to actually *not do* the thing you really want to do? And what about the ending of the story? Does Frog actually have will-power? Does the temptation have to be there, staring you in the face, for you to be exercising will-power? Or can you exercise will-power by getting rid of the thing you know you can't resist so that you won't later experience a failure of will-power? All of these are provocative questions about the nature of will-power, a concept that philosophers have discussed at least as far back as Aristotle.

A story like 'Cookies' is deceptively simple. Lobel's genius was to take a concept that most of us think we understand, and use in our daily lives without a second thought, and present a narrative which illustrates a range of philosophical issues about it. My surprising discovery over the past decade or so is that there are many books whose narratives similarly bring us face-to-face with the philosophical perplexities inherent in many of our ordinary beliefs and theories.

But what does a philosophical discussion among young children look like? Put away notions of me presenting a riveted group of seven-year-olds with a mini-lecture on Aristotle's theory of weakness of the will and its relevance to 'Cookies'. Simply put, that would be a non-starter. But since a story like 'Cookies' presents such clear philosophical conundra to its readers and listeners, it doesn't take much to use it to initiate a philosophical discussion of will-power among a group of young children. All it takes is a well-placed question, such as, "Do you think Frog and Toad have will-power at the end of the story, like Frog says?" In my experience, children will immediately yell out "Yes!" or "No way!" The challenge is to take their excitement and interest in this philosophical issue, and channel it into a good discussion. To do so, we tell the children that doing philosophy requires that they abide by a number of simple rules: things like not speaking out of turn nor ridiculing what someone has said. The essential rules are captured by a simple series of words: *Think* about what you believe; explain *why* you do; *listen* to what others have to say; decide

whether you *agree or disagree* with what others say, and *why*. That's all there is to it.

Of course, in actual practice, it takes a lot of skill to facilitate a philosophical discussion among young children. The skill which I most underestimated when I first began facilitating philosophical discussion in elementary schools was listening. Adults don't often *really* listen to young children. We are too busy with our schedules and our plans to take the time to hear what young children are telling or asking us. However, when you lead a philosophical discussion with children, you have to pay attention to what they are saying so that you can help the children maintain their focus. Once you can do this, the results are wonderful.

I am repeatedly amazed by what children are able to accomplish in a philosophical discussion. I am often struck by how the children make claims that remind me of ideas I learned only after years of reading and thinking about philosophy. For example, consider *The Important Book* (1990) by Margaret Wise Brown. For each of a number of things, such as grass, an apple, rain, a spoon, and you, the book says that something is the important thing about it. It also lists a number of other things that the object also is. The important thing about rain, for example, is that it is wet; its other properties are falling from the sky, sounding like rain, making things shiny, and not tasting like anything. When a group of eight-year-olds were discussing the book, they were very dissatisfied with that list. They proposed a list of their own, which included: It makes puddles and ponds; it splashes; it can evaporate; and it makes mud. But the children decided that they thought the most important thing about rain was that it makes things grow.

The student facilitating the discussion asked the children to explain why they thought their list was better than the book's. Jamilla said, "Well, the book's list has things mainly about what it looks like, like the senses, but not what it does. Our list is more of its purpose." Alice added, "Our list is kinda like a dictionary. The book's list is sorta not so good because 'wet' is what rain is, but 'makes puddles' and 'makes things grow' has more of a description it tells you more about what rain does." The third graders have here distinguished two different ways of looking at an object like rain: the book's characterization of rain is more in terms of what rain is or what we might call its *structural properties*; their own description highlights what rain *does* – its *function*. Both the Pragmatists and Martin Heidegger, although coming from very different perspectives, criticized the tradition of Western philosophy for privileging structure over function – precisely the criticism that the children make of *The Important Book's* characterization of rain. So these eight-year-olds were actually able to develop a contrast between these two different ways of thinking about the nature of objects which even many college students find hard to understand.

One thing unique about this way of discussing philosophy using children's literature, is that we avoid stories that people generally think are most philosophical, namely, fables and other stories with a clear moral. It's true that many fables point towards ideas that often have a great deal of philosophical merit. Take Aesop's fable 'The Ant and the Grasshopper'. An ant is busily preparing for winter one fall day when he encounters a grasshopper, who laughs at the ant for working rather than enjoying the beautiful day. The ant warns the grasshopper that he will be sorry when the winter comes and he does not have enough to eat. One winter day, when the grasshopper has no food, he knocks on the door of the ant's home and asks him for food. The ant tells him that he should have prepared for the winter in the fall, and now he'll just have to go hungry. Clearly, the message in this fable is that you can't always do what gives you immediate pleasure, you have to think about the future. Certainly, this is a lesson that children have to learn. However, our discussions with children are explicitly not about *telling* the children what they should think. We want to them to *tell us* what they think and why they think it. So although it is possible to use a fable to have a philosophical discussion with children – "How do you decide when to just enjoy yourself, and when to prepare for the future?" – I prefer to use books that naturally evoke perplexity in children.

So far, I have been discussing picture books, but other types of children's books are also great for launching children into philosophy. I have more experience with picture books because they can be read and discussed in a single session lasting 45 minutes to an hour, the length of time I generally have for my

lessons. And even though fourth and fifth graders [nine- and ten-year-olds] are well past the age at which they will be reading picture books, we have had great success using picture books with children in those grades. In fact, they generally develop a healthy respect for books that they had dismissed as babyish.

Some chapters from novels are quite suitable for philosophy discussions as well. ‘The Rescue of the Tin Woodman’ chapter from *The Wizard of Oz* is a great one to use. The film version omits the story the Woodman tells, preferring the song ‘If I Only Had a Heart’, but in the book, the Tin Woodman explains how he came to be missing a heart. The Wicked Witch of the East put him under a spell so that every time he tried to chop wood, he chopped off a part of his body. Every time he did so, the tinsmith replaced the part with a tin one. Only he forgot to give him a heart. As a result, the Tin Woodman can no longer love the Munchkin girl he had intended to marry and for whom he had suffered the witch’s spell.

The first puzzle this story raises is why the Tin Woodman is able to think of himself as the same person he was when he had a body made of flesh and bones, now that he is made of tin. The piece-by-piece reconstruction of the Tin Woodman resembles the story of the ship of Theseus which Aristotle relates. Another interesting aspect of the *Oz* story involves the Straw Man. The Straw Man lacks a brain, and he claims that having a brain is more important than having a heart, for, without a brain, you wouldn’t know what to do with your heart. But the Tin Woodman responds by stating that, having had both, he prefers the heart, for the heart is necessary for love, and love is the only thing that brings real happiness. The question of whether thinking or caring for others is the most important or distinctive features of human beings is one philosophers have debated through the ages. This book provides a great way to launch into a philosophical discussion of these issues with older children.

Research has shown that being read to is the one unambiguous factor in predicting whether children will grow up to be readers. (For example, see Jim Trelease, *The Read-Aloud Handbook*, Chapter 1 (1979).) So, in reading books to children, we’re fostering a habit of reading. Creating life-long readers is important, so this is a very beneficial aspect of our program. But the reason I started using ‘read-aloud’ to introduce philosophy to children is simply that kids love being read to. Their excitement at being read to sparks their interest in the questions the book raises. Can there be a better way to involve children in learning than to use something that they love doing? Philosophy gets associated with read-alouds and the pleasure they take from them.

This is not meant to deny that there are many other very good ways to introduce young children to the study of philosophy. Nor have I been attempting to justify teaching philosophy to young children, although I hope that some of the reasons have emerged from what I have said. In a nutshell, young children enjoy doing philosophy and are good at it. It contributes to the development of their intellectual skills in a demonstrable way. What else do you need to know?

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*Thomas Wartenberg, aside from being the Film Editor of Philosophy Now, has been introducing children to philosophy for more than a decade. His website, [teachingchildrenphilosophy.org](http://teachingchildrenphilosophy.org), features many children’s books that can be used in philosophical discussions. He is the author of Big Ideas for Little Kids: Teaching Philosophy Through Children’s Literature (Rowman and Littlefield, 2009).*