

# The Philosophy of Childhood Gareth Matthews

## A Philosopher's View of Childhood

"Do you think there could be any such thing as the beginning of time?" I asked the dozen third and fourth graders in my philosophy discussion group in Newton, Massachusetts. (We had been trying to write a story about time travel.)

"No," several of the kids replied.

Then Nick spoke up. "The universe is everything and everywhere," he announced, and then paused. "But then if there was a big bang or something, what was the big bang in?"

Nick's question had long puzzled me, too. In my own case, hearing lectures on the "big bang" theory of the origin of the universe given by learned astrophysicists and cosmologists had never quelled the conceptual worry that Nick articulated so simply and directly.

At the time of this discussion Nick had just turned nine years old. The others in the group were anywhere from nine to ten and a half.

Not only did Nick have a genuine puzzle about how the universe could have begun, he also had a metaphysical principle that required beginnings for everything, the universe included. Everything there is, he said, has a beginning. As he realized, that principle reintroduces the problem about the universe. "How did the universe start?" he kept asking.

"The universe," said Sam, "is what everything appeared on. It's not really anything. It's what other things started on."

"So there always has to be a universe?" I asked.

"Yeah," agreed Sam, "there always has to be a universe."

"So if there was always a universe," I went on, "there was no first time, either."

"There was a first time for certain things," explained Sam, "but not for the universe. There was a first time for the earth, there was a first time for the stars, there was a first time for the sun. But there was no first time for the universe."

"Can you convince Nick that the universe has to always be there?" I asked Sam.

Sam replied with a rhetorical question. "What would the universe have appeared on?" he asked simply.

"That's what I don't understand," admitted Nick.

Sam's conception of the universe (what everything else appears "on") is reminiscent of Plato's idea of the "receptacle" in his dialogue *Timæus*: "... the mother and receptacle of all created and visible and in any way sensible things is not to be termed earth or air or fire or water, or any of their compounds, or any of the elements from which these are derived, but is an invisible and formless being which receives all things..." (*Timæus* 51A). On this view the universe itself never came to be; it is what other things come to be in, or "on." If, as Ross, another child in the same group, put the point later in our discussion, things "started out on vast blackness, then that's just the universe then; the universe is vast blackness."

I have said that Sam's conception is reminiscent of Plato's. But there is a respect in which Sam's idea may be superior to Plato's. The idea of a receptacle is the idea of a container. A container walls some things in and other things out. To wall things in and out it must have walls. Sam's idea of what other things appear "on" projects three-dimensional reality onto two dimensions, but it

allows us to think of the "ground of being" as having indefinite borders. Whether the universe is finite or infinite can be left indeterminate. By contrast, Plato's receptacle must be finite. Moreover, we must wonder what the nature of the receptacle's walls could be, though there is no answer to this question in Plato.

In our discussion Nick never gave up his principle that everything there is has a beginning. But he remained puzzled about how this principle could be applied to the universe itself. Every time he was asked what the universe could have first appeared on, he replied with engaging candor, "That's the part I don't get." Of course it was he who first raised this problem with his principle that everything there is has a beginning.

Many people are familiar with Saul Steinberg's *New Yorker* cover depicting the New Yorker's view of the country. Manhattan Island dominates the scene; the other boroughs of New York City are prominent, though smaller than Manhattan. San Francisco is to be seen in the distance at the other coast. And there is not much in between.

A philosopher's view of childhood is likely to be just as distorted. On the philosopher's view, children sit around conducting virtuoso discussions of mind-bending questions like 'Did the universe itself have a beginning, and if so, what did it begin on?' Although I have tried to document in my writings the claim that *some* children *sometimes* do this, even I would have to admit that this sort of activity is not the most obvious feature of childhood.

Still, it is worth pointing out that discussions such as the one I have just recorded can, and sometimes do, occur. There are at least two reasons why it is important to point this out. First, philosophical thinking in children has been left out of the account of childhood that developmental psychologists have given us. Even if philosophical thinking is far from the most prominent feature of childhood, its presence should be duly noted. For one thing, leaving it out encourages undeserved condescension toward chil-

dren. If the most daunting intellectual challenges that Sam and Nick face are to learn the twelve-times table and the passive form of the verb "to be," condescension toward these children as thinkers has some warrant in fact. But if Sam and Nick can raise for us in vivid and compelling form the puzzles of how the universe could have begun, then there are at least some contexts in which they should be considered our partners in a joint effort to understand it all.

There is a second reason why it is important to take due account of philosophical thinking in young children. Doing so helps us understand philosophy.

Much of philosophy involves giving up adult pretensions to know. The philosopher asks, "What is time, anyway?" when other adults assume, no doubt unthinkingly, that they are well beyond the point of needing to ask that question. They may want to know whether they have enough time to do the week's shopping, or to pick up a newspaper. They may want to know what time it is, but it doesn't occur to them to ask, "What is time?" St. Augustine put the point well: "What, then, is time? Provided that no one asks me, I know. But if I want to explain it to a questioner, I am baffled" (*Confessions* 11.14). Among the annoying questions that children ask are some that are genuinely baffling. In important part, philosophy is an adult attempt to deal with the genuinely baffling questions of childhood.

I can't remember asking myself, as a child, what time is. But I did puzzle over the beginning of the world. My puzzlement as a child of five or six took the form of the following question: 'Supposing that God created the world at some particular time, how is it that the world looks as though it had been going on forever?'

I know now that my problem in cosmogony was a bit like that of St. Thomas Aquinas. Like me, Aquinas accepted the Christian doctrine that God created the world, indeed, created it, Aquinas supposed, out of nothing. (I don't know now whether the *ex nihilo* part belonged to my theology as a six-year-old.) But Aquinas was

grand hypothesis runs into a counterexample. One simply incorporates the counterexample into the hypothesis!

Kristin's color hypothesis is not only fresh and exciting—at least as uniquely wonderful a gift to her father, I should say, as any one of the watercolor pictures she might have presented to him—it also recalls the thinking of the earliest philosophers we have any record of, the ancient Milesians. Like Kristin, the Milesians wanted to know what everything is made of. Thales said "Water" (presumably he thought that the earth was something like frozen or compacted water, and that air was very rarefied steam); Anaximander said "The infinite" or "The indefinite"; whereas Anaximenes said "Air." (I like Kristin's hypothesis better than any of these.)

A later anecdote from Kristin recalls another pre-Socratic philosopher, Parmenides. Kristin was five, and learning how to read. She was learning to recognize syllables and to sound them out so as to be able to recognize words. She was quite proud of her success.

Again, sitting on her bed talking to her father, she commented, "I'm sure glad we have letters."

Kristin's father was somewhat surprised at that particular expression of gratitude. "Why?" he asked.

"Cause if there was no letters, there would be no sounds," explained Kristin. "If there was no sounds, there would be no words . . . If there was no words, we couldn't think . . . and if we couldn't think, there would be no world."

Kristin's chain reasoning is breathtaking. It is also reminiscent of Parmenides' enigmatic fragment to *gar auto noein estin te kai einai* ("For the same thing is there both to be thought of and to be"). That might be understood to entail 'Only what can be thought, can be.' If, then, we grant Kristin her interesting assumptions that (1) without words nothing could be thought and (2) without letters there would be no words, we get the fascinating conclusion 'Without letters there could be no world.'

Both these anecdotes from Kristin show how the thought of a

also very respectful of Aristotle's arguments for the eternity of the world. He had, then, somehow, to reconcile the appearance of beginninglessness, as captured in Aristotle's rather impressive reasoning, with the revealed doctrine of creation, which, he thought, was an absolute beginning.

For myself—that childhood self—I came up with an analogy. Having posed my question to my mother and received no helpful response, I returned later to reassure her. "Don't worry, Mom," I said, "I think it's like a perfect circle someone has drawn. If you had been there when it was drawn, you would know where the circle begins. But as you look at it now, there's no way of telling. It's like a perfect circle, where the end connects up with the beginning without showing."

When now, sixty years later, I teach Aristotle or Aquinas to university students, I try to locate the questioning child in me and my students. Unless I do so, the philosophy we do together will lose much of its urgency and much of its point.

Let's return to the point about respecting children as partners in inquiry. Parents and teachers are often so impressed with the burdens they bear in having to nurture, instruct, reassure, and inspire their children that they fail to appreciate what children have to offer adults. One of the exciting things that children have to offer us is a new philosophical perspective.

Consider the case of Kristin, who was four years old. She was teaching herself to use watercolors. As she painted, she began to think about the colors themselves. Sitting on her bed, talking to her father, she announced, "Dad, the world is all made of colors."

Kristin's father, who, as I happen to know, wants to make sense of it all as much as his four-year-old daughter did, liked Kristin's hypothesis, and reacted positively. But, recognizing a difficulty, he asked her, "What about glass?"

Kristin thought for a moment. Then she announced firmly, "Colors and glass."

Like any good philosopher, Kristin knew what to do when one's

child may be a priceless gift to a parent or teacher with ears to hear. And both of them also give us reason to think of philosophy as, in part, an adult response to the questions of childhood.

The twentieth century has seen an amazing growth in the study of childhood. Two ideas have been central to the way childhood has been studied in our time. One is the idea that children develop and that their development is a *maturational* process. In part, maturation is, quite obviously, a biological process. Children grow bigger, their legs and arms grow longer, baby faces grow into older-looking faces, baby teeth fall out and are replaced by adult teeth, and so on. But maturation is also a psychological and social process. Baby talk, baby thoughts, and baby behavior are replaced by the talk, thoughts, and behavior of young children, then by that of older children, adolescents, and, finally, adults.

The second idea central to the recent study of childhood is that growth takes place in identifiable *stages*. As school teachers can testify, the stages of biological growth children experience can be correlated only roughly with their actual ages. Thus one child in a given class will tower over the rest, while another has yet to catch up with the class average. But the stages of biological, as well as intellectual and social, growth are at least broadly related to age. Putting the idea of maturation and the idea of a sequence of age-related stages together, we get the conception of child development as a maturational process with identifiable stages that fall into an at least roughly age-related sequence.

Clearly maturation has a goal; its goal is maturity. Early stages are superseded by later stages that are automatically assumed to have been less satisfactory. Thus the "stage/maturational model" of child development, as we can call it, which has found unquestioned acceptance in the study of childhood, has an evaluational bias built into it. Whatever the biological or psychological structures in a standard twelve-year-old turn out to be, the stage/maturational model of development guarantees, before any research is

done at all, that these structures will be more nearly satisfactory than the superseded structures of, say, a six-year-old.

In many areas of human development this evaluational bias seems quite appropriate. We don't want grown-ups, or even adolescents, to have to chew their adult-sized steaks with baby teeth. But when it comes to philosophy, the assumption is quite out of place. There are several reasons for this.

First, there is no reason whatsoever to suppose that, simply by virtue of growing up in some standard way, adolescents or adults naturally achieve an appropriate level of maturity in handling philosophical questions—in, for example, being able to discuss whether time might have had a beginning, or whether some super-computer might be said to have a mind.

Second, it should be obvious to anyone who listens to the philosophical comments and questions of young children that these comments and questions have a freshness and inventiveness that is hard for even the most imaginative adult to match. Freshness and inventiveness are not the only criteria for doing philosophy well: discipline and rigor should also count heavily. And children can be expected to be less disciplined and less rigorous than their adult counterparts. Still, in philosophy, as in poetry, freshness and inventiveness are much to be prized.

I recently asked a college class to respond, in writing, to Tim's question from the beginning of *Philosophy and the Young Child*: "Papa, how can we be sure that everything is not a dream?" A mother in my class recalled that her daughter, then three and a half, had once asked, "Mama, are we 'live' or are we on video?" This child's question obviously bears an important resemblance to the traditional dream question. But it is also a delightfully fresh and new question, one that could not have been conceived before TV, indeed before the development of video cameras and VCRs.

Some features of the dream problem carry over into the video problem. Thus just as I might have had the thought, in my dream, that I am awake, so the word "live" might appear on the screen

when I am watching a video. But some features are new. Unlike the dream problem, the video problem suggests that our lives are already on tape, just waiting to be shown.

So children are often fresh and inventive thinkers. All too often, maturity brings with it staleness and uninventiveness. This is a second reason for rejecting the evaluational assumption built into the stage/maturational model of child development.

Third, Descartes taught us to do philosophy by "starting over." Instead of assuming the correctness of what my teachers have taught me, or what the society around me seems to accept, I am to make a fresh beginning to see if I can show by some means of my very own that I really do know whatever it is I claim to know. As college students soon learn in their first philosophy course, it isn't easy to rid oneself of adult assumptions, even temporarily, and even for a fairly circumscribed purpose. It isn't easy, that is, for adults. Children have far less of a problem. In a certain way, then, adult philosophers who follow Descartes in trying to "start over" are trying to make themselves as little children again, even if only temporarily. That is hard for adults. It is unnecessary for children.

It isn't that "starting over" is all there is to doing philosophy. That isn't true at all. But learning to be comfortable with "naive" questions is an important part of doing philosophy well. Thus for this reason, as well as for the other two, when it comes to doing philosophy, the evaluational assumption of the stage/maturational model gets things all wrong.

Like the New Yorker's view of the United States, my view of children as little philosophers is a distortion. But so also is the conventional view of childhood as a development through a sequence of roughly age-related stages that aims at maturity. Sometimes, it seems, the best way to correct one distortion is to pair it with an appealing, but opposed, distortion. I hope that that is true in this case.

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# Theories and Models of Childhood

Like many parents of our generation, my wife and I raised our children with a tattered copy of Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care* close at hand. When a child's fever shot up in the middle of the night, it was comforting to find Dr. Spock saying, "Between the ages of 1 and 5 years, children may develop fever as high as 104°." And when a neighbor's child, at six months, still had no teeth, it was reassuring to be able to read to the neighbor from Dr. Spock, "One baby gets his first tooth at 3 months, another not till a year. Yet both are healthy, normal infants."

At the beginning of the chapter titled "Your Baby's Development," however, Dr. Spock adopts a somewhat different tone. It is as if he were leaning back in his swivel chair and expatiating on grander themes. Section 351, which begins this chapter, carries the bold-print caption, "He's repeating the whole history of the human race." This first paragraph continues:

There's nothing in the world more fascinating than watching a child grow and develop. At first you think of it as just a matter of growing bigger. Then, as he begins to do things, you may think of it as "learning tricks." But it's really more complicated and full of meaning than that. Each child as he develops is retracing the whole history of mankind, physically and spiritually, step by step. A baby starts off in the womb as a single tiny cell, just the way the first living thing appeared in the ocean. Weeks later, as he lies in the