Alien Adventures in Philosophy: creating a community of enquiry through "philosophy in role"

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ABSTRACT

"Philosophy in role" is an umbrella term for programmes using role-playing games and interactive narratives to link episodes of philosophical enquiry. Two such programmes are described, "Alien Adventures in Philosophy" by the present author and "Arête – The Philosophical Role-Playing Game" by Professor Jason Howard of Viterbo University. Their origins, merits and contrasts with "traditional" P4C are explored, with a focus on the benefits for pupil engagement and for teachers new to enquiry-based learning.

Consideration is given to the impact of this method on enquiry dialogue, and to the effect of the addition of negotiation and deliberation dialogues which are inherent in role-play. Some suggestions are made on the light these programmes shed on wider connections between philosophy and imaginative play, and avenues for the further development of such programmes are briefly sketched.

The distinctive feature of "philosophy in role" is that, rather than reasoning about philosophical issues in response to a story, participants reason *within* the story, taking on personae whose enquiries and decisions are integral to the narrative. I am not concerned here with the use of drama as a stimulus for enquiry, or as a creative outcome of it, but of a more intimate relationship between role-play and enquiry, in which participants dip in and out of role "live", with their thinking informed by the concerns of the characters they inhabit "in-game" as well as by their own concerns in the "outside world", a phrase from Ann Sharp that has added meaning for philosophy in role.

It will help to begin by describing two programmes, which by "convergent evolution" fill similar pedagogical niches but retain the distinctive characters of their respective origins. My own involvement in philosophy for children, before connecting substantively with the "official" P4C movement, began with telling very short stories ending with a philosophical challenge. For example:

> Suppose that last night Blib and Blob came to your house while you were sleeping.
> They drugged you and whisked you off to their flying saucer. They removed your
> brain from your body, floated it in a glass vat of life-supporting fluid, and connected

> it up to a super-computer. Your body was then destroyed. It is the super-computer
> that now controls all your experiences. (Laws 2000)

This reworking of Descartes famous thought experiment was from "The Philosophy Files", a popular introduction to philosophy for teenagers. It was important, though, that such stories were not read, but retold, with elaborations and repetitions that varied with each telling. Storytelling commands a different quality of attention to story reading. This is supported by quantitative studies such as Trostle & Hicks (1998). There is something in the living thread between teller and listener which is a close relative of the quality of connectedness that sets community of enquiry apart from other classroom experiences.

Another important feature is that the stories were told in the second person, situating the listeners in the heart of the dilemma. So at the end of the extract above, the challenge is, "How can *you* prove to me that you are real?" I developed this second person narrative more fully when I began delivering "Alien Adventures in Philosophy" workshops in schools, with pupils from 9 to 12 years old. In this scenario, children become intergalactic travellers searching the cosmos for a planet to call their own, encountering a variety of practical and philosophical problems which they must solve through dialogue. After an excitable take-off routine that involves loud engine noises, weightlessness, artificial gravity, and being placed into suspended animation, the philosophers arrive on their first planet.

> You go down the steps of your spaceship, eager to see this new world. You take your
> first breath of the sweet alien air, which smells a bit like toffee, and look around. All
> over the planet, you can see tall purple cactuses. And walking towards you, you can
> see a group of aliens that look very happy. They come up to you and, since they have
> eight arms each, it only takes a few of them to shake hands with all of you. As they
> shake your hands, they say, "Hello! We're so pleased... to eat you."
>
> You think, "Oh, bless them, they don't understand English very well." So in the way
> people do when they are travelling abroad, you say very slowly and loudly, "No, no.
> You... mean...pleased...to...MEET...you."
>
> And the aliens look you up and down and say, "Oh no. There's nothing wrong with
> our English. We definitely, absolutely, positively, 100% mean pleased... to... EAT
> YOU!" And with that, they use their many strong arms to tie you hand and foot to
> the purple cactuses! Oo! Ouch! They start sharpening their knives...
>
> Turn to the person at the cactus next to you, and decide how you are going to try to
> escape. (Buckley 2010)

In this script for teachers, I have attempted to maintain a flavour of a told rather than read story, as well as the crucial second person narrative. You can imagine the relish with which classes join in with

this scenario: younger children will sit, unprompted, with their hands "tied" behind their backs, and they throw themselves into the challenge with a myriad of James Bond inspired escape plans.

Gregory (2006) has drawn the attention of P4Cers to the classification of normative dialogue types offered by Walton (1998). At this point in a philosophy in role session, the dialogue generated is not that of enquiry, but a mixture of other types: deliberation dialogue – "What shall we do?"; negotiation dialogue – "What can we give you so you'll let us go?"; and persuasion dialogue – "If you eat me, you'll catch a nasty disease." All these types of dialogue are arguably more immediately accessible to children than enquiry. Beginning with them maximises participation and enthusiasm. Typically there are only three or four children at most who do not speak out at this stage in their first session. It allows confidence and new protocols such as good listening and "passing it on" to be established ready for enquiry, rather than presenting the cognitive challenges of enquiry and the social challenge of whole-class dialogue simultaneously.

Once they tried a few ideas for escape, the facilitator moves the session on to enquiry discourse. One of the aliens confides:

> "Erm. You are looking rather delicious, and I'm really looking forward to eating you. I'm so bored of cactus. The only thing is, when we had an earthling to dinner once before, just before we boiled him, he shouted out, 'Don't do it! Eating human beings is wrong!' But we never got to find out why he thought it was wrong to eat him because ... we ate him. But it gave me indigestion thinking about it. So if you can convince us that eating people is wrong, we'll let you go. And if you can't then at least I won't get indigestion this time."

The ensuing discussions tend to raise questions on the nature of persons, the status of non-human animals, reciprocity and vegetarianism, but have also touched on relativism, consciousness, conscience and other issues. Eventually, the philosophers convince the aliens that eating people is wrong, and are released to continue their adventure. The take off routine, with its noise and excitement, acts as a celebration of a successful enquiry, and once the group are placed back in suspended animation, they can be recalled to the "outside world" of the classroom.

Each new planet confronts them with a different dilemma. Should they introduce the concept of God to a planet that has no such word? An alien teacher is about to cane a pupil; should they persuade her to commute the punishment to a detention, moistening the slime on the school corridors? The basic creative process is to take a thought experiment or problem from traditional philosophy and to "alienize" it – rather like providing a new orchestration for a familiar tune.

Inserted between these philosophical episodes, are a variety of "interludes", which fulfil a similar role to warm-up games in traditional P4C. They promote engagement, build teamwork and practise listening skills. For example, a space walk to carry out running repairs goes wrong, and groups of participants become glued together in a "human knot" from which they must disentangle themselves. Activities such as this are familiar to workers in the field of outdoor education; once again, they are "alienized" into the context of the overarching interactive narrative to provide continuity and motivation.

A contrasting approach has been developed by Professor Jason Howard of Viterbo University. Although I was already running Alien Adventures workshops, I did not begin to think systematically about it until a session at last year's IAPC Summer seminar in which we played his inspired creation, "Arête". The excitement this generated in a group of adult philosophers was an indication of its potential with children.

Arête was developed to introduce P4C to sessions in Boys' and Girls' clubs, a voluntary extracurricular setting in which "any semblance of a traditional classroom would be seriously counterproductive" (Howard 2008). Rather than emerging from a storytelling tradition, Arête's antecedents are in the world of fantasy role playing games (RPGs) such as "Dungeons and Dragons" (Gygax & Arneson 1974).

The first stage in such games is for each player to generate the character he or she will inhabit during the game. Players choose a "race" for their character (human, dwarf, elf or cyclops) and an occupation such as wizard, knight, scholar or spy. They then roll dice to give values for "attributes" such as charisma, beauty, physical might and willpower which inform the way the player imagines the strengths and weaknesses of their character in the game. They choose from a range of specialist skills open to their occupation, such as "picking locks" for a spy, or "detecting magic" for a wizard. Players in magical occupations select the spells they can cast, and all are issued with "in-game" currency to purchase weapons, armour and necessaries for the quest.

All these are recorded onto a character sheet, where the player also keeps a running tally of "stamina points". These can be lost in combat and recovered through healing or the passage of "in-game" time. Character generation is time-consuming, and militates against the use of the game with full classes, but it builds a great deal of excitement and anticipation. There are also pedagogical advantages to having a more thoroughly worked up character. You are invited to imagine being someone else, radically different from your real self, rather than simply to imagine yourself into the story. This adds to the creative and empathic challenges of the game and also makes a further "distancing technique" available to players in discussions – "My elf would say..."

The Arête narrative is a quest, reminiscent of that of "Lord of the Rings", in which a diverse group of young adventurers join forces to recover a magical artefact and avert a global war between their four races. The enquiries are worked into the narrative in a similar way to Alien Adventures. Here, the adventurers have ventured into the tunnels of the golden mountain, and are about to claim the bronze pedestal of the "scales of justice", the object of their quest. Then a voice fills the room.

> Welcome to the home of the spirit of the golden mountain. I have been awaiting some true heroes to arrive such as you for many years now. Before I allow you to take the prized artefact you seek, you must pass one final test and demonstrate to me that I can trust you with my one and only gift. The greatest of all gifts is the gift of wisdom, for the one who has it needs nothing else besides. Try if you might to define what wisdom is, and then devise a test to demonstrate how one could recognise those who have wisdom, from those who merely pretend to be wise. Do this and the gift of bronze is yours, and until you do you cannot leave. Now begin! (Howard ibid.)

As in Alien Adventures, what follows would be immediately recognisable as a P4C enquiry, but perhaps with an added sense of urgency because the question has to be resolved for the game to continue.

The enquiries alternate with non-philosophical challenges that allow other forms of dialogue and collaboration to come to the fore. How to cross the river of lava and avoid being clubbed to death by the stone golem? Should we trust the word of a goblin who says she is ready to defect to our side? In Arête, these challenges are enriched by the greater development of characters and the possibility that some difficulties will have to be resolved through combat. Players consider what their characters, with their various skills, attributes, spells and equipment can contribute to the success of the group and negotiate with one another which strategies to adopt. The combat itself is carried out using a system of dice rolls to establish whether attacks are successful and how much damage they cause. The use of combat raises some interesting ethical questions, but as these are addressed in the author's introduction to the game I will not repeat them here.

It is easy to see how the features of either of these methods of philosophy in role could be transposed to a variety of different scenarios – a society struggling for survival after a disaster; a ship exploring from island to island; a mediaeval chivalric quest; a government beset with problems; perhaps even ordinary life. Most genres of children's literature would be susceptible to a similar treatment... bring on the vampires?

What, then, are the benefits of such an approach? The most obvious is the immediate engagement it generates from pupils. As one participant put it, "It still felt like a game, even though I knew I was learning." Those children who would take rapidly to P4C and who have experienced both methods seem to take just as well to philosophy in role, but it also appeals to some more disaffected children who connect with the genre through popular culture, or who are otherwise drawn in by the story. For children who define themselves in opposition to school, the sessions offer a "third place" between work and play, which they have not yet classified as enemy territory and to which they give one another permission to contribute. A third and perhaps the most interesting group to consider are those children who are usually shy about bringing their own opinions to an enquiry, yet are confident to do so when offered the opportunity to do so in role.

Some key features of the discourse during these sessions emerged in conversation with Rebecca Carter and John Greenwood, teachers at Castle View School, Essex, England, who have been piloting Arête with Year 8 pupils. P4Cers are used to children moving with fluidity between the worlds of the stimulus, that of their own lives, of shared fictional worlds of book, TV and film, of contemporary culture, historical example and of ideas in the abstract. Philosophy in role adds to that a richer engagement with the story and a variety of new "persons" in which to articulate ideas. Depending on the child's level of imaginative engagement at that moment, or the convenience of one context or another for making a particular point, "I" can mean "I, John, in Year 8", "I the controller of this character" or "I, Ansafdi the Elf". It provides a distancing technique that can be instinctively deployed to voice controversial ideas, or experiment with different perspectives, as in more convoluted structures like, "I think my character would say that..."

Interestingly, different children can participate seamlessly in the same discussion while operating at all these different levels. At times, there were additional levels of complexity, as when a child offered a hypothetical example in role as a character, but which was implicitly understood by most of those present to be a description of her own situation in the real world!

As a facilitator, one also moves between being in character - as an alien or the voice of the golden mountain, for example – and a more traditional pedagogical role. Sometimes, these shifts are explicitly signalled, as when the world of the game is paused to invite comments on the process or to praise the depth of a discussion that has just ended; but mostly, the shifts between narrator, character and facilitator roles are natural and fluid.

A further empathic shift can occur when players temporarily occupy the role of other characters in the scenario. One group of alien adventurers were presented with the task of dividing the estate of a wealthy alien between a selection of "offspring", including clones, someone suffering amnesia after

being bitten by a poisonous sheep, and a dutiful (because computerised) child. They quickly assumed the roles of the competing claimants, with the remainder formed into a jury. The spontaneity with which they did so, and their immersion in the imaginative scenario they elaborated, reinforced my impression that what was going on in our sessions bore a close relation to genuine play.

The relationship between play and philosophy has an ancient pedigree, and exploring it in detail is beyond the scope of this paper. Huizinga's "Homo Ludens" (1938) provides some convenient criteria for "play"- that it provides freedom; is not ordinary life; is distinct in time and space from ordinary life; exhibits order and, finally, is not something from which (directly at least) profit is to be obtained. My intuition is that the "game" element of philosophy in role meets these criteria well. Perhaps because children are experts at play, this relieves some of their inhibitions and puts them into a more creative frame of mind, reminding them that they can look to themselves to create meaning rather than seeking it from an authority. This shows up in the way that they begin to make procedural suggestions more quickly than in traditional P4C, assuming ownership at an earlier stage. I find the enquiries that result from these sessions are more energised, have broader participation, and are more risk-taking and more creative than traditional enquiries with children of the same age.

In addition to the multiple worlds through which the dialogue can move, and the variety of "persons" that can be adopted more or less simultaneously by different participants, philosophy in role permits different dialogue types to interweave. Some players may be fully immersed in the enquiry aspects of a dialogue, while others are focussed on persuading the facilitator/gamemaster that they have solved the problem satisfactorily, and others are attempting to find practical solutions that will escape the need for further enquiry. There can be an amusing tension between these goals, as when a group are attempting to explain to some aliens why eating people is wrong, and a player takes the aliens side in the enquiry and points up their own hypocrisy as carnivores!

As a facilitator employing the game as a means to introduce philosophy to children, one is likely to privilege enquiry dialogue and see it as the peak of dialogue – but this is perhaps to impose an adult purpose and limit the ownership the children have of the game. Just as children do not naturally respect a boundary between philosophy and other disciplines, so they happily mix in different types of dialogue. Perhaps what results is a normative dialogue type not on Walton's list, which one might call paidial dialogue from the Greek for playfulness – a dialogue that has as its purpose "to enjoy a game" and as its standard of success, "what will sustain play".

Adopting a critical stance, there are two central objections to philosophy in role. The first concerns the authenticity of the activity as a game. This from the context of video gaming:

> A story is linear. The events of a story occur in the same order, and in the same way, each time you read (or watch or listen to) it. A story is a controlled experience; the author consciously crafts it, choosing precisely these events, in this order, to create a story with maximum impact. If the events occurred in some other fashion, the impact of the story would be diminished -- or if that isn't true, the author isn't doing a good job.
>
> A game is non-linear. Games must provide at least the illusion of free will to the player; players must feel that they have freedom of action within the structure of the game. The structure constrains what they can do, to be sure, but they must feel they have options; if not, they are not actively engaged. Rather, they are mere passive recipients of the experience, and they're not playing any more. They must not be constrained to a linear path of events, unchangeable in order, or they'll feel they're being railroaded through the game, that nothing they do has any impact, that they are not playing in any meaningful sense.
>
> In other words, there's a direct, immediate conflict between the demands of story and the demands of a game. Divergence from a story's path is likely to make for a less satisfying story; restricting a player's freedom of action is likely to make for a less satisfying game. (Costikyan 2000)

I have quoted at length here because, substituting "lesson" in place of "story" and "enquiry" in place of "game", it also serves to articulate the obvious but legitimate critique from the P4C tradition: that in imposing questions rather than giving children the freedom to create and choose their own, philosophy in role fails to effect the shift in power away from the teacher which is a central feature of a community of enquiry.

From a small sample, players seem content with the balance. I was fortunate to work with a group of 12 year old pupils at Castle View School who, from the beginning, took an interest in the construction of Alien Adventures and were adept at evaluating what we were doing "in-game". A few felt it was unfair that "we can't win unless we have a discussion" and that "you already have the answers". The others were happy to work within the constraints of the game, and preferred to continue it than to switch to traditional P4C. They reported that it made it more fun, gave it more purpose, made the questions matter to them more and gave them a focus for their discussions. They knew that they couldn't do "just anything" in the game but were realistic about why that was. The "illusion of free will" with regard to the gameplay was sufficient, and they also understood that in their enquiries they did not have to reach "the answer" but "an answer" that demonstrated they had engaged with the question. A response that summarised the majority view was "It's much better than school – give the guy a break!"

Here, as with teachers, the suspicion may linger that part of the attraction is that philosophy in role is attractive as a "soft option" which requires less autonomy from participants and facilitators. It offers

an easy way to support teachers who have had relatively little training to embrace P4C. The game creates a great deal of goodwill on the part of the children, and "sells" philosophy to them; the narrative provides a ready-made sequence of enquiries which are conceptually rich and, to begin with at least, avoids the need for children to formulate their own enquiry questions, an aspect with which beginning facilitators often struggle. These are all positive features. But its very ease of implementation could lull teachers into a false sense of continuity with their present practice, failing to appreciate the shift in power in the classroom associated with forming a community of enquiry. There is a risk that some teachers will seize on facilitation prompts and use them to elicit a tick list of expected responses. The result may still be fun, and prompt deep thinking, but it will be "distributed monologue", a form of pseudodialogue in which the class are engaged in an elaborate game of "snap" with the teacher's script. Because of this risk, it will be important that any widespread dissemination of the method does not take it in isolation from P4C as more usually practised. Teachers who are experienced facilitators, or who have a natural affinity for enquiry learning, will be alert to interests of the group that can be brought into the world of the game as they emerge.

The authenticity of the game element will also depend in large measure on the confidence and creativity of the individual facilitator. Some teachers will feel constrained to stick closely to the central narrative supported by the resources; others, especially those with fond memories of playing role-playing games as teenagers, may be happier to improvise in response to unforeseen actions by the players.

A separate criticism is that, while providing a powerful context for exploration of "concepts to think about", such as bravery, justice, God and power, an imaginative narrative does not provide opportunities for exploring "concepts to think with", such as assumption, contradiction, criterion. It might be possible to write explorations of such concepts into the story, but that might become rather forced. Michelle Whitworth, who has been using Alien Adventures in intergenerational work, has experimented with following in-game discussions with reflections on concepts such as "assumption" back in the "real world", using the in-game discussion as material for reflection. Developing that approach might lead to a more comprehensive programme that would be more closely analogous to the Lipman/Sharp novels and manuals.

At present, the intention of Alien Adventures is to provide an introduction to P4C which builds the skills and dispositions of both pupils and facilitators in a way that maximises the chances of early success. There are episodes that develop the skills of creating and choosing philosophical questions, for example. The approach could also provide variety for established communities of enquiry, or, as was Professor Howard's intention with Arête, something that avoids any "semblance to the traditional classroom" for extra-curricular and nonformal education settings.

Avenues for further development are philosophy in role adventures aimed at different ages, and with other themes (a post-apocalypse scenario might tackle issues in political philosophy). There is also the possibility of a synthesis of the two approaches described here, with more characterisation for each player than in Alien Adventures but a simpler "mechanic" for combat and character generation than Arête to extend its potential from smaller groups to more typical class sizes. It will also be interesting to hear the reflections of established communities of enquiry that elect to embark on a philosophy in role adventure for a term.

In my experience, it is in any case a particularly joyful way of philosophising with children, and an excellent stimulus for one's own creativity.

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