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## Philosophy for children meets the art of living: a holistic approach to an education for life

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# *Philosophy for Children Meets the Art of Living: A Holistic Approach to an Education for Life*

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*Abstract: This article explores the meeting of two approaches towards philosophy and education: the philosophy for children (P4C) approach advocated by Lipman and others, and Schmid's (2000a) philosophical concept of Lebenskunst (the art of living). Schmid explores the concept of the beautiful or good life by asking what is necessary for each individual to be able to develop their own art of living and which aspects of life are significant when shaping a good and beautiful life. One element of Schmid's theory is the practical application of philosophy through the notions of Bildung, (self-)reflection, prudence and practical wisdom, as well as the requirement for each individual to take responsibility for actively shaping their life as an artwork. In this sense, each person is the artist responsible for living their own beautiful life. We argue that there are useful parallels between Schmid's concept of the art of living and P4C, such as the ideal of a holistic philosophy that is "lived." The pragmatic approach of P4C focuses on the embodied learner who practices critical, caring and creative thinking. Both P4C and Schmid's theory are reminiscent of the Aristotelian notion of practical wisdom (phronesis), which allows for an approach to an education for life that prepares (young) students to develop their own art of living.*

## **Introduction**

Historically, of central concern in philosophy is the question of how one might live a good life. Defining the "good" life is crucial, and an empirical approach to the topic ties the idea of the good life to being human and embodied. For Aristotle, the Ancient Greek virtue ethicist, the aim of life was *eudaimonia* or "happiness." Following on from his teachers, Socrates and Plato, Aristotle recognised the role of questioning and self-reflection, practices necessary to living a good life, in pursuit of truth and wisdom; Aristotle also drew upon the Platonic notion of the cardinal virtues in fleshing out how humans may achieve the good life. In *The Republic*, Plato detailed four cardinal virtues that a virtuous person ought to practice: wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice (427e). Aristotle came to be known as a virtue ethicist because he claimed the good life is a virtuous life due to the fact that we are social creatures whose behaviour impacts upon one another. Aristotle identified the virtues as mid-point between excessive and deficient behaviour (1106a); for instance, courage is a virtue while fear (deficient) and rashness (excessive) are vices (1107b). Following the doctrine of the mean, we aim for what is

appropriate in a given situation as virtuous actions are supported by good intentions and appropriate emotional dispositions. Aristotle thus claimed the virtues, as good habits of character, will assist us to achieve *eudaimonia*, which is often translated as “happiness” but has a decidedly different meaning than what is often understood as happiness today. For Aristotle, *eudaimonia* meant the highest form of happiness, which is an end in itself and does not add to any other aim or goal; “true happiness” or “felicity” might be better translations in this context, and it is often connected with an attitude of “serene happiness” (Müller-Commichau, 2007).

Following Aristotle, we believe that aiming for *eudaimonia* is a worthy goal and the role of education in helping to shape a good life is crucial. The pragmatic approach to a contextual life lived in a specific time and place is a value shared by the two approaches we wish to connect in this article. Wilhelm Schmid’s concept of *Lebenskunst* (art of living, or AoL) and that of Philosophy for Children (P4C) share key values such as *Bildung*, (self-)reflection and practical wisdom (*phronesis*) which includes critical, creative and caring thinking skills. Wisdom in this sense involves knowing the right thing to do at the right time, and being able to so act with the appropriate emotional disposition. These key thinking skills are encouraged by educators concerned with the practical question of how we support students in developing skills that will set them up to be able to live a good life. Schmid’s concept of the AoL outlines a range of skills and knowledge necessary for living a good and beautiful life. Combining his philosophy with the educational methodology of P4C provides educators with a useful starting point to support individuals not only in practicing critical reflection and prudence, crucial to the development of democratic citizens, but also in actively engaging in the development of an art of living that allows them to live a beautiful life and flourish in today’s global society. It needs to be mentioned here that the argument in this paper is mainly situated in a Western context which is currently that of a strongly individualistic democracy. While P4C has been well applied in Eastern cultures (such as Singapore), whether or not Schmid’s AoL has a place in other cultural and social contexts must be further discussed elsewhere as it is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we are confident that the discourse around the art of living and educational perspectives, specifically P4C, is relevant beyond current Western cultural settings. By bringing AoL together with P4C we hope to provide educators with a holistic model with which they can engage theoretically with a view to practical application in the classroom in order to support students’ pedagogical journey, including character formation and the acquisition of lifelong skills.

### ***Lebenskunst: The Art of Living***

The approach to the art of living that will be most relevant in this article is Wilhelm Schmid’s (2000a; Teschers, 2010) concept of *Lebenskunst*. Schmid’s main objective is to explore how the art of living may assist individuals to live a good or, in his words, “beautiful life.” To support this account, Schmid draws strongly on Foucault’s (1984) notion of the *care of the self* and he argues that a beautiful life is a question of individual taste and cannot be prescribed in any general way based upon normative guidelines or social consensus. The subjectivism of Schmid’s notion of the beautiful life is open to the criticism of individual relativism, yet Schmid draws upon Aristotle to defend his concept of the AoL. Schmid makes a pragmatic claim that in current neo-liberal and individualistic societies, shared normative values as a foundation for social structures and human interaction are limited in their ability to guide the actions

and decision-making of individuals in everyday life (2000a, p. 66). He develops a moral theory (pp. 66–71) that takes the self-interest of the individual as its starting point, and then adds Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis* (prudence and practical wisdom). On this view, the contextual individual living in a society is better off considering and accounting for the needs and desires of others as well as their own. This creates the values of self-care alongside a care for others, which Schmid extends further towards a care for society, humanity and our planet in general. On the basis of the “enlightened self-interest” (p. 63, this and other quotes from Schmid are our translations), enlightened through prudence and practical wisdom, Schmid develops an *individual ethics of prudence*, which,

based on the self-interest of each individual, takes the interests of others and the general public into account as this again is important for the interests of the individual... The individual ethics that is understood as an art of living finally occurs in the artful realisation of existence, which is based on reflection of the conditions and possibilities that are of importance for this realisation: instead of presuming the self and its capability for life, the reflected art of living aims at the development of the self and at the learning of how to shape life. (p. 67)

For Schmid, to engage in the art of living one must take responsibility for one’s own life and try to make it a beautiful one: “[T]he art of living is the wholeheartedness of the attempt, for this reason [our responsibility for our own life], to take possession of one’s own life in good time and potentially make a *beautiful life* out of it” (2000b, p. 7, emphasis in original).

To understand this pointed definition more clearly, it is useful to unpack some of the key aspects of Schmid’s theory. Schmid emphasises that engaging in the art of living is an active endeavour. One cannot wait for it to happen on its own; one has to take responsibility for shaping one’s own life. Schmid also emphasises the aspect of *art* in the art of living. He chooses the term “beautiful life” instead of “good life” to emphasise that this quality is a question of individual taste. It is similar to a painting that can be beautiful in the eye of one and ugly in the eye of another. Combining these two aspects of *active engagement* and *art*, Schmid sees an individual who engages in the art of living as being an artist who is shaping his or her own life into a piece of art. Consequently, the judgment as to whether one’s life is a good or beautiful one lies in the eye of the one living this life. A shared value-base with others occurs through individuals engaged in the art of living reflecting on the values of their society, either consciously accepting societal values or challenging them, but this internalisation of normative morality occurs through critical reflection. Finally, Schmid points out the potentiality of a beautiful life, implying that there is no guarantee for living a beautiful life even if we take responsibility for our own lives and try our best to shape them into what we would perceive as beautiful ones. However, we still engage in the art of living whether or not we consider ourselves successful or not. The engagement in the art of living is a life-long process and if one’s life has been a beautiful one or not can, in the end, only be judged by each individual at the end of his or her lifespan.

The connection between Schmid’s concept of the art of living and education is, as has been argued elsewhere (Teschers, 2013a), that both have, or should have, the same final aim: *the best possible life for each individual under the circumstances he or she is living in*.<sup>1</sup> As educators, we can support our students on

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<sup>1</sup> An argument could be made, following R. S. Peters (1973), that education is an end in itself and not a means to an end (for example, reducible to vocational training). Taking into account Aristotle’s notion of *eudaimonia* in combination with Schmid’s notion of living a beautiful life, the art of living and education both are ends in themselves and, one could argue, potentially the same end (Teschers, 2013a).

their way towards shaping their own art of living. For Schmid, the term that encapsulates the promotion of the values and skills associated with (self-)reflection and *phronesis* is *Bildung*, which, in the German understanding, has three related meanings: knowledge, prudence and self-cultivation. The term is strongly shaped by German Idealism and aims towards aesthetical and moral perfection (Liebau, 1999). In this way, *Bildung* is holistic and inclusive: it goes beyond the classroom and sets up an art of living and an education for life. One aspect of the art of living is freedom for the individual to make sensible choices and care for one's self as well as for others. Thus, the role of the educator in assisting students in this regard is vital. Much like Aristotelian ethics, the practice of an approach to a contextual life and moral decision-making is an ongoing endeavour, but one that relies on the support of mentors and role models.

In addition to *Bildung*, Schmid (2000a) refers to the concept of *hermeneutics* as it is discussed by Gadamer (1975) and argues that it is related to *Bildung* and highly relevant to his concept of the art of living. The hermeneutical understanding of learning and becoming is fundamental to the process of shaping one's own life and one's self. The hermeneutical cycle of perception, interpretation, and incorporation into one's worldview and self, followed by a changed perception based on this worldview, requires the abilities of self-reflection, critical thinking and interpretation, which, among other skills, can be developed and strengthened through Philosophy for Children, and are important in Schmid's concept of the art of living.

## Philosophy for Children

Philosophy for Children (P4C) started in the 1970s in order to encourage children to think for themselves with a view to becoming reasonable and democratic citizens. Supporters of P4C believed that philosophy need not be confined to the domain of the academy, but rather that children from age three upwards are capable of critical, creative and caring thinking. The term "P4C" was coined by Matthew Lipman (1976), who wanted to encourage reasonableness in citizens and figured the best way to do so was to teach philosophical thinking skills from an early age. The aim of teaching philosophy in schools was to produce critical, caring, creative and collaborative thinkers. One central methodology advocated by P4C practitioners is the Community of Inquiry (CoI). The CoI is based on democratic, student-led discussions where the teacher acts as a facilitator instead of being the one source of all knowledge (Cam, 1995).

The CoI commences with the use of age-appropriate narratives or other stimulus texts, such as an object or video, which is then discussed with students in a democratic manner with a focus on the questions of the participants. The CoI classroom is arranged in a circle with chairs facing inwards so that students can listen to and speak with each other, rather than aiming their dialogue solely towards the teacher standing at the front of the classroom. By focussing on the students' ideas, the role of the teacher is radicalised as the teacher acts as a facilitator of the discussion, following the dialogue where it goes without a specific endpoint in mind (Kennedy, 2015).

In order to ensure epistemic progress is made within such a classroom, the teacher should ideally be trained in philosophy and P4C methodology. The trained facilitator encourages critically reflective thinking skills in students as they discuss various ideas and build upon or challenge their own concepts as well as those of others (Sharp, 2007). Lipman defines critical thinking as "thinking that (1)

facilitates judgment because it (2) relies on criteria, (3) is self-correcting, and (4) is sensitive to context” (Lipman, 1991, p. 116). Yet critical thinking skills alone are not enough, and Laurance Splitter and Ann Sharp highlight “caring” and “creative” thinking as equally important skills children should be encouraged to develop (Lipman, 1991; Splitter & Sharp, 1995). In this way the critical thinker will not just know what the right thing to do is; they will also know how to go about accomplishing that action while being sensitive to the context and others involved in the situation. It is this contextual application of knowledge and the transferable thinking skills that leads Sharp to claim that the rituals involved in the practice of P4C in a CoI classroom setting can lead to the cultivation of wisdom (Sharp, 2007, p. 13).

Empirical research conducted by Topping and Trickey (2007a; 2007b) have demonstrated that children who study philosophy are more likely to achieve better academic results and that they also have additional social benefits such as better self-esteem and increased empathy for others. There is also said to be less bullying in the schoolyard and fewer behaviour management issues (Millett & Tapper, 2012). Influenced strongly by the work of John Dewey (1910/1997; 1916/2004), the aim of philosophy for children is to teach students to carefully consider diverse ideas, be self-reflective and empathise with others. It has been argued that these thinking skills will encourage students to be reasonable and democratic, to treat others fairly and to be open to reconsidering their own ideas as they seek evidence for beliefs (Burgh, Field & Freakley, 2006). This ideal does not seem too far removed from the aim of developing an art of living whereby each person is given the tools required to apply to the creation of their own “beautiful” life. A beautiful life includes caring for oneself but also caring for others. This is a goal shared by advocates of the art of living and P4C.

### **Community of Inquiry (CoI) as a Tool to Teach Relevant Skills**

Schmid (2000a) discusses some key skills and areas of knowledge that he considers as most important for developing one’s own art of living. Among these are *Bildung*, self-reflection, prudence and practical wisdom (*phronesis*), as well as possible curriculum topics such as *the human being as individual, the social human being, difficulties and burdens of human life, striving for fulfilment and meaning in life, religions, beliefs and human cultures, and personal life-styles and global perspectives*. We believe that the P4C methodology can assist in bringing Schmid’s art of living to the classroom and be useful in creating a holistic attitude towards education, setting students on their own path as lifelong learners who shape their own beautiful lives. The specific manner in which this may occur is through the philosophical approach to the curriculum areas Schmid highlights as important for the self-reflective individual.

One way that P4C can assist in bringing alive Schmid’s ideas is through the Community of Inquiry. Based on open, facilitated conversation, the CoI encourages participants to reflect and build upon their own ideas as well as those of others in a safe classroom environment. As the CoI is an ideal forum in which to discuss meaningful subjects, we believe it would work well as a pedagogical tool that allows students to explore the curriculum topics detailed in Schmid’s AoL. The concepts Schmid highlights, including those of personhood, personal identity, religious and moral concepts and modern dilemmas, are all readily compatible with philosophy. A topic such as the effect of personal habits and expressions (for instance one’s language and gestures) on others may be discussed within a CoI and further explored via concept games, techniques employed in P4C. The benefit of the CoI is that it combines intellectual exploration with compassionate respect for the views of others. Students who

participate regularly in a CoI not only perform better academically but also socially as their self-esteem is built up and they see themselves as a member of a community of thinkers (Millett & Tapper, 2012, p. 546). Developing the students' own questions is a central component of the CoI and the aim is to seek knowledge and uncover truth for its own sake as per the Socratic tradition (D'Olimpio, 2013). As Laurance Splitter (2011) explains:

Participating in a CoI allows students, individually and collaboratively, to develop their own ideas and perspectives based on appropriately rigorous modes of thinking and against the background of a thorough understanding and appreciation of those ideas and perspectives that, having stood the test of time, may be represented as society's best view of things to date. (p. 497)

As the CoI encourages individual reflection as well as the collaborative critique of ideas, the CoI may be seen as sympathetic to Schmid's notion of the individual exploring and developing his or her own art of living. Schmid's subjective starting point of self-interest is benefitted by social engagement in a group environment that encourages understanding and building upon, as well as refining, diverse ideas as advocated by practitioners of P4C.

Another reason the CoI methodology in particular supports the implementation of Schmid's AoL in an educational environment is that the attention is on the holistic progress of the individual within the group. It is not expected that every participant will reach a homogenous view; rather, pluralism is expected and respect for diversity is encouraged. Splitter (2011) notes that the interactive CoI aims at the "wellbeing of its members (in intellectual, moral and affective terms)" (p. 498). The CoI encourages empathy, as participants are building upon, not simply arguing against, the ideas of others. However, just because diverse ideas are expected and encouraged does not mean that no ideas or values are shared amongst the participants. The benefit of the CoI is that it encourages self-reflection and openness to new information. This allows for the process of gaining knowledge to be dynamic, self-correcting and structured, but democratic, and resists collapse into relativism by continuing dialogue rather than ending a conversation when opinions differ (Golding, 2011, pp. 476 & 482).

Similarly, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle claims that the individual interprets the virtues according to one's individual understanding and context, yet this does not deny that virtues such as courage, honesty, trust and loyalty are shared. The individual as a political, social and moral human being flourishes within a community; the *eudemonia* aimed at by the virtuous agent is intrinsically linked to the *polis*. The individual must reflect on the ideals of their society, of which there are more than one, in order to decide which version of the good life is suitable for themselves.

In this way we see how the CoI may be a useful tool to develop the faculties supported by both P4C and the art of living. The art of living places primacy on the notions of *Bildung*, (self-)reflection and practical wisdom. This self-shaping or self-cultivating aspect that is key in the concept of *Bildung* and the art of living ties in strongly with outcomes of P4C. Leon Benade (2013) affirms the explicit claims that the CoI as practised in P4C supports the development of democratic, self-reflective and considerate individuals. Reflecting on other theorists who claim the same, Benade (p. 7) quotes as follows:

Claims No 1 and 2

Citizens of a democratic state are required to think and deliberate impartially on a range of



contentious moral issues; the traditional forms of moral and religious thinking are poor preparation for this task; philosophical education in schools that considers controversial issues will better equip tomorrow's voter to make responsible democratic decisions. (Brighouse, 2008, pp. 61–62)

P4C's democratic and egalitarian community of enquiry pedagogy allows pupils to ask questions... (Murriss, 2008, pp. 105–107)

#### Claim No 3

The argument is that philosophy is a powerful subject and that philosophising, or philosophic enquiry, is the optimum pedagogy for fostering the essential skills and dispositions of critical thinking. (Winstanley, 2008, p. 85)

Benade goes on to argue that P4C fulfils these requirements, offering evidence that the CoI enables the praxis of three core character traits: respect, participation and social responsibility. These character traits are required for the individual to artfully shape their own beautiful life.

Also required for the art of living is creativity and the use of one's imagination. P4C also supports the active role of the child's imagination and the CoI can claim to encourage creativity by stimulating the imagination (Bleazby, 2012; Millett & Tapper, 2012), which is important for the self-shaping process. This ties in to Schmid's concept of the aesthetic value of a life lived beautifully. The traits mentioned above of respect, participation and social responsibility, (self-)reflection and prudence as well as the use of the imagination are all important for both the art of living and P4C and may be practiced through the CoI methodology. Thus the CoI as employed in the classroom may be seen to be a useful tool to assist in the development of the key faculties for creating one's own art of living and shaping one's own beautiful life.

### **Challenges and Requirements of AoL/P4C**

Millett & Tapper (2013) indicate that one of the challenges for using Philosophy for Children (P4C) in schools is a lack of teacher training in philosophy and the CoI. To explore philosophical topics and issues through a philosophical lens, a teacher needs to have at least some background in philosophy. The same is true for teaching the art of living. According to Schmid (2000a), an AoL teacher needs to engage in his or her own art of living endeavour. He or she needs to pursue the development of his or her own art of living and to live, or shape, a beautiful life. Further, Schmid states that an AoL teacher needs to be knowledgeable in a range of areas, of which philosophy is only one. As other areas of relevance for developing a good and beautiful life today, Schmid lists anthropology, cultural studies, religious studies, psychology, sociology, media and technology, sciences, law and ecology (pp. 317–324). It goes without saying that no one teacher can be an expert in all these areas; however, some basic understanding could be acquired during teacher training if art of living classes were considered a valuable part of today's curricula and teacher training were thus appropriately adjusted to cater for it. However, if this is asking too much of teacher training and curricula in an already crowded curriculum, it may be that the study of philosophy (as required for P4C) and practice in CoI methodology could be applied to other curriculum subjects more generally (Kennedy White, 2013).

Thus, we acknowledge that one challenge to the compatibility of Schmid's art of living approach and P4C is that Schmid's approach can be deemed far wider than that of P4C. Traditionally, P4C advocates for including philosophy classes in the curriculum, which is suitable for all year levels. Meanwhile, Schmid advocates a whole school approach towards supporting the art of living, whereby everyone involved in the school community, as well as how the building and grounds are constructed, is a considered aspect of the education for life. However, perhaps this wide, holistic approach offered by Schmid is not so far removed from P4C. There have been some very successful all-school approaches adopted by advocates of P4C that incorporate the CoI and other P4C techniques, such as the question quadrant (Cam, 2006) and concept games, into every lesson and subject area. Two well-documented examples of the whole-school P4C approach include Pemberton Primary School in Western Australia and Buranda State School in Queensland (Golding et al., 2012; Millett & Tapper, 2013). Millett & Tapper argue that the CoI can be used as a tool in most traditional school subjects to enrich the student's experience of schooling and their personal development, and Golding et al. report that benefits of a whole-school P4C approach include less bullying in the playground and increased self-esteem, as students identify themselves as belonging to a respectful group of inquirers. Schmid (2000a) argues in similar ways that the art of living can be integrated in a whole-school approach that includes not only all teachers and students, but also administrative staff, janitors, gardeners, as well as the school building and surroundings themselves. It is worth asking the question whether these integrated whole-school approaches are compatible, which we believe they are.

One aspect where we see an important benefit of uniting P4C with Schmid's AoL concept is that Schmid explicitly makes room for the notion of spirituality in conjunction with wisdom in his consideration of living a beautiful life. For Schmid, wisdom is even wider than practical wisdom (*phronesis*), which, one could argue, sits on one side of a continuum, with spirituality on the other (Teschers, 2013b). Spirituality should not be missed in a holistic educational approach as it is key, according to de Souza (2009), for a "flourishing society—one devoted to improving our wellbeing rather than just expanding the economy" (p. 677). By considering the role of spirituality in a modern society, P4C may benefit from the inclusion of AoL. Educators may wish to create democratic and respectful citizens who can think critically, creatively and empathetically, yet it would also be beneficial to give students the skills to be able to reflect on their own spirituality as well as that of others. We claim that reflection on spirituality (including religion as one aspect of it) can very well be the topic of CoI sessions, and therefore this aspect of AoL links to and even supplements P4C.

### **Conclusion: A Holistic Approach to Education**

The shared benefit of the art of living approach and philosophy in schools is that of a holistic approach to education. Both Schmid and proponents of P4C see students as being taught skills that will assist them in their lives and in the future. These skills are not simply to master exams and regurgitate facts, but rather to live beautiful lives as lifelong learners. This holistic educational approach, we argue, has to go beyond skills that are currently in demand by industry and economy. Today's education systems, where young people spend a significant part of their daily lives, have a huge impact on students' development and futures. These futures should not be determined or unduly limited by current economic or political agendas. Education, understood here as the empowerment of (young) students to

develop their own art of living, seeks to help students think for themselves and take responsibility for their own future choices. With this in mind, the CoI is a valuable tool in support of the development of *Bildung*, self-reflection, practical wisdom and a broad and well-rounded knowledge base.

Schmid seems to be aiming for something wider than P4C, as the development of one's own art of living is important not only to lead a successful life but a *beautiful* life. The art of living includes the search for meaning and purpose in life, and it requires the development of prudence and practical wisdom as it asks individuals to consciously reflect on how they want to live. This includes considering others, one's society and humanity on a global scale. While the AoL has this in common with P4C, it further allows room for the individual undertaking the creation of their own beautiful life to reflect upon and refine their personal daily habits with a view to recognising the interconnectedness between individuals and societies on a global level. Such considerations require individuals to ask relevant philosophical questions as they seek to make meaning. In this way, P4C can help AoL in an educational setting. The CoI can accommodate aspects of Schmid's AoL concept and it certainly can support the development of necessary thinking skills. However, P4C does not contain all of the relevant concepts of AoL. Arguably, even AoL teacher training cannot contain them all, as they are notions that are continually developed and practiced as one lives a whole, unique life. Yet one key focus shared by the art of living approach and P4C practitioners is wisdom. Again, it is worth noting that for Schmid this concept of wisdom is wider even than *phronesis* or practical wisdom (which, arguably, P4C would be content with). Schmid's concept of wisdom and living a beautiful life also has space for spirituality. We have claimed that, in this way and others, AoL can augment P4C, and the methodology of P4C, specifically the CoI, can assist in bringing Schmid's AoL to life in the classroom setting.

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