

## On the meaning of education holding hands with philosophy:

A conversation along a walk to *Pão de Açúcar* (28 October 2023)

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### Abstract

This text presents a conversation between two long time philosophical and educational friends reflecting on the field of philosophical education and childhood. The discussion began as a part of a shared experience of an intensive teacher education workshop held at the State University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It covers themes including teacher education; philosophy as inquiry and a way of life; methodological issues on philosophical inquiry with children; educational and philosophical time; philosophy for children; questioning, reasonableness; colonisation and counter-colonisation. The conversation affirms the philosophical and educational force of beginning. The conversation ends with a coda after the two friends meet again during the traditional annual Mendham teacher education seminar in New Jersey, USA.

### Key words

colonisation, counter colonisation, Philosophy for Children, questioning, teacher education

**Walter:** Dear Maughn, it is lovely to have you as a visiting scholar at the State University of Rio de Janeiro. We have been sharing a wonderful experience of teacher education at our campus in Ilha Grande.<sup>1</sup> It is a time and place where we propose an experience inspired by the IAPC<sup>2</sup> practice of philosophical and educational

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<sup>1</sup> The site of a former immigration quarantine station and maximum-security prison, Ilha Grande (Big Island) is a forested island about twelve kilometers off the Atlantic coast of Rio de Janeiro. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, most of the island falls within the protected Ilha Grande State Park.

<sup>2</sup> The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) was co-founded at Montclair State College (now University) in 1974 by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp and is now directed by Gregory.

preparation at Mendham, New Jersey. I had the privilege to participate in several Mendham seminars between 1993 and 1995, both as a participant and a member of the coaching staff. In my understanding, these seminars are a crucial instance of the IAPC proposal of teacher education, at least in the sense that they have an experimental dimension and that they are a living experience of the practice of philosophy which is expected to happen between children and adults. In the Mendham seminars, both a model of philosophical education and of preparation of educators are constantly practiced. We organise a yearly one-week seminar and, even though we have participated in a shorter one, it seems to me you might have in any case experienced the spirit and main features of our proposal. Which are the dimensions of the experience you are interested in, that called your attention to the way we practiced them at Ilha Grande? Is it the relationship to speaking and listening or more broadly to what it means to educate philosophically?

**Maughn:** I can't thank you enough for bringing me here, brother, to meet your colleagues and students, to be back in beautiful Brazil, and to see *you* in your academic role—and your role as my long-time friend! Seeing you discuss with your colleagues and students, I was wondering how you understand the function of the facilitator in a philosophical dialogue. That will, of course, depend on how we think philosophy happens in a group.

**Walter:** I agree with you, and I also think that maybe this issue is also related to the issue of form and content. So that we can translate your question into another: Is philosophy (mainly) a content or a form? Maybe there is a need to clarify that a content might be a theory, concept, or history, but also a set of skills of critical thinking or whatever. In this sense, if someone thinks that philosophy has to do with developing, applying or putting into practice some skills, the facilitator would be attentive whether or not the students practice these skills; but if someone thinks that philosophy is related to the way you relate to the thinking that is being practiced, then what may be expected from the facilitator, as you called it, or the educator, more broadly speaking, might be very different. The same would happen if you think that philosophy is related to the content of what you say, or to any other way of understanding philosophy. So, yes, I agree with you, and in our case, philosophy is understood as a form of relationship to what the others think and say.

**Maughn:** So you don't think of philosophy content in the traditional categories of ethics, epistemology, political philosophy, and such, is that right?

**Walter:** In a sense we do, and in that sense, as an educator, you might be putting more attention on the content of what people say. But if you consider philosophy as a form or process, you might be more attentive to the way people relate, both to their own thinking and to others' thinking—or maybe to other things, like how participants are listening to each other, how they are attentive to the discussion, and things like that. In the end, the things you pay attention to are connected, as you said before, to what you think philosophy is. For example, if you think philosophy is an individual task, then it will be very difficult for you to educate, because you'll only be interested in what each individual says and not in the relationships between them. But if you think philosophy is a communal or collective practice, then different ways or styles of educating might emerge. In our case, because of the way we understand the practice of philosophy, we are less and less interested to focus on the content of what people say. I know this might sound a little strong or provocative, but what I am trying to say is not that content does not matter but that we are more and more engaged with the way people relate to what they say and think, and to what others say and think. So we are more and more interested in the form or structure of what is going on and this is what we try to care for and foster.

**Maughn:** That's a very helpful distinction—and it seems to me that you and I probably live and practice on either side of it, though probably not at the extremes! For instance, I pay attention to both of the kinds of content you mentioned. With college students, I want them to have a historical understanding of where the practices we are using came from—Western philosophy, social justice movements, liberation theology, Buddhism, etc. We need to historicise our commitments for them, so they better understand what those commitments mean. With children, I think it's important to find ways to invite them to discuss ethical, political, aesthetic, epistemological, and metaphysical meaning in their lives—even though these are very traditional Western academic categories. First, I doubt they're only Western. More importantly, I believe these are not meanings we impose on children, but meanings already within their lives. And they have little chance to explore them and make sense of them in school, or even at home or in their religious communities.

Then, regarding the content of thinking skills, yes I do, intentionally, teach/model/invite what I think of as inquiry skills, which are just cultural tools that have evolved over time to be good for certain kinds of projects. Of course, these tools, like the language we speak, give certain kinds of shape to our philosophy, but I don't believe this makes our philosophy narrowly rationalistic. And anyway, there's no such thing as thinking or speaking or philosophising that doesn't use them. What

matters is that we use them reflectively, so that we can decide when to use which ones and for what purposes, and we can also adapt the tools themselves when they aren't serving our purposes.

I read your (2019) essay with our friend Magda criticising Mat [Lipman] and Ann [Sharp]'s emphasis on method, and, to be honest, I see it quite differently. For me, methods are just cultural traditions that represent the thinking and labour and experimenting of past generations, a lot of which we still cherish, like particular ways of cooking, gardening, praying, music making, swimming (which you get to do every day here!), distance hiking (which I get to do frequently where I live), and yes, teaching. Methods get born and grow up in particular circumstances, and they only continue into the future by being adapted and changed.

So that leads me to another question: Are there any kinds of protocols or methods for doing philosophy that you think are more helpful and some others you think are less helpful? If you see that there is a method going on that it is not helpful would you intervene? Try to change it?

**Walter:** Well, I am not sure if I would say helpful; maybe, I would prefer to say interesting, open, or dialogical. I think there is an issue with 'methods', at least in our educational realities we need to deal with. At our times—again, I am speaking from what I experience in Brazil and it might be very different in other contexts—there is a very strong demand on outcomes, evaluation, and educational results. In that context, educators are pressed to apply 'efficient', 'updated' methods, and in a general sense pedagogical work is instrumentalised, i.e. educators are pressed to think 'how' questions instead of 'why' and 'for what' ... And you ask about what is probably one of the highest challenges for teacher educators: how to intervene in a way not to impose your desirable structure while at the same time not allowing a structure you think should not be taking place. It might be more clear for us what we do *not* want to happen than about what we want to happen ...

**Maughn:** Why am I not surprised? [both laugh intensely] I don't have a problem with a teacher, parent, or friend introducing a desirable method. I was raised with all kinds of methods: piano lessons, algebra, street maps, brushing my teeth, writing a letter, making bread, jury duty, civil disobedience. These are a lot more flexible than they might seem, but they are traditional inventions that came to be meaningful for people—to make life better. We want to share (I don't say 'impose') these methods with the next generation, at the same time expecting them to make changes, even as we have made changes to them. I'm just as frightened of meeting children in schools

with no agenda whatsoever of what will likely help them live meaningful lives, as I am of meeting them with very rigid expectations about the kind of lives they should be living.

**Walter:** I mean that it is easier to react when we perceive something we do not feel comfortable with, according to what we expect of a philosophical practice. Again, something related to the form or structure of what is taking place. And when something happens that makes us feel comfortable, we just foster or feed it. Generally speaking, it seems that, in a sense, it could be any method, any way, any path, as far as it responds to the principles and senses we are working for in a philosophical education, i.e. as far as it fosters curiosity and expresses commitment with a more beautiful and fair world, to say it with Paulo Freire (see Kohan 2018).

**Maughn:** Is that not a method? One obvious example is when you have dominant people in class, they want to speak all the time and they do not allow other people to speak, they continually interrupt.

**Walter:** Exactly; or when you have this kind of violence from boys to girls, men to women, adults to children, homophobic practices, etc.—should we also include here violence from teachers to students? Maybe we are more attentive to these practices. What other things called your attention while we were in our seminar on the Island?

**Maughn:** This helps me better understand the dialogues we had on Ilha Grande. I noticed your facilitation was much less interventionist than mine tends to be. But that makes me also wonder what you meant when you were saying that some understanding of the community of inquiry is part of what you do. I wonder what that construct still means for you. Do you think of philosophy as inquiry, and if so, how do you think about inquiry?

**Walter:** This is interesting and in a sense we are again around the question, What does it mean to do philosophy? What is specific about philosophy? In what sense is philosophical inquiry different from scientific inquiry, or religious inquiry, or artistic inquiry? I more and more think philosophy is a relationship. We are in a philosophical relationship when some kind of connection happens between what you say and what others say, between what you say and what you feel, between what you think and the way you relate to others' thinking.

**Maughn:** When you say 'the way' what way is that?

**Walter:** Yes, that is a main philosophical issue, isn't it? How to talk about it? And maybe, again, it is more easy to say what is *not* a philosophical relationship than what a philosophical relationship is. Trying to respond, I would say that there is something that has to do with time, and something that has to do with space; i.e. the way the people in the community feel time, the experience of time that is being shared. Philosophy has to do with experiencing a *scholastic* time, in the original Greek meaning of *schola*: a free-time, a kind of wasting time. For example, in a philosophical inquiry you feel you are not arriving anywhere. This will be unacceptable for a scientific or even a religious inquiry (and maybe a pedagogical inquiry?), but for a philosophical inquiry it might be a good sign. So, I think that this sensation that you are lost, wandering, errant, is also a spatial feeling. To say it in other words, it is not following a line but walking or thinking in circles or ellipses: beginning, walking, and beginning again; questioning, thinking and questioning again. And when you lose the feeling of the chronological, and you want to spend more of this kind of free time, like a child playing, it does not matter what is happening with chronological time. You just want to spend more of this intense, present, enduring time. I understand that this is not enough, not sufficient to distinguish philosophy. This relationship to time and space might also be said of artistic inquiry.

**Maughn:** In a way, it seems you and I are both children of our cultural philosophical traditions: you of the continental and Latin American, me of the Anglo-American. You tend to be suspicious of methods, goals, agendas, consensus; I tend to be suspicious of ungrounded errancy, especially when specific existential issues or political harms need to be addressed. In any case, you connected the concept of time to the concept of movement, when you said you were not worried about arriving at any place or about accomplishing something, is that right?

**Walter:** Yes, I think they are very connected. In our very capitalistic societies, *chronos* is very dominant. *Chronos* is like a line, and we all need to arrive to the end of the line by being effective, productive, efficient. Again, it seems easier to say what kind of time is not philosophical than to say which kind is [both laugh again]. If we are too sensitive to chronological time, it is obvious we are not in philosophy. If we are not so worried about ending but about beginning again ... and again ... we might be closer to philosophical time. This understanding has pedagogical implications.

**Maughn:** Definitely, definitely. Though I feel morally responsible to have some agenda, some idea of how to spend time with my students, I feel equally morally responsible to be sufficiently present in each moment with them that I'm able to let go

of the agenda and do something else that becomes more important in the moment with them.

**Walter:** And this is why we try not to plan our experiences too much. We consider that the time of philosophy is close to the time of loving, playing, creating: you need to be entirely present. We want the educator to be sensitive to creating the conditions so that this time can be experienced by all participants so that everyone can be present in the present. This is why we do not want to make them dependent on chronological time: 'Ten minutes for this, ten more for that', etc. In *chronos* there is no present other than an instant, a now dividing past and future. When you are worried about organising time according to chronological patterns *aionic*, present, intense time is much more difficult to be experienced. Consequently, philosophy suffers.

**Maughn:** Well, I do think of movement in philosophy, but I don't think of it as being on a conveyor belt, or having to arrive somewhere at a particular time. I think of it as both playful *and* constructive. Every act of creating has movement and direction. For instance, I'm more and more convinced of the importance of what we're now calling 'argument literacy', which is just knowing your way around different kinds of arguments. I especially like how Douglas Walton (1998) writes about the pragmatics of argumentation. Like when someone talks or when you listen to the radio you recognise, 'Oh, they are making this or that kind of argument, and I see the pieces of it. I can step back. I don't agree with this piece, and therefore, this argument doesn't work for me.' I think, especially today when most young people are so *saturated* with media, they need that. So much of our thinking has been shaped by the strong racist, sexist, elitist, heteronormative, consumerist images and messages in the media we consume and in the institutions we live with, that in order to really think for ourselves and think with others, we need to learn the disciplines—yes, I especially like that word—of journalism, argumentation, forensic science, statistics, and philosophy.

And I think that *making* arguments, building arguments—which I think of as a creative, fun, interesting activity, like making a garden or building a house—is a way you start to remake the world the way you see it, and when that's in a community, of course, it becomes even more rich, because you draw on so many other ideas and perspectives. But if the community wants to make some changes, the way I'm conceiving argument, which is very broad and very diverse, is the way we do that. A community garden is an argument. A town budget is an argument. A way of life is an argument. There is something to work on or to work against.

This is related to the concept of judgement, as I have learned it, especially, from Justus Buchler, the one who hired Mat Lipman at Columbia (see Gregory 2024). For Buchler (1951), judgement is *everything* we say, make, or do—consciously or subconsciously. Lipman was more or less obsessed with what counts as ‘good judgement’. In any case, I think of philosophical judgement as both an opportunity and a responsibility; to say, make, or do something that makes something in our experience more just, more beautiful, or just make more sense. For instance, we are often called on to make judgements in response to the question, ‘What does justice mean in this particular situation—in this time, place, community?’ Sometimes the *via negativa*—to say what justice is *not*—is not sufficient, so we are really obligated to assume the risk of taking a stance, acting for what seems right, in our vulnerability. To do this is not necessarily imperialist or capitalist or machistic.

**Walter:** To be sincere, I feel a little distant from the importance given to judgement in philosophical inquiry. As you said, this is closely related to how we understand philosophy. And sensitive to some Latin-American and European thinkers—like Simón Rodríguez<sup>3</sup> among the former, and Socrates, Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot among the latter—we tend to give more and more attention to philosophy as a way of life. Of course, you can question this alternative and propose that the fostering of judgement has as its aim living a better life; but I would question this argument in the sense that it contains assumptions concerning the human subject as a rational or reasonable being, and concerning the task of philosophy related to thinking and judging that we feel a little distant from. In any case, can you think about other dimensions that are as important as judging for you?

**Maughn:** First, our friendship is built on sincerity, so thank you. And I’m a fan of Foucault and almost a devotee of Hadot. And as you surmised, I do believe that the aim of fostering judgement is making a difference, living a better life. And I believe the human subject should be partly understood as reasonable. But my conception of reasonableness is pretty broad. It includes much more than rationality; it includes aesthetic and erotic sensibility, deep curiosity, an intuition of interconnectedness, and playful creativity. For me, philosophy is the invitation to let our curiosity roam freely, especially in the territory of deeper or perhaps ultimate kinds of meaning (even if

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<sup>3</sup> Simón Rodríguez (1769-1854) was the tutor of Simón Bolívar, the military officer who led what are now the countries of Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela, to independence from Spain, and who named Rodríguez ‘the Socrates of Caracas’. Rodríguez founded what is considered the first philosophical popular school in South America, early in the nineteenth century (see Rodríguez 2001).



these are partly culturally constructed) and to respond in ways that ‘ameliorate’ those meanings—to use the pragmatist jargon. All methods, languages, argument structures limit our thinking in some ways but they also expand our thinking. That doesn’t make philosophy an algorithm, like first do this and then make that move.

But in response to your question, as important for me as the judgement is the question.

**Walter:** I like that! First, as you say, philosophy is not a formula or a recipe. But we also consider philosophical inquiry very close to questions and questioning. And I would like you to expand a little more on your understanding of questioning. For us, questioning is not mainly a linguistic activity but a form of living or existence. So that it is not about making (philosophical) questions, i.e. utterances, but incorporating questioning in a philosophical existence. Or, to say it in other words, to learn to live a questioning life. I would say more: learn to live a self-questioning life both in an individual and community sense. Speaking about life, I was wondering how you consider the connection between all these ideas and life?

**Maughn:** I was thinking about that too. I understand that last distinction—between linguistic and existential questioning—to be about questioning that is ‘merely’ intellectual or superficial, as opposed to questioning that arises from a philosophical sensitivity to our lives, our communities, our politics, our land, our art, etc. And, of course, all of that involves questioning ourselves—though we often need the perspectives of others to be able to do that, right?

**Walter:** When you referred to Walton, I was thinking about what philosophers I would like to refer to and, as I already said, I thought about some Latin Americans and some Europeans. I would like to add some others like Paulo Freire, but it is not so important the names as what we are trying to think. More and more, I try to consider not only what philosophers think and write but their efforts to translate their ideas into a way of life. And I am aware I’ve only mentioned a few white men. I would like, then, to add some *quilombola*<sup>4</sup> figures, like Nego Bispo and Ana Mumbuca. Among the ones I mentioned before, Michel Foucault is an inspiring figure because he was an activist, a militant of a philosophical life, as Paulo Freire was of an educational life. So they did not teach only or mainly because of their writings but

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<sup>4</sup> A *quilombola* is a member of a *quilombos*, an independent Afro-Brazilian community established by runaway slaves.

because of the kind of life they lived. I wonder how these considerations are connected to what we are speaking about?

**Maughn:** I see them as very much connected. I teach Freire every semester, not as an academic, but as, really, a political fighter. It's wonderful that your book (2021) is helping to introduce Freire to a new generation of educators. And, of course, Foucault is a gay political icon for me. In fact, my commitment to philosophy as a way of life is the reason I'm committed to the use, the questioning, and the reconstruction of methods of living. I'm still taken by the Deweyan idea that we're confronted with many kinds of experience that are troubling or promising but we don't know what to do, so we inquire and we experiment. And experimenting puts our community's ideas and thinking back into practice. 'Let's do something and see what happens.' And Dewey said, it's never going to turn out as you expected—never. There will always be more problems and opportunities you didn't anticipate, so the inquiry really never ends.

**Walter:** Dewey is an interesting case, and maybe you can tell us more about the way he tried to live his ideas. These ideas you have just mentioned—do they concern all kinds of inquiries, or specifically philosophical inquiry? Because, remember, we're trying to find something specific about philosophy.

**Maughn:** Well, Dewey said that philosophy had to stop focusing on the problems of philosophers and start using methods developed by philosophers to focus on the problems of ordinary people.<sup>5</sup> And he was a good example of this; he was a leading social reformer. He worked with Jane Addams at Hull House in Chicago. He helped to found the American Civil Liberties Union, the New School for Social Research, the American Federation of Teachers (which I work for!), and other progressive organisations. He defended Maxim Gorky, Bertrand Russell, and Leon Trotsky. As you say, names are not important as authorities, but can be helpful as examples.

I think some conception of inquiry as a journey from something we perceive as troubling or doubtful or promising toward something clearer or more beautiful or more just or more colourful, interesting, is how philosophy returns to life. That more or less explains the way I facilitate a philosophical encounter; I'm restless to see where it will lead, in terms of how we live.

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<sup>5</sup> 'Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be the device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes the method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men [sic]' (Dewey 1917/2008, p. 46).

**Walter:** Maybe that's the importance of questioning or the central role it has; something like, philosophy breathes the air of questioning.

**Maughn:** I like that, yes—but I would add that, for me, philosophy also breathes the air of action, doing, making something.

**Walter:** It finds air or new life or a new birth, because, I think I would say that definitely philosophy has a singular relationship to questions—very different from other issues.

**Maughn:** And how would you describe that relationship?

**Walter:** Yeah, that's a big challenge. But I think that if we were speaking about scientific inquiry, we wouldn't need to say the obvious but not always true thing, that scientists are always more interested in answers.

**Maughn:** Right—no, wait, the best scientists are also philosophers, always questioning.

**Walter:** But I do think that when we are doing philosophical inquiry, the kind of place that questions have is unique—the impact a question has when it appears—even when, or even more when someone else raises a question. So maybe the impact of questions on thinking is something that in philosophy is very singular. Probably both scientists and philosopher are very happy when they find a good question, but only scientist celebrate a good answer. And maybe this is a connection to what we were saying before about the spatial and temporal dimension. It is as if we were walking differently on thinking, let's say.

**Maughn:** Which you and I are doing now, in this moment—walking and thinking.

**Walter:** Exactly! [they laugh] It's like if we were walking questioning and answering just to give time and space for a new question ... as if with every question a new kind of opening emerges. 'Oh, we can go there!' 'Oh, no, we can also turn and go there.' It's a broadening of the possibilities of walking (thinking).

**Maughn:** Yes, that's a useful metaphor: branching out—but, for me, narrowing down is just as important. For me, philosophical inquiry has to do both. If there's never a narrowing down, it's not inquiry, it's just ...

**Walter:** Opening and opening?

**Maughn:** Yes! Endlessly opening and opening, without ever putting your shovel in the earth. An inquiry is a journey. Philosophy originates in questioning, doubting, wondering, interrogating, as Professor Gersem Baniwa reminded us the other day.<sup>6</sup> To formulate a question—to put a question into the world—is a beautiful and necessary human act, as you have helped so many to experience. It is an audacious act; to pose a question that in some way threatens the status quo, the way we live, or even how we understand reality. Like Socrates said, a question can sting and it can temporarily numb us. That's one reason we need to philosophise with children, because they can remind us how to do that. But then, I think to really live with a question, to take it seriously and be committed to it, is to be moved to take a journey. The ground I was standing on before has crumbled beneath me. Inquiry is what we do to travel from a question toward an answer that we find satisfying, helpful, enabling, hopeful. When we ask a question we have a thirst for more meaning, to make more or better sense of life. So inquiry is always creative; we invent possibilities, we explore possible answers, and we experiment—first in ideas and then in the world of action.

And that's why reasons matter. Lately, working with my undergraduate students, when we study Socratic pedagogy, I've come to realise that many of them don't have the sense that there are some questions for which it matters that there is either a 'correct' answer or, as I prefer to say, a more reasonable answer (even if that can mean many different things). And I think it's mostly because of what's happened to media—commercial media and political media, especially. The idea that there is such a thing as journalism school, where you learn methods of investigation and reporting that reduce bias—that's so important for many purposes. Not that everything has to be true or false, or more and less reasonable. But when it comes to some questions, like, 'Do vaccinations work?' or 'Should we believe everything Trump says?'—it matters! And if you have no conception of arguments and evidence, you're helpless.

**Walter:** Right, the political implications are very bad.

**Maughn:** Very bad. It seems like every semester it takes me longer, not even to convince them but for them even to understand the idea itself, that there is such a thing as more reasonable and less reasonable. Many of them say, 'Well, everyone has

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<sup>6</sup> Baniwa, Kohan, and Gregory had spoken at X EFENN, the tenth Encontro de Filosofia da Educação do Norte e Nordeste [Conference on Philosophy of Education in the North and Northeast of Brazil] held at the Instituto Federal do Pará / Campus Rural do Marabá [Federal Institute of Para / Marabá Rural Campus], Marabá, Pará, Brazil, 1 November 2023.

their own idea.' Of course they do, but that doesn't mean every idea is equally reasonable. And when you're thinking about questions like that, don't you want to know how to deal with arguments and evidence? What kinds of arguments are valid, and what kinds of evidence are relevant, in this domain or in that domain?

**Walter:** Yes, that's very important everywhere, as you say, especially with social media.

**Maughn:** And some of them say, 'In science maybe, but in not philosophy. In philosophy ...'

**Walter:** '... everyone has their own truth.' So, there's no way to come together.

**Maughn:** Then there's no inquiry, there's nothing to inquire about, we just share: 'This is my truth, what's your truth? Oh, that's interesting.'

**Walter:** Right, it's dangerous. And it's comfortable. It's my truth, it's your truth.

**Maughn:** It also ties into the social dynamic of, 'I don't want people to judge me, I don't want to talk out loud. I need to curate my social media image.' Many of my students are frozen with that kind of social anxiety.

But I also don't believe philosophical inquiry always results in a good argument—especially not right away. It depends on the question we struggle with. We may need to live with it for a long time, and bring it with us to many kinds of exploration—reading, discussion, traveling, experimenting. And the judgement we finally make may be a poem or a piece of legislation—or a brick through a window.

**Walter:** Dear brother, I wonder how we can end this conversation. In fact, I would love not to end it, to let it remain open—to continue it anytime, every time, for all time. Or maybe we can end it by going back to its beginning as a way of making, in a childlike way, beginnings out of ends. We began with a memory of your coming to Rio and our memories of the wonderful time shared, especially in a land of suffering, but also of questioning and dreaming, named Ilha Grande. Can we end up dreaming of another encounter in this extraordinary space and time?

**Maughn:** I don't know if many people know that you and I met as students in the first philosophy PhD program with an emphasis on philosophy for children, created by our mentors Ann Margaret Sharp and Teresa de la Garza at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City, in the early 1990s. That was, as you say, an

extraordinary space and time. And though our personal and professional lives have pulled us in many different directions since then, our conversation has never ended. I fear the world is more troubled today than it was even then, but I take courage to recognise from this present conversation with you that philosophy can still bring people together to question, dream, and build something new, something that might have lasting value.

### **Coda, August 25, 2025**

**Walter:** Maughn, dear brother, time is wise, as some people say. Some months ago, we left resting this conversation when we didn't know that we would meet again in the space of Mendham about which we have been talking in the conversation.<sup>7</sup> And now, as you suggested, we could not make this conversation public without bringing at least some impressions of this recent encounter which I so much enjoyed. In fact, it was our first 'Mendham' together and very special because it's thirty (30!!!!!!) years since I was there in 1995 as member of the coaching team. Before, in 1993, it was also there where I met Ann and Mat for the first time and felt in love with our movement.

**Maughn:** The Mendham course was my first experience as a new, assistant professor at Montclair, in 1997. It was a treat for us to have you back as a visiting scholar.

**Walter:** I feel thankful and honoured for that, brother. And some things impressed me a lot this time—your tremendous effort to keep alive the legacy, which provokes all sorts of effects, for example, the syllabus, the first sessions, the coaching structure, the *Pixie* plays and other activities look really close to the ones we practiced in the 90s, which gave birth in me to contrasting feelings. One the one side, it travelled me back to that time and to feel again those deep emotions of dreams at the beginnings in the field. So it was like a rebeginning. But, on the other side, the travel was not without movements and tensions because our way of inhabiting philosophy and childhood nowadays is very different from thirty years ago. So, it was like arriving again very different to the same place and playing again a game we play quite differently now. In fact, our Mendham, Ilha Grande, as you have experienced, is not so sensitive to that important dimension of presenting and preserving a legacy. We tend to privilege experience and our formation is more like a field of experimentation where we try different forms every time. So, on the one side, the tension expresses itself between, to

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<sup>7</sup> Walter was hosted by the IAPC as a visiting scholar and coach for the 2025 IAPC Residential Summer Course in Philosophy for Children, which has been held at St. Marguerite's Retreat House in Mendham, New Jersey, since 1983.

put it dramatically, two almost opposite possibilities of imagining a space of formation: as conserving or transforming.

**Maughn:** To be frank, I was really taken aback when you mentioned during the course that it seemed to you that not much had changed since you were here in the 1990s. Having interviewed several people who trained with Lipman and Sharp in the late 1970s and early 1980s before the training course was held at Mendham<sup>8</sup>—including our friend Peter Shea<sup>9</sup> who was with us again this year—I’ve learned that the way the course was organised back then was as different from what it had become in the 1990s when you and I first attended, as it was from what you experienced with us this year. Of course, all of us who have continued the course at Mendham do, yes, consciously, work to preserve what we still find meaningful in its legacy, at the same time that we continue to evolve it in light of new scholarship, new materials, and new practices. We believe it’s a particular and particularly valuable philosophical tradition that should be continued into the future.

This is also why I’ve spent so much time in the past several years doing historical research with Megan [Lavery]<sup>10</sup>—looking into the scholarship and biographies and media interviews of the ‘Philosophy for Children founders’, as well as interviewing their students and people who worked with them. And it’s why we’ve created a digital archive to share this historical material with other students and scholars.<sup>11</sup> We’ve learned many surprising things about them; things that help us better understand their work but also help us bring a more critical perspective to it by historicising it.

**Walter:** Well, all that is true and very valuable, the way you have been so intensely researching and offering all sort of resources in the field. On another dimension, I also felt a very strong tension at this Mendham between what we could call colonising and counter-colonising forces that expresses in different ways in our practice. For example, there is a kind of decolonising discourse among us—I mean, among you and me and many others in the global Philosophy for Children community—both in the practice

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<sup>8</sup> See e.g. the interviews with Phil Guin and Ann Gazzard at the IAPC Oral Histories archive at [https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/iapc\\_oral\\_histories/](https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/iapc_oral_histories/).

<sup>9</sup> Shea is the Editor in Chief of the IAPC curriculum resource *Thinking in Stories: Reviewing Philosophy in Children’s Literature* ([https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/iapc\\_thinkingstories/](https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/iapc_thinkingstories/)).

<sup>10</sup> Megan Jane Lavery is Professor and Director of the Philosophy and Education Program at Teachers College, Columbia University. She is co-editor with Gregory of the *Philosophy for Children Founders* series (Routledge).

<sup>11</sup> See <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/iapc>.

of philosophy itself and regarding the subjects of this practice, mainly children, as if Philosophy for Children would decolonise educational practices and the subjectivation processes these practices offer. And even though there is a sense in which that dimension effectively takes place, at the same time, there are many colonising forces in Philosophy for Children, and this Mendham showed them once again.

**Maughn:** I'm glad you brought this up for discussion at Mendham and glad to have another chance to discuss it with you here.

**Walter:** For example, it was completely in English and less diverse than my previous Mendhams; mostly US and Europeans participants, a group from Philippines, one South Korean and me. In the 90s at Mendham there were always some Latin-Americans and Africans and, even though English was also the shared language, there was a lot of translation going on; an explicit one (Eugenio Echeverria translating to and from Spanish) and also a lot of informal translation between languages, philosophies, cultures, etc. This seems a relevant difference because I remember many participants having little or almost no English made possible some things that could not be possible in the recent Mendham. Also, in this monolingual conversation some feel at home and some others need to make a big effort to be able to express themselves as they would in their mother tongue. That creates an unequal condition, that the former sometimes are not even aware of, but that has a concrete and extended impact on the kind of practice that is being shared.

**Maughn:** I completely agree. Since our university closed our graduate programs, we lost the ability to offer scholarships to people who otherwise would not be able to afford spending time with us. This is a tremendous loss. We work very hard to keep the cost of the course at Mendham as low as possible—it's by far the least expensive residential course of its kind in the U.S.—but it is still prohibitive for many, especially with travel, and the result is, typically, that we have fewer participants from the global southern hemisphere. Another factor is that many people who join us at Mendham these days are funded by their universities—I believe that was the case this year, in fact, for the participants from Australia, Austria, Ireland, Italy, the Philippines, and Sweden.

Another factor is that many countries now do their own Philosophy for Children training courses—Eugenio is a good example. Rather than bring a group of Latin American colleagues here and translating for them, he runs his own conference/workshops in Chiapas. And of course, people in Brazil and South America



can study with you. In fact, as I recall, there were very few people from the northern hemisphere at Ilha Grande. That development is wonderful, though, as you say, having a less diverse group with us at Mendham is a loss, humanly and philosophically.

I'm also very aware of the history of the English language as a mechanism of colonialism—something my students at Montclair continue to struggle with. So, the fact that people need to speak English to participate in Mendham (unless we're able to invite a large-enough group to support a translator) perpetuates English as a colonising mechanism. I get that; and I get that it doesn't make up for the fact that because global capitalism forces so many people to acquire English as a secondary language, every year at Mendham we benefit from more cultural diversity than people experience in most other academic settings—the informal translation between languages, philosophies, and cultures, you mentioned.

**Walter:** I understand. At the same time, revisiting the program this year, the use of the Lipman/Sharp novels and manuals was also a strong experience: in the novels, characters living in an 'ideal' setting, being ideal in terms of a privileged and excluding society, reproducing what has been thoroughly explicit as epistemic injustice, gender prejudices and whiteness supremacy (see, for example, Burg & Thornton forthcoming, Chetty, Reynolds & Wurtz 2025, Elicor 2019).

**Maughn:** Yes, we study and practice parts of the original curricular novels written by Lipman, though we supplement them with philosophical stories by Sharp and David Kennedy, and we introduce some theory and practice of philosophising with children's literature. You may not know that Megan and I are also among those who have written about the discriminatory elements of some of Lipman's novels and the children's literature that Gareth Matthews selected to philosophise with children (see Chetty, Gregory & Laverty 2022, Gregory & Laverty 2023, Gregory & Laverty forthcoming; Laverty & Gregory forthcoming;), which we shared at Mendham.

**Walter:** In fact, I didn't. Anyway, I was also struck by the way the very first inquiry sessions on the novels were 'facilitated' by the IAPC team—modelled in such a compact and almost standardised practice with very slight variations. Together with the theoretical foundations sessions, that were offered in the form of explanatory sessions, it created what I felt as a kind of colonising atmosphere. The agendas of inquiry questions generated by participants in each session could not but reflect this atmosphere with idealised questions, as well as the conversations we had about them.

**Maughn:** I'm very proud of the work we've been doing since I came to Montclair and the IAPC to evolve the theory and practice of facilitating philosophical dialogue as inquiry, with the intention of moving from questions toward creative, reasonable responses, as we discussed in our earlier conversation. Our facilitation practice is more standardised than it was in the 1990s, yes. It's a distinctive IAPC practice that, like all such practices (including your pedagogy of the question and of philosophical errancy) makes certain things possible while it makes other things more difficult. That understanding is also why we now offer experiences of Myles Horton's story circle and of *Lectio Divina* (contemplative reading) as alternative dialogue protocols at Mendham. I can't see that what we do is any more 'colonising' than what I experienced with you at Ilha Grande, or in the session you led at Mendham—unless you see any attempt to perpetuate a tradition into the future as necessarily colonising? We develop ways of doing things, and we study and adapt them over time, and we invite people to learn about them. I suppose it would be colonising if we insisted that our way was the only way or the best way to philosophise with children, but that's not how we think of it.

In fact, I wonder how you reconcile your promotion of the pedagogy of the question—of strenuously resisting movement toward possible answers, of insisting on staying at the beginning without the need to get somewhere, of seeing childhood as *aionic* time that dwells in perpetual play—with your (and my) forceful critique of colonialism, which involves very concrete propositions, arguments, evidence, and proposals for change.

As for the theoretical texts we study together at Mendham, yes, of course, in part they explain our practice, but more importantly, they offer different theoretical frameworks that illuminate different aspects of our work—at the same time they make other aspects more obscure, which is why discussing them together is so fruitful.

**Walter:** Brother, you are raising a very important issue—is every educationally philosophical practice colonising? In a sense, you are right, but even if that were the case, some distinctions might help us to consider this issue. For example, there is no theoretical and methodological program established in Ilha Grande. It is a field of experimentation. And even though there are some principles—we cannot and we don't want to experiment from nowhere—they function quite different than Mendham's principles. In our case, they work as beginnings, point of departures, not as normative for the practice.

The concept of reasonableness might be a good example to illustrate this point. At this Mendham you reiterated Lipman's tripartite scheme of thinking, 'higher-order' thinking, i.e. a superior thinking fostered to cultivate good judgement, and reasonableness, which, according to Lipman, is reason tempered by judgement. Thus, reasonableness carries, as a theoretical and ideal concept, the values of the history of intellectual thought from which it emerges. In the same way, the Philosophy for Children program carries the values of the history of philosophy it aims to reconstruct and make available for children. Let's consider our errant and philosophical childlike pedagogy of the question. All these words around pedagogy are trying to put it into movement, showing its kind of precarious, non-pretentious and open character. That's precisely why we resist answers, and we insist on staying at the beginning, so as to maintain the path as open as possible, as a way not only to maintain ourselves in an opposite position to the dominant one in our times which stresses the need of ends, answers, and results, but also to resist the paradigm of academic activity where propositions, arguments, evidence, and proposals for change are needed in a 'critical' position.

These are my impressions, dear brother, together with the joy of being together with old and new friends. And I am not talking about individuals or intentions. I love you as I love Megan and David and I realise how you also stand against diverse forms of colonisation and oppression. As well as I am aware that Matthew Lipman had also those intentions, suffering in his own personal life some of the oppressions we are talking about (see Lipman 2008). But it seems to me that Philosophy for Children, at least as it was practiced at Mendham, is not able or not ready to problematise its own assumptions and ideological forces.

**Maughn:** Well, for me, Lipman's theory of thinking and judgement is a cultural artifact, a product of his own education and experiences, and not in any way universal. That's part of the reason we do the historical research, to learn more about the archaeology of these ideas, so that we can critically re-evaluate them. So, again, for me the question is not whether Lipman and Sharp or anyone else who has suggested norms for thinking or inquiry or doing philosophy 'got it right', but what those norms make possible and what they make difficult or impossible. And I'm pretty certain both Mat and Ann would want their ideas evaluated that way. But, as a citizen of a country that is systematically dismantling its institutions and regulations related to public health, climate change, and voting rights, I am 100% committed to teaching a construct of reasonableness that makes possible close attention to what counts as reliable

arguments and evidence in those matters—at the same time that it broadens the construct to include perception, value, and emotion.

The only other way I know to problematise our own assumptions and ideological forces is to welcome the kind of dialogue you and I have been enjoying, among friends who feel like brothers who have divergent perspectives on philosophy and education.

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