

REVIEW ESSAY

Gareth Matthews and the Philosophy of Childhood

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Abstract

Gareth Matthews believes that children are natural philosophers capable of asking and addressing philosophical problems. However, their inquisitiveness disappears through socialization. Matthews encourages adults to nourish children's thinking by inviting children to think with adults, by allowing them to take part in the thinking process of the community, in this case the community may be considered as the classroom or a family dinner where members of the family discuss matters which attract the curiosity of children. Whichever way, adults should be able to fashion themselves to children as adults who are thinking and are open to talking with children who are just beginning to explore their thoughts. With this being said, this extended book review will present Matthew's *Philosophy of Childhood* and how his thoughts can help us rethink how we view children and childhood.

Key words: *Philosophy, Children, Science, Teaching, Wonder*

Philosophy of Childhood

Gareth Matthews is prominent for his critique of traditional education where children are often limited to be mere followers of their teachers, concentrating on the transfer of knowledge, therefore, “underrating the voice of the child.”¹ His books *Philosophy and the Young Child* (1982), *Dialogues with Children* (1984), and *Philosophy of Childhood* (1994) provide us with evidence that children can indeed philosophize. These books are compilations of Matthews’ discussions with children on various topics such as ethics, art, mortality, and happiness, to name a few—here, we can easily recognize the philosophical bent of each discussion. Through the documentation of these discussions, he raises the point that doing philosophy is natural to humans; it is just through our organized socialization that philosophy slips away from people. What he tried to do in his written works is to re-establish that philosophy is a natural way of thinking by reintroducing philosophy to his students and readers. He poses questions that people might have asked during their younger years, questions like: “How can we be sure that everything is not a dream?” or “How can we be sure that we are ever awake?”²

In *Philosophy and the Young Child*, Matthews states that the philosophy of childhood must include the following discussions:

1. A conception of **what a child is**;

¹ David Kennedy and Nancy Vansieleghem, “What is Philosophy for Children, What is Philosophy with Children- After Matthew Lipman?”, *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 45, no. 2 (2011): 172.

² Gareth Matthews, *Philosophy and the Young Child*, (USA: Harvard University Press, 1980), I.

2. A conception of what the **goods of childhood are**;
3. A conception of what **cognitive interest and goals** are appropriate to childhood;
4. An assessment of what the **moral capacities** of children are; and
5. A framework for understanding **children's rights and responsibilities**, as well as parents' rights and **responsibilities** with respect to their children.³

He notes that the answers to these five desiderata, as he calls it, may be found in Aristotle's writings. However, he disagrees with Aristotle's take on children as he is against Aristotle's take on women and slaves. If we are to follow Aristotle's line of thinking, we can then surmise that the nature of children is to be potential adults and the goods of childhood are derivative from the goods of adulthood.⁴ Here, we can argue that the idea of childhood cannot be equated to something less than an adult, the whole idea of childhood must be taken separately from that of adults, and we are to do an injustice to the development of children if we are to look into their development alongside the adults' fullness. Matthews stresses the point that "there are some things that many children do better while they are still children, than they will ever do as adults."⁵ An example of this is child art—some of which are inventive, imaginative, colorful and

³ Gareth Matthews, *A Philosophy of Childhood* (Bloomington: The Poynter Center for the Study of Ethics and American Institutions, Indiana University, 2006), 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

free⁶—as the name suggests, it can only be done by children through a child’s gaze and imagination. The discussions about these five desiderata may be found in his book *Philosophy of Childhood* which will be discussed further in the latter part of this paper.

Critique of Developmental Psychology

Matthews was also critical of the Piagetian theory of development, because it did not make any allowance for the philosophical thinking of children. Children aged four are still in the stage of pre-operational thought, and yet, children at this age can already ask potent philosophical questions.⁷ He believes that “philosophical thinking in children has been left out of the account of childhood that developmental psychologists have given us.”⁸ Therefore, there cannot be a sweeping generalization on the development of children. Matthews was once asked, “What’s the thought of fourth graders like?” He could not answer the question precisely because we cannot point to a generalized theory of children’s development.

If a certain experiment group of children think in a particular way, it is illogical to claim that each child belonging to that same phase must think that way; an exemption to the said “norm” might mean that a particular child is experiencing a certain level of abnormality. No wonder, students who think beyond what they are “supposed” to think are labeled delinquents or problem students in class. According to Matthews, we need to consider

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gareth Matthews, *Philosophy of Childhood*, 2.

⁸ Ibid., 12.

that development does not just mean enlargement; we need to look into the cognitive, emotional and social development.⁹ However, we need to note that there is still no concrete definition of childhood; what we have are theoretical models to guide our research.

Developmental psychologists consider children to live in a pre-rational and pre-scientific world. Matthews is against such notions, because according to him, “children may understand something about the modern, scientific world better than most adults do.”¹⁰ He also defends the point that children may surprisingly be rational and wise.¹¹ He stresses that “developmentalists are concerned with the normal and standard and are almost bound to ignore such remarks and questions on purely methodological grounds.”¹² The capacity to philosophize cannot be measured by such experimentations and methods.

Matthews noted three points that developmental psychologists should address. First is that developmental psychologists are bound to ignore the discussions on the development of capacity—that is “to think philosophically and discuss basic questions openly.”¹³ Very few adults bother to raise philosophical questions and are not concerned whether philosophy is practiced well, let alone to think how philosophy can be taught to children, or how the ability to philosophize can be introduced to children. Second, he emphasizes that developmental psychologists limit the

⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰ Ibid., 28.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Gareth Matthews, *Dialogues with Children*, (USA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 116.

¹³ Ibid.

idea of development to biological models where a fully developed individual becomes the standard of development. In a paper written by Storme and Vlieghe, they argued that childhood “is an antidote to current societal developments—relates then to an experience that renders it impossible to remain who one is or is supposed to be.”¹⁴ This is in agreement with Matthews’ initial claim that the value of the self is lost in the process of socialization; in this case, Storme and Vlieghe claim that the experience of childhood might be useful in understanding the self. The article also suggests that “childhood is not the negation of adulthood . . . it should be taken as such, as the indeterminate openness that characterizes or correlates with the world.”¹⁵ Thirdly, Matthews opens the idea that since Piaget is a towering figure in developmental psychology, his method being influenced by Swiss and French culture, his line of thinking is more pretentious and more systematic. He suggests that the English-speaking world, on the contrary, has been characterized to be unpretentious. He laments over the fact that nowhere in developmental psychology can we find a section which discusses how children are able to develop philosophical thinking, let alone discussions on how to foster the inquisitiveness of children.¹⁶

Piaget made use of experiments to qualify children’s development. These experiments can easily be replicated and done with children as long as we use the same tools that Piaget used. Matthews specifies that Piaget made use of a technique to

¹⁴ T. Storme, and J. Vlieghe, “The Experience of Childhood and the Learning Society”, *Journal of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain*. 45, no. 2 (2011): 192.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁶ Matthews, *Dialogues with Children*, 118.

chart the intellectual development of children into three or four stages of progression.¹⁷ Piaget tried to outline the mastery of children and conclude that the child at a certain age is at a particular stage and so on. It would be difficult to conclude that a particular child is at a certain level of maturation which subscribes to the standard and norm of development. Philosophical progress cannot be measured and imposed at a certain age because philosophical maturation may be dependent on the exposure and experiences of the children. What Matthews is trying to argue here is that, these experiments reveal an age-related sequence which means that the age of children matters. There is a need to consider age-appropriate activities in such a way that it becomes futile to teach children a lesson that does not correspond to their particular stage. If we are to follow this line of reasoning, then, to teach philosophy to children who are in their “pre-rational” stage becomes more harmful than helpful. Matthews, however, insists that children are more than capable of thinking rationally and philosophically—this claim may not be backed up by any psychological theory or experimentation, but this conclusion has become very evident in his classes with children. He cannot propose an age-appropriate philosophizing wherein if a child is at age five he should be concerned with the problems of the external world or that at age seven he should be concerned with abstraction, because such is not the case; as he earlier proposed, philosophy is a natural activity of human beings and children are the more inquisitive ones.¹⁸

¹⁷ Matthews, *Philosophy and the Young Child*, 37–38.

¹⁸ Matthews, *Dialogues with Children*, 36–37.

Dialogues with Children

Proof to claims of a child's ability to philosophize may be found in Matthews' *Dialogues with Children*. Here, one finds the documentation of Matthews' philosophical discussions with students from St. Mary's Music School. Matthews started his classes with an incomplete narrative. The children would then start pitching in with their insights. After documenting the discussion, Matthews would return to the class with a finished story based on the discussion. One interesting discussion found in the book is the story of the ship *Ciudad de Inca*. Matthews made use of the story of this 1846 ship that sunk and was only recovered from the bottom of the sea in 1981. Upon its recovery, the ship was restored changing 85 percent of its timber. The exchanges from the class are as follows:

Matthews: What's the problem?

Donald: The problem is that . . . we want to find out which is which. Is the ship the old ship, or is the ship just a model, a replica, a copy of the original ship?

David-Paul: That's easy

Matthews: Why is it easy?

David-Paul: Perhaps the spirit of the old ship would still be there.

It's not really a new ship if it's still got some old timber . . . and the spirit of the old ship.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid., 37–38.

The children wanted to know how much of the *Ciudad de Inca* remained as the old ship with 85 percent of the ship's timber replaced. One suggested that if the keel remained then the spirit of the old ship remained, as in changing parts of a car but retaining its original machine making it the same old car. Or it could be the same as changing the bricks of an old castle—how many bricks need to be replaced to say that the old castle still remained. Again, these exchanges just prove Matthews' point—that children are capable of rationalizing and philosophizing.

Another story included in the book touched on ethics. The story is about a six-year old boy named Ian. He found himself alienated from his own house when three children of his parent's friends monopolized the television which kept him from watching his favorite program. He then raises the issue to his mother, "Why is it better for three people to be selfish than for one?"²⁰ Clearly, Matthews was presenting a utilitarian problem, and his students were quick to pick up on the argument.

David-Paul: They're going to visit your house once, you have to make a nice impression.

Martin: It's not very nice to come into someone's house and say 'we-want-to watch-the Moomins.'

David-Paul: By the way, isn't it a bit mean, though, because there are three people; with three people, they could all play together.

²⁰ Ibid., 91.

Martin: I would hate it, if I was watching TV happily and suddenly somebody comes up the driveway with three weird children. The mom says, ‘Go and watch TV,’ and they come up and say, ‘We want to watch the Moomins.’ I mean, they could easily have watched what Freddie was watching.

David-Paul: They have to respect other people’s rights as well. The Moomins are on almost every day²¹.

At this point, the students started qualifying, that if the Moomins was a series and what Ian wanted to watch was a series too, then, both could watch what they missed some other time. Here, Matthews was trying to introduce the idea of utilitarianism but the children did not take on from there.

Martin: It’s not really fair if three people get what they want and leave one person out. That one person will feel really hurt.

David-Paul: It depends on the ages. If one person is really old and the others are small, then the younger children should be allowed to watch their program.

Richard: No. You should respect your elders.

²¹ Ibid., 94.

- Matthews: You have two different principles.
Donald: I wouldn't exactly have minded it. I would say, "They only want to watch this one and then tomorrow they'll be gone and I can watch my program next time."²²

With this, Matthews introduced the idea of the Golden Mean; David-Paul then concluded that if everybody used it, it would be brilliant.²³ He concludes that children can act morally. He disagrees with Kohlberg's idea that children go through the pre-moral stage. In another article he discussed that if children's notion of morality will be anchored on or dependent on an adult's idea of morality and if a child soon realizes that the authority figures around them are morally flawed, then, their idea of what is moral fails.²⁴

Matthews gave a lecture to a fifth grade class in Japan. Here, he discussed the concept of happiness with the children. Roy, a fifth grade student, started the discussion by saying that he finds happiness in scratching an insect bite and would not care about anything else the moment he starts scratching.

- Yoshimoto: No matter how happy a person is, that person should have more desires than one . . . For each person complete happiness needs to include many more things to make that person happy.

²² *Ibid.*, 97.

²³ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁴ Matthews, "A Philosophy of Childhood," 17.

- Karini: Perfect happiness must last a long time. One happy moment is not enough for perfect happiness
- Student A: If scratching an insect bite is complete happiness, what happens when you have many insect bites? How will you even know which insect bite to scratch?
- Student B: Scratching an insect bite and enjoying it so much that, at the moment, you don't want anything else, is only one petal of the flower of happiness.²⁵

These two class discussions are evidence that children can truly think and articulate their thoughts on morality. We can see that if children are given the right time and venue they can discuss philosophical matters amongst themselves and with adults.

Evident in the works of Matthews is the manner in which he linked children's literature with philosophy. According to him, "there is an important strand of children's literature that is genuinely philosophical."²⁶ The danger, however, in children's fiction is that, it may be "motivated by the adult's unhealthy infatuation with an idealized child, an infatuation that may be sexual in some unconscious or repressed way."²⁷ The case of fairy tales and fantasies may be considered as an example of this danger—the author consistently presents the case of a princess

²⁵ Ibid., 19, emphasis mine.

²⁶ Matthews, *The Philosophy of Childhood*, 4.

²⁷ Ibid., 103.

who needs a prince to save her from evil curses; as a result young girls assimilate themselves with this kind of thinking. Therefore, teachers must have the ability to look into children's literature and be able to filter which ones are useful in articulating a particular topic in class.

He documented the use of the story "Many Moons" by James Thurber in his class; the story talks about perceptual illusions of the size of the moon. "His aim is to convince his students that philosophy is a natural activity that could prepare them for certain vocations."²⁸ He stresses the point that when children converse, professional philosophers can recognize their arguments to be philosophical. This is very evident in children ages three to seven, however, the older the children get, the less philosophical their questioning becomes. His hypothesis could be that children at this age become well-settled in school, and they have learned that only necessary questions are to be asked. This may then lead to a tendency for children to stop wondering.²⁹ He also used Arnold Lobel's story "Frog and the Toad." Frog and Toad started eating the cookies that Toad baked. They had already eaten too much but Toad still wanted another piece. After finishing up the cookies, Frog exclaimed that they needed willpower to resist eating the cookie.³⁰ Through this story children can start a discussion on what willpower means and how it could be possible for them to develop and make use of willpower.

²⁸ Ibid., 4.

²⁹ Ibid., 5.

³⁰ Matthews, *Philosophy and the Young Child*, 64.

In Matthews' book *Philosophy and the Young Child*, he narrated the story of John who for an instance thought about our lives being a part of a film. Here, John held his father's cello and the cello fell over and broke. He went to his mother and whispered "I wish everything was on a film and you could rewind it and do it over again . . . of course, then it would just happen again because there is only one film."³¹ We can see here that John is alluding to the idea of fatalism—where everything has been recorded in a film and whatever was happening was bound to happen already, or that what has happened can no longer be erased.

Conception of Philosophy of Childhood

Gareth Matthews, like Matthew Lipman, first got into thinking about the possibility of using philosophy with children when he encountered his own children asking about issues that are philosophical in nature. In his book, *The Philosophy of Childhood*, he narrates how their family cat, Fluffy, contracted fleas. His daughter, Sarah, who was only four years old at that time, asked how Fluffy got fleas. He then explained that the flea might have jumped off from the other cat to Fluffy. Sarah then remarked "How did that cat get fleas?" He gave the same explanation, to which Sarah retorted: "But Daddy, it can't go on like that forever; the only thing that goes on like that forever is numbers!"³² Matthews found similarities between Sarah's thinking to that of St. Thomas Aquinas' Cosmological Argument, from thereon, he

³¹ Ibid.

³² Matthews, *The Philosophy of Childhood*, 1.

became convinced that children are capable, not just of asking philosophical questions, but of deriving philosophical answers as well.

Matthews recounts that:

Lipman suggested in a symposium at the annual meetings of the American Philosophical Association that we might think of philosophy of childhood in analogy to the philosophy of religion, philosophy of science, philosophy of art, philosophy of history, and the many other already familiar, “philosophy of x” subjects currently recognized in college curricula.³³

He said that he resisted Lipman’s suggestion at first, but later on accepted it. He argues that our notion of childhood is historically, culturally and philosophically problematic. But these thoughts are “worthy of philosophical examination and critique.”³⁴ With this, he was able to teach the first course of Philosophy of Childhood at Mount Holyoke College. He continues to hope that he could at least help to secure the place of Philosophy of Childhood in the philosophy curriculum of the future.³⁵ He suggests that professional philosophers can help teachers and parents who are not well-exposed to philosophy to “recognize and appreciate some of the naively profound questions of childhood.”³⁶ This can be done by presenting philosophically charged arguments and thoughts by children so

³³ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 36–37.

that parents and teachers can recognize it when their own children and students bring it up; from here, the parents and teachers can participate in and encourage that line of thinking.³⁷ If parents and teachers do not recognize potent philosophical questions like: “Daddy, why don’t I see you double because I have two eyes? And I can see you with each one by itself?” or “How does the big bathroom door get through my small eye?”, then, they have missed the chance to explore the ideas better.

He notes that parents and teachers have been very busy trying to nurture and hone the children that they fail to notice that children have something to offer the adults—that is, a new philosophical perspective.³⁸ In most cases, we offer arguments which are highly questionable and yet when children start questioning our position we end up reprimanding them. This act leads to “impoverishing children’s intellectual lives, this diminishes our relationship with children and discourages in their children the spirit of independent intellectual inquiry.”³⁹ For adults to talk philosophy to children, they must be able to rid themselves of all defensiveness. Matthews stresses the point that at a certain moment, children see things with a fresher perspective.⁴⁰ Adults must be sensitive at all times, as children may at times be anxious to share what they think about a given situation. Adults must be capable to identify such moments and be able to address such anxiety rationally without shunning away the children’s ideas. Matthews encourages the adults to cultivate

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 14.

³⁹ *Philosophy and the Young Child*, 21.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 84–85.

children's innocence which shall enable the children to "puzzle and muse over the simplest things."⁴¹ This could be the key for children to continue being inquisitive and creative—this is a way to bar too much socialization from happening within the framework of a child's thinking.

Conclusion

Matthews' criticism of developmental psychology makes one realize that one may be objectified by modern science. The standardizing and labeling done by developmental psychologists actually hinders the exploration of the child's intellectual development. The convenient labeling of disorders that psychologists resort to bars the realization of the other potentialities of children. Also, the universalizing done in the educational system does not warrant the learning and development of children. Standardized testing and standardized pedagogy does not give enough room for the intellectual development of children. It makes children think within the structure dictated by their educators which is a very potent way of ending the inquisitiveness of children.

Matthews reminds us that "children have the ability to be much more independent thinkers than we normally allow them to be."⁴² The adults must continue to give children the opportunity to think for themselves. The school must not over-burden the children with too much work thereby leading the children to just merely repeat what their textbooks say as this activity discourages

⁴¹ Ibid., 94.

⁴² Matthews, *A Philosophy of Childhood*, 14.

them from thinking. The challenge for adults, both for the parents and the teachers, is to rethink their own set of knowledge and beliefs. He posits that if we only allow children to share their thoughts and musings, then we are giving them the chance to influence even the adults' mode of thinking.

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