

Matthews, Gareth B. *The child's philosopher*. Maughn Rollins Gregory & Megan Jane Lavery, eds. London & New York: Routledge, 2022.

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This book may be described as a *Festschrift*—or more accurately a *Gedenkschrift*, given that it is a posthumous celebration of Gareth Matthews' (1929-2011) work and career. It consists of a selected anthology of his papers, interspersed with papers by scholars that offer interpretive perspectives on his work. The Matthews papers, which are brilliantly chosen, represent only one dimension of his *oeuvre*; he was in fact a recognized scholar of ancient and medieval philosophy, particularly Plato, Aristotle and Augustine. The present selection draws from his persistent, oddly related inquiry, pursued over the course of almost 40 years, into the theory and practice of conducting philosophical conversations with children, whether inside or outside the classroom. This inquiry was grounded in and fueled by a fundamental interest in the phenomenon of human childhood per se, and a conviction that the cognitive and moral capacities of children tend to be either ignored or underestimated by the great majority of adults, including teachers. As such, his project was an emancipatory one, which called for the philosophical deconstruction of those scientific theories in the realm of child development that reify and institutionalize the “deficit model” of childhood, and as such effectively suppressed children's potential contribution to the epistemological, ontological, aesthetic and axiological claims and questions that preoccupy *homo rationalis* throughout the life cycle.

Both of Matthew's projects revolve around his philosopher's love of what he calls “Socratic perplexity,” and his discovery that children, who generally are not yet inured to the *aporia*, are often, through their very “ignorance,” unconscious masters of the dialectic. Matthews makes this discovery when he brings his razor-sharp philosophical

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ear, tuned both to analytic microanalysis and to sheer wonder, into the service of documenting and analyzing the typically overlooked, disregarded and/or misunderstood, deceptively simple philosophical thinking of children. As such, he turns the old adultomorphic prime time saw “kids say the darndest things” on its head, to “kids say the most philosophically interesting things,” and demonstrates this with numerous examples, taken from a good thirty years of engaging in philosophical dialogue with groups of children, and with examples from conversations with his own young children. Indeed, the latter seem to have been his initial inspiration – testimony to the powers of childhood to awaken adult sensibilities.

Matthews’ extraordinary capacity for listening with a “third ear” to children’s spontaneous thinking led him in several directions, all of which are documented in this volume, both in his own papers and those of his commentators, which are geared to his, and help us to place his contributions in the larger contexts of child study, cognitive development theory, children’s literature, and philosophical pedagogy. One major direction was what is now known as philosophy of childhood, a discursive field of which he may be considered to be one founder. I say “one” because the impulses and preoccupations that constitute that field have emerged regularly at least since J.J. Rousseau’s announcement in 1762 that “We know nothing of childhood, and with our mistaken notions the further we advance the further we go astray, “and have been fitfully articulated in the literature of the humanities ever since. It may be distinguished both from “child study,” which is typically dominated by the sociological imagination, and “child development,” which is the domain of psychology--both soft sciences aspiring to hard, and both redolent with unarticulated philosophical assumptions.

Philosophy of childhood’s preoccupations are fed on a deeper level by the work of cross-cultural anthropologists and psychohistorians, artists, poets, theologians, psychoanalysts, memoirists, novelists, phenomenologists, educationalists and, it must be noted, a very few “real” philosophers. That the latter – Gaston Bachelard, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Giorgio Agamben, and Giles Deleuze & Felix Guattari in particular – are post-structuralist continental philosophers is significant for



an understanding of Matthews' approach to the field, which was marked – and some may say limited--by the hegemonic status of analytic philosophy in the British and American academy, and which was at its height in his time. On the other hand, it could be argued that his highly refined analytic acumen in deciphering the implicit logical arguments of the children with whom he entered into dialogue was a gift from the hegemon in question. And for those familiar only with his two books *Philosophy and the Young Child* and *The Philosophy of Childhood*, which are concerned primarily with critique and counterexample of prevailing views of developmental psychology, the choice of his papers in this volume offers an eye-opening picture of his grasp of the phenomena of cognitive and moral development. His strikingly original papers on these themes – especially on concept development--that are included in this volume are curated in a masterful paper by Jennifer Glaser, who teases out the genealogy of his approach in Wittgensteinian language philosophy and Vygotskian social mediation.

As for philosophy of childhood, it was Matthew Lipman, forever the Deweyan Pragmatist and educational activist who, we learn in the rich and nuanced introduction to this volume, first drew Matthews, his longtime collaborator and fellow traveler, into the labor of articulating a coherent approach to this emergent field. And it is historically significant that, although Lipman was always more preoccupied with developing a programmatic approach to (post)Socratic practice, he devoted a hefty double-issue of the second volume of his quarterly journal *Thinking* (2,3-4, 1981), of which Matthews was acting as sole contributing editor at the time, to what he referred to as “Philosophies of Childhood.” Matthews' book *Philosophy and the Young Child*, in which he launched a major critique of Piagetian cognitive stage theory, had just been published – a critique that, seen in retrospect, evokes the writing on the wall signaling the mass defection from Piagetian cognitive stage theory among developmental psychologists over the course of the 1980's.

The “Philosophies of Childhood” issue of *Thinking* leads off with a paper by Lipman, who goes straight to the point:

The discovery that children can do philosophy – and that they do so competently and with relish – points up in other ways the need to

develop philosophies of childhood. For if children can reason as they begin to speak, and if they can do philosophy as they begin to reason, the present alliance between philosophical ethics and developmental psychology will begin to show welcome signs of strain. (p. 5)

Lipman's paper is followed by Matthews' critique of what is known as recapitulation theory, as in "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" – the bio-evolutionary assumption that the development of an organism (ontogeny) expresses in its own life cycle all the intermediate forms of its ancestors throughout evolution (phylogeny). As such it was, after Aristotle, the grand progenitor of all stage theories. Matthews locates it in the history of developmental theory as one of three models – the Preformationist, according to which "cognitive development is the making manifest of cognitive structures that were latent all along"; the Logical Model, "the idea that development proceeds by specification and generalization"; and the Recapitulation Model, according to which "a child's intellectual development mirrors the succession of concepts to be found in the evolution of our culture," (p. 12), which he subjects to a cool but thorough analytic drubbing.

Then, having done its purely philosophical business, this special issue of *Thinking* takes a surprising and evocative turn by including no fewer than eleven lengthy selections from well-known autobiographies of childhood – including, among others, Jan Korczak, Thomas Traherne, Maxim Gorky, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, George Orwell, and Kathleen Raine (whose striking adolescent image appears on the cover) – accompanied by superbly curated illustrations. I would argue that this literary opening made by (I'm assuming) Lipman in the discursive structure of the emerging field of philosophy of childhood is a decisive one, and represents a widening of the boundaries to include the aesthetic and the phenomenological dimensions of the study of childhood; and that this widening implies, in turn, the widening of the discourse to include what Walter Kohan & Claire Cassidy, in the last critical paper in this volume, call the phenomenon of "non-chronological childhood," or "the concept of childhood unrelated to a stage of human life," (p. 227) a concept explored in Lyotard's notion of



infantia and Deleuze & Guattari's "block of childhood" and "becoming child." Here "childhood" is understood as a form of subjectivity, an onto-epistemological modality of the human that carries an inestimable emancipatory potential, and in which Kohan and Cassidy understand Matthews to have been "simply not interested." (229).

In Matthews' defense, we might understand him to have been performing – and performing it superbly – a Wittgensteinian function of clearing up the muddles and illogicalities that stubbornly inhere in adults' evaluations of children's thinking, and launching an emancipatory crusade against the deficit theory. On this account, the deconstruction of adultomorphic projections onto children could be seen as preparing the way for the "becoming child" that Deleuze and Guattari understand as, in Kohan and Cassidy's words, ". . . not a given subjectivity transforming itself into a childlike subjectivity but one that occupies a childlike space of transformation, an escape line that the system can neither incorporate nor coopt . . . [and] in this sense a political concept" (p. 228). On the other hand, it could also be argued that, as deeply influenced as he was by the analytic tradition, Matthews putative liberatory deconstruction of the pre-rational image of the child was carried out in in the (implicit) name of that very same rationality: the child made rational--"little philosopher"--makes of the child a "little adult," and of childhood not a space of transformation, but of reproduction. And in fact his critique of Piaget's recapitulationist association of the child and the "primitive" misses what might be one redeeming virtue of that theory, to the extent that it suggests a different form of reason, another pre-Enlightenment logic, a non-Western metaphysic, not pre-rational but pre-rationalistic.

It is the dialectical recovery of this form of reason that, some would say, represents our only hope in the crisis of the Anthropocene, in that it represents a recovery of a way of being in and connecting with the world that constitutes a recovered relationship with nature. This recovery of childish reason is becoming increasingly visible in the work of a new generation of posthuman scholars, whether

called “new materialism”²; in fact, as David Skrbina has documented in his magisterial *Panpsychism in the West* (2005) this non-dualistic, relational epistemology has constituted a thread in the Western philosophical tradition from the hylozoism of the Pre-Socratics through David Bohm and Rupert Sheldrake. Its implications for the study of childhood and children are under exploration in the work of Karin Murris, whose paper in this volume on “age transgressive” philosophizing with children, together with Kohan and Cassidy’s, represent the promise of posthuman work in philosophy of childhood.

The dialectic re-appropriation of a non-chronological understanding of childhood that seeks a reconstruction of childhood which transgresses the “anthropocentric binaries of Western dominant philosophy” (p. 228) does not, in my opinion, go “beyond” Matthews’ work. In fact a strictly non-chronological approach to childhood runs the risk of leaving children behind. What Matthews brings to the discourse is a keen, almost Zenlike form of attention to the ratiocinations of actual children, and an ability to translate them into “grownup” language. It is that form of attention, I would argue, that opens a space, not only for the becoming child of the adult, but the becoming child of the chronological child, who, early on, is being conformed to the anthropocentric, adultomorphic binaries in question. In fact he demonstrated for us a form of philosophical pedagogy evocative of the “ignorant schoolmaster,” and as such provides us with a model for facilitation that is paradigmatic for philosophy with children.

This superbly edited book shows us the inner workings of that project. If there is a “beyond” to his work, it might be initiated in questions like: what does it tell us about the liberation of children’s voice and agentic capacities, about the phenomenological givens of adult-child dialogue, and what implications do these questions have for education as an institution--with how we do school? Can

² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, (2010), or “new animism” (<https://networks.h-net.org/node/73374/announcements/5849565/new-animism-creativity-and-critique-university-leeds-18%E2%80%9320-june>)



philosophizing with children as an educational activity lead to “becoming child,” or does it risk the neutralization and bureaucratization of the philosophical impulse? Is the child a potential emancipatory figure in cultural evolution or just a symbol of that emancipation? These questions, it seems to me, follow naturally from his work and move in a political direction—towards reimagining the school as a site dedicated to personal, cultural and social reconstruction—a goal as promising as it is distant, and towards which Matthews’ work, in its steady passion and vivid immediacy, points.

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