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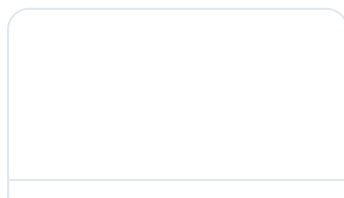
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by Maria daVenza Tillmanns, PhD

Proprioception is usually used in reference to body movement and the self-perception of body movement. *Proprius* in Latin means “one’s own,” or “self.” It refers to the physical knowledge acquired, say, in the process of doing a particular activity, such as riding a bicycle, for instance. You can be told how to ride a bicycle, and this may be of some help. But in the end, it’s the physical knowledge and not the mere theoretical knowledge that enables you to ride your bike. David Bohm, a world-renowned theoretical physicist, applied this notion of *proprioception* to the movement of thought, the process of thought. In *On Dialogue*, he contends that thinking can become aware of its own movement and aware of itself in action:

“Proprioception” is a technical term – you could also say “self-perception of thought,” “self-awareness of thought,” or “thought is aware of itself in action.” Whatever terms we use, I am saying: thought should be able to perceive its own movement, be aware of

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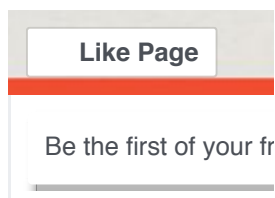
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its own movement. In the process of thought there should be the awareness of that movement, of the intention to think, and of the result which the thinking produces.

This opens the door to an understanding of thinking *as a process* like any other physical process, such as riding a bicycle. We usually think of thinking as an abstract process – one of learning abstract knowledge and how to apply that knowledge. And this is what we are primarily taught in school. Unfortunately, some methods used in doing philosophy with children focus too much on strictly developing abstract critical thinking skills.

In doing philosophy with children, I am interested in focusing on the process of thinking in the process of thinking. In this way, it is also different from metacognition, which tends to focus on the ability to self-correct *in response* to the self-assessment toward the completion of a task.

Bohm focuses on developing the

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awareness *in the process* of thinking itself and not *in response* to the process of thinking. Knowing how to ride a bicycle *abstractly*—you sit on the bicycle seat and push your two feet down on the peddles to move the bicycle forward—will never teach you how to *actually* ride a bike. It may give you some guidance, but not much more.

So we can have a situation where we (think we) know how to ride a bike (abstractly), but cannot actually do so (physically). In this way, abstract thinking alone, as Bohm points out, can be very misleading. This is precisely what Socrates tried to show: the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Can you *actually* ride a bicycle? Are you, in fact, brave? Are you, in fact, a just person?

Let's consider a more modern example: David Bohm, who died in 1992, was very concerned about what he perceived as the breakdown of communication. In *On Dialogue*, Bohm explores the nature of this breakdown. To this end, he focuses on the nature of thinking as *a process*.

He makes the distinction between what he calls 'abstract thought' and 'the tacit, concrete process of thought.' Where these two forms of thinking—which together form the entire process of

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thinking—are not in sync, self-deception and miscommunication take place.

Self-deception and miscommunication take place when I think I can ride a bike, but in fact cannot. You may assume you know something because you have memorized it, but without the tacit, concrete knowledge, which is the basis for being able to *act* on what you know, you are deceiving yourself and others.

Action comes *not* from our abstract knowledge, but rather from our tacit knowledge.

Bohm states that for any action/change to take place, it has to take place in the tacit, concrete process of thought:

This tacit, concrete process is actual knowledge... In the case of riding a bicycle, if you don't know how to ride, then the knowledge isn't right – the tacit knowledge is not coherent in the context of trying to ride the bike, and you don't have the intended result. The incoherence becomes clear – you

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fall when you want to ride. Physically, tacit knowledge is where the action is coming from. And physical change depends on changing the tacit response. Therefore, changing the abstract thought is one step, but unless it also changes the way the body responds, it won't be enough... You need the tacit knowledge which you get by actually riding... There is movement in that tacit knowledge, which is that it is exploring possibilities.

He goes on to say:

The question is: can we do this in thought as well as in bicycle riding. I am proposing that thought – to think – is actually a tacit process more subtle than riding the bicycle. The concrete process of

thinking is very tacit. At the actual level where thinking emerges in the tacit process, it is a movement. In principle, that movement could be self-aware... – that the concrete, real process of the movement of thought could be self-aware, without bringing in a “self” who is aware of it.

Under this approach, philosophy is the process of learning about the process of thinking itself and how it affects everything we *do*. It is learning how to actually ride the bike of philosophizing. Philosophy should affect everything we *do*, not just everything we *think*. For this I want to refer to Robert Pirsig's book, *Lila – An Inquiry into Morals*:

He liked the word “philosophology.” It was just right... Philosophology is to philosophy as musicology is to music, or as art history and art appreciation are to art, or

as literary criticism is to creative writing. It's a derivative, secondary field, a sometimes parasitic growth that likes to think it controls its host by analyzing and intellectualizing its host's behavior... Yet, ridiculous as it sounds, this is exactly what happens in the philosophology that calls itself philosophy... Can you imagine the ridiculousness of an art historian taking his students to museums, having them write a thesis on some historical or technical aspect of what they see there, and after a few years of this giving them degrees that say they are accomplished artists. They've never held a brush or a mallet and chisel in their hands. All they know is art history.... Students aren't expected to philosophize. Actual painting, music composition and creative

writing are almost impossible to teach and so they barely get in the academic door. True philosophy doesn't get in at all.

I believe this is the point Socrates and Bohm tried to make clear: our job is to master the art of understanding the nature of something—the nature of what it means to be courageous in *Laches*, or the nature of friendship in *Lysis*. Trying to “intellectualize” this understanding Persig calls “philosophology.”

To explain the world we live in abstractly resembles the tip of the iceberg, whereas what we understand but cannot explain the same way, exists below the surface.

What is below is certainly as real as what exists above the surface. To explain what exists below the surface we use metaphors, analogies, poetry, music or scientific explanations such as space-time or the Higgs boson. What exists below the surface we cannot explain in abstract terms.

Abstract thought does not have the capacity for movement. And while we can engage in thought experiments and

develop good reasoning skills, it lacks the ability for movement and therefore also the ability for proprioception, thought in action.

And since abstract thought does not originate within the living self it can never become aware of itself in the way that the tacit, concrete process of thought can.

This is also why abstract thought alone fails to transfer to real life lived experiences in life. It lacks the basis for transference, because it does not exist in lived relationship to reality.

...any change that really counts has to take place in the tacit, concrete process of thought itself. It cannot take place only in abstract thought.

Abstract thought builds on what is known, whereas the tacit, concrete process of thought builds on what is not known... as does philosophy.

Learning how to ride a bike involves riding it while not knowing how to. We

develop the ability to ride a bike in the process of riding it.

Too much of our thinking takes place on the level of abstract thought, and this is where we go wrong and where we end up living a life that's "incoherent." It is out of sync. And while we think we can "impose" abstract thought to establish coherent functioning, there is nothing further from the truth. It only leads to further incoherent living. Any change has to take place in the tacit processes of thought.

While children can grasp abstract concepts taught in school, they often show difficulty in transferring this knowledge to 'real life' situations:

Coherence includes the entire process of the mind – which includes the tacit processes of thought. Therefore, any change that really counts has to take place in the tacit, concrete process of thought itself. It cannot take place only in abstract thought.

■

To only operate from abstract thought, disassociated from the tacit, concrete process of thought, has dangerous consequences. Disassociated abstract thought can allow us to do the most horrible things to one another, the environment, other life forms and provide justifications for it. In other words, saying that you are taking care of your health by having a health care plan is not the same as actually *taking care of your health*. But we often convince ourselves that it is – and that’s where self-deception and miscommunication enter our reasoning processes.

Let’s consider another example: When we operate/act from a place of feeling threatened by another person, for no other reason than that they are different from who we are, or from what we believe, we operate from our tacit concrete knowledge of fear and threat. Abstractly, we know those we feel threatened by are human beings as well, who deserve respect, deserve being listened to fairly, but in the realm of tacit knowledge, our fear predominates.

This leads to what Bohm calls the paradox in thinking and feeling:

Thus, it is now more urgent than ever that we give attention... to the inward dullness and non-perceptiveness which allows us to go on failing to notice the paradox in thinking and feeling... A mind caught in such paradox will inevitably fall into self-deception, aimed at the creation of illusions that appear to relieve the pain resulting from the attempt to go on with self-contradiction.

So how do we develop this perceptiveness, so urgently needed? How do we develop this proprioception of thought? For instance, I am angry about what so-and-so said to me, but I know I should not be angry. I can suppress my anger, but this does not in any way lead to “coherence” in thinking; in fact it leads to self-deception and miscommunication instead.

Bohm suggests that in order to deal with this incoherence in thinking, proprioception can help us to “see” both thoughts simultaneously, meaning while

operating from our assumptions, we are aware of them as well.

In this way, a space has been created for thinking to move again, instead of being stuck in the non-moving thought/assumption alone. Proprioception of thought liberates our thinking from the reflexes of thinking – the reflexes we have been educated into believing to be truths about the world we live in. Reflexes of thought can get in the way of thinking!

Bohm states that we tend to treat thought as truth rather than as a movement and in that way we get stuck in the “truths,” which obstruct the movement of thinking. If we strictly focus on developing abstract thinking skills, we ignore “the realm in which genius is at home, where insight is at work, logic can hardly find access to” (Heschel) – and what he calls the “origin of thought.”

Philosophy is more than developing good reasoning skills, although that is certainly a part of it. And it is more than learning to make good arguments. It is more than logic, and more than learning about the theories of past philosophers.

Philosophy specializes in thinking, the *art of thinking*, if you will. And as such, it

teaches us to become aware of our thinking and thought processes. So in learning how to philosophize, we learn to *suspend* or put on hold the results of thinking and focus on the tacit, concrete process of thinking itself and create the self-awareness of thinking in action.

This is central to why it is important to philosophize with young children. Doing philosophy with children starting in elementary school, develops the child's awareness of him/herself as a thinking being. Philosophy with children creates the opportunity for developing the awareness of the tacit process of thinking itself, which is still paramount in young children.

I have always maintained that we should establish an *academy* for philosophy, just as we have an art academy or music academy for exactly the reasons Pirsig points out. An academy of philosophy would focus not exclusively on the history of philosophy, but rather on the "doing" of philosophy. When you start with young children and give them the opportunity to philosophize ("do" philosophy) they quickly catch on and not only learn to philosophize but importantly experience *themselves* as uniquely thinking beings.

Eyes with perfect vision are able to accommodate, which is the adjustment of the optics of the eye to keep an object in focus. Thinking as movement is like training the mind to accommodate, to listen to other points of view and integrate them into one's own thinking as it evolves trying to develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of a certain topic under discussion. Instead of applying what we have blindly memorized to situations we find ourselves in, this deeper understanding now *informs* our actions.

If so, it's not what we tell ourselves (abstractly) that enhances the education of character. It's proprioception of thought – an astute awareness of thought in action, which develops character. Decisions then come from integrated knowledge, not from what we have unthinkingly come to accept.

Can I still be fair when feeling threatened? Do I have the astuteness of thought that without suppressing my fear of the other, I can “hold the tension” between my thinking and feeling and act honorably.

So what exactly does thinking in action look like? What are some of its characteristics?

- For one it is a creative process, something new is being created
- New thoughts/ideas come to mind, such as moments of sudden insights
- It is unpredictable – there is no knowing how it will evolve and what turns will be taken
- It is engaging – you engage the unknown
- It is about trying to understand, not to want to know the answer
- It is about learning to ask the “right” questions to move the discussion further and deeper into the subject matter
- It is multifaceted, contradictory, confusing
- It not about (subjective) opinion or (objective (truth); it is about letting insights emerge out of what is created
- Being ready to grab an interesting idea
- It is about thinking that is alive and surprising

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're not even afraid? What's there to be brave about? With this question, I try to bring the children to a place of "aporia," a place of puzzlement and wonder. Aporia *empowers* thinking by sparking wonder and curiosity.

In their book, *Journey of the Universe*, Swimme and Tucker state, "For or a young mammal, behavior is open-ended in a way that is rarer in adults... In a word, what often occupies their consciousness is *play... they enter into many kinds of relationships out of sheer curiosity*" (emphasis added).

In doing philosophy with children, we play with ideas. We are curious and Siobhan Lyons states in her *Philosophy Now* article, "What makes a philosopher?"

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.

Aporia is about being puzzled and curious and about engaging with *many possibilities*, enhancing our thinking while developing our self-awareness of the process of thinking.

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 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.

This *a priori* relation to the world forms the basis for the intuitive knowledge we have of the world, for intuitive thought emerges from one's total engagement, one's "lived relations" with the world.

And as I have tried to show, philosophizing with children at an early age makes them aware of the tacit processes of thought, not yet imposed upon by abstract thought.

Philosophy with children dialogues engages the children as whole beings and not just their opinions. They know *they* matter, because their thoughts and feelings are taken seriously. In the process they learn to take themselves and their thoughts and feelings seriously as well – they learn that they matter, also to themselves.

What Matthew Lipman refers to as a "tacking in the wind," when having philosophical discussions with children, Bohm describes as follows:

And so it can go back and forth, with the continual emergence of a new content that is common to [both] participants. Thus, in a

dialogue, each person does not attempt to make common certain ideas or items of information already known to him. Rather, it may be said that the two people are making something in common, i.e. creating something new together.

But of course such communication can lead to the creation of something new only if people are able to freely listen to each other, without prejudice, and without trying to influence each other. Each has to be interested primarily in truth and coherence, so that he is ready to drop his old ideas and intentions, and be ready to go on to something different, when this is called for. If, however, two people merely want to convey ideas or points of view to each other, as if these were items of

information, then they must inevitably fail to meet. For each will hear the other through the screen of his own thoughts, which he tends to maintain and defend, regardless of whether or not they are true or cohere.

The most important aspect of doing philosophy with children is that it *engages* their thinking and not just their opinions. It engages their whole being which also contributes to building self-confidence and self-esteem, because they experience themselves as persons whose thoughts and feelings *matter*. In doing philosophy with children, children are engaged in thinking together, creating speech-with-meaning through genuine listening and genuine talking. Martin Buber calls this process of thinking together creating speech-with-meaning:

Only if real listening as well as real talking takes place will the full possibility of learning be present in class discussions, ... Only

through genuine listening, and not through any mere feeling of group unity, will the full potentiality of any group as a group be realized... One should follow the common, which means that lived speech, speech-with-meaning, is a value in itself.

Speech-with-meaning “flows”. Children “are making something *in common*, i.e. creating something new together” (Bohm).

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