Ethics Education with Thomas Wartenberg and Chris Robichaud

Eleanor Price, producer: I'm Eleanor Price, and this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

[music]

Eleanor: We talk a lot on the show about knowing things about ethics or morality, but we don't often talk about the active process of *learning* ethics or morality. So, today, we're turning to the source of ethics education: the educators themselves. We'll hear from two superstar teachers in the philosophy world: Harvard professor Chris Robichaud introduces us to the world of ethics and games, and Thomas Wartenberg, the founder of Teaching Children Philosophy, will explain how reading *Frog and Toad* to kids gets them considering tough questions.

Thomas Wartenberg: Frog and Toad were reading a book together. "The people in this book are brave," said Toad. "They fight dragons and giants and they are never afraid."
"I wonder if we are brave," said Frog. Frog and Toad looked into a mirror. "We look brave," said Frog.
"Yes, but are we?" asked Toad.

Eleanor: From picture books like *Frog and Toad* to high-stakes gaming simulations, it turns out that philosophy education is a lot more than a textbook about Aristotle. All of this on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

[music ends]

Eleanor: Thomas Wartenberg is best known for his work teaching young children philosophy. In fact, he's the founder of the "Teaching Children Philosophy" program and website, which focuses on using kids' books to get to the heart of philosophical issues. Tom's interest in children's education developed when his son was entering elementary school.

Thomas Wartenberg (Tom): I was very interested in the idea that kids really were interested in philosophical issues. And it didn't really come home to me how interested they were till I had my own son. And then surprisingly he would get into discussions with me that were clearly philosophical -- he was interested in philosophical issues and he would, he really liked talking about those things. So when he went to elementary school, I decided that I would develop a program at his school. Part of my motivation for going in was thinking, well, maybe I can help support the teachers in teaching literature, but give a sort of more philosophical bent to how they taught literature. By this time I had adopted a sort of model where the teaching philosophy to always take place through picture books. And so I decided the thing to do was just to read a

---

picture book to the teachers and model the sort of discussion that I thought that they could have with the kids using them.

Eleanor: Modeling a philosophical discussion is key to learning the basics of philosophy. And because philosophy and ethics go hand-in-hand, children who learn how to engage with philosophy are also learning the building blocks of ethics.

Tom: We want the kids to talk to each other and have the kids listen to each other and try to figure things out together. And what I've noticed is almost universally the kids all share a concern for ethical issues. They may have different opinions about the specific issue that you're talking about. But they all for example would agree that things have to be fair. And they don't like it when things aren't fair.

Eleanor: Because kids are naturally drawn to discussing philosophy, and Tom was already teaching ethics on the collegiate level, it made sense to give his college students the opportunity to get involved with kids in the classroom.

Tom: I remember as a young professor, thinking and being told that you'd never really learn a subject, till you have to teach it. I have to say when I was developing the course I was really thinking about myself and the little elementary school kids and trying to figure out how to make this work. And the college kids just became sort of a source of labor for me. But in fact, they learned a tremendous amount. They understand Aristotle better by reading frog and toad and having to think about the nature of bravery, than just reading Aristotle and trying to write a paper that they don't really care about. Because when they are listening to the kids and responding to the kids and getting the kids to talk, they have to be thinking on their feet about the nature of bravery, and the relationship to a danger, and what's the relationship between being brave and cowardly and all these sorts of issues. And so it's a really easy way to get college students to learn ethics, ethical theory, but also, but to learn it through teaching it to young children who then are also benefiting from it. So it's like a win-win situation.

Eleanor: Tom points out that teaching elementary-aged kids and college students are two completely different experiences. So while in the college classroom it's okay to focus on the history of philosophy as well as the actual content, little kids don't need the same kind of context.

Tom: One of the really distinctive things about the way in which we teach philosophy to children, is that we don't do any of the things you might expect, right? So it's not like we have a text of dumbed down Plato dialogue. In a college introductory course, almost everyone teaches Plato. If you do that, then what you're doing is you're asking the kids to learn about the history of philosophy, and that's not really what we want them to do. What we're interested in doing is having them participate in the activity of philosophizing, very much actually like Plato was doing with his -- the people he spoke with, his interlocutors. We want them to feel part of that process. And we also want the kids to relate to one another and not have the teacher constantly being the one to ask questions and determining the agenda of what's going on. The teacher works as a facilitator rather than as a dispenser of knowledge. So it's a very different methodology.

Eleanor: Tom's example for this "different methodology" is Dragons and Giants. It's a story starring Frog and Toad, two amphibian friends that have various adventures in a series of stories by Arnold Lobel. They're classic kids' books that you might remember from childhood. Here's Tom with an excerpt.

Tom: [reading] Frog and Toad were reading a book together. "The people in this book are brave," said Toad. "They fight dragons and giants and they are never afraid."
"I wonder if we are brave," said Frog. Frog and Toad looked into a mirror. "We look brave," said Frog.
"Yes, but are we?" asked Toad.

Tom: [speaking] I read the story. And then I started off a discussion, which is about the nature of courage. You've got two really interesting philosophical ideas that have already come up. The first one is that Toad has given, it's not a definition but he's -- it's what philosophers call a necessary condition. He's given a necessary condition for someone being brave but they can't be scared. And he says they're brave because they fight dragons and giants and they're never afraid. Do they face-- what's their version of dragons and giants, dangerous things? What sorts of things are dangerous? Well for Toad, as it turns out in the story, avalanches and hawks and snakes. If they could face those things without being afraid, then that would show that they were brave. And that's actually what happens in the balance of the story. So one of the things that happens is that we get a philosophical thesis about the nature of bravery and its relationship to fear that the story is going to test. So that's one really philosophically interesting issue. And then if you look at the whole story is constructed, it seems to me, to investigate that and to show in fact that claim is false.

So Frog and Toad then take in this idea about what it is to be brave and then they want to know, "Are we brave?" And the first thing they do, they say, "Well, let's look in the mirror and see." Well, can you see bravery? Is bravery the sort of thing that you can see? That's a really fun thing to ask kids. You know, you can ask them, "Make a brave face." And then you say, "If someone looks like that, do you know that they're brave?" So that raises two questions: what is it to look brave? And what's the difference looking brave and being brave? So already in those first two pages, I mean, it's a short story anyway, but you've seen two really interesting topics for philosophical discussion come up in the narrative. And then it's very easy to have a philosophical discussion with kids because you just say, "Well, look, Toad says there's a difference between looking brave and being brave. How do we understand that?"

Eleanor: As Tom explains, there's more to picture books than cute drawings and wholesome amphibians.

Tom: I've come to learn that many picture books have philosophical content. The reason, I think, is this: I think kids face a world that's incredibly puzzling, and they're trying to make sense of that world. And that's why they ask so many questions. The world just doesn't make sense to them and they want to understand it. Well, that's actually the origin of philosophy. Both Plato and Aristotle said philosophy begins in wonder. And not wonder in the sense of like, "Ooh that's beautiful;" wonder in the sense of "Huh? How come?" And so successful picture books, I think, are successful for a variety of reasons. Obviously, they have lovely illustrations, and they have clever stories, but they also deal with some of the questions that kids are puzzled about. They

form a really good way into a philosophy discussion because they start kids off wondering about a question that they already are interested in.

The books themselves create puzzles that you can get the kids to look at, and think about and discuss. One of the benefits of using the picture books for this program is that kids start seeing books as something that are much more interesting, worth reading, because they're not just being asked to say, "What's the theme and who are the characters," and sort of...They're being asked to think about the ideas that are in the books. And those are much more interesting things to think about. So we often have kids coming out of the program saying, "I'm going to go to the library tomorrow and find some more books to read." That seems to be another virtue of method of using picture books to do philosophy.

[music]

Eleanor: Our next guest is Chris Robichaud, a lecturer at Harvard's Kennedy School. Like Tom, he incorporates storytelling into his pedagogy. For him, narrative is at the heart of how we learn.

Chris Robichaud: I think fiction is very important. I think -- we've seen some studies that suggest that people who tend to read fiction more often have deeper empathetic connections to other perspectives. And that's just at the level of persons. In terms of fictional settings, I think even really fanciful settings can get us into an interesting place and can get us in there pretty quickly. So I think we're natural storytellers. We've been consuming stories and playing games since we were very, very little, all of us presumably, or at least the vast majority of us. I think it's unfortunate that at times we forget how much learning comes out of that as we get older.

Eleanor: One way Chris integrates storytelling into teaching philosophy and ethics is through something he calls moral simulations. Moral simulations can be any kind of game or exercise where people have to consider tricky moral situations and reach a decision about how to behave in that situation. These simulations are designed to be a bit like role-playing games.

Chris: For instance, I designed a simulation called Liberty Hospital and the participants are the members of the ethics board of a hospital and it's a terrible day in the, in the city. There's a terrorist attack and the hospital ethics board -- this is slightly fanciful -- but the hospital ethics board has to make a lot of decisions about how to distribute scarce resources as patients come in, as some patients refuse care, et cetera, et cetera. So the features of it that I think track morality are having to make hard trade offs between the different sets of values, doing right by patients, saving the most lives, honoring doctors' wishes, these sorts of things.
Eleanor: Chris explains that different simulations encourage different kinds of moral engagement.

Chris: There's, you know, a huge range of what could count as a simulation that teaches ethics or that helps develop moral reasoning, these sorts of things. So one type would be for individuals to be given different roles where these roles are perhaps considerably quite different than who they are, and part of the simulation will have them occupying a completely different perspective and then having to navigate a scenario from that other person's perspective. And so the moral learning there would be a kind of compassion or empathetic association with that

different perspective. I don't design too many simulations like that, but I find them to be quite valuable when I've seen them enacted.

The kinds of simulations that I design really tries to have the person be the person in the simulation. It's you, it's me, it's whoever the participant is, but adopting a specific role. So not an entirely different worldview, but you're an advisor to the president or the prime minister or you're sitting on the ethics board of a hospital or you're on a team that's trying to elect someone. You get the idea. Then you're given a whole bunch of different situations and you've got a reason through them, sometimes -- or for me, most often -- in groups. I design them so that you have to do a little bit of group deliberation and then you have to make a decision. And the simulations that I design often use a randomizing component, dice, not for complete arbitrariness, but just to sort of really drive home the idea that uncertainty is part of real world decision making. The value that I find in that is it puts people in situations where they have to think for themselves about what they would do and they might surprise themselves when they see what they did in that situation versus what they think they would have done sitting down in an armchair, in the classroom, that sort of thing.

Eleanor: Moral simulations can help philosophy and ethics come alive for students in the classroom.

Chris: What you want to do after you've exposed people to maybe some more, some ethical reasoning in a more traditional classroom setting is tell them that what you're going to do now is give them an opportunity to practice this in a quasi-real situation to see how much of it sticks, how much of it didn't stick, to see what other factors ended up being relevant. Introduce maybe a little moral psychology into it as well. One thing that I do tell participants of the simulation is to be those and this goes back to what I had said earlier, is to be themselves. I don't want them to -- unless that's the point of the simulation -- I don't want them to adopt a false character to be and be like, "I'm going to be in the simulation. I'm going to be the crazy person. Ha ha ha." That's not the point of it. It's you. So that you can ... The point of that is so that you can learn something about yourself when you step back outside of the simulation.

Eleanor: Chris argues that these simulations shouldn't be the only way students come into contact with philosophy and ethics.

Chris: Yeah, I mean, I'm hesitant to tell people that have a simulation is just, you learn the theory and then you put it into practice. I think that simulations work best in the context of teaching ethics, some of which is introduction of theory, some of which might be consideration of rich cases, and then some of it is sort of more active learning, experiential, simulation play. The simulation part of it, you know, you don't just, at least if you to do it well, you shouldn't just have the simulation, but you should then step outside of it when you're done with folks and have a debrief. You know, what did you choose, why did you think that, what didn't you see that might have been relevant now that you're thinking about it? There's a lot to be gained from those debriefs. But in general I think that, pedagogy that incorporates simulations into the teaching ethics is really important, but I would be very hesitant and a bit skeptical thinking that you could do all the work that you needed to do in teaching moral reasoning just by running people through a variety of ethical, moral simulations.

Eleanor: You're not only learning about yourself when you engage in a moral simulation. Moral simulations are also valuable because they get people reasoning *together.*

Chris: It's a great dynamic that emerges and one that we're just learning about. By that I mean a lot of the moral psychology that's developed over the past couple of decades is primarily, not exclusively but primarily, focused on the individual reasoner and what they do. But we're only beginning to sort of see what happens when you put people into groups and see how they deliberate and how they can be pushed around by what other people are saying. A lot of the effects we know from other contexts. There's the anchoring effect. If a group is looking at a moral situation and someone comes in right off the bat from the conversation and says, "This is what ought to be done," and they're emphatic about it, they're passionate, that can anchor the whole conversation. Everyone can say, "Well, now we've got to work around that."

Eleanor: Using stories in teaching philosophy gets kids and adults alike to focus on what matters in philosophy, not just the jargon or the discipline. Ultimately, getting people to consider philosophy and ethics differently could change the way they view the world. For Thomas Wartenberg, making them part of an elementary curriculum is the perfect place to start.

Tom: So picture books just have-- are so various and so interesting. And kids love them and so do their parents. It's a great way to get people into philosophical discussions. One of the nice things is if we start doing philosophy earlier, people will see philosophy as just a normal part of human life, which is I think it is. The same way that we think of art, music and literature as important aspects of human life, I think philosophy is too. And if we started with young kids, then philosophy will just become more integral to the way in which people approach the world and I think they'll live more fulfilling lives.

[music]

Eleanor: If you want to know more about Thomas Wartenberg's work, he's got a book called *Big Ideas for Little Kids*. Chris Robichaud can be found on Youtube and Twitter, being a pundit and practicing public philosophy. You can find information about both of our guests on our shownotes page at www.examiningethics.org.

Let us know what you think of today's show. Record a voice memo on your phone and email it to us at examiningethics@gmail.com. Be sure to include your first name and where you're from. Or, if you're shy about recording your voice, send us an email with your thoughts and we'll share it with our listeners.

Christiane Wisehart, producer: And we actually have something else to share with our listeners, don't we, Eleanor?

Eleanor: As a matter of fact, yeah. So, I'm actually leaving the Examining Ethics team and the Prindle Institute. I'm on my way to start a PhD at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York.

Christiane: And I think you have been an amazing podcast producer and an amazing editor of the Prindle Post, but I think you'll be an even better professor.

Eleanor: Aww, thank you Christiane. I'm going to miss working with you so much. I've learned a huge amount about philosophy and just like, everything to do with academia here on Examining Ethics and at Prindle. So I'm going to miss you guys a lot.

Christiane: And we'll miss you too.

[music]

Credits: Examining Ethics is hosted by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University. Eleanor Price and Christiane Wisehart wrote and produced the show. Our logo was created by Evie Brosius. Our music is by Blue Dot Sessions and can be found online at www.sessions.blue. Examining Ethics is made possible by the generous support of DePauw Alumni, friends of the Prindle Institute, and you the listeners. Thank you for your support.

The views expressed here are the opinions of the individual speakers alone. They do not represent the position of DePauw University or the Prindle Institute for Ethics.

Easter Egg:

Christiane: [laughing] Byeeeeee.

Eleanor: [laughing, joking voice] Please leave. [off mic] So there will be a little music, add the credits...

Christiane: [joking voice] You can get going anytime.

Eleanor: Just leave your key...

Christiane: The door's open!