AN INQUIRY-BASED PHILOSOPHY COURSE FOR CHILDREN

Fr Tom Daly SJ

Edited by Fr. Robin Koning SJ (April 2021)

Editor's Introduction:

This document combines two papers:

- An Inquiry-Based Philosophy Course for Children
- An Inquiry Based Philosophy – Section 2

These are clearly related, as the titles suggest and the fact that Fr Daly had them together in the one folder. Moreover, the second paper begins, "We saw in the previous article that there are four types of question that can be classified according to the appropriate answers." This is precisely the focus of the first paper.

The papers were enclosed by a sheet on which was hand-written:

An Inquiry-Based Philosophy Course for Children

1. Questions
2. Answers

This gives a clue as to how the topic is divided between the two papers, and complements the opening sentence of the second paper.

Unusually for Fr Daly, there is no date on these papers and there is nothing to suggest who the intended publisher or audience was. We have yet to find any record of an occasion on which he might have presented it.

Daly has numbered each paper separately, so that his numbering, at the top of the pages, begins afresh with the second paper. In this combined version, we have added numbering which is consecutive across the two papers. These numbers appear at the bottom centre of each page, in parentheses.

AN INQUIRY-BASED PHILOSOPHY COURSE FOR CHILDREN

How many questions can a child ask? How many sorts of questions can a child ask? How many questions need a child ask? How many questions should a child ask? Are there any answers to questions? Where do questions lead?

On the basis of these questions that I have just put, I propose to outline a philosophy course for children that needs no other resources. It is up to the teacher to handle the questions that we have just looked at and to build upon them. This and subsequent articles will show how that can be done based on the series of classes that I gave at North Reservoir some years ago and then repeated at Burke Hall and at Kostka Hall and later built up into a series of courses for senior executives in management with the help of Mr John Little.

I call it a philosophy course because philosophy is a love for wisdom and wisdom means an ability to organise one's knowledge and one's activities and decisions in a sensible way. Philosophy has been considered the queen of the sciences and now-a-days it is the task of organising and unifying all that we know in mathematics, say, and science, and common sense. Children have a certain amount of knowledge of maths and perhaps a little bit of other sciences, but our main resource in this course is their power to ask questions and that is why I began in that way.

It is up to the teacher to utilise the four questions I put at the beginning and perhaps teachers can start by directing those enquiries to themselves before trying them out on a class of students. Do I ever enquire? Do I ever wonder? Well, how can we get an answer to that? It is an interesting sort of answer that is based on the data that I myself have just provided by asking it.

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Do you resonate with that question? Does it make sense to you? Do you think you can get an answer based on the question itself? Our main resource is the children's ability to face such a question and ask it and find if they can get an answer to it, and then they can go onto be asked how many questions they can ask, so I envisage as the primary written resource the series of questions that can be put on a blackboard coming from the children in the class themselves, and that can go on for perhaps a few days.

For the time being, and perhaps for all time, we don't need to answer many of the questions that they can propose to us because what we are trying to do is to find the data for an affirmation that the children can ask a lot of questions, a great number of questions, and they should come up with some sort of an answer to that question of number, and that leads to a single fact that we can point out - of transcendence. Transcendence is a good solid philosophical word for "going beyond". We can reach that pretty quickly where the child can go beyond what he or she has just been doing.

Each of us can go beyond the questions that we have been asking to find that we have a desire to know. It may not be very active, but it is there and it is a desire that can go beyond the immediate objects to other objects that might occur to us or come before us and I can formulate that desire to know in these questions. The desire to know is basic to the questions. We can call it the power of wonder or the power of enquiry and so eventually we can ask a child to affirm the facts that I am a wonderer and that wondering is a wonderful thing. It is a remarkable power that it would be nice for us to be able to organise and utilise to the best of our native ability, an ability that belongs to just about every waking human being

In 1957 Fr Bernard Lonergan, a Canadian Jesuit, wrote his first large book *Insight* which has remained in print ever since then and was most recently republished by the University of Toronto Press. It is a big book and it has had a very big influence on a large number of people. Over 200 people have done doctoral dissertations based on his work. Though the book itself was rather sophisticated probing into the frontiers of mathematics and of science and of statistics, with some relief in dealing with common sense and social and political thought, it has also a brief commentary on a large number of former philosophies and makes an assessment of these before going on to ethics and the treatment of the nature of God and the function of religion in contemporary thought. In all this the main resources are those of the readers themselves.

I mention Lonergan not to suggest that anyone read *Insight*, but simply to show that the basic work has been done and it can be broken down into this very much briefer course than can be given to children and it can allow any children to use their own resources, as they meet many new subjects for the first time, to integrate them into their own intellectual and emotional life.

So this first resource is the list of questions that the children themselves have proposed and that cover the blackboard. This list leads to the query, "Do I ever inquire?" and the answer is, "There, I have done so"! Inquiry is a fairly powerful human ability. It seems to be almost spontaneous and can keep on going and can spread. I started off by saying it can go beyond the questions that have been asked before and the answers that might have been given to some of those questions.

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I imagine a trained teacher could get a good deal of fun in class in building up this list of questions and parrying the very definite demands that the children will make to get answers to them. It is not the answers we are interested in at the moment, but just showing the human power of wondering and getting our students to realise that for themselves and see how widely this power of inquiry can reach.

The next step is to use this list of questions again without hurrying on to look for any answers; we may never get the answers to most of them at all. We use the same list as the basis for the second question I put at the beginning – "How many sorts of question can a child ask?" or – more directly – How many sorts of question can I ask?

Again, the students can use their own resources to try to classify the questions and a good deal of effort could usefully be made, I think, in classifying them in various ways; difficult questions and easy ones, general questions and specific ones. It is up to them to think of how they can sort them to get them into various columns and it does not matter too much how far they go or in what directions those lead. It is all a matter of exercising their powers of reflecting on their ability as inquirers.

One fairly useful way of classifying the questions is based on sort of question-words that are being used to ask them: Which and Why and What and How and When and Where and How big and things like that. Then there is the fact that some questions don't have special question-words but are formed by reversing an ordinary statement sentence: Am I a human being? Did we come to school today? and so on.

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Before too long perhaps another question can arise – why do we ask questions – and that suggests an obvious answer – to get answers. We are seeking answers, we are seeking knowledge, we are seeking facts, if you like, or explanations and something like that, but at any rate a focus on answers is an important step.

In our analysis of our power to ask questions, the teacher can at some stage direct this sorting process into that particular line through types of answer and you can get some fairly simple types of classifications of sorts of answers. Sometimes the answer has to be very long, for instance to the question How does a motor car work? Some answers on the other hand can be very short and so it is quite an interesting exercise to ask how short can it be - a good answer to a question, how short can it be? There are fairly obvious answers to that, seen in particular types of answer that we are using all the time, just Yes and No. We can then focus on this Yes and No type of answer. What sort of questions are there to which those answers would be appropriate?

An interesting fact about our power to answer questions comes out at this stage. Sometimes we are not ready to say Yes or we are not ready to say No, so we have to put it off. We can say instead, "I don't know", or we could say only Perhaps or Possibly or Probably, knowing that we have to do further work before we can get onto the Yes or the No answer.

A short answer is called an affirmation (or a negation) and expresses the person's assent to the proposition that has been put to them or dissent from that proposition that formulates the core of the question. A long answer on the other hand is generally or often connected with giving an explanation saying why or how or perhaps even what something is.

For our purposes there are two other categories of question to which neither the short answer of Yes or No nor a long explanatory answer is appropriate. The first of these two new categories is one that is answered simply by a name or by pointing. "Where is the front gate? Where is Coburg? Where is Thomastown? Where is Sydney?" This could be answered by pointing in the appropriate direction or by saying, "up north", or "over to the east". "When are the finals? When is Christmas?" and instead of pointing we use the names – September, or December. "When is the end of this class?" –we use the names for hours and minutes. Names do not give us a great deal of information, but they are very useful in that they indicate fields of data where we can search for knowledge.

The fourth type of appropriate answer that does not fit into those other categories is simply making an action, making a decision. Will we stop this class now? Will we stop pursuing this topic? Will we change to another subject altogether? They may say that Yes or No is an appropriate answer, but that is only a matter of getting people to consent to someone else's decision. The basic answer is simply a decision, or an action that carries on from such a decision.

So we can find four categories in which we can group many of the interrogative words like Where? and When? and Which? and Who? and Why? and What? We have added Will I? or Will we? When we have got this far we can give at least a preliminary answer to our second basic question, How many types of question can I ask? From the point of view of the types of answer, we can say that there seem to be four types of question that cover somehow or other most of the ones that we gathered in our original list on the blackboard. Those that require a short answer; those that require a long answer; those that can be answered better by pointing or by giving a name; and those that can be answered appropriately only by making a decision and carrying it out into action.

At some stage, perhaps at the very beginning, we can orient all this by one of the questions that may well have come up, "What am I?" The most obvious answer is "a human being." That, however, is just a sort of name. We should be able to give a deeper explanation of what we are. One such deeper response is, Someone that has the power to ask questions, someone that has the power to ask four sorts of questions that are distinct from each other and that can be co-ordinated together, and so we can move onto a new field of inquiry putting order into these four human conscious activities we have been talking about.

Decisions often require a good deal of deliberating and therefore they presuppose many facts and knowledge consisting of statements to which we can say Yes rather than No or rather than the escapes through Probably and Perhaps. Knowledge and facts presuppose understanding and therefore intelligibility. If we don't know the meaning of a question at all, it is silly to say Yes or No or even to give an escape clause such as Perhaps. Understanding or knowing the meaning of words or the topics and objects that they are dealing with presupposes experience. We have seen things or heard things or felt things. To understand something we have to look and listen and taste. This presupposes all the looking and listening and tasting that has gone on in discovering all the sciences.

Taste led to distinctions that moved on to answers through chemistry. Seeing led on to talk about colours and finding the strange properties of prisms and leading onto physics. Feeling led to distinctions between hot and cold and seeking through a thermometer some objectivity that gave a more appropriate and accurate answer than we could give by just saying hotter or colder. We could look at the thermometer to find the measure.

Through this consideration of what questions presuppose other stages of knowledge, we can make a diagram of the structure of human knowing starting off from experience and moving onto understanding and moving on from that to knowledge.

There is a structure, not just of human knowledge, but of human activity and control, so we can give a preliminary yet fairly satisfactory and thorough answer to the question, "What am I?". I am something that can see and hear and taste and touch and smell; something that can understand and explain some things; something that can arrive at knowledge of facts and definite knowledge and truth; and something that can make changes in the world through decisions. Shall we finish this class? Shall we stop from going on with this topic? You can get some enthusiastic answers to that sort of question, but at least it shows that we have the power of making some sort of decision.

AN INQUIRY BASED PHILOSOPHY – SECTION 2

We saw in the previous article there are four types of question that can be classified according to the appropriate answers. These correspond to the use of various question-words. One of those types of answer, an unexpected type perhaps, was just simply pointing, a pointing that gives you a direction which indicates something to attend to, and that seems to be similar to the questions, Where or When or Which of even Who. They simply help us to name places or people or times on which we can focus and to which we can attend in order to discover something. The discovery may be simply that of seeing colours or hearing sounds.

Also, of course, we can recall memories quite well and we ask When, when we think of a particular time or year or indeed a place where we have been, and memories will well up and we can start attending to those. I suppose we think of that as sense-knowledge largely.

Another sort of question was the one that leads to explanations, that expects explanations, and for which explanations are an appropriate type of answer. Such explanations can be prompted by questions like, How and What or Why perhaps. Why were you late for school? Someone might try to invent an explanation or recall the intelligent explanation that really does account for their having been late. How does a motorcar work? Some people will say simply by putting in the key and turning it. Well, that is true. How do you work a motorcar? At the age of three or so perhaps you learnt how to turn on the television set or how to turn on the radio a little bit later. You probably learnt how to use a video recorder and replay it.

Behind the radio or television set or motorcar there is something they call a black box, which has a whole lot of works in it, and we can ask about that too. How does the motorcar work?

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How does the radio work? How can we receive a station that is transmitting from miles away? Therefore, as for the motorcar, I suppose we can say it works by the wheels rotating on the ground and the friction of the wheels against the ground enables the wheels to go forward. They are rotated by the crankshaft being turned around by a piston rod and the piston had force on it due to an explosion of a petrol-air mixture in the cylinder, started by a spark.

While that is a fairly brief account, in nearly every class of 11 year olds there would be one or two students who would give a much, much fuller account of how a motorcar works. That account of how it works is roughly equivalent to *what is* a motorcar. A motorcar is a vehicle used for transporting people by moving along a road using the explosion of a petrol-air mixture in a cylinder to push a crankshaft around and drive a wheel with sufficient friction to move along the ground rather than slip against it.

The question might have been, Why is the motorcar moving? and a very similar answer can be given. The motorcar is moving because it has an engine of that sort and has been turned on. The word Why might be used to give a different sort of an explanation. Why is the motorcar moving? Because I wanted to get to school. Notice, however, that that answer moves me away from the motor car into some other explanation going outside of the motor car, but there is also a Why or a How that leads you into a deeper explanation of the motor car. Why does the crankshaft move? Because the piston is pushed by an explosion. Why does the explosion occur? Because petrol can turn into a vapour that is oxidised by the oxygen in the air and the gas forms a gas that is able to expand, partly because of being heated.

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Most of these sorts of explanations that I have been giving are things we have learnt from others. We can get explanations by other people explaining things to us and thus helping us to understand those things. But we have the capacity of finding explanations ourselves and that is a very exciting thing. Even on simple matters, finding explanations is something that we can do for ourselves and that involves the power of understanding. It is true that understanding comes into work when we are listening to someone else giving an explanation for us when teaching us. They are helping us to understand how the motorcar works. But sometimes we can discover little things by ourselves and that is a remarkable capacity that human beings have, so that our inquiring is leading us to know more about ourselves. We are people who can discover things or invent things. Invention is similar to discovery as it is discovering a way of getting something done.

Where do explanations come from, apart from other people? They seem to come from our mind, from ourself under the drive of a question, so the question has great drive in that looking for understanding, seeking for understanding, but somehow or other we have to make a discovery, a fresh discovery. A fresh act of understanding something we have not understood before is often called an insight, and that is an absolutely key element in human knowledge – insights. Fresh understanding; after a while they lose their freshness but their power remains and then we just say, Well, I have understood that for a long while.

The insight comes from attending to some sort of data, the data of senses, what we have seen and heard. We look at the motorcar and behind each back wheel we find an axle, giving only one line of connection with the rest of the car through the centres of the wheels, not through their edges where there is a tyre - a way of contacting the road - and that axle is connected

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to a crankshaft, which has come back from the engine. When we look at the bends in the crankshaft we can see how the movement of the piston rod has been able to turn the crankshaft around, and through the axle the wheels goes round. It is by looking or listening or feeling perhaps that we can discover such an intelligibility in things. Insight is the activity of my mind, and intelligibility is the corresponding element in the motor-car, or other object that we are talking about. It is able to be understood. Lonergan called his main book *Insight* because insight is obviously an extremely important activity or event, and extremely important for philosophy.

His first illustration of insight is through detective stories. When we are reading a detective story we are presented with all the clues, we read about them in the words of the book and we imagine them in our minds, the places and people and activities, but we don't see who has done the murder. The skill of the writer is to present all those clues to us in the hope that towards the end of the book we will discover suddenly how it all fits together. This sudden discovery is an insight, making sense of the whole story. It is a very exciting moment.

Another way of experiencing insight is in doing puzzles and so puzzles can be a very wonderful element in education. When I first went into this matter, I asked a number of teachers whether they used puzzles much in their teaching and they said, Oh yes, they are a great reward for someone who has done his or her work well and is ahead of the rest of the class – we give them puzzles and they enjoy them. Why do they enjoy them? Well, the teacher did not think of that, so I imagine there are a lot of teachers out there who use puzzles as rewards when they may just as well have used them as elements in teaching the

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students philosophy, teaching them to know themselves. People enjoy puzzles because, without being quite explicitly aware of it, they are enjoying being human. They enjoy one of the great powers of humanity, and this motivates them to go on and work with other puzzles.

Along with puzzles we have riddles. They are verbal puzzles and many are very ancient. Normally they are rather hard to get out. Often the answer is eventually given by the person who set the riddle and people still enjoy that. Even though they have not worked it out themselves, they can see it does now make sense. One of the most ancient riddles is: What is the animal that walks on four legs in the morning, two legs during the day and three legs in the evening? Well, you can think of various animals you know, but the answer is A human being. You can explain it thus: In the morning of your life you crawl, in the active part of your life you walk and in the evening of your life when you are getting old you have a walking stick and so you have a third leg.

Jokes are different from riddles because the comedian uses a terrific skill of timing in telling the joke so that the hearers suddenly get the insight at the last word of the joke, the punch line as we say. They are hit by a change in the intelligibility of the story. The comedian was telling a story that went on and on and which made some sense but there was nothing very interesting or exciting about it, and then suddenly you see that there was something else coming, some quite different overall unifying meaning that strikes you suddenly as an insight, and you laugh. Why do you laugh? Because you are enjoying this experience of new unity that is very human and very powerful and exciting.

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There are regularly new jokes that someone has invented and that, as they used to say, move around the world in a fortnight. Nowadays they probably move around the world much more quickly through the Internet, but besides those jokes there are spontaneous jokes that occur regularly in conversation and they are just wonderful ways of teaching philosophy.

I suppose the best example I had in introducing this philosophy was when I was talking to a group of people interested in philosophy for children and somehow or another I made a spontaneous joke. I have completely forgotten what it was now, but they all laughed vigorously and enjoyed it greatly, and I pointed to one of the people in front of me and asked, Why did you laugh? He gave a beautiful explanation of understanding and of insight, something like saying, You were telling a story that was making some sort of sense but then suddenly there flashed on my mind the realisation that it made sense in an entirely different way and a new way that was different to what I had been expecting and so I just burst out laughing with great joy. We continued as a very unified class and we were able to develop the philosophy on the basis of that.

Lonergan gives examples of how insights occur in simple mathematics and can be helped to build up a branch of mathematics. He then gives examples of how insights occur in science and then goes on how insights occur in common sense. Common sense is a very positive thing. You praise someone if you say that they have a lot of common sense. Really it means that they are intelligent. It is different to the intelligence that you have in an ordinary classroom and the subjects that you have to learn at school because common sense is concerned with the ability to operate practically and live in a particular and normally fairly limited environment. It is the ability to act intelligently there, to make decisions about your

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actions that are intelligent and that allow for the particular environment you are in. I say it is limited to a particular area or time because as you can see, when a child from the country comes to the city they are said to have no common sense for sometime. They have had the ability to act intelligently within the country environment and they don't know too much about how things work in the city and vice versa. The country children themselves laugh at the city child who has come to their school and does not know the way you move around the paddocks and so on there.

One important task in writing history is to discover what was the common sense of some time way back in the past. What was the intelligent way of acting in those days, in those places, and how is that different from the way we do things now with the different tools and ways of cooking and ways of moving and ways of building and the ways of communicating with each other. My main point at the moment however is simply that a strong basis in philosophy can be given by a teacher who makes use of the spontaneous jokes that occur in class, who uses other jokes as well and allows the children to speak about their favourite jokes and perhaps explain them to others if necessary. Such a teacher will go on to set puzzles for the children. An alert teacher watches the smile on the face of the child who has solved a puzzle and is quick to point to that child and to get all the others to watch him or her and share in their enjoyment even though they have not got the puzzle out for themselves. This gives them more incentive to work at the same puzzle or some other puzzles so that they will have the same enjoyment and break out into the same smile. The insight normally occurs almost instantaneously and it illuminates the issue, throws light upon it, it is joyful, its experience is powerful, it is something venerable adding value to the data that we have been attending to.

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Nearly every student who has just solved a puzzle can show remarkable skill in giving hints to the other students that can help them to solve that puzzle for themselves without giving the answer away.

Also an insight demands expression which can formulate it into words, whether we would like to formulate it into words which are quite different from the data from which we got it but which express the same insight. An insight is open to implication and it unifies the data, it suggests intelligibility in the world. An insight requires a good deal of attention to the data but is not forced on us by that data. It requires something from ourselves which is basically that drive of acquiring interest which sustains us in our attention, but when the insight comes it enriches that data enormously and gives it a great deal of sense that it didn't seem to have before. We can then go on to pick elements of that data or similar parallel elements like words or diagrams in order to express the insight in a way that makes it easier for us to remember it and retain or regain it for ourselves at a later stage, and also to communicate it to other people.