

Philosopher and Child Together

A Review of Gareth B. Matthews' *The Philosophy of Childhood*

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Like its subjects, this book is direct, simple and often surprising.

Matthews does not offer a systematic philosophy of childhood. Instead, he ruminates on the possibilities and promises of such a philosophy. The book might better have been titled *A Prolegomena to Any Future Philosophy of Childhood*, but that would have been quite a mouthful. What Matthews offers is a vision of the child and the philosopher together - of the childlikeness of the philosopher and the philosophicalness of the child.

In Chapter One, "A Philosopher's View of Childhood", Matthews argues that adults have distorted views of childhood. What Matthews thinks is that adults tend to (sometimes) view children as full-tilt, small-scale philosophers doing philosophy with little words; or, adults tend to (more often) view children as developmental psychologists do, i.e. as lacking both the wherewithal and the hankering to do philosophy.

I think Augustine (at least, Augustine as understood by Wittgenstein: cf. *Philosophical Investigations* 1) is a good example of the first tendency. Augustine describes a child acquiring his native language in a way that requires the child to be an MIT-ish philosopher of language, coordinating (new) words and world and fine shades of behavior.

Piaget is Matthews' example of the second tendency. Perhaps it would be better to say that it is adults with a particular reaction to Piaget's work who are Matthews' example. The problem is that Piaget's remarkable experiments have lead those who think about the experiments into moralizing about them. Piaget's experiments have lead those who think about them to believe that children are strangers among adults, almost a different form of life.

Much of what follows Chapter One is an attempt to correct, or at least to provide counterbalance to, these distortions:

...[W]e must guard against letting...models caricature our children and limit the possibilities we are willing to recognize in our dealings with them as fellow human beings. (Pg.29)

In two fine chapters on the work of Piaget (Chapters Three and Four), Matthews shows that Piaget's model of children's cognitive development has a peculiar power to make adults blind to the actual cognitive achievements of children. Matthews counterbalances this blinding power by illuminatingly comparing the stages of the child's development with the development of Presocratic thinking. The point for Matthews is not that Kristin or Karl or John are (or should be seen to be) Democritus, Jr. Rather, his point is that seeing the stages of the child's development as one-mistake-after-another-until-the-truth-is-found is to miss the adventure of ideas that is being played out in the child's development.

It is to miss the sense in which the child's development is "a natural exercise in speculative metaphysics" (pg.47). Along the way in these chapters, Matthews shows that it is often true that many of the conceptual or philosophical issues connected with Piaget's work are by-passed by Piaget's experimental methods.

In the chapter "Moral Development" (Chapter Five), Matthews again shows the danger of theories of development. While he admits that such theories can sometimes "encourage us to distance ourselves from our children" (pg.66) in ways that are helpful, the very fact that such theories "distance" us from our children suggests that the theories need to be handled deliberately and reservedly.

I am reminded, here, of Thoreau's brilliant paragraphs on theory in *Walden* ("Solitude"). There, Thoreau reminds us that theory - what he calls "being beside ourselves in a sane sense" - is a double-edged thing: while it may make us self-critical, positively self-critical, it may also make us "poor neighbors and friends sometimes", or poor parents and adults.

Looking at ourselves or at our children from sideways-on is at best a perilous practice. Part of the peril is that we sometimes forget who is to be master - our theories or us - and turn a helpful perspective into a prison. (Our theories are, after all, ours. We are often the subjects of our theories but are not subject to them). Matthews ends the chapter by pointing out that

Any developmental theory that rules out, on purely theoretical grounds, even the possibility that we adults may occasionally have something to learn, morally, from a child is, for that reason, defective; it is also morally offensive. (Pg.67)

Chapters Six through Ten discuss the topics of children's rights, childhood amnesia, childhood and death, literature for children and child art. These chapters break with the predominantly critical tone of the first five and turn more constructive. Each chapter attempts to show that children sometimes have something to teach us about, and are capable often of joining in our discussions of, rights, the past, death and art. The old saw: "Not in front of the children", is itself childish. Each chapter argues, roughly, that acknowledging our children, not just noticing them but being actively and continuously attentive to them, is itself an aspect of being adult. We have, all of us, spent time as children. To forget that and to refuse now to spend time with children, not just beside them but among them, is to fail in the task of self-acknowledgement. And self-acknowledgement is a philosophical task.

I recollect that there was once a funny-looking Athenian who spent a lot of his philosophical time with children.

Anyway, Matthews has written a fine book.