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## THE APPLICATION OF PROPRICEPTION OF THINKING TO DOING PHILOSOPHY WITH CHILDREN

**Tillmanns Maria daVenza,**

University of California, San Diego, USA, PhD,  
UC San Diego 9500 Gilman Dr. La Jolla, CA 92093  
E-mail: davenza@sbcglobal.net

### Abstract

This paper focuses on creating a paradigm shift; looking at how philosophy for and with children can inform philosophy, instead of having philosophy inform philosophy for and with children. My work in doing philosophy with children has shown me the limitations to trying to understand their way of doing philosophy through the lens of how adults understand philosophy and the influence western philosophy has had on the perception of what kids do when they are involved in philosophical group discussions. The paradigm shift is relationally-based and for this I include the work of Martin Buber and David Bohm. Instead of looking at how we can develop critical thinking skills in children through developing their abstract thinking, I am interested in looking at what Bohm calls the tacit, concrete process of thinking. It's the thinking that underlies thinking, so to speak. It's the act of thinking underlying the abstract thinking we usually associate with thinking. In doing philosophy with children, I am interested in focusing on the process of thinking in the process of thinking.

### Key concepts:

philosophy with children,  
relationally-based philosophy,  
proprioception,  
abstract thinking vs. tacit concrete process  
of thinking,  
aporia.

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 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 [1, p. 79]. 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 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 and with your two feet you pedal and 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, that 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? Philosophy, then, is 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." [6, p. 322—323].

This is the point Socrates is trying to make also; that philosophy is 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 Pirsig calls "philosophology." And in this way, Socrates knows that he does not know. He makes a clear distinction between knowledge and understanding. In the *Symposium* he brings in Diotima who, at the hand of a myth, provides us an understanding of love, after everyone else has tried to define love [7]. Socrates knows the limitations of "knowledge." But interestingly, understanding does not have those limitations. The depths at which we can understand something are endless. That is because developing an understanding of something involves *movement*, whereas knowledge is stagnant, rarefied. Knowledge as such has its applications in real life, but falls short if not undergirded by a deeper conceptual understanding, which

is always evolving. Understanding rests on insights, which are generally hard to articulate. And so we use metaphors, analogies, poems and other art forms to "point at" an understanding. This is what Diotima does in the *Symposium*.

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.

Abraham Joshua Heschel has another way to describe this idea of developing the ability for gaining insights to deepen our understanding: "The greater hindrance to knowledge is our adjustment to conventional notions, to mental clichés. Wonder ... is therefore a prerequisite for an authentic awareness of that which is ... Wonder, rather than doubt, is the root of knowledge ... Wonder is a state of mind in which we do not look at reality through the latticework of our memorized knowledge ... Insights are the roots of art, philosophy and religion, and must be acknowledged as common and fundamental fact of mental life. The ways of creative thinking do not always coincide with those charted by traditional logicians; the realm where genius is at home, where insight is at work — logic can barely find access to." [4, p. 14—17].

It is this discrepancy of knowing something abstractly yet lacking an understanding, which also greatly interferes with how we communicate. 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 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 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. "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." [1, p. 79].

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. Making children aware at a young age, when they are still predominantly operating from a tacit, concrete knowledge basis as opposed to one driven by abstract knowledge, is why doing philosophy with children is so crucial. When abstract thought takes over, without the awareness of the tacit process of thinking, incoherence in thinking takes place and with it the problem of 'transference,' as many teachers and university instructors are aware of. 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." [1, p. 78]. 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 "incoherent functioning" becomes clear; where self-deception and miscommunication enter in.

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." [1, p. 66 — 67].

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. This is what Bohm calls "incoherence in thinking." 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. In order to deal with this incoherence in thinking — Bohm suggests, that perceptiveness or 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. Philosophy, in my opinion, should treat thinking as *movement*; in fact that is what philosophizing entails: thought in action. Painting is a movement, composing and making music is a movement. Likewise, philosophy — the art of thinking — should also be approached as a movement rather than as an abstract skill set. And 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.” [4, p. 17]. Not to say that such a skill set is not valuable in and of itself, but it is not philosophy proper, in my opinion.

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 for what you believe in. It is more than logic, and more than learning about what the great thinkers of the ages thought. 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. 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.

We often look to people we think of as wise, as people with “true” understanding. They seem to have developed the tacit, concrete knowledge necessary *to act* in ways we admire, such as Malala, the Pakistani girl who stood up against the Taliban, such as the pilot Sullenberger, who landed the plane safely in the Hudson, Mandela, who acted to end Apartheid, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising against the Nazis. It’s not what we tell ourselves (abstract-

ly) 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 aha’s and 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 true dialogue we become aware of all movement of thought, not just our own. It’s the choreography of thought. In this way it is like theatre and dance and athletics. Proprioception of thought is participatory thought. Instead of the self engaging in thinking, abstract thinking, thought becomes self-less in that it is participating in something beyond the self — in something greater than the self — in the process of thought/thinking itself. Our involvement is not with the end result, but with the process itself. We have no “surplus of seeing,” because we are engaged in the process of relating to thinking. We are all in this process together, engaged in this process together — participating in the unfolding of thought/thinking.

Aporia is where this process can begin — the process of thinking as *movement* and as engaging in participatory thought. 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.” [8, p. 85]. In doing philosophy with children, we play with ideas. We are curious and Shobhan Lyons states in her 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.” [5, p. 23]. Likewise, Bohm states: “There is *movement* in that tacit knowledge, which is that it is *exploring possibilities*.” [1, p. 79]. 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 our thinking while developing our self-awareness of the process of thinking. Through *aporia*, the intuitive mind develops. Only the intuitive mind has the flexibility for movement, for the intuitive mind is realized in lived relations. In *I and Thou* 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 in-born Thou. *The inborn Thou is realized in the lived relations with that which meets it*.” [2, p. 27] 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.

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.” [1, p. 78] 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. 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. This then enables children to engage in coherent functioning — where they and their thoughts are taken seriously and cohere.

Philosophical dialogues also create meaning. Bohm states: "Meaning is not static — it is *flowing*. And if we have the meaning being shared, then it is *flowing* among us; it holds the group together. Then everybody is sensitive to all the nuances going around, *not merely to what is happening in his own mind*. From that forms a meaning that is shared. And in that way we can talk together *coherently* and together. Whereas generally people hold to their assumptions, so they are not thinking together." [1, p. 40] 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." [1, p. 2—3].

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." [3, p. 41]. Bohm describes the process of creating something new in relationship as similar to the artist and the scientist. "Thus something new is continually created that is common to the artist and the material on which he is working ... The scientist is engaged in a similar "dialogue" with nature." [1, p. 3] In doing philosophy with children, children

are engaged in thinking together, creating speech-with-meaning through genuine listening and genuine talking. Speech-with —meaning "flows". Children "are making something *in common*, i.e. creating something new together."

It signifies movement. What is created becomes integrated in the child's entire thinking process. When children are taught to think together in this way, they learn to think coherently, without their forming a split between the tacit, concrete process of thought and abstract thought. When children have the regular experience of thinking with their entire being when doing philosophy, they will develop this in other areas of school learning as well. What is learned is integrated and need not be memorized. As Mark Twain so famously said: I have never let my schooling interfere with my education. Philosophy with children promotes the education of children in this sense.

It fosters coherent thinking, as Bohm point out. Coherent thinking in turn develops the capacity for the proprioception of thinking — thinking becoming self aware, aware of itself in action [1, p. 79]. This process is essential to "whole" thinking, which involves the entire thinking being, and not just the abstract thinking process. Surely, we can teach critical thinking skills and teach children to be self-reflective, but I agree with David Bohm and Martin Buber that becoming aware of thinking in action will create a new generation of coherent thinkers. If we only educate the brain and not the thinking being, we become "incoherent" thinkers and thus become disconnected from the world, from other people, and from ourselves as well. This has dangerous consequences. Disassociated abstract thought can allow us to do the most horrible things to the environment, other life forms, and other people, and provide justifications for it. As Bohm states: "...because incoherent functioning is really very dangerous." [1, p. 78].

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*. We can teach them to think more critically, but in my opinion engaging children to become coherent thinkers is paramount to why doing philosophy with children is essential for their education and preparing them for the world they live in.

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## ПРИМЕНЕНИЕ ПРОПРИОЦЕПЦИИ МЫШЛЕНИЯ В ФИЛОСОФСТВОВАНИИ С ДЕТЬМИ

**Тиллманнс Мария да Венза**  
(*Tillmanns Maria da Venza*),

Калифорнийский университет (Сан-Диего, США),  
доктор философии,  
UC San Diego 9500 Gilman Dr. La Jolla, CA 92093  
E-mail: davenza@sbcglobal.net

### Аннотация

Статья посвящена обоснованию смены парадигмы в философии для детей, а именно тому, что философия для детей сама может привнести в академическую философию, а не наоборот. Смена парадигмы связана с раскрытием категории «отношение» (М. Бубер, Д. Бом). Это априорное отношение к миру формирует основу для интуитивного знания о нем, поскольку интуитивное мышление исходит из полного участия человека в «переживаемом отношении» с бытием. Вместо акцентирования внимания на том, как можно развить у детей навыки критического мышления посредством абстрактного мышления, необходимо сосредоточиться на неявном, конкретном мыслительном процессе, поскольку именно он лежит в основе мышления.

### Ключевые слова:

философия с детьми,  
реляционная философия,  
проприоцепция,  
абстрактное мышление vs. неявный конкретный  
мыслительный процесс,  
апория.