

Philosophy and the Young Child*

Reviewed by
Loren Barritt
University of Michigan



*G. B. Matthews.
Cambridge, Mass:
Harvard University
Press, 1980.

The central question posed by this book is asked of Bruno Bettelheim. It is really meant for all of us who live with children.

How can anyone who has spent so much of his working life with children suppose them as limited in intellectual capacity as Bettelheim does? (pp. 71,72)

Gareth Matthews is a professional philosopher, a collector and analyzer of puzzlements. His interest in perplexity enables him to see children in ways that other observers, including many developmental psychologists, miss. His book is composed around interchanges between children and adults. Usually these begin as questions children pose to their "more informed" elders. Here is one example:

Ian (six years) found to his chagrin that the three children of his parents' friends monopolized the television; they kept him from watching his favorite program. "Mother," he asked in frustration, "why is it better for three people to be selfish than for one?" (p. 28)

Matthews takes questions like this very seriously, which does not mean he has no fun with them; on the contrary. But he steadfastly refuses to dismiss children's puzzlements as unworthy of adult interest. In each case he places the question within a philosophical tradition showing how the child's uncertainty is much like the philosopher's. And by so doing he transforms what some have seen as childish ignorances into a significant adult concern.

Matthews has little sympathy for adults who want to see children as lame brained for developmental or any other reasons, and he chooses no insignificant target to make his point. He finds Piaget's ideas about the growth of child thought unacceptable because they always presume there is an adequate answer to philosophical questions; adults have it and children don't. Matthews shows the adult philosophers also disagree about the correct answers to Piaget's questions. In fact some of the answers philosophers give are not in principle different from the so-called less developed ones given by the youngest children. In Matthews' view Piaget is "immune to philosophical puzzlement" (p. 54) and therefore misses the child's point.

Matthews takes such delight in his talks with children that he seems angry at the rest of us for not recognizing the sophistication hidden in the child's innocence. He finds Bettelheim's generalizations about children's ignorance, as expressed in his book *The Uses of Enchantment*, factually false and morally repugnant" (p. 69).

And for the rest of us there is this:

Adults discourage children from asking philosophical questions, first by being patronizing to them and then by directing their

inquiring minds toward more “useful” investigations. Most adults aren’t themselves interested in philosophical questions . . . Moreover, it doesn’t occur to most adults that there are questions that a child can ask that they can’t provide a definite answer to .

In spite of the strong words to adults *Philosophy and the Young Child* is not primarily an angry book; it is actually a gentle one. Matthews takes pleasure in telling stories about encounters with young thinkers. And the fun of the play of ideas shines in the text. He writes clearly, without imposing professional jargon between the reader and himself.

So who is correct about children? Who sees them for what they really are? Is it Piaget and Bettelheim with their beliefs that children’s thinking develops slowly according to a pre-established schedule beginning with concrete events and finishing (the idea that there is a finish is a significant point of contention) in thought that goes beyond the observable into an ordered world of the possible? Or is Matthews right that

for many young members of the human race, philosophical thinking—including on occasion, subtle and ingenious reasoning—is as natural as making music and playing games, and quite as much a part of being human. (p. 36)

The disagreement illustrates the power of purpose in the interpretation of events. Piaget believes fundamental problems in epistemology can only be solved by analyzing the answers of different aged children to carefully chosen sets of questions. Piaget is a master of clever means for clinically testing children. But the problems are always of Piaget’s making. And he has no interest at all in the individual responses of particular children, since the purpose is to build a genetic theory of knowledge, not to study individual variation. For Piaget children are a means to learn how systems of knowledge and thought come to be. By organizing their answers, he has made a theory of impressive verisimilitude.

Gareth Matthews is fascinated with life’s questions and he recognizes the same interest in children. Matthews doesn’t see himself as fundamentally wiser than children. Certainly he knows that he knows more about the traditions of philosophy, but that doesn’t solve most of the dilemmas. There is a humility and reverence in Matthews’ treatment of children that is both touching and convincing. His willingness to cross disciplinary lines and give us his fresh opinion about children is as unusual as it is beneficial. How nice it is to have the disciplinary barrier between philosophy and child study raised. We would all profit were it to remain out of the way.

For me there is irony in Matthews’ criticisms of Piaget because I was trained at a time (1960) when the experimental, positivistic, psychological tradition was all powerful, and it was Piaget, then largely

ignored, who first revealed to me (and I suspect many others) the wonder to be found in dialogue with children. It was Piaget who rejected the methodological dogma that the same questions had to be put to every child in exactly the same words. It was Piaget who began his career by rejecting the assigned task of counting correct answers to standardize a psychological test. He chose rather to explore in discussion with the children the reasons for their "incorrect" answers. And it has been a hallmark for me of Piaget's clinical method that there is always more interest in children's viewpoints than in the right answer.

On the other hand I take Matthews' point as well made that in seeking for consistency across children and assuming a particular end point for epistemology—that thought must come to mirror logic—Piaget has overreached the evidence to achieve an uncluttered picture.

Piaget freed us from the narrow vision of children thrown up by psychological testing. He in turn created a picture which has come in its own way to fix observations to only part of the whole. Gareth Matthews has helped to take another step on the path to a fuller picture of children—and adults, too.

For Gareth Matthews (as for Kornei Chukovsky whose translated Russian book *From Two to Five* came to mind as I read *Philosophy and the Young Child*) children are at home at play in the world. Chukovsky found them natural poets as well as inveterate questioners between the ages of 2 and 5. For both Matthews and Chukovsky, children have a natural affinity for the paradoxes they find in the strange culture that is adulthood. What adults have learned no longer to ponder, children are unafraid to face. What children seem to lack is not a subtle organized mind capable of abstract thinking but the adult's learned awareness that some questions are too tough to handle and ought therefore not be asked.

Adults have learned to organize ignorance. There are things to know and which could be found out. There are others too difficult ever to understand. About the former it is alright to ask when conditions are right for admitting ignorance—which is very seldom for most of us. About the latter it is best to keep silent. Adults know that to ask about the "unanswerable" is to commit a social faux pas. It is to be frivolous. Matthews has tried to convince us that these difficult questions are not frivolous but they are childlike. It is in the nature of children to be philosophical and of philosophy to be childlike.

It would be hard to read *Philosophy and the Young Child* without being reminded of that other philosopher who had such respect for children, Jean Jacques Rousseau. His words can stand as a fit summing up for Matthews argument and this review. "*Le maitre a encore beaucoup a apprendre de l'enfant.*" (The teacher always has more to learn from the child.) If you enjoy ironies as I do, you'll be pleased to know that this was the motto of the Institute Jean Jacques Rousseau at the University of Geneva of which Jean Piaget was for so many years the director.

References

- Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976.
- Chukovsky, Korei. *From Two to Five*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.