

Philosophical Dialogues with Children on Justice and Truth

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Introduction

In 2015, Cluj-Napoca (Romania) was the European Youth Capital. In 2015, supported by the Mayor's Office, banks, and other contributors, the Common Cluj initiative was established as the major project involving young people in the city. In 2016, this continued with a different budget, launching a competition aimed at organizing and implementing events and programs for children and young people. This initiative also encouraged online voting to engage the city's residents. Out of 161 competing projects, the Philosophy for/with Children Club secured the 9th position with 526 votes. The municipality supported perhaps 50 projects with limited financial aid, focusing more on material expenses and didactic tools, while ensuring significant advertising opportunities. Subsequently, based on a partnership agreement between the Faculty of History and Philosophy at Babeş-Bolyai University and the Octavian Goga Cluj County Library, a series of Philosophy for Children Club sessions in Romanian, English, and Hungarian were conducted at multiple branches of the county library in Cluj-Napoca. These sessions involve instructors and doctoral students from the Philosophy Institutes on a monthly basis, sometimes more frequently. Philosophy for Children activities have been going on ever since. In 2022-2023, during several club activities, we read and discussed collectively about justice and truth.

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pandemic, there was a period when even the club activities took place online for several months.

The idea of promoting the club on special occasions emerged: for example, initiating a similar event series resembling the German Frederick Day in October (a day dedicated to reading) [2], where alongside other activities, children's philosophy sessions could be organized as a supporting/background activity, or on the World Philosophy Day (in November). Of course, there has been and continues to be demand for regular sessions as well, at least monthly or with other schedules, in libraries but also in other locations (such as the botanical garden, or in bookstores) or online (due to the pandemic). In 2022-2023, during several club activities, we read and discussed collectively about justice and truth. As the starting point for our sessions on justice, we chose Ervin Lázár's tale, entitled *Az igazságtevő Nyúl* ("The Just Judge Rabbit"). Twenty children participated in the session, which began with an introductory game/competition to set the mood. Children could sign up in pairs for the competition (with some pairs even forming during the process), competing in twos simultaneously. The task was to walk from one end of the room to the other by taking steps where the heel of one shoe met the toe of the other shoe consistently. Before the competition, while considering the participants, there was an opportunity to guess who might win. During the mini races held in pairs, we discussed what each participant experienced and thought at the beginning, during, and at the end of the race/game. Were there any surprises? Who would win? The one with bigger feet, longer shoes? The girl? The boy? The taller one? The older one? The more skillful, sporty one? Often, the child who was most commonly predicted to win didn't actually win. There was even a pairing where the tallest, biggest-footed child competed with the smallest one. Cheaters had to restart the course from the beginning.

We also sang well-known songs that featured walnuts and Rabbits:

1. "Oh, the walnut is good,
the blackbird whistles,
its joyful song soars,
living, oh, it's so good!"

2. "Where are you going, little bunny..."

Then, we collectively read the beginning of the story:

Ervin Lázár: *The Just Judge Rabbit* [3]

"The Monkey sat on the walnut tree, eating nuts. He cheerfully spat out the nutshells, humming a tune, in a good mood because the sun was shining, and no stronger animal passed by – and ultimately: he ate, thinking the world belonged to him. Then he spotted an ant.

- Hmm – he said gruffly –, what kind of fly dirt is wriggling around there?
- I'm not dirt – said the Ant, offended. – I'm an ant.

- It doesn't matter – said the Monkey –, just get away from me!
- Why, am I bothering you? – wondered the Ant. – You can eat here undisturbed until the end of days as far as I'm concerned.
- Don't talk back – the Monkey arrogantly waved –, or else I'll just swat you!... What day did you say earlier?
- The end of days.
- Well, then you'll be whining until then!
- But I have work to do here – said the Ant. – I can't stop my work because of your whim.

The Monkey was astonished, raised his eyebrows, and placed both hands on his hips (while also holding on with his tail so he wouldn't fall off).

- This impudence! – he shouted. – Listen here, you speck, your dirt-dot, or whatever I should call you!
- You better address me by my proper name – said the Ant angrily. – I have just as much right to wander around here as you do.

At this, the Monkey couldn't even respond; in astonishment, he dropped half a nut to the ground.

- Your right? How dare you claim you have rights?
- I'm just as much an animal as you are – said the Ant.

The Monkey started to laugh loudly.

- This one has gone crazy – he said, looking around to show the crazy Ant to someone, but there was no one around.
- I haven't gone crazy at all – replied to the Ant. – Indeed, I'm just as much an animal as you are.
- Are you just as strong? – mocked the Monkey.
- Just as strong – said the Ant.
- Are you just as fast? – asked the Monkey, holding his stomach from laughter.
- Just as fast! – said the Ant angrily.
- Come on – laughed the Monkey –, let's compete then!
- Alright – said the determined Ant and did two push-ups as a warm-up.

They went down beneath the tree.

- First, we'll have a race – said the Monkey. – See that tree over there?
- Yes, I do – said the Ant.
- That's the finish line. We'll start on three – said the

Monkey and began counting.

On three, he dashed off. The Ant also ran as fast as his legs could carry him. But before he could reach five blades of grass, the Monkey was already shouting from the other tree.

- Where are you?
- Here – grumbled the Ant angrily.
- Well, you see, little bug!
- I had to take detours around the blades of grass – the Ant defended himself.

The Monkey burst into laughter at this.

- Now we're going to lift weights – he said. – Here's this rock; first, I'll lift it, then you.

He grabbed the rock, threw it in the air, even shouted "whoops", caught it, and placed it on the ground.

- Now it's your turn!

The Ant braced himself, started pressing the rock with his shoulder, blood rushed to his head from the effort. The stone didn't budge, and the Monkey grinned.

- Now we're having a tree-climbing race – he said. – Come under the tree, we'll start on three.

The Ant progressed a palm's length, but the Monkey was already at the top of the tree.

- "Now you'd deserve a thumping for your impudence – said the Monkey as he climbed down. – If you dare say it again, that you're just as much an animal as I am, you'll have only yourself to blame!

The Ant blushed with shame. The Monkey turned away, started to look for the half of the nut that he had just dropped.

- Where could my half nut be? – he said in a low voice.
- Sorry – a voice chimed in.
- I just ate it. I didn't know it was yours.
- The Rabbit stepped forward, lifting the fallen leaf he wore on his head as a hat.

The Monkey was thrilled to finally tell someone about what happened. He didn't even care about the half nut. When he finished telling the story, the Rabbit shook his head in disbelief.

- Did you really beat him?
- Well, don't you believe it? – asked the Monkey, offended.
- Was there a referee? – asked the Rabbit instead of responding.
- There wasn't.

- Then it doesn't count – said the Rabbit. – Repeat the competition. I'll be the referee.
- It's fine by me – said the Monkey with a smug smile."

Here, in the middle of the story, we paused to discuss the first half of the tale. Children had to formulate questions that we then voted on. The questions that received the most votes, and which we discussed, were:

1. When is a competition considered valid? Why? (It requires an impartial judge, committee, jury, or perhaps spectators, witnesses, cameras. If the rules are predetermined, the participants sign up in advance, meeting certain conditions like age group, weight class, etc.)
2. Was the competition fair? Why? (It didn't seem fair: the monkey, acting as a competitor, controlled and decided on tasks favorable to him, etc.)
3. What unfair competitions have we heard of, experienced, or can we imagine? (It's not fair to make children compete against adults in math or different sports. It's also unfair to have girls compete with boys in certain strength tests or to have minorities compete against majorities in the majority's native language because minorities might be at a disadvantage, etc. It's also unfair to exclude or disadvantage someone from certain competitions based on their skin color, for example.)

The children became familiar with the concepts of equal opportunity and discrimination. Discrimination refers to any differential treatment (action, activity, statement, neglected action, behavior) that affects the equal opportunity of an individual or a group. Its impact can be negative or positive, and its methods can be either overt or covert. They were then given the task of thinking in pairs about how they could make the competition fairer if they were the judges. Possible solutions included having the Monkey compete against other monkeys, and the Ant against other ants. Another idea was to give the Ant a 1-meter advantage in the running competition.

At the end, we read out Ervin Lázár's solution:

- "Alright, then take a hundred steps – said the Rabbit to the Monkey.

The Monkey took a hundred steps, and at the hundredth step, he stuck a dry twig into the ground.

- There will be the finish line! – shouted the Rabbit, and the Monkey nodded.
- I don't want to compete – said the Ant tearfully. – He'll win anyway. He's a better animal than I am after all.
- Quiet! Contestants don't speak unnecessarily – said the Rabbit sternly, then looked around. – Where are you?
- Here – said the Ant from the shade of a pumpkin seed.

Meanwhile, the Monkey arrived back.

- We can begin – he said.
- Wait – signaled the Rabbit. Then he turned to the Ant. – You take a hundred steps as well.

The Ant took a hundred steps, just from one blade of grass to the next.

- What’s this for? – asked the Monkey suspiciously.
- Of course, you both run a hundred steps. What’s not to understand? Wasn’t that how you did it before?
- But no! – said the Ant in a martial tone.
- Then it wasn’t fair – shrugged the Rabbit. – Now, however, it’ll be a hundred ant steps and a hundred monkey steps. That’ll be fair.

The Monkey wanted to say something, but the Rabbit interrupted:

- Hush! I am the race referee!

They ran. The Monkey hadn’t reached even half the distance, but the Ant was already at the other blade of grass.

- Unfortunately, you’re left behind – said the Rabbit to the Monkey.

The Monkey fumed.

- The weightlifting will decide! – he shouted.
- First, we’ll do some weighing – said the Rabbit.
- What are you talking about?! – shouted the Monkey.
- We’re weighing – said the Rabbit, placing the Ant on one ear and a small stone on the other.
- That’s ear measurement – explained the Rabbit. – Okay. They’re exactly the same weight.

The Ant effortlessly lifted the pebble weighing as much as an ant.

- Now it’s your turn, lift a stone that weighs as much as you – said the Rabbit.
- It seems you’ll make me sit on your ear too? – mocked the Monkey.
- No – said the Rabbit, carefully examining the Monkey, then considering a large stone. – I’m doing this with eye measurement. It’s just as accurate as ear measurement.

The Monkey struggled, even bulging his eyes, as he lifted the stone.

- The Eagle Owl excellently cures hernias – mocked the Ant.
- Make another comment like that and I’ll disqualify you from the race! – shouted the Rabbit.

The Ant lifted a stone twice as heavy as himself, which the Monkey couldn’t do. He screamed in anger:

- I’ll show him when it comes to climbing the tree!
- Excuse me, just climbing – corrected the Rabbit, but the Monkey didn’t quite understand. – Because only you’ll be the one climbing the tree. Let’s see... – The Rabbit peered at the tree. – It’s five times taller than you – he explained to the Monkey –, and this blade of grass is five times taller than the Ant. So, he’ll be climbing this blade of grass.

The Monkey climbed exceptionally well and reached the top of the tree at the same time the Ant reached the top of the blade of grass.

- Draw – decided the Rabbit. – You improved something in this. But the overall competition was won by the Ant.

The Monkey was already standing on the ground, engulfed by rage. He grabbed a stick and let out a scream:

- You’ll both pay for this!
- Run – commanded the Rabbit, swiftly grabbing the Ant and racing off as fast as his legs could carry him.

They stopped at the edge of the forest. The Rabbit was panting from exhaustion, and set down the Ant. They laughed at each other.

- We won – said the Rabbit.

And it’s true. They’ve won!”

At the end of the session, I talked to the children briefly about one of Zeno’s paradoxes: the race between Achilles and the Tortoise.

In the autumn of 2022, discussions on truth took place on several occasions based on the stories of Isabelle Desegher within another Comm’on Cluj project. Through the tales and games of a detective cat, CritiCat (the main character), children were encouraged to engage in critical thinking.

We began the first session with a game: everyone had to state two true and one false statement about themselves in a mixed order. The others had to guess which statement was false and provide arguments to support their reasoning. For instance: “I’m Zita, I’m 12 years old. I have a sibling. I attend a sports university.” (At 12 years old, one cannot be a university student.) Or: “I am Csaba, I have a puppy. I like to play the piano and ride horses. I don’t like animals.” (Either he doesn’t have a puppy or it’s not true that he doesn’t like animals.)

Then came storytelling.

Isabelle Desegher: The Hour of Truth [4]

“For thousands of years he had travelled. Salty seas, high mountains, deep valleys, wild moors he had crossed. But still CritiCat had not found her. How he longed for her! For her beauty. Her grace. Her purity. And above all, her well-roundedness. All in

vain. No matter which way he went, no matter what people said about her, Truth was nowhere to be found. CritiCat never managed to catch her. Time and again she slipped through his fingers.

His courage sank around him like a shadowy cape. Until the moment his eye suddenly fell onto a wooden signpost. There, at the edge of the world, on a wonky sign at the side of the road, there it was. Black and white. 'Truth. 365 kilometers.' The arrow pointed left. CritiCat began to purr. Even his shadow straightened its back. He thought about Truth. Would she be beautiful? Great and overwhelming? Or very small? Would she live in an ivory tower? What would she eat? And what would she do all day?

After 365 km CritiCat, somewhat surprised, arrived at a cave. Well, really it was more like a big, dark, smelly hole. It smelled like dull and dark loneliness. CritiCat stuck his head around the edge and called out: 'Hello?' An echo carried his message. No answer. He looked at the clock. The hour of Truth had come. Finally he would meet her.

And there she was. Neatly on time. But Truth... was ... very different. She was naked. Ugly. And old. Older than the oldest oak tree. Thousands of lines marked her face. She was all bent and misshapen. Shrivelled. 'This can't be true,' thought CritiCat. But alas, she was. Truth beckoned him. 'I've been waiting for you,' she said. CritiCat swallowed. 'Come,' she said, 'and live with me.' He choked on a hairball. CritiCat thought carefully. The road to Truth had been long. His travels had been difficult. And Truth sounded persuasive, she made him curious. This was his only chance to unravel her, to learn of her true nature. Finally, CritiCat chose her, and accepted her as true.

Life with Truth was strange at first. To be honest, it felt a little awkward. Like a sweater that doesn't quite fit. It was itchy. Especially at the start. But after a while, things settled down. CritiCat learned to live with Truth. He learned how to handle her. Day by day. He slept, woke up and ate with her. They washed the dishes together, cooked together and went shopping for groceries. They made love and on Sunday they had a picnic under a tree in the park. Life continued as it always had. Strangely, CritiCat even started to love Truth. They got married and – believe it or not – they even had children.

Sometimes CritiCat still saw Truth as the old, ugly woman he had met on that first day. But sometimes she would radiate like a star in the sky. On those days, Truth seemed more beautiful than she was. Sometimes she was quiet and seemed lost in thought. A moment later she would be bursting with so much energy that she would skip through the grass like a new-born calf. You never knew with Truth. Things could go any which way. She always had a surprise up her sleeve.

CritiCat lived with her for an eternity. In that time, he had managed to learn everything there is to know about Truth. And one day, he was done with her – and she with him. They said goodbye. Their embrace lasted a little longer than expected. Then they said 'Bye,' and 'All the best,' and they parted.

When CritiCat was about to turn the corner, Truth called after him: 'Just one more thing. When others ask about me, will you tell them I am young and beautiful?' Then she vanished. And before CritiCat could respond, her words swirled and fluttered in the wind like leaves."

The questions examined during the conversation:

- Is there something that is always true?
- Is the truth alterable?
- Where does the truth come from?
- When can you be sure of something?
- What is a lie?
- Is lying amusing?
- Can a lie also be true?
- Does every person lie?
- Is it sometimes good to lie?
- Why do people lie?

Suggested activities and exercises:

1. The truth pill.

Imagine that there exists a drug allowing you to read the thoughts of others. Would you take this drug?

The children can place their option on a line with one end labeled "I would take it" and the other "I wouldn't take it".

I would take it. -----
-----I wouldn't take it.

The two children representing the farthest positions should explain their thought process, while the rest can debate if they disagree. If anyone changes their position, they can move it, and each time someone does so, you can ask why they changed their mind.

Kant's exercise

Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher, maintained the principle that one should never lie, and he did not tolerate any exceptions to this rule, even if it meant saving the life of our best friend.

Let's examine with the children whether we maintain this idea/statement from the following dilemmas.

I. Jasmine can only invite two of her friends to her birthday, but she has three very good friends. After much contemplation, she decides to invite only Sarah and Steven. She doesn't tell Sonia that she's having a party.

- Did Jasmine lie to Sonia? Why not?
- What would you do? Would you tell Sonia that she's not invited? Why not?

II. Samuel tells Mark that he can't participate in the soccer match because he is "fat and cannot run fast enough". The teacher gets upset with Samuel upon hearing this. "But you always say that we have to tell the truth", Samuel complains.

- What is your opinion about Samuel's standpoint?
- What would you do if you were Samuel?
- Should you always honestly say what you think and believe?

III. Dad asks if I ate all the candy, and I answer that I didn't. Later, I remember that I did. I forgot.

- Did I lie to Dad?
- What would you do? Would you admit your mistake, or would you remain silent?
- Does staying silent about the truth mean the same as lying?

IV. As an editor, you have to choose between publishing two articles: one is quite important but boring (providing health-related information), and the other is a slightly scandalous gossip piece about the royal family.

- Which newspaper article would you print? Why?
- What do you think most editors would do? Why?

Truth, lies, fake news, opinions...? We encounter them daily and try to differentiate between them and understand them – because our decisions also depend on them, whether we're 8 or 80 years old. At a Children's Philosophy Club, we could think and investigate together about these topics alongside the detective cat (CritiCat). The investigation continues, activities go on.

References

1. Methodologically, Children's Philosophy Clubs are built upon Matthew Lipman's educational program in Philosophy for Children and its further

developments. The Philosophy for Children program is an educational initiative aimed at fostering critical thinking and cultivating a culture of questioning as opposed to a culture of mere answers. Matthew Lipman (1922–2010), an American professor of logic and philosophy, initiated Philosophy for Children (PFC) in the late 1960s. It is implemented in over 35 countries worldwide. In terms of content, in Cluj-Napoca, primarily, Thomas Wartenberg's work from 2009 served as the starting point. (Thomas E. Wartenberg: *Big Ideas for Little Kids. Teaching Philosophy through Children's Literature*. Rowman & Littlefield Education, Lanham-New York-Toronto-Plymouth/UK, 2009). The book comprises four chapters: the third chapter presents concrete recommendations for discussing specific books/stories; preceding this are methodological considerations and the author's delineation of the process for preparing lesson plans. The final chapter suggests supplementary activities and provides a bibliography. Related to this topic, see also Erzsebet Kerekes: *Képz(öd)ésben. Gyermek- és nevelésfilozófiai tanulmányok. Egyetemi Műhely Kiadó, Bolyai Társaság – Kolozsvár 2016, 115-160*. But we also used other texts; for instance, during Hungarian-language sessions, we discussed texts by Ervin Lázár, or reflected on Isabelle Desegher's CritiCat tales.

2. Frederick Day is inspired by Leo Lionni's book *Frederick*. The book is about a little mouse who comforts his friends during the long winter nights when they have run out of all their food by sharing poems and tales, magically bringing spring into the dark, cold winter. This is where the idea for *Frederick Day* originated. Every year in Baden-Württemberg, on a gloomy day in October, readings conjure sunshine into the hearts of children. The program, following the Austrian model of *Andersen Day*, which has been held annually since 1997, involves not only schools and kindergartens but also libraries, educational colleges, bookstores, publishers, and other associations. The organizers carefully select the books to be read, considering the age-specific characteristics. In addition to the readings, games, discussions, and author-reader meetings are also included. (In this case as well, the model was the Austrian *Andersen Day*, where 8–12 books are selected, and for these, a joint effort among book publishers, librarians, and educators produces a nearly forty-page methodological material.) See Pompor Zoltán: *Olvasóvá nevelődés – alulnézetből*.
3. Lázár Ervin: *A Hétfejű Tündér*. Budapest 2016. 9-14.
4. Hereinafter we rely on Isabelle Desegher: *The Hour of Truth*. In: Idem: *CritiCat. Philosophy with children about fake news* 11-15.

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