The Giving Tree
by Shel Silverstein

Questions for Philosophical Discussion
by Christina M. Blair, revised by Jelena Spasojevic

Philosophical topic: Giving and Altruism

The tree keeps on giving to the boy until it has nothing left to give. The boy on the other hand does not give anything to the tree.

1. Is the boy selfish? Why?
2. What about the tree, is the tree selfish?
3. Is there a word for someone who keeps on giving without thinking about him/herself or expecting something in return?
4. Is the tree selfless? Why?
5. Why do you think the tree is not happy after giving her trunk?
6. Have you ever given something away and later wished that you didn’t?
7. Is it easier to give something away if the receiver truly appreciates the gift? Why?
8. When we give something to someone, do we expect something in return? Why?
9. When we are given something, do we feel that we owe something to the giver?
10. Would you give something you really need if someone you love needed it, too?
11. Why do we give?
12. Is it right or wrong to keep on giving without getting anything in return?
13. Are there limits to giving?

Philosophical topic: The nature of love
In the very beginning of the book, the author talks about the things that the tree and the boy did together. The author also says that the tree loved the boy.

1. Why did the tree love the boy in the beginning?
2. Why did the tree keep on loving the boy?
3. Did the boy love the tree? Why?
4. Who do you love? Why do you love them?
5. How do you know that you love someone?
6. Do you treat differently people that you love and the ones that you don’t love?
7. When you love someone, how do you show him or her that you love them?
8. What is love?
9. Can you love someone even if they are not with you?
10. How could your love be different towards someone who is with you versus someone who is far away?
11. Have you ever been angry with someone you love because they were away for a while, or because they did something you did not like?
12. Can you be angry with someone and still love them at the same time?

Philosophical topic: Happiness

The tree is not really happy after giving the boy her trunk.

1. Is the boy happy at the end of the story?
2. Is the tree happy?
3. If you were the tree would you be happy? Why?
4. How do you know when you are happy?
5. Does it make you happy when others are happy?
6. Have you ever done something just to make someone happy?
7. Does doing things to make others happy necessarily make you happy?
8. Do you need others in order to be happy?
9. What is happiness? (Is it a feeling? Is it a state of mind? Or something else?)
10. Do you need a reason to be happy (e.g. something good happens), or can you be happy without a reason?
11. Can you be happy and sad at the same time?

Guidelines for Philosophical Discussion
by Christina M. Blair, revised by Jelena Spasojevic
The Giving Tree has quite a bit to offer to a philosophical discussion on happiness, love, giving, and receiving. The question sets for the book encourage children to explore what it means to be happy, what it means to love someone, what kinds of things we do for people we love, the value and the consequences of giving, and the concepts of selfishness and selflessness. Because these terms are so simplistic, they offer a vast range of possibilities for discussion and curiosity, which may or may not lead to a consensual definition. The issues raised by The Giving Tree are based on simple topics, yet these are some of the great issues philosophers have pondered for years. Children may find that the questions are not as easily answered as they had thought.

Many of the themes run throughout the book, but the questions for each theme are clustered together in order to ensure the depth of the discussion. Since the issue of giving is more prominent and salient than the other two themes in the book, it is presented first. The aspect of giving is loaded with potential conversation because there are so many different situations and conditions under which we give. Altruism is closely intertwined with giving since the tree in the book gives itself away until there’s only a stump left. Altruism is an important philosophical issue into which the children may find a world of insight. Mystic and social theories regard altruism as the only right way of being. According to them, serving others is the only reason of our existence and the highest moral value. On the other hand, objectivist ethics favors rational selfishness – the idea that humans are traders who give only to get in return, and who neither make sacrifices nor obtain them. The questions in this set should spark a discussion about these two extremes. For example, the questions explore what happens and how it feels when we keep on giving without getting anything in return, and if this kind of giving can be justified with anything. Also, this discussion might bring up a question of how likely it is (or whether it is even possible) to give without expecting anything in return. After all, if we look from the perspective of objectivist ethics, it could be argued that the tree gives itself to the boy because she loves him, and being able to make him happy not only gives her pleasure, but gives her hope that he will love her back.

As love is so closely related to giving, it is discussed next. The question set explores love in its presentation, function, and nature. The first few questions invoke curiosity about how we recognize and express our emotions as well as how we justify them. The discussion of these questions is supposed to ease children into the more abstract question of defining love. Again, philosophers have proposed different explanations of love: some believe that we love others because of their essence and that love should be selfless. Others think that we love others because of their properties, and in this sense love is not selfless. We choose to love people with certain attributes that we value, and if they lose those attributes we are no longer obligated to love them. The Giving Tree offers both of these concepts – the tree loves the boy selflessly while boy loves the tree because of its properties – so discussing these issues with children will be a fun and fruitful process that will bring many interesting ideas. The last three questions are aimed to deepen children’s ideas about love and challenge some concepts that they might have (e.g. they might say that loving someone is being close to them, or that loving someone includes only positive actions and emotions).

The next set brings up an entirely new subject - happiness, which is closely entwined with the other two issues in the book. The tree loves the boy, and thus wanting to see him happy, is giving him all of herself. However, in this giving process the tree is sometimes happy and sometimes not. Thus, The
*Giving Tree* reflects on the role of others as an important piece in our happiness. Aristotle was perhaps one of the first philosophers who recognized this role when proposing that although happiness is the chief good and as such is self-sufficient, even a happy person needs to live with others and to have friends. The discussion questions are designed to lead children into thinking about these issues, as well as to try and define happiness. A lot of them will probably be inclined to say that happiness is a feeling. This can be further explored by asking them what contributes to that feeling, and if those contributing things may be the essential “parts” of happiness. Some of them might say that happiness is having fun. This idea can be further examined by asking them if there are instances when they happen not to be doing anything fun, or anything at all for that matter, but are still happy. If they cannot come up with experiences of this sort, an illustration of a Buddhist monk, for an instance, might be used to show that happiness might be achieved when one is not doing much.