

Gareth B. Matthews

Philosophy & the Young Child



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For Mary

Preface

I FIRST BECAME INTERESTED in the philosophical thought of young children by worrying about how to teach introductory courses in philosophy to college students. Many students seemed to resist the idea that doing philosophy could be natural. In response to their resistance I hit on the strategy of showing them that as children many of them had already done philosophy. It occurred to me that my task as a college philosophy teacher was to reintroduce my students to an activity that they had once enjoyed and found natural, but that they had later been socialized to abandon.

Once I began ruminating on philosophical thinking in children, I found the subject fascinating. I also found that it interested others, both inside and outside the classroom. So I began to develop my ideas about it, to do some informal research and teaching on the subject, and to gather the reactions and thoughts of others—philosophers and nonphilosophers, parents, teachers, and simply people who like children.

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G.B.M.

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1. Puzzlement

TIM (about six years), while busily engaged in licking a pot, asked, "Papa, how can we be sure that everything is not a dream?"

NO DOUBT it seems to Tim that he is busily engaged in licking a pot. If he were dreaming, he would, presumably, be dreaming that he is busily engaged in licking a pot. What is the difference between really licking a pot and only dreaming that one is doing so? Perhaps the difference is only this: if one is dreaming, one may wake up from the dream and then know that the pot-licking episode was only a dream.

Does it, or should it, make any difference to Tim to know whether he is awake or dreaming? If so, what difference? Wouldn't the pot taste just as good?¹

I have been talking as though Tim's question were "How do I know whether I am now dreaming?" But, of course, it isn't that. Rather, it is this: "How can we be sure that not *everything* is a dream?" That is, how can we be sure that we are ever awake?

Suppose that everything is a dream, my dream. There would be parts of my dream in which I seem to be awake and parts of it in which I seem to be asleep. What could be the difference between life as I now believe it to be, with its waking periods and its dream episodes, and a lifelong dream

in which I seem sometimes to be awake and sometimes to have dreamt this or that?

Tim's puzzle is quintessentially philosophical. Tim has framed a question that calls into doubt a very ordinary notion (being awake) in such a way as to make us wonder whether we really know something that most of us unquestioningly assume we know. What it makes us wonder is whether we know that we are sometimes awake and that, therefore, not all life is a dream.

Puzzlement and wonder are closely related. Aristotle says that philosophy begins in wonder (*Metaphysics* 982b12). Bertrand Russell tells us that philosophy, "if it cannot *answer* so many questions as we could wish, has at least the power of *asking* questions which increase the interest of the world, and show the strangeness and wonder lying just below the surface even in the commonest things of daily life."²

Aristotle also suggests that the wonder that initiates philosophy is akin to puzzlement (*Metaphysics* 982b17-18). And Wittgenstein says, "A philosophical problem has the form: 'I don't know my way about.'"³

Sometimes philosophical puzzlement is dissolved. One learns to find one's way about; perhaps one reasons one's way out of the difficulty. But sometimes the puzzlement is not dissolved, at least not for a long time.

JORDAN (five years), going to bed at eight one evening, asked, "If I go to bed at eight and get up at seven in the morning, how do I really know that the little hand of the clock has gone around only once? Do I have to stay up all night to watch it? If I look away even for a short time, maybe the small hand will go around twice."

In part, perhaps, Jordan's puzzlement rests on an unease about not having enough evidence, or maybe not enough evidence of the right sort, to draw a commonsense conclusion, namely, the conclusion that between a given night and the next morning the little hand of the clock goes around once and only once.

Usually, one's observations of a clock are sporadic. Jordan, for example, may check on his clock from time to time during the day, but not, obviously, when he is out of the room: not when he eats his meals, watches television, goes out to play or off to school. In principle Jordan could surely devote a whole day to watching his clock. He could ask that his meals be brought to his bedroom, or he could take his clock with him to the dinner table. By these means Jordan could keep the clock under constant surveillance.

Jordan's final comment—"If I look away even for a short time, maybe the small hand will go around twice"—suggests that his problem may not be the practical one of, as a philosopher of science might say, enlarging his evidence base. Rather, it suggests that no matter how much constant attention Jordan lavishes on his clock, there may still be a worry about how he can justifiably extrapolate from observed periods to unobserved ones.

Are observed states and actions a reliable guide to unobserved states and actions? Jordan may have a friend at kindergarten who manages to make faces at the teacher whenever her back is turned, and not otherwise. How do we know that clocks are not like that? *Do* we know that they aren't? Maybe induction rests on an assumption as naive as the belief that what Jordan and his friend do under the watchful eye of the teacher is a reliable guide to what they do when the teacher leaves the room or looks away.

I don't know whether Jordan found a way to deal with

his puzzlement. Perhaps he did, or perhaps he eventually lost interest in it. If, someday, he takes a college philosophy course, he may find that it includes discussion of what is called "the problem of induction." Stripped to its essentials, this is a problem of saying whether, and if so, on what basis, we can be justified in taking observed instances as a guide to unobserved instances. Jordan may find in the problem of induction an old friend. Of course, by the time Jordan gets to college, he may have forgotten that he had ever worried about the unobserved behavior of his clock.

ONE DAY John Edgar (four years), who had often seen airplanes take off, rise, and gradually disappear into the distance, took his first plane ride. When the plane stopped ascending and the seat-belt sign went out, John Edgar turned to his father and said in a rather relieved, but still puzzled, tone of voice, "Things don't really get smaller up here."

Philosophers and psychologists have long debated whether an airplane disappearing into the distance seems to be getting smaller and we learn to interpret the appearance of a shrinking object as a case of an object receding into space, or whether, after we have had sufficient experience with objects moving away from us and coming toward us, the airplane simply seems to be receding into the distance and no inference or interpretation is required.

The first idea fits a philosophical reconstruction of our knowledge according to whether we receive data through our senses that are in themselves incorrigible (that is, we know infallibly how things *seem* to us) and we make inferences from these data to the reality that lies behind them (in this case, to the conclusion that the airplane is really going farther and farther away from us). According to this view,

the mistakes we make about the world we perceive around us arise from the inferences we draw from incorrigible and indubitable data.

Opponents of this sense-datum view insist that it is impossible to isolate the pure datum of sense experience and distinguish it from all interpretations we put on it and from all inferences we draw from it. According to them, once we have had experience with receding objects, the objects do not appear to shrink when they recede; they simply appear to recede.

The disagreement between the two sides is important in epistemology, the theory of knowledge. The sense-datum view is obviously friendly to the idea that we could reconstruct all our knowledge of the world around us in such a way as to show that it rests on secure foundations, sense data. The other view considers foundationalism in epistemology naive and misconceived.

John Edgar's comment suggests that a much more nearly pure "given" is available to him than the critics of the sense-datum theory suppose is available. Moreover, his comment indicates that he may have put a wrong interpretation on his data and is in the process of working out another interpretation.

Do airplanes really shrink as they go up into the sky? If they did, how would they look, up in the sky, to the passengers they are carrying? Surely the passengers too would shrink. Looking at themselves and at the inside of the plane, they might be in no better position to detect the shrinkage than Alice was in Wonderland:

Soon her eye fell on a little glass box that was lying under the table: she opened it, and found in it a very small cake, on which the words "EAT ME" were beautifully marked in currants. "Well, I'll eat it," said Alice,

"and if it makes me grow larger, I can reach the key; and if it makes me grow smaller, I can creep under the door; so either way I'll get into the garden, and I don't care which happens!"

She ate a little bit, and said anxiously to herself "Which way? Which way?" holding her hand on the top of her head to feel which way it was growing, and she was quite surprised to find that she remained the same size.⁴

If John Edgar's conclusion is based simply on how things look in the cabin around him, his inference is just as shaky as Alice's. No doubt, however, he will soon have a look out the window. Perhaps he will see the airport from which the plane took off. He will see that the people and the planes still on the ground have "shrunk" in much the way that airplanes "shrink" into the distance when he himself is on the ground. Reflection on these data may lead him to distinguish appearance from reality and to infer that receding objects seem to get smaller even though they actually maintain their size.

WHEN I TAUGHT "Philosophy and the Young Child" at Smith College several years ago, one of my students decided to try out some of the questions we were discussing on her five-year-old brother, David. During spring vacation she interviewed him and recorded the exchange. In the transcript is an instructive moment of puzzlement over the concept of life:

DAVID worries about whether an apple is alive. He decides that it is when it's on the ground but not when it has been brought into the house.

Is the apple on the table alive? David is puzzled. If it is alive, then when we eat it, we eat something that is alive. If it isn't, how does it differ from an apple still hanging from a tree?

A common approach to the question of life is to list several "life" functions (digestion, elimination, reproduction, locomotion) and then say that an organism is alive if it is capable of performing several of those functions. David seems not to have had that kind of approach in mind. What did he have in mind?

Consider flowers. When we cut roses, bring them inside, and put them in water in a vase, we say that we are keeping them alive (at least until the petals begin to fall and the leaves to turn brown).

We don't put apples in water. We might put them in a cool place, but we don't say that we are doing this to keep them alive—only, perhaps, to keep them fresh. Do they, then, cease to be alive when we bring them indoors?

Are apples alive when they lie on the ground? Perhaps David thinks of an apple's being alive in terms of its life cycle. He may know that the apple contains seeds and nourishment for the seeds and that, if an apple is left on the ground, a seed may eventually germinate and produce a little apple tree. This little tree may grow into a big one and, in turn, produce apples of its own. In this way the cycle goes on.

Perhaps one could say that death occurs when the cycle is interrupted, for example, when the sapling withers so that it will not grow into a tree or when the apple is brought indoors so that its seeds will not germinate. This suggestion is an interesting one, an ingenious response to a very old and very persistent puzzle.

I AM TUCKING my eight-year-old son, John, in bed. He looks up at me and asks, quite without warning, "Daddy, why don't I see you double, because I have two eyes and I can see you with each one by itself?"

What do I say?

First, I try to make sure that I understand what is puzzling him.

"You have two ears," I point out. "Are you surprised you don't *hear* double?"

John grins. "What is hearing double?"

"Well, maybe my-my voi-voice wo-would s-sound li-like thi-this," I say.

He reflects. "But your ears both go to the same place."

"And couldn't it be that your eyes both go to the same place?" I suggest.

He gets serious, thinks, then grins again. "You're just giving me another problem," he protests. "I want to think about the one I already have."

Fair enough. "Maybe," I suggest, "it's because the picture you get with your left eye comes together with the picture you get with your right eye. When they come together they make *one* picture."

We experiment with two fingers, one closer to our eyes, the other farther away. We try focusing now on one, now on the other. The aim is to see how, by focusing on the nearer finger, we can see the farther one double and vice versa. The moral is supposed to be that the two pictures don't *always* come together to make one, though they usually do.

My son is not satisfied. It turns out that he has constructed for himself, elaborating in various ways on what he has learned at school about vision and the retinal image, a complex theory of vision according to which one image comes through each eye, is reversed, rereversed, and then