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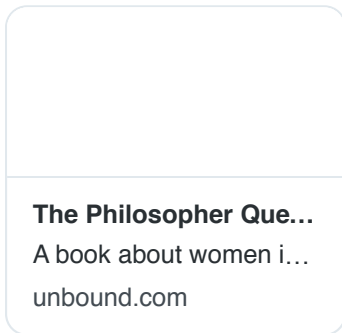
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Aporia Questions Using Picture Books

January 23, 2019 by Blog Contributor

by Maria daVenza Tillmanns, PhD

The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift. – Albert Einstein

Aporia

When rationality fails us we are puzzled and left with a sense of aporia (απορία) meaning *puzzlement* or *wonderment*. We are “at a loss,” perplexed. Many of Plato’s dialogues leave us with this sense of aporia. In philosophy, *aporia* refers to a philosophical puzzle or a seemingly insoluble impasse in an inquiry. What we thought we knew, we have to admit we do not know – rationally. On the other hand, we may have developed a deeper sense of love (in Plato’s *Symposium*), or courage (in Plato’s *Laches*), in the process.

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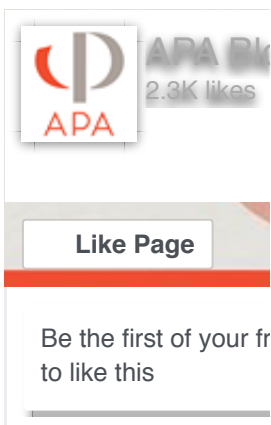
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Aporia with Children

In my philosophical discussions with elementary school children, I use questions not just to uncover hidden assumptions the children may have, but to lead them to a place of aporia – puzzlement, a place of “not-knowing.” If some children assume that to be brave is to be fearless, I not only ask why they assume this, but go on to ask how it is that we can be called brave if we are not afraid? What’s there to be brave about? With this question, I try to bring the children to a place of “aporia.” So how do you think your way out of a puzzling question? This sparks curiosity.

Limits of Rational Thought

Eastern philosophy tries to give us a deeper sense of understanding reality by showing the limits of rational thought as well. The Zen koan of the sound of one hand clapping is to guide students to enlightenment. Where the mind hits a wall, a deeper understanding can emerge.

Oftentimes we try to replace deeper thinking with knowledge. The more I know, the less I have to think. I have the answers, so I do not have to live in a world of uncertainty, ambiguity, feeling

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perplexed or “at a loss.” However, this is precisely the place true thinking can begin: *Now what?*

When we are “at a loss” we tend to seek advice from an “expert.” Our own thinking seems to have failed us. But in philosophical discussions with children, *aporia* empowers them to think.

Wonderment empowers thinking. In *Journey of the Universe*, by Brian Thomas Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, they state, “This sense of wonder is one of our most valuable guides on this ongoing journey into our future as *full human beings*. And continue with how “Wonder is a gateway through which the universe floods in and takes up residence within us.” (p.113, emphasis added).

Wonder captivates us and connects us to the world around us. In “doing” philosophy with children, this sense of wonder is expanded upon. And as Swimme and Tucker surmise, “What if, after a hundred million years of mammalian existence, there appeared a species that could *remain* spontaneous, curious, astonished, compelled to try everything? What would happen then?” (p. 86, emphasis added).

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For a young mammal, behavior is open-ended in a way that is rarer in adults... Certainly some of their playful activity can be understood as preparation and practice for their later lives. But much of it is without any direct relationship to adult behavior. In a word, what often occupies their consciousness is play... they enter into many kinds of relationships out of sheer curiosity. With their play they are discovering the exuberance of being alive. (p. 85, emphasis added).

APA News

In doing philosophy with children, we play with ideas. As Shobhan Lyons states in her article, "What makes a philosopher?", in *Philosophy Now* (Oct./Nov. 2018, issue 128): "Linking philosophy and truth is a common approach; but I believe that *philosophy is less a search for truth and more an engagement with possibilities; those that exist and those that are yet to exist...* A philosopher is therefore one who does not profess to know anything."

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(p.23, emphasis added). And as mentioned in the quote above, "... they enter into many kinds of relationships out of sheer curiosity." Aporia is about being puzzled and curious and about engaging with many possibilities, enhancing deep thinking.

It is as though our ability to explain the world we live in resembles the tip of the iceberg above the surface. Similarly, what we understand but cannot explain the same way, exists below the surface.

To explain what exists below the surface we use metaphors, analogies, poetry, music or scientific explanations. Nevertheless, we know love reading Solomon's Love in the Song of Songs; we know courage when we read about Hector's bravery in Homer's Iliad. With children, I use picture books. The stories and the pictures lend themselves perfectly to developing a deeper understanding of what lies beneath the puzzlement. I will give some examples later in the article.

Stella's Paper

After I told my professor in the Plato Seminar during my undergrad studies that I would like to re-write some of Plato's dialogues for children, he

suggested I write my final paper on a topic in philosophy that could be understood by children. That's how Stella (12 years old at the time), my landlady's niece and I ended up writing in dialogue format, *How Come the Opposite of What I think is True is Usually Really True?*

The paper focuses on how fear often interferes with our thinking. We often do things we might not do otherwise, if it weren't for the fact that fear had us thinking differently, often leaving us with a feeling of regret: *What was I thinking?*

We need to understand fear intuitively, using real-world cases, rather than rationally—for fear cannot be explained rationally. How do I know when my thinking is motivated by fear rather than fairness, for example? It's *rational* to justify retaliation, hitting back against others as being "fair." But is it?

Children are born with an intuitive grasp of the world, the "*a priori* of relation," according to existentialist philosopher and scholar, Martin Buber. From early on, they have to "figure out" how to survive. They may quickly sense if being in the arms of a particular adult feels safe or not and may start crying if they do not.

In *I and Thou* (1923), Martin Buber wrote,

“It is simply not the case that the child first perceives an object, then, as it were, puts himself in relation to it. But the effort to establish relation comes first... In the beginning is relation – as a category of being, readiness, grasping form, mould for the soul; it is the *a priori* of relation, the inborn Thou. *The inborn Thou is realized in the lived relations with that which meets it*” (p.27, emphasis added). This *a priori* relation to the world forms the basis for the intuitive knowledge we have of the world. Intuitive thought then emerges from one’s total engagement, one’s “lived relations” with the world. In other words, we are born with an intuitive *inborn* compass.

An Internal Compass

Coming to a deeper understanding helps us to orient a kind of *internal compass*, guided by which we can learn to recognize the value of something (not all that glitters is gold), the potential danger of something (recognizing red flags in life), and to navigate the world.

This compass guides us in our decision-making to survive a complex and dangerous world. The compass needs to be educated much in the way Socrates tried to educate his interlocutors in the Agora, or Zen Buddhists try to educate

their students.

The compass we use to navigate life needs to be cultivated from an early age. It does not *tell* us rationally what is good or what is bad. It is not that simple. *Remember, the stars we sail by, are not fixed, either.* So we need to develop a sense for what may be right or not in any particular situation. We may have a general sense, but need to learn how to apply this general sense to specific situations, which are *unique*. In every *new* situation we have to figure out what is the right thing to do (not the correct thing, for that seems to imply there is only one correct way).

Let's consider another metaphor: To navigate our ship in this world, we need concrete skills, of course. What use is it knowing how to sail by the stars when we do not know how to handle a ship on the high seas. *But with all the technical skills of sailing lacking the knowledge of how to orient our ship, we are lost at sea.* My sense is that we put too much weight on acquiring concrete knowledge and too little—nowadays anyway—on our ability to sail by the stars.

In our philosophical discussions, we try to focus on the compass. The compass has the cardinal directions, but it also

has all the degrees in between. And every degree can make a huge difference in how to steer *your* ship.

For example, whereas fear may be a good thing in some instances, it may not be in others. Lying may be necessary in some instances and a good thing (although, it doesn't imply that lying in itself is a good thing), and in other cases it may be harmful and hurtful. So how *do* you decide? This is where navigational skills come into play. What may work in some instances may in fact be the entirely wrong thing to do in other cases. So how *can you tell?* This is where you need to learn how to respond to complex situations, and not reduce all situations to a one fits all solution.

The Art of Not Knowing/Aporia

What expertise do philosophers have and what can they bring to philosophical discussions with children? Philosophers are experts in *not* knowing, experts in aporia. In practicing the art of philosophy, we engage each other to think together to explore concepts we only vaguely understand. Thinking together not only binds us, but also allows us to explore unknown and perhaps unknowable territory with joy, curiosity and confidence. And in my

experience with children, they thoroughly enjoy these discussions and are eager to participate.

In the following, I will present some examples of leading group discussions to a place of aporia. The stories I will use are: "Dragons and Giants," and "Cookies," in *Frog and Toad Together*, by Arnold Lobel, "The Club" in *Grasshopper on the Road*, also by Arnold Lobel, *It's Mine*, by Leo Lionni, and *The Giving Tree*, by Shel Silverstein.

Dragons and Giants in *Frog and Toad Together*.

Frog and Toad want to find out if they are brave and looking in the mirror doesn't really tell them *if* they are brave. They decide to climb a mountain if they are. While doing so, they come across a snake that wants to eat them for lunch, they are suddenly in the path of an avalanche of rolling stones, and at the top of the mountain a hawk sweeps over them. All these encounters terrify them. Finally, having reached the top of mountain, they run back down as fast as they can, back to Toad's house, where Toad crawls under his blanket in bed, and Frog hides in the closet. They stay there for a long time feeling very brave together.

The question is, are Frog and Toad brave?

Many children say that to be brave you cannot be afraid. Since Frog and Toad are afraid, they cannot be brave.

The aporia question is, whether you can be brave without being afraid? If you are not in the least afraid, what makes you brave? If you are not afraid of dogs, are you brave when you see them in the street?

Children are puzzled by this question and often don't find a way out of the dilemma until they come up with the idea that an element of danger plays a role in being brave and in being afraid. The snake presented an element of danger, as did the avalanche, and the hawk. One child figured out that if you are not afraid, you don't know the danger you are in.

Another aporia question is, whether Frog and Toad are brave when they decide to jump out of the way of the snake, the avalanche or the hawk? It seems to make Frog and Toad not brave. This raises the question of Frog and Toad being foolish rather than brave if they were not to jump out of the way.

A third aporia question has to do with the

question how we *know* we are foolish or brave when dealing with that which is dangerous.

This question can truly only be answered by an individual in a real life situation by the way s/he decides to act in a dangerous situation. And is the act truly a brave act or simply foolish?

What makes these questions aporia questions is that they seem counter-intuitive and contradictory. On the face of it, these questions don't seem to make sense. Children are puzzled and "at a loss," until they figure that what lurks below the apparent paradox, is an understanding of what it means to be brave in real life. Reason alone tells you that you cannot be brave and afraid at the same time. But real life tells you that without being aware of the danger involved and the fear that comes with knowing the danger involved, you cannot be brave.

Cookies, in *Frog and Toad Together*.

Toad baked some cookies and brought them over to Frog's house. It's a big bowl with lots and lots of cookies in it, and they can't stop eating them. Soon they decide they better stop eating them or they will get sick. But they cannot seem

to stop; let's have one last cookie, one very last cookie. What to do? Frog decides that what they really need is willpower. Toad is not sure what that is, and Frog explains that willpower is trying hard not to do something you really want to do, like eating all the cookies. So, they come up with different tactics to keep from eating all the cookies, such as putting the remaining cookies in a box, tying a string around the box and putting the box on a high shelf. But that won't really work, because they can take it down from the shelf, untie the string, open the box and eat the cookies. So they finally decide to dump the cookies outside for the birds to eat.

The question is, do Frog and Toad have willpower?

Many children will say that they do, because they got rid of the cookies and will no longer be tempted to eat them.

The aporia question is, whether it is really willpower if you *get rid* of something, because then you don't have to "try hard" not to do something you really want to do. Of course, it took willpower to get rid of the cookies. But now you have eliminated the problem. Some children thought throwing the cookies out was really "fake will power," as they called it.

Surely, Frog and Toad are making attempts, which should be acknowledged. The children responded, however, that real willpower is when you can stay away from the cookies when the bowl of cookies is still in front of you on the table, or when you decided to leave some cookies for tomorrow.

Another aporia question has to do with when we *know* we have willpower – again a question, which can only be answered by an individual person in a real-life situation by the way s/he decides to act, such as of having to exert willpower with regards to stopping a bad habit, for example.

The Club, in *Grasshopper on the Road*:

Grasshopper is going down the road when he sees a bunch of beetles carrying signs that say that they love morning. The beetles are morning lovers and celebrate morning every morning. When they see Grasshopper, they ask him whether he likes morning and he says he does. The beetles are thrilled and make him part of their “we love morning club.” They give him a wreath and a sign to carry, but things go terribly wrong when Grasshopper announces that he also likes afternoon and night is very nice too. The beetles are shocked and rip the

wreath from him and take away his sign: nobody, nobody who loves afternoon and night can be in our club. And Grasshopper continues on down the road. It's morning and he sees the dew sparkle in the sunlight.

The question is, whether it's ok for the beetles to throw Grasshopper out of the club.

The children have different ideas about this, some say 'yes,' because it's the beetles' club and they make up the rules. Others believe that the beetles should leave Grasshopper in the club, because he does love morning, after all.

The aporia question is whether it is *fair* to throw Grasshopper out? Because even if the beetles have the right to throw Grasshopper out of the club, should they?

The children decide it's not fair, if the beetles didn't tell him about the rules to begin with. They made him a member of the club, because he loved morning and threw him out when he said he also loved afternoon and night. Grasshopper didn't have a say in any of this. Then again, Grasshopper could have figured out that the beetles *only* loved morning, because their signs said they loved morning.

Although, they might have carried “ we love afternoon” signs in the afternoon... who knows. They also figured that it was not fair to throw him out being so rude and unkind to Grasshopper. Being rude is not fair.

Another aporia question is about what would be fair? One child proposed that one beetle might take Grasshopper aside and explain the rules of the club to him and then makes sure Grasshopper is treated with respect, whether he stays or leaves.

A third aporia question is about how do we know something is fair? That can only be answered by an individual in a real-life situation by the way s/he decides to act according to what s/he thinks is fair. For some, retaliation is fair.

A New House, in *Grasshopper on the Road*:

Grasshopper sees an apple on top of a hill and decides, yum! lunch, as he takes a big bite out of the apple. This, however, caused the apple to start rolling down the hill. Grasshopper hears a voice inside the apple, telling him to keep his house from being destroyed as it is rolling down the hill. My bathtub is in the living room; my bed is in the kitchen. Grasshopper is

trying to catch the apple, as it is rolling faster and faster down the hill. In the end it crashes into a tree at the bottom of the hill and is smashed into a hundred pieces. Luckily, it is an apple tree, and Worm has decided to find a new house to live in, one without a big bite in it, either.

The question is, should Worm be angry at Grasshopper?

The children often agree that he shouldn't be angry. Grasshopper didn't mean to hurt Worm and destroy his home.

The aporia question is, isn't Worm justified in being angry at Grasshopper for destroying his home, even though it was an accident? In other words, should I be angry with someone who hurt me, even if it is not done on purpose? I am hurt; so can't I be angry because I have been hurt? The children often feel that when it was not done on purpose, you can't really be angry. And Grasshopper not only didn't make the apple roll down the hill on purpose, he also tried to catch the apple. He was trying to save Worm's home. But it still crashed and was destroyed.

Another aporia question is, can you punish someone when what they have

done wasn't done on purpose? Is it OK for your parents to punish you when you have done something wrong, even though you didn't do it on purpose? Or your teacher tells you didn't do a good enough job even when you really tried your best, but it didn't come out right? At this point the children often feel that the punishment is to make you more careful not to break the glass or the toy, etc. And maybe Grasshopper will knock on the apple next time, to see if someone is living in it, before he takes a big bite out of it.

Another aporia question is then whether we are justified in punishing the innocent? Does it make sense to punish your baby brother for breaking your toy? Or are the police justified to shoot an unarmed Black man, because they feel their life is threatened?

It's Mine, by Leo Lionni:

On a small island in the middle of Rainbow Pond, there lived three quarrelsome frogs, Milton, Rupert and Lydia. They fought all day long, about what they thought was theirs and theirs alone. The water belonged to Milton, the earth belonged to Rupert, and the air belonged to Lydia. A Toad on the other side of the island was fed up with all the

quarrelling and told the frogs to stop. But they didn't. They kept on fighting. Then the rain began to fall and their small island grew smaller and smaller. At last, they could only cling to one rock that was left. They huddled together, trembling from cold and fright, but they felt better that they were at least together sharing fears and hopes. When the rain stopped and the water receded, they saw that the rock was not a rock; it was the Toad, who had saved them. They were so very happy and the next morning they all jumped into the water together, they leaped after butterflies in the air together and finally rested in the weeds together. The island, the water and the air could now be shared in peace.

The question is: can we say that the earth, the air and water belongs to me only? No, the children agree; if only you get to breathe the air, there won't be any left for me and I'll die.

The aporia question is, how can I tell something is truly mine or not? One child responds that her smile is hers. But what if I make you smile? Is it also partly mine? One child said that even your home is not strictly yours, because it belongs to the earth.

The Giving Tree, by Shel Silverstein.

There is a boy and there is a tree – a giving tree. The two are friends and the boy comes every day to play with the tree, gather her leaves, climb up her trunk, swing from branches, and eat her apples. The boy loves the tree and the tree is happy. But as the boy grows older, his friendship with the tree changes too. He doesn't come as often and the tree is often sad and alone. And when he does come to see her, he wants things from her, such as money. But she wants him to stay and swing from her branches the way he used to. But he isn't interested anymore. He is too old for that now. So the tree tells him to take her apples and sell them in town. He stays away for a long time and when he comes back, he wants a house and the tree tells him to take her branches to build a house. When he comes back again after having stayed away for a very long time, he wants a boat and she tells him to cut down her trunk so he can make a boat and sail away. Finally, when the boy, now a very old man, comes again, the tree has nothing left to give and tells him to sit on her stump if all he needs now is a place to sit down and rest.

The question is, did the tree give the boy too much? Most children will agree that giving her life for the boy is giving too much. And the boy never seemed happy.

In the illustrations, his face was always unhappy. He just wants more and more; and people who want more and more are never happy.

The aporia question has to do with whether there such a thing as giving *too* much. Does unconditional giving imply giving all, even at your own expense? Because when it is at your expense, you stop being there to do the giving. Some children feel the tree gave too much, because in the end, she died. Many children responded that the boy should have gone out to get a job in order to get the things he wanted and not ask the tree for all these things. Another child came up with the observation that since apples have seeds, he could have planted the seeds and then he could have sold the apples from all those new trees and get the money he needs for building a house, and a boat.

Another aporia question is why the boy never gave the tree what she wanted and needed? Can a friendship be one-sided and still be a friendship? The children feel that overall the tree was happy when she could make the boy happy. They compared it to the giving a mother does. But that is not the same as a friendship. In a friendship the relationship works both ways, and the boy could have visited

the tree more often and not just when he needed something. Some kids said that he should “grow up.” He could have brought his family to meet the tree, his friend from when he was a boy.

I have tried to give some examples of using picture books to get children thinking on their own and to figure out how they would have responded in these situations. Bringing children to a place of not-knowing (the answer), triggers their curiosity and engages them in the questioning process. They are now personally involved and this makes the questioning come alive. They are in charge of their own answers and can freely change their minds, Hey, George said something that made me change my mind. Aporia opens a place of wonder and curiosity and allows them to play with ideas without the pressure of coming up with the right answer. They are developing their “sacred gift” (Einstein quote), a deeper understanding of what is discussed and the complexity involved. There are no simple answers – maybe temporary answers; answers that make sense, for now. This enhances flexibility in thinking and collaborative thinking. It also allows for independent thinking; we don’t all have to agree and believe the same thing. It’s okay to have very different views on things. That

makes it exciting and interesting. If wondering about things enhances children's interest in learning, we know that it will motivate them for a lifetime.

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