A Wittgensteinian Perspective on the Multidimensionality of Truth in the Community of Philosophical Inquiry

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Abstract: Truth is vaguely conceived in the method of the Philosophy for Children (P4C) program's Community of [Philosophical] Inquiry (COI or CPI) either as "discovered," implied as objective and universal, or even "generated" or something subjectively and relatively apprehended in a COI. There are also extreme views that assert that it is not central to a philosophical inquiry, as the latter is only concerned with refining judgment and belief clarification. Is attaining truth not a concern of a community of philosophical inquirers? This essay discusses the notion of truth in a COI, which is the primary approach of the Lipman–Sharp P4C program. It asserts that a multidimensional representation of truth in the context of a COI is not fraught with contradictions and inconsistencies but gives a complete and more comprehensive account of how a child naturally understands the world and attains knowledge through an education based on inquiry. By adopting Wittgenstein's multidimensional model of representation highlighted by Kuusela, it further argues that a multifaceted perspective on truth complements the nature of the COI process, which aligns with the goal of P4C to provide children with opportunities to discover, assess, and analyze ideas openly and fruitfully.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, community of philosophical inquiry, philosophy for children, truth

"Sometimes the use of the word 'truth' is confined to designating a logical property of propositions; but if we extend its significance to designate the character of existential reference, this is the meaning of truth: processes of change so directed that they achieve an intended consummation."
– John Dewey, Experience and Nature

Introduction: Problematizing the Nature of Truth in Philosophy for Children

Truth is vaguely conceived in the method of the Philosophy for Children (P4C) program's Community of [Philosophical] Inquiry (COI or CPI). There are disagreements among thinkers and practitioners in P4C as to the nature of truth evident in the COI.[1] Some P4C practitioners view truth as something "discovered" in the context of a communal inquiry, implying a theory about truth being objective and universal. Some thinkers see it as "generated" through collaborative dialogical inquiry, which lends credence to the perspective that truth seems subjectively and relatively apprehended in a COI. There are also extreme views that assert that truth is not central to a philosophical inquiry, as the latter is only concerned with refining judgment and belief clarification. Interestingly, there are some practitioners who even argue that the method and practice of P4C is riddled with an implicit paradox given that doing philosophy demands a focus on the general and the abstract while the practice of employing it in classrooms requires integrating the concrete and particular experiences and perspectives of children.[2]

How does P4C present truth and demonstrate its import in a COI session? It is generally regarded as an unspoken fact that the practice of the P4C program's COI method is not truth-focused but, rather, inquiry-focused. The primary aim of the approach is to get students to inquire about what they know for the purpose of refining their understanding of reality and the world in the spirit of collaborative meaning-making. Lipman defines inquiry as "a self-corrective practice in which a subject matter is investigated with the aim of discovering or inventing ways of dealing with what is problematic."[3] Topics come from prompts in the form of stories or novels infused with philosophical themes that incite the exercise of thinking skills. Children ponder on questions they identify individually, and later on, as a whole, as they cast votes to decide which query to resolve in the inquiry. The community proceeds by carefully unpacking the question, providing provisional answers, clarifying ideas, and building upon the thoughts of everyone until they arrive at "the most reasonable judgment"[4] (or "the most

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[1] Jennifer Bleazby, "Overcoming Relativism and Absolutism: Dewey's Ideals of Truth and Meaning in Philosophy for Children," in *Educational Philosophy and Theory,* 43 (2011).

[2] Maria Kasmirli, "The Paradox of Philosophy for Children and How to Resolve It," in *Childhood & Philosophy,* 16 (2020).

[3] Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 184.

[4] *Ibid.,* 100.

reasonable philosophical one," according to Gregory).[5] Participants collaboratively and caringly take part in the development of the inquiry as they are guided by the facilitator who is responsible for making sure that reason takes over. Respect and care for one another are maintained at every step.

Considering the nature of the process in a COI session, does it mean that the P4C program promotes a relativistic conception of truth in education, propagating the postmodernist views that "anything is considered acceptable" and "all opinions are equally valid"? Does the COI method, which is the central pedagogical tool of the P4C program, also subtly proliferate the alleged postmodernist ideology that presents truth as arbitrary and unobjective? And wouldn't this fact about the COI method negatively impact the acceptability of it being introduced as a pedagogy applicable to teaching young children?

It would help to analyze how truth is rightly conceived in the COI method based on its nature and process. This essay adopts Wittgenstein's theory of "meaning as use" expounded by Oskari Kuusela and considers how a multidimensional view of truth facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the notion of truth in the COI method.[6] This essay also examines the COI method as a unique "language game" and "a form of life" in the way Wittgenstein views the two concepts to get a good grasp of what transpires in a COI.[7] I argue later on that a dynamic and multidimensional view of truth would help address the issue of the COI method being relativistic and problematic and how instrumental such a method is in equipping children with thinking skills and honing capacities for thought to attain a better understanding of the reality they live in.

The Lipman–Sharp Philosophy for Children Program's Method of Community of Philosophical Inquiry

In the late 1960s, American philosophers and educationists Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp pioneered an innovative reading program and pedagogical technique to train children to become reflective thinkers and inquirers. The reading program was called "Philosophy for Children." It was designed to equip children with philosophical skills and engage them in dialogues revolving around philosophical themes and concepts infused in

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[5] Maughn Gregory, "The Arc of Inquiry in Classroom Dialogue," Lecture. International Summer Workshop at the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, Mendham, New Jersey. August 5, 2017.

[6] Oskari Kuusela, *Wittgenstein on Logic as the Method of Philosophy: Re-examining the Roots and Development of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 210–219.

[7] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1958).

novels and stories. The pedagogical technique is one in which the classroom is set up to closely imitate a community wherein inquiry and dialogue happen among its members. This approach is called the Community of [Philosophical] Inquiry (COI or CPI) method. Through this inquiry-based pedagogy, classrooms are transformed into communities of inquirers. In the COI, teachers become facilitators of dialogues among students while the latter participate as co-inquirers and take responsibility for their learning.

In the P4C program, the concept of education takes a different form as it is presented as a reconstructive process that a learner engages in rather than a phase that a learner programmatically undergoes "for the transfer of bodies of established knowledge" to take place.[8] In this light, education becomes an opportunity to inquire about one's experiences and participate in meaning-making and clarification by involving oneself in a communal dialogue with other inquirers. Furthermore, P4C redesigns students' learning experience, thereby abandoning the traditional framework that stunts the intellectual growth of the children. Traditionally, in the classroom, teachers are metaphorically treated as the show's director, as the students depend primarily on their knowledge and ideas. Teachers communicate their knowledge and expertise through teacher-led discussions and didactic lectures on pre-identified topics and themes while the students absorb information and regurgitate it in assessments. In a P4C classroom, the responsibility of keeping the atmosphere educative is shared both by the teachers and the students through participating in a collaborative dialogue on topics democratically identified and chosen. P4C classes become a community endeavor; each member relies on one another, thus making education relevant, engaging, interactive, and fruitful.

The COI method is a critical concept in the program.[9] It is a "theory of education made flesh."[10] P4C treats education as a process that "has no end beyond itself; it is its own end," which "is one of continual reorganizing, reconstructing, transforming."[11] When learners participate in an inquiry, they engage in "the reconstruction of one's own experience, as opposed to absorbing pre-packaged content delivered by the textbook or the teacher."[12] Lipman argues that this is what education should be about, that is, allowing students to discuss problems and think for themselves as they engage in

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[8] Philip Cam, "The Theory of Education Made Flesh," in *In Community of Inquiry with Ann Margaret Sharp: Childhood, Philosophy and Education*, ed. by Maughn Rollins Gregory and Megan Jane Laverty (New York: Routledge, 2018), 31.

[9] *Ibid*.

[10] *Ibid*.

[11] John Dewey, "Democracy and Education," in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, ed. by J.A. Bodyston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1916/2008), 50.

[12] Cam, "Theory of Education Made Flesh," 31.

inquiry with others.[13] Education should be an opportunity for collaborative inquiry and problem-solving. Lipman asserts that when children are not allowed to explore and answer the issues they identify together in the context of a COI, "no interest or motivation is engendered," and education will simply be "a charade and a mockery."[14] If one wants education to be experienced by students truly, thinking is what should be happening in the classroom.[15] By definition, a COI is a group of individuals committed to working together to clarify and refine their understanding of reality by asking questions, sharing ideas, and reasoning well with others. The COI also refers to the approach by which the community members participate in dialogues about philosophical topics.

In light of the nature of education proposed in the P4C program and embodied through the COI method, questions as to the entire process being "unduly relativistic" and "open-ended" which can be seen as "problematic in the educational context" have come to the fore.[16] To a certain extent, COIs are "condemned to relativism, that is, the view that there can be no way of adjudicating between conflicting theories or views of the world," or falling into subjectivism, which is "the view that each of us is condemned to live in our worlds, bound to our own individual perspectives."[17] To a certain extent, these issues resonate with the postmodernist theory of truth as arbitrary, which stresses that all opinions are valid and that no objectivity can be reached in any form of agreement. When applied to education, a postmodernist approach to truth challenges the objectivity of knowledge and the high premium educational institutions place on perennial foundations of human understanding and activity. Postmodernism applied to truth poses significant threats on the education of children. Rhodena Townsell argues that:

> there is no view that a postmodernist refuses to act upon, however absurd or immoral. There is no method that the postmodernist regards as indispensable. The postmodernist opposes only one thing. That opposition is held against universal standards, laws, ideas, and the

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[13] Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 20.

[14] *Ibid*.

[15] *Ibid*.

[16] Cam, "Theory of Education Made Flesh," 30.

[17] Ann Margaret Sharp, "What Is a 'Community of Inquiry'?" in *In Community of Inquiry with Ann Margaret Sharp: Childhood, Philosophy and Education*, ed. by Maughn Rollins Gregory and Megan Jane Laverty (New York: Routledge, 2018), 41.

type of behavior that results from the practice of those standards.[18]

In the COI, should students be left to their own devices to decide on the objects of class discussions and, ultimately, their education? Letting children decide on the objects of their education is empowering, but what if they engage in discussions that make unnecessary hullaballoos on frivolous, uneducational matters, thus stealing the limelight from academic endeavors? Also, do children possess absolute autonomy to take responsibility over what topics merit attention in class discussions? Can learners be trusted entirely to take control? Allowing discussions to flow freely without a specific direction might also create an inescapable impasse of conflicting opinions, which may become more harmful than beneficial to the intellectual experience of a naïve child. While an inquiry-based education can unlock the intellectual capacities of children, one should be reminded that an inquiry, in and of itself, can also be employed in ways that increase intellectual slovenliness and indifference or apathy.

In the next section, a case for analyzing the notion of truth in the COI method through Wittgenstein's multidimensional model of representing language and meaning will be explored.

Oskari Kuusela on Wittgenstein's Multidimensional Model of Representing Language and a Theory of Meaning as Use

The same postmodernist view of truth was misappropriated to the later Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein was wrongly conceived to have repudiated his previous thoughts on the nature of language and truth, evident in his early writings, specifically in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. When Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations*, turned his attention to ordinary language and veered away from a somewhat limited perspective on logic as a strict system of truth and falsehood, he was said to have turned entirely away from Russellian and Fregean logic. Proofs of this sudden change in outlook, among many others, were the absence of logical notation in *Philosophical Investigations*, the introduction of the concept of a language game and the notion of language being a "form of life" in the writings of the later Wittgenstein.

Oskari Kuusela challenges this view by claiming that Wittgenstein maintained a multidimensional representation of language and truth in

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[18] Rhodena Townsell, "A National Look at Postmodernism's Pros and Cons in Educational Leadership," in *National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision Journal*, 25 (2007), 2.

Philosophical Investigations, which is to say that Wittgenstein did not abandon his earlier theories on logic, language, and truth but brought it closer to how we use them in everyday discourse.[19] He argues that Wittgenstein's methodology of describing language in *Philosophical Investigations* does not intend to put forward theses of strictness in language use and highlights the necessity of seeing a concept and understanding its meaning from different perspectives, which may initially look contradictory.[20] For example, while considering the case of color concepts, Wittgenstein's mention of agreement as an essential feature of the use of color concepts, according to Kuusela, is his way of clarifying that being generally agreed about the colors of things is necessary for communication about colors to take place.[21] General agreement on meaning is essential for communication and discussion, but this does not mean we see things similarly, especially when perceiving colors, which is difficult to ascertain and defend. In the same vein, although the earlier Wittgenstein might be said to claim that logic has strict rules and truth is that which can be subjected to the strict rules of logic, the later Wittgenstein does not contradict such a claim and instead defends a more expansive and a more inclusive description of logic and truth to include even those items that do not fall within the traditional notions.

In this light, Kuusela discusses Wittgenstein's methodology of combining different modes of representation or description in which the legitimacy of one representation method does not automatically exclude the possibility of an additional description.[22] For example, does seeing one image in a Gestalt picture automatically exclude the possibility and legitimacy of seeing other images from the same picture? Wittgenstein, according to Kuusela, will surely disagree with the said statement, as several models of representation are not exclusionary.[23] Instead, they offer mutually independent perspectives on the same picture. Here, Kuusela brings forward several examples of how Wittgenstein employed a multidimensional description of language and logic when he talks about (1) the arbitrariness and non-arbitrariness of grammar at the same time, (2) meaning as constituted strictly by rules and meaning as ungoverned by fixed rules, and (3) mathematical propositions as arbitrary and non-empirical versus mathematical rules as having an application to reality.[24] Wittgenstein's nonreductive and nonempirical approach to describing language recognizes that there is a necessary amount of vagueness and ambiguity in language use,

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[19] Kuusela, *Wittgenstein on Logic as the Method of Philosophy*, 210–219.
[20] *Ibid*.
[21] *Ibid.,* 210.
[22] *Ibid.,* 210–219.
[23] *Ibid*.
[24] *Ibid.,* 215.

making language valuable and useable. Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations*, became more open to understanding language and how humans participate in language use, allowing for a more comprehensive and naturalistic account of it.

Furthermore, limiting the meaning of a word to one account or description does not work well within Wittgenstein's theory of "meaning as use." Wittgenstein employs the term "language-game" to emphasize that "the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life."[25] One cannot divorce the use of language from the context in which it is done. On the topic, Wittgenstein enumerated examples of language-games such as "giving orders, describing, reporting, speculating," and many others.[26] On any occasion that language is used, one participates in an activity or a game that is uniquely characterized and bounded by rules. Language has an "essential connection with the environment of its use."[27] Language gets continuously shaped as its users use it and so does meaning and one's conception of a word. The participation of language users as "embodied beings in interaction with their surroundings or environment" adds layers and facets to the shaping of language and meaning.[28] This is also why Wittgenstein calls language a form of life. As a form of life, language "cannot simply be detached from" the environments in which it is used, which means that to understand the meaning of words and concepts, they must be analyzed in light of the environment and context in which they are used.[29] Thus, since word usage is nuanced as it should not be understood detached from a linguistic environment, descriptions of meaning should also showcase the same multidimensionality and complexity.

In the next section, a multidimensional representation or description of truth will be employed to make sense of the notion of truth in the COI method.

A Multidimensional Representation of Truth in the COI Method

How is truth exactly understood in a COI? What functions does truth perform in the exchanges of ideas in an inquiry? Truth is multidimensionally conceived in the COI method. The following subsections discuss the conceptions of truth at play in the COI inquiry process.

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[25] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 15.

[26] *Ibid*.

[27] Kuusela, *Wittgenstein on Logic as the Method of Philosophy*, 201.

[28] *Ibid*.

[29] *Ibid*.

Truth as a Result of Reason

In a COI, the goal of the inquiry is for children to develop habits of the mind to prepare them to engage in philosophical considerations of concepts with other thinkers. Children are taught logical rules not through a lecture but by allowing them to participate in dialogues guided by reason, thus equipping them with skills such as detecting errors in reasoning, spotting fallacies, and identifying contradictions, among many others. Dialogues in a COI session are "disciplined by logic" as "one must reason to follow what is going on in them."[30] Logic is employed in the inquiry as rigidity and structures, when applied to thinking, also help expand one's understanding and arm one with thinking skills to be ready to take on more complex thoughts and ideas. Essentially, when the classrooms become COIs, "the moves that are made to follow the argument where it leads are logical moves."[31] Everything that happens in the inquiry is a step to prepare children for thought and deeper thinking based on sound argumentation. Lipman further asserts:

> As a community of inquiry proceeds with its deliberations, every move engenders some new requiredness. The discovery of a piece of evidence throws light on the nature of the further evidence that is now needed. The disclosure of a claim makes it necessary to discover the reasons for that claim. The making of an inference compels the participants to explore what was being assumed or taken for granted that led to the selection of that particular inference. A contention that several things are different demands that the question be raised of how they are to be distinguished. Each move sets up a train of countering or supporting moves. As subsidiary issues are settled, the community's sense of direction is confirmed and clarified, and the inquiry proceeds with renewed vigor.[32]

Inquiry is structured in the COI method as it follows a kind of logic. Lipman asserts that thinking operations in a dialogue follow a "functional" hierarchy in order to support the flow of ideas.[33] Steps in the inquiry are taken

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[30] Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 92.

[31] *Ibid*.

[32] *Ibid*., 92.

[33] *Ibid.*, 66.

to ensure progress and cater to the individual needs of the participants. To this end, the facilitator is trained to see the direction of the inquiry according to a "hierarchy of inquiry moves[34]." Occupying the top spot in the hierarchy of inquiry moves is the "time-out." This move shows the importance the COI method gives to "taking a pause" in the inquiry as it is aimed at making sure all the participants are essentially on the same page and the exchange of ideas is adequately summarized, thus ensuring that no one is left behind in the course of the discussion. The second move is "clarify." Here, students ask questions to clear the ground and settle ambiguities in thought. Those who share their ideas are requested to make their opinions more understandable by offering analogies, illustrations, and whatnot. Other members of the community may assist in clearing things up by stating what they understood as well at that point in the inquiry. The next move is "respond." This is offered when one member wants to build upon an idea shared by another participant. This move helps expand and extend the discussion, thereby allowing progress in the inquiry to take place. The last move is "offer a new idea." This move holds the least priority as it is meant to be made whenever someone needs to open a new topic or lead the discussion toward another path. The fact that inquiry is structured based on the hierarchy of moves one can make as one participates in it shows that principles of logic and reason are embedded in the whole process. Through these moves, "truths" come to view naturally as they are discovered along the way in the pursuit of answers and clarity.

Accordingly, when the rules of logic are employed in the COI, students generate truths and refine their understanding of them with the guidance of reason. Children learn that not all thinking and argumentation are sound; in fact, some are fallacious and contradictory. Through the structures of reason, they learn in the inquiry along the way; they become disciplined in entertaining thoughts that seem to pass off as truthful and factual and learn to navigate the inquiry with other thinkers by sifting through the ideas together. Here, one discovers one aspect of truth evident in the COI—truths are seen as the products of applying rigidity and structures to thinking and dialogue. Truths, in this sense, are gems discovered on the way towards understanding, refined and collected to build a comprehensive account of reality. In the same light, truths are treated as solid building blocks generated through discussion that are foundational to erecting an edifice of collective knowledge and wisdom.

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[34] This order of inquiry moves was shared by one participant in the International Summer Workshop at the IAPC, Mendham, New Jersey in August 2017. This hierarchy intuitively follows what facilitators must consider to take precedence in a COI.

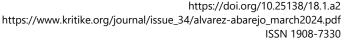*Truth as the Most Reasonable Philosophical Judgment*

The end goals of COI sessions are "provisional judgments" arrived at by the community through thorough discussions, and they are described as the most reasonable philosophical judgment possible.[35] Although it could take hours and many sessions before a community of inquirers gets to the bottom of things, there is always an attempt to settle some, if not all, of the issues and topics that came to light in the dialogue. Interestingly, these "occasional settlements" should not be characterized with "finality" as they are "perches or resting places."[36] A settlement is always open-ended in a dialogue or inquiry. Dewey puts it this way:

> The "settlement" of a particular situation by a particular inquiry is no guarantee that *that* settled conclusion will always remain settled. The attainment of settled beliefs is a progressive matter; there is no belief so settled as not to be exposed to further inquiry …. In scientific inquiry, the criterion of what is taken to be settled, or to be knowledge, is *so* settled that it is available as a resource in further inquiry; not being settled in such way as not to be subject to revision in further inquiry.[37]

These reasonable provisional judgments constitute another perspective of truth in the COI. Truths are understood as the most reasonable philosophical judgments in the inquiry, but they are not held with finality and completeness. Lipman took it from Dewey's notion of truth as "warranted assertibility"—a term substituted by Dewey for truth, showing his disinclination towards using it.[38] Dewey understands and presents truth as warranted assertibility which "designates a potentiality rather than an actuality."[39] This characterization of truth achieved in an inquiry being never final and entirely settled makes the COI method a unique pedagogy in education. The treatment of answers in an inquiry directly contrasts with that of the traditional conception of education in which answers are thought to be achieved when one passively listens to the teacher and ticks the to-do lists designed by a knowledgeable other.

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[35] Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 93.

[36] *Ibid*.

[37] John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1938), 8–9.

[38] Peter Joseph Cahill, "John Dewey's Concept of Truth" (Master's Thesis: Loyola University Chicago, USA, 1954), 33, <https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1930&context=luc_theses>.

[39] Dewey, *Logic*, 7–9.

Furthermore, learning in the COI session implies learning with others—a shared experience that children actively participate in with many others, not only with one or a few knowledgeable adults. This is also why truth is conceived in a COI only as a form of judgment or an opinion. The inquiry allows for treating answers and ideas with openness and liberty. The inquiry is set up in an atmosphere in which students can freely share their thoughts without being afraid of getting judged by other people because all are invited to contribute to providing the most reasonable answer to the question.

Indeed, reasonableness (and rationality) is significant both in the process of inquiry and the result of the inquiry, which is the community's provisional judgment. Lipman notes:

> To be reasonable in the context of a community of inquiry means that "one has the capacity to employ rational procedures in a judicious manner, in the sense that, say a hospital physician dealing with a highly contagious patient must make reasonable judgments as to the employment of standard medical procedures. But to be reasonable can refer not just to how one acts, but to how one is acted upon: It signifies one's capacity to listen or to be open to reason. Both senses of the term are fundamental for the community of inquirers.[40]

This note is important to discuss to highlight that although the occasional settlements of the community are not treated as strongly conclusive, the procedures through which they are attained are guided by reason and argumentation, which shows the strength and the validity of the process and the reasonableness of the said outcomes. Seen in this light, some truths, after all, are difficult to ascertain fully, but they nonetheless give us directions in the pursuit of clarity and understanding. As "perches" or "resting places," the provisional truths give a sense of closure to the inquiry participants.

Truth as Elusive in an Inquiry

Truth is difficult to catch in an inquiry participated by people coming from different backgrounds. This shows the other aspect of truth evident in participating in an inquiry—it is elusive and hard to come by. In the same vein, Wittgenstein understood the complexity of language use and the

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[40] Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 97.

difficulty of arriving at a complete agreement when it comes to meaning due to "facts of nature" that "mould language."[41] "Uniformity" seems to be an impossibility, considering that where one is certain, "someone else is uncertain" about the same thing.[42] Kuusela argues that
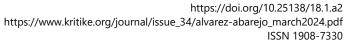
> the fixity of the boundaries of concepts is therefore affected, for example, by factors such as variation or lack of uniformity in the behaviour of language users, including how confidently or reliably they can identify something as falling under a concept.[43]

The lack of uniformity in understanding due to facts of nature is also experienced in a COI session. For example, a class composed of students with different socioeconomic backgrounds will have difficulty agreeing when talking about what constitutes a fulfilling, successful life. Those from well-to-do families may regard success as completing college degrees and landing jobs and professions that provide more considerable compensation. In contrast, those from families living in harsh and impoverished conditions may find being able to provide for the basic needs of their families constitutive of a successful life. Because these students came from different economic realities, agreement may not be reached, and a uniform answer may not be available. Differences in experience account for the difficulty of coming up with a unified meaning of a concept or a word as it is used daily. The same is true for basically any word or concept which is widely used in different contexts. But does this mean that the word or the concept at hand may never be used and fully understood?

In the COI session, agreement in meaning is not given the sole focus but the refinement of one's understanding regarding the meanings of experiences. Following the example used above, an inquiry which proceeded on the said route may end on a note that success in life is understood differently depending on one's values, principles, and priorities. This means that a provisional answer, the most reasonable philosophical judgment about the topic, may still be reached despite the lack of a shared experience and perspective on an issue.

Truth being elusive is not so much a weakness in a philosophical inquiry but a natural consequence of the direction and the process of the COI method. Logical clarification and analysis are the breath in which the philosophical inquiry takes place. The entire experience of participating in an

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[41] Kuusela, *Wittgenstein on Logic as the Method of Philosophy*, 202.

[42] *Ibid*.

[43] *Ibid*.

inquiry provides the participants with an avenue where they can clarify their ideas and help others describe theirs, analyze and unpack their thoughts through the help of other thinkers, and share the burden with the other members of the community to refine judgment and expand the community's understanding of a topic or an issue. Objectifying truth, i.e., treating truth as something everyone is looking for as it is simply hiding somewhere, is a wrong conception of what the whole community aspires to achieve. Attaining understanding and gaining an awareness of the complexity of thought, not simply a specific notion of reality, is what the inquiry is about.

Truth as a Muddle that Jumpstarts Inquiry

In the COI method, there is a sense in which truth is conceived as a "muddle" or a problematic hypothesis or thought that, when found, opens the door for inquiry to take place. Lipman argues that "for there to be an inquiry, there must be some doubt that all is well, some recognition that one's situation contains troubling difficulties and is somehow problematic."[44] Dewey also recognizes "problematic or indeterminate situations" as conditional to an inquiry.[45] Dewey states, "Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole."[46] Thus, the identification of problems, in the form of vaguely understood truths, puts inquiry to use by providing it a context in which its process may be employed.[47]

In this light, truth is considered problematic and something which needs to be further clarified. This experience of engaging in doubting and problematizing on a topic happens in the COI session right after a material or a prompt in the form of a story or text is provided. After reading the prompt or the text, children are given time to develop questions they want to discuss in the inquiry. These moments of silence and processing engage children in thinking about ideas they can create questions about. These opportunities give them time to identify which ideas in their head baffle them and recall experiences that provide them with a sense of doubt, which are great prompts for philosophical questioning. The goal of the inquiry, thus, is for the community to resolve the problems or issues embedded in the chosen question of the session. Truth, as conceived here, constitutes those

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[44] Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 94.
[45] Cahill, "John Dewey's Concept of Truth," 41.
[46] Dewey, *Logic*, 8.
[47] Cahill, "John Dewey's Concept of Truth," 42.

problematic, individual perceptions of children regarding reality the stimulus prompted them to think about.

This additional conception of truth seems confounding. Appropriating Wittgenstein's concept of a language game to the COI method, it should be maintained that speaking the language of the community of inquirers is part of an activity or a form of life distinct to the environment in which the language is spoken. In the environment where the COI is meant to take place, truth is also understood as that which propels inquiry. A truth that is not problematic enough cannot open the discussion or dialogue. Moreover, being open to being challenged and doubting one's previous knowledge is also a part of participating in a COI activity. Doubt has a role to play in the COI. Fynes-Clinton and Renshaw explain that in a collaborative activity like the COI, "epistemic doubt," as they call it, initiates the process of inquiry and is cultivated further as children participate in the process.[48] Interestingly, doubt is present in the whole process of inquiry because it is the one that promotes collective inquiry and becomes the "philosophical stance of ignorance" that begins the inquiry.[49] At this juncture, it is important to note that although an inquiry may be considered "settled" after a grueling and prolonged exchange of ideas among participants, the whole experience fosters the habit of approaching resolutions with openness and judiciousness. Thus, if the community decides, they can take up the same resolution as the basis of their future inquiries and start in renewed doubt as they consider the topic as if approaching the same issue for the first time. Doubt, indeed, plays a prominent role in the COI method.

Conclusion: Why Seeing the Community of Inquiry as a Language Game and a Form of Life Important in Education

Education is meant to prepare children intellectually to take on more significant epistemic pursuits in the future. Dewey argues that education should concern itself with what matters in life. As the popular Deweyan statement goes, "Education is not a preparation for life; education is life itself." The children we teach in schools will eventually become active participants in building and strengthening their communities. Their participation involves inquiring with others and collaborating with different people in epistemic and intellectual endeavors. Educational institutions can contribute to helping children transition effectively and smoothly to taking up essential roles in society by arming them with skills that fit the bill. If, at

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[48] Elizabeth Jane Fynes-Clinton and Peter Renshaw, "The Role of Doubt in Collaborative Philosophical Inquiry with Children," in *Childhood & Philosophy*, 17 (2021).

[49] *Ibid*.

an early age, children are exposed to the complexities of understanding and making sense of their realities, and even the idea of the difficulty of grasping truths, they can be better equipped in their future intellectual pursuits. The COI method, in a sense, simulates the kinds of intellectual experiences children may be confronted with in the future, and it does so by structuring the practice of inquiry while at the same time keeping the exchanges of ideas as authentic and close-to-real as possible.

This is why the COI method, to an extent, provides a structure to inquiry while leaving some room for organic discussions to take place as the exchanges come about as messy and cluttered, yet open, complex, and expansive. The whole method mimics how an inquiry inside our minds proceeds naturally—unstructured and complex at times but eventually turns out to be progressive and disciplined when allowed to take its course naturally. Similar to how Wittgenstein defines the practice of language guided by rules that change and evolve, the COI method is also process-oriented, despite the process being open and unfixed. The COI method, as a language game, does not limit the practice of inquiry within pre-set bounds. The structure only serves the purpose of igniting inquiry, but the actual exchanges of ideas and reasons are what ultimately lead the direction of the inquiry.

Sharp recognizes this ambiguity in the practice of the COI. She regards the COI as an "open-ended process," that is, "it is rather a process through which children come to 'live the life of inquiry'" which is an "on-going conversation."[50] In the Wittgensteinian sense, the COI has a life of its own. This is an essential feature of the COI method because through participating in the COI, one becomes a participant as well in an education that prioritizes engaging students in the "process of growth in the ability to reconstruct one's own experience so that one can live a fuller, happier, qualitatively richer life."[51]

Ironically, the question of what exactly constitutes a COI is baffling to Sharp. Sharp finds it challenging to answer the question when one teacher told her in a teacher education residential workshop in P4C at the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children that "they were now truly a community of inquiry."[52] The difficulty of answering does not come from the lack of a definitive answer to the question—it comes from the fact that Sharp herself recognizes that the COI is an example of "lived experiences that we know are genuine, recognized as such when we experience them, even

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[50] Cam, "The Theory of Education Made Flesh," 30.

[51] Ann Margaret Sharp, "What Is a Community of Inquiry," in *Journal of Moral Education,* 16 (1987), 45.

[52] Sharp, "What Is a 'Community of Inquiry'?," 38.

though we can't describe or explain them in words."[53] Sharp argues that the difficulty of calling any specific discourse a COI exists not because of the impossibility of perfecting an inquiry but because she knows that different inquiries occur among COIs. There may be similarities, but the contexts and the directions those inquiries are taking will always be distinctly unique vis-à-vis one another. Each experience in a COI session is a *sui generis*; participation across sessions is incommensurable. Sharp maintains that "[t]here is something about the notion of 'community of inquiry', whether posited as the goal of good teaching or described as a lived experience, that calls for analysis and a ferreting out of identifying criteria and assumptions."[54] In a similar sense, I argue that given that there is no one-size-fits-all conception of a COI, there is also an absence of a one-size-fits-all conception of truth in participating in the inquiry. COIs emerging and happening across communities of participants are unique and distinct from one another. As a natural consequence, the discoveries and outcomes, i.e., the truths that emerge from every inquiry, are different, making every engagement alive and unique.

Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations*, uses the term "affinities" when he discusses language games as forms of life.[55] Appropriating it to the COI method, the COI is a language game that has a unique form of life. Every inquiry takes different forms and proceeds in different directions. Every inquiry is alive—evolving depending on the context of usage, the backgrounds of the participants, and the topics discussed. Dewey understands the process of an inquiry in the same manner as he maintains that each inquiry is special in that outcomes of an inquiry are "parts of an enterprise that is continually renewed, or is a going concern."[56] Thus, truth in the inquiry, is "not merely one successful operation, but rather the accumulation of resolved situations … truth is rather in a process, just as life itself does not consist of an instant of activity, but of a flow of activity."[57] The participation of each member and many other factors add layers of complexity and uniqueness to this unique form of life, which only goes to show that each inquiry is alive and dynamic. Each experience in an inquiry characterizes its own. This is also the reason why some inquiries demand "closures" while some do not. Some inquiries go off on a tangent and still flourish, while others appear very linear but focused. Each inquiry is unique.

When adopted in children's education, the COI approach exposes children to the complexities of thinking and the ardent task of grasping

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[53] *Ibid*, 39.

[54] *Ibid*.

[55] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.

[56] Dewey, *Logic*, 9.

[57] Cahill, "John Dewey's Concept of Truth," 34.

truths, which prepares them for life as Dewey envisions. This does not only become a preparation, but participating in an inquiry is an actual activation of their capacities—it gets them to "actually do" it. Children are not taught how to think but are given opportunities to perform what they already have capacities for. Education here becomes facilitative, appropriate, and directly relevant to learners. And such an education is what children deserve to experience.

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