

Pauses for Questions: Why Adopt the Agambenian Characterization of Philosophy for Children?

David I. Backer

Cleveland State University

In an educational milieu obsessed with data-driven decision-making and outcomes-based learning, how do we understand the value of Philosophy for Children (P4C)? Our author's answer is compelling: P4C is a way of doing philosophy, a way of learning, which suspends all answers. The purpose is not to come to an answer, but rather to foster the permanent delay of inquiry. The benefit of P4C is therefore an experience, not an outcome: the experience of potentiality itself, to learn and not-learn.

This account of P4C's value, which I will refer to as a "characterization" in what follows, understands P4C as an experience of potentiality itself, which is also an experience of passion for one's facticity and opacity in concealment. Each of these — impotentiality and passion for facticity — constitute freedom and the limits of one's freedom, that is, the capacity of one's incapacity and the confines of one's socialization. When one can do something, in other words, it is important to remember that one can also not do it, and in that realization is an expression of one's freedom. Realizing that one can also not do something also engenders an appreciation for what one is and a love for oneself. P4C, as a practice of delay of conclusion and outcome, the author claims, is an opportunity to develop these appreciations. In response to the Agambenian characterization of P4C, I would like to pose three questions: one about characterizations of P4C in general, another about P4C's public relations, and, finally, one about the difference between experiences and outcomes. I end with a proposal based on these questions.

As mentioned, the author presents us with a characterization of P4C, or an account of its benefits — a way to understand its worth. Though the endnotes refer readers to recent literature on P4C, the essay's framework for characterizing P4C raises an interesting question: What are the different characterizations of P4C available, in case one wanted to know what the options might be aside from or in addition to the Agambenian one. Arranging this buffet of options would, of course, build on the rich tradition of P4C but would also add to it by mapping the terrain. For example, the author mentions that Matthew Lipman conceived of P4C as a practice of pragmatic thinking. Here, then, is one option for a characterization: that P4C instills a pragmatic type of thought where communities inquire conjointly, successfully leading one another towards useful truths. But there are other kinds of thinking in communities of inquiry, such as the Deleuze-inflected style of P4C practiced by Walter Kohan in Brazil, where communities of inquiry explore the original, wondrous, and aesthetic possibilities and powers of the child-like state. On the other end of the spectrum would be a classical-logical kind of thinking, wherein P4C is meant to instruct students in an analytic style of argumentation through dialogue. Further still, through a Habermasian lens, "thinking" might entail a form of intersubjective rational autonomy that, via dialogue, resists technocracy in favor of the lifeworld. There are others, which

we could label by the names of philosophers, which could further enrich the buffet. Are there as many characterizations of P4C as there are perspectives on thinking and philosophizing? If so, why should we adopt the Agambenian as opposed to (or in conjunction with) these others?

Implicit in the author's characterization of P4C is a concern with public relations. Not only is he concerned with P4C practitioners' own understanding of P4C, but also how those adherents might successfully communicate the value of P4C, and, perhaps, philosophy in general in an outcomes-driven milieu. This is a perennial if not daily question for philosophers in academic and professional environments where philosophical work is undervalued. When pushed to say why students should learn philosophy or philosophically, what can the philosopher say? What should she say? Does the Agambenian characterization of P4C, that it is to some degree purposeless, serve to communicate its value to others in the contemporary milieu?

The author bids us to think (and implies that we might say) that philosophy cannot and will not guarantee outcomes but rather experiences of wonder, depth, and freedom. These experiences are not outcomes, but rather a negation of instrumentality itself. I wonder, is such an experience another kind of outcome, rather than a negation of outcomes? One might accurately say that an experience of wondrous freedom — the capacity of incapacity — *results* from philosophical inquiry. Isn't that experience just another kind of outcome?

The author uses the example of pausing and wait-time, or moments of teacher silence, both as a concrete instance of instruction in potentiality itself and as a metaphor for the Agambenian characterization of P4C's benefits. Each of the questions offered here may be understood through this pause. First, P4C and philosophy itself have many other aspects beyond pausing, silence, and delay. Certainly we can think of P4C's benefits in terms of pausing, and the corresponding understanding of freedom and love in impotentiality, but, among other options, why should we? Second, when communicating the value of P4C to others, is the pause — a not-doing — the best paradigm to cite? Third, is a pause a negation of outcomes or just another kind of outcome?

To close, consider a proposal that responds to each of these questions: Educational discourse analyst James T. Dillon argues that the value of teacher wait-time is that it increases the likelihood that students will ask their own questions rather than passively respond to teacher questions. (This is why teachers, according to Dillon, should not talk as much if their desired activity is discussion.) Could the Agambenian characterization of P4C be a good characterization precisely for this reason, that it is a way of understanding student questioning? The question is arguably philosophy's most powerful habit and essential to P4C's value across the spectrum of characterizations alluded to before. A question is an expression of uncertainty and wonder that suffuses the questioner with both freedom in impotentiality and an appreciation for herself at that moment. The proposal is to consider the student question as the paradigm in the Agambenian characterization, along with the teacher pause. By including the student question with the teacher pause as paradigmatic, we have a reason to adopt the Agambenian understanding over others (it is a theory

of student questioning), it is a good way to describe P4C's value to other people (P4C promotes student questioning) and dissolves the experience-outcome tension (asking a question is both and neither experience and/nor outcome). In other words, is the passion for (not) teaching a beneficial account of P4C's benefits because it emphasizes and theorizes student questioning?