Equal Time for Freethought
Interview with Maughn Gregory, Director of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, by Neil J. Murphy
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Transcribed by Joel Schlosberg

Neil J. Murphy: Welcome to Equal Time for Freethought, Maughn Gregory!

Maughn Gregory: Thank you. Good evening.

Neil J. Murphy: Thank you. Why don't you start by telling us what your institute actually does?

Maughn Gregory: The Institute, as the name suggests, advances the cause of philosophy for children, which is a program of doing philosophy with children in many different contexts; mostly in schools. We just celebrated our 30th anniversary in November.

Neil J. Murphy: Congratulations.

Maughn Gregory: Thank you. The institute publishes a curriculum that we use to do philosophy with children, preschool through high school. We have many different venues of teacher preparation to do the philosophy program with the children. We have conferences around the world. And the best thing about it is that we get to actually work with the children.

Neil J. Murphy: Absolutely. Now most people, right or wrong, have the stereotype of philosophy as this meaningless, academic exercise where you have your head in the clouds and you discuss these issues that have no concern in the real world. What is the importance of having philosophical methods and that type of methodology for children? What are the benefits?

Maughn Gregory: Well first of all, Philosophy for Children is not about teaching children the history of philosophy. So it's not like a college-level Intro to Philosophy course that's been put down on a child's level.

Neil J. Murphy: Right.

Maughn Gregory: It's actually about exploring with children the philosophical dimensions of their experience and our experience. And by that I mean, for example, the ethical dimension of ordinary experience. What they go through on the playground; their relationships with friends, with teachers; there's an ethical dimension to all of that. There's also an aesthetic dimension to all of that. There's beauty to be found, there's beauty to be created, in ordinary experience. There's a logical dimension. There's an epistemological dimension: how do we know what we know, or how can we be sure of what we know, things like this. And children have these kinds of experiences that they wonder about. And so philosophy gives them the chance to explore these dimensions of their own experience.

Neil J. Murphy: We're gonna get into the specific aspects of ethical reasoning, and the aspect of epistemology; and we're gonna get to education as we get on with this interview. But it seems, at least from my perspective, just what you've said in the last couple of minutes: you seem to have a radically different viewpoint about how we should view children, almost in the sense of human nature. Because in our society unfortunately, we talk about the impact of religion. Religion kind of teaches — and by here, I mean specifically monotheistic religion — that children are inherently kind of nasty, brutish, short, and evil. Kind of the Hobbesian notion —

Maughn Gregory: Well, they *are* short!

Neil J. Murphy: Well, short, yeah. [laughter] Although genetics is an interesting thing. But what I'm curious about is that: it seems you would have to have a very different view of human nature, or specifically a child's nature, as the foundation for the work you try to do. Is that a fair assessment?

Maughn Gregory: I would say so. Yeah, it's a very humbling experience to have a philosophical dialogue with children. Because you realize right away — and teachers who are doing this for the first time realize right away — that they're in new water where they don't have the answers necessarily. We may have done some thinking about these issues ourselves. But the minute you open this discussion up with children, you find out that they have their own valid experiences and their own insights. And there's a lot that we can learn from their insights.

Neil J. Murphy: Yeah, I'm a 7th and 8th grade social studies teacher myself. And in that environment, one of the things that I notice that's difficult is that the teacher is *always* thought of as the authority figure. There's a theory in education called Bloom's taxonomy. We have this kind of lower-level/higher-level. And we, as educators, pay a lot of lip service to this notion of higher-level thinking; but if you observe it, what really actually happens is lower-level thinking disguised as higher-level thinking.
How do you distinguish between simply giving children, let's say, the philosophical theories — Plato, and Aristotle, and Dewey, and even Machiavelli depending on how interesting you wanna make it — as opposed to, let's say, teaching them the actual skills of what it means to be a critical thinker. How do you go through that divide?

Maughn Gregory: Well, we talk to the children, initially, about inquiry, and about doing philosophy as a kind of inquiry. And the most important part about that is questioning and problematizing. And kids are fantastic at that. They have a lot to teach us about asking really honest and penetrating questions; and about problematizing concepts and ideas and values and issues that some of us have taken for granted for a lot of years.

Neil J. Murphy: Now many people would argue, especially traditional parents, that children shouldn't really be engaging in this type of inquiry. Their version of discipline and their version of inquiry is the answer, "because I said so." And that is the hammer by which you throw down. What is your response to this notion that Mommy-said-so or Daddy-said-so should be the type of morality or environment that they should be raised in for children's reasoning skills?

Maughn Gregory: Well, I might say that there are two kinds of responses in that vein that we get from parents. There's the group of parents who say, "We don't want the school or the teacher telling our kid what to believe about religion/sex/politics, the big philosophical issues". And then there's another kind of parent, they go even farther, and they say that "We want to be the exclusive control of what our children will believe about" such-and-such-and-such. And the latter parent, we really don't have much of a chance of convincing. And so I think maybe they should just have the opportunity to opt their kid out.

But the other kind of parent, who says that "we don't want the school to be telling them what to believe," all we have to do is bring them into a philosophy session and they see that this is sort of the opposite of indoctrination. That by giving their kids the skills and the experience and the validation of doing inquiry for themselves, they become in charge of their own values and their own ideas.

Neil J. Murphy: I'd like to come back to that point of indoctrination for a second. You kind of segued into the notion of character education. It's a very thorny issue with a lot of parents, because on the one hand they don't want this top-down authority imposing a certain set of values, but on the other hand, character education, many people would argue, is important: that children should have those types of values. Do you think character education in today's schools really counts as character education?

Maughn Gregory: I guess we have to start defining our terms.

Neil J. Murphy: A bit of a loaded question, I admit, but —

Maughn Gregory: My answer has to be "yes and no". The famous Aristotelian response. In the sense that character education is a narrowly conceived program in which a particular set of values or a particular view of what character means is instilled into the child, then I would say no. But any kind of education that's construed as a form of inquiry, I think, and there is a place for that. And if character education can be construed and be conducted as a form of inquiry — for example, ethical inquiry — then I think that it very much should be in the schools.

Neil J. Murphy: Maughn, I'd like to ask a kind of a personal anecdote. You actually have these sessions where children come in and meet in a group. We had our colleague Arnell Dowret — a shout-out to him for hoping he's doing OK — we used to have these type of things called Secular Connections, where people would get together and talk about various issues that were affecting them personally.

And it seems as if, when you have a Philosophy for Children session, you said before that personal experience is a very strong factor. Do you actually have children come in and say, in their own way, "My mommy told me that this wasn't good, but I don't know why," or do you actually have them look at a specific writing and discuss it in the Socratic dialogue. How does an actual Advancement for Philosophy for Children session work?

Maughn Gregory: The structure is the latter that you just mentioned. We have some kind of stimulus text. We usually start with the curriculum that we have, which are philosophical novels and stories. They're stories in which philosophical issues have been written into the stories. Although we don't have an agenda for what the kids will discuss.

Because after they read a story, then we discuss it together. The children ask whatever questions they want to ask that are meaningful to them. And out of their questions, we construct the agenda for the discussion.

Neil J. Murphy: One of the things I'm very curious about: we in the freethinking community, and by that I mean the non-religious community, we see religion as almost a tool of brainwashing. And by that, we mean, as we see it, that children are forced to believe religious concepts against their will at a young age. So, for example, they'll go through, let's say, a baptism or a confirmation, but never really knowing why they believe the things they do. How do you train children in philosophical inquiry without putting the notion in their head that this is the *only* way to engage in inquiry? How do you tread those waters?

Maughn Gregory: Well, I think that the best answer to that is that part of doing philosophy is inquiry into the very methods of philosophy itself, and problematizing what it means to be doing inquiry. In fact, I think that's one of the most important parts of the philosophy program, is that the children become involved with the facilitator in discussing, "What does it mean to be doing philosophy? What does it mean to be thinking critically? What does it mean to be doing good inquiry? Have we been doing good inquiry today? Have we been thinking deep enough? Are there alternative ways of thinking that we've not thought up yet, or views that we've not brought into the circle yet?"

Neil J. Murphy: You've talked a lot about theory. Let's go into some concrete examples. Give an example of what an actual session would look like. Like bringing a problem, how you would actually go through it with a child. Would you give a concrete example?

Maughn Gregory: Sure. We might be reading a story in which there's an ethical problem that comes up. Fairness, for example, or friendship. And the children will ask a number of questions around that concept. And then we will talk about which questions do we take first, and we'll make an agenda. And then we just start discussing the question that they came up with. And in most discussions, the children will tell stories from their family life, from their own life; relate to what's happened. And then the facilitator is prompting them to challenge one another; to build on each other's ideas; to try to generalize, although we don't force consensus. We try to see, can we come to some kind of consensus? Are there ways we can generalize our ideas?

Neil J. Murphy: One of the things that the freethinking community — at least as far as humanists — are a big believer in, is the notion of an objective standard of ethics. In that, even though a subjective person might have their own interpretation, there's still an objective standard we can appeal to, as a way of adjudicating between, let's say, moral problems. How do you go through that, where you might have a child — By the way, just to interrupt, what are the ages that you have of the children in your groups?

Maughn Gregory: We're right now piloting a new curriculum for preschool. It's sort of a pre-philosophical session we have with them. And we go through high school.

Neil J. Murphy: Pre-Socratic kindergarten.

Maughn Gregory: That's right.

Neil J. Murphy: There you go.

Anyway, back to my original question. I'm curious as to how you go through this objective/subjective divide. Because on the one hand, you don't want to tell the child "this is the right answer, this is the right way to reason through this ethical dilemma." But you also want to, as you said, encourage the philosophical inquiry. Not just in an abstract way, but doing the dirty work of actually doing it. For example, let's take an ethical dilemma. Let's say, friendship; cooperation; justice; an issue of justice. How would you go through that objective/subjective divide?

Maughn Gregory: Well, that's something we discuss very frequently. That issue comes up in almost every grade. Because that's something the kids think about. And a lot of kids have already thought about these things. I mean, they may not have the vocabulary of objective/subjective, but some of their questions on the board will be: is it possible to think otherwise than this? Isn't there only one right answer about this? And I think, pretty quickly, kids that do philosophy come to the realization that where we are when we're having philosophical discussions is a kind of middle ground between absolutism and relativism. Because they're not comfortable with the idea that there's no right answer; that every viewpoint is as reasonable or acceptable as every other viewpoint. But on the other hand, they don't like the idea that there's one expected answer.

Neil J. Murphy: I was talking with a caller before you came in, about family values and moral values being one of the defining characteristics of the 2004 election, for better or worse. And it seems a lot of your work would seem to have a great application in the areas of how families could communicate with each other, interact, set guidelines; and the type of morality, whether a nurturant parent, strict father morality; some type of egalitarian morality. How do you think your work can actually be used with families, in trying to promote either (a) nonreligious values, or (b) just philosophical values in general?

Maughn Gregory: Well, there's two ways. One of the most beautiful things that happens is that children, after they've been doing philosophy for a while — and I should have said this before — that we like to talk a lot about judgment. That the end of the inquiry is supposed to be a judgment. So we explore, for example, ethical experience. We look at different ethical ideas, for the reason that we want to come up with ethical judgments. We want to be able to make better ethical judgments.

And so one of the things that children will come back and say, is that, "After doing philosophy, I can recognize now that when I go home, the kind of conversation we have is or is not fair-minded; I do or do not have the same rights to speak and have a voice in those conversations, or on the playground, or in church, that I do here," and they value that so strongly. And teachers will say the same thing. They'll say, "Well, I'm in faculty meeting now, I speak differently, because I have a sense of entitlement, that people should be listening to me; they should be taking me seriously."

Barry F. Seidman: I just have one question. Sorry, Neil. When they're learning this, and they've done it for several years, and they get to, say, sophomore or junior in high school, and they're in their families and stuff, and they're understanding this, and they're doing

this, and acting this way: are they getting resistance? Because, like Neil said, the general public doesn't really have, right now, the kind of philosophical wherewithal. Are they coming back to you saying, "You know, I told my parents this wasn't being fair, this wasn't a good argument, and they punished me for three weeks"?

Maughn Gregory: Not very often. Usually, parents are very impressed. I mean, if you ask a parent: "Do you want your kid to be able to think critically, and have free and open inquiry into all areas or not?" most of them will say yes. And they can't deny that when the kid brings that up to them, that "Shouldn't I be entitled? Shouldn't we have a fair discussion?"

Barry F. Seidman: Even if it's about something like religion or politics.

Maughn Gregory: Yeah. In my experience, that's almost all the time. Most parents feel that way.

Neil J. Murphy: It's interesting, Barry, because they say in the adult world that you shouldn't talk about religion or politics or the bedroom, and yet it seems you want to talk about religion and politics and ... the other topic (21 and older). But one of the things I'm curious about is, what is the actual research — the academic research, or scientific research — show as to the positive correlations with the work you're trying to do. What has been the research on that?

Maughn Gregory: There's a growing body of empirical research. The Philosophy for Children movement coincided with the critical thinking movement. And a lot of schools bought into the program because they saw it as a critical thinking skills program. And the early research showed, quite strongly, that that was one of the main benefits. And then more recently, there's been an interest in social and character and ethical education. And so, studies have shown that kids who do philosophy are more, for example, democratically minded; they'll give-and-take, they want to hear other points of view. And they're able to reason and look at other points of view in ethical situations and political dilemmas.

Neil J. Murphy: How do you apply your work into the schools? And there's so many ways it could be applied, it seems. Let's take pedagogy, or the theory of education itself. How could you apply that to, let's say, pedagogical methods, where administrators and teachers could actually create, in other language, the humanities or the sciences or the arts, the ways that we can actually get the type of inquiry you wanna do, into the methods? How do you do that?

Maughn Gregory: Well, the Community of Inquiry, which is the main pedagogical framework that we use, is actually used across the disciplines. And we do a lot of work with teachers in bringing the philosophy of the different disciplines to the disciplines. So they can uncover the philosophical assumptions and the philosophical dimensions of each discipline.

Neil J. Murphy: I'm a 7th and 8th grade social studies teacher. And in my *own* classroom, I try to do a lot of alternative assessments, whether it's roleplaying or mock trials. And we do a lot of reading of trade books for kids. But if you have the higher-level/lower-level students, in your opinion, is there a way that you can take the work that you are doing with

Philosophy for Children, to actually either bring up lower-level students or perhaps create a kind of classroom which is more democratized as opposed to [unintelligible]?

Maughn Gregory: You know, the interesting thing about philosophy is that it actually does do that. We do philosophy with gifted kids; we do philosophy in regular classrooms; we do it in all kinds of situations. And what we've found is that the so-called higher- or faster-thinking kids are not the best philosophers. And in many instances, it's the kids that test lower who are actually the more profound thinkers. They puzzle through things very carefully. And in Philosophy Circle, maybe they don't say as much as everybody else. But when they do, they have something very profound to say.

Barry F. Seidman: Because testing is all about memorization.

Maughn Gregory: That's it. Lower-level skills. And a lot of gifted programs are about thinking very quickly, and about jumping ahead five paces; instead of slowing down, making connections, and looking at assumptions.

Neil J. Murphy: And thinking quickly doesn't mean thinking correctly.

Maughn Gregory: That's exactly right.

Neil J. Murphy: Well, unfortunately, we only have a little bit of time left, so I'd like to give you an opportunity. Do you have your website, and any last thoughts you have about the work you do, and what you want to hope that your work does with the people you come across?

Maughn Gregory: Thank you. Our website: I should say we're located at Montclair State University, within the College of Education and Human Services, and our website is www.montclair.edu/iapc. And in closing I'd just like to say that I think that sometimes adults mabye forget how meaningful these kinds of inquiries are for kids. But a lot of adults, when they come and learn Philosophy for Children, they'll say, "Oh yeah, these are the kinds of questions I used to wonder about, before I started going to school."

Neil J. Murphy: Perfect closing. Thank you very much, Maughn Gregory, for coming in today. I'd like to have you back again for a full interview, and then we can take the actual questions from our audience. Thank you very much for coming in, and it's a pleasure and I hope to see you again.

Maughn Gregory: Thank you very much.

Neil J. Murphy: Thank you very much.