

The Philosopher's Child

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Why childhood

Most contemporary philosophers take for granted that human beings are as much part of the natural world as lions or tigers. When they face philosophical difficulties about Mind, they feel that they cannot appeal to any transcendent, other-worldly realities. Whatever explains our capacities as conscious, intelligent, social animals must lie comfortably within the natural order of things. And yet they find terrible difficulties in trying to explain the relationship between ourselves and everything else. They still see a world-splitting chasm between our cognitive capacities and the properties of the physical world. And not only that, they find another gap which causes them at least as much trouble - the gap between ourselves and the rest of the animate world. Of course we believe that we evolved from other forms of life. But how can we imagine a smooth shift from the experience of brute animals to human experience. Given that animals have different sorts of experience from ours, how can there be a continuity between our experience and the experience of chimpanzees or molluscs? How can we imagine what it is like to be a bat?

There is another continuity problem closer to home: what have we to say about the relationship between the experience of infants and of adults? Perhaps we can be more optimistic about this continuity problem. After all children have the same physiology as adults; they are ours; once we were one of them; they are all around us, crawling all over us, at all hours of day and night. How familiar. What's more, they are, barring grave misfortune or mistreatment, en route to us. Surely there cannot be much of a problem in philosophically tracking the child's progress from helpless babe to the small child competently speaking her mother tongue, selecting channels on TV and listening to her iPod? But down the ages, philosophers have managed to find it mysterious. The result is a tradition back to Plato of down-grading childhood experience.

In the *Meno* Socrates purports to show that ***we do not learn, and that what we call learning is only a process of recollection***. He demonstrates his point by eliciting geometric theorems from an uneducated slave boy by just asking him questions (he tells him nothing, gives him no information). His conclusion is:

... if there have been always true thoughts in him, both at the time when he was and was not a man, which only need to be awakened into knowledge by putting questions to him, his soul must have

always possessed this knowledge, for he always either was or was not a man?

The questioning of the slave-boy in the *Meno* amounts to a denial of the possibility of learning. Socrates can allow no middle ground between absence of knowledge and **true thoughts** for ***he always either was or was not a man?*** One of the deep-set Platonic assumptions is that the Perfect is intelligible and the Imperfect unintelligible, including the provisional, the temporary, the on-its-way. The transience of childhood is no country for eternal ideas. The denial of learning means that childhood is not a period in which the psyche grows and develops. It is a disguise the psyche takes on, or a benighted state it has been condemned to.

Descartes thought that he had to disown childhood before he could begin his philosophical enterprise. Discounting childhood was the essential first step towards philosophical enlightenment:

It is now some years since I detected how many were the false beliefs that I had from my earliest youth admitted as true, and how doubtful was everything I had since constructed on this basis; and from that time I was convinced that I must once for all seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build anew from the foundation, if I wanted to establish any firm and permanent structure in the sciences.

You may think that I am misrepresenting Descartes by calling this disowning or discounting childhood: he is attacking inherited opinions and prejudices, not early experience. However the connection between uncritically held beliefs and childhood is not accidental: childhood is a phase of human life characterized by cognitive dependence; it lacks the autonomy of which the *Cogito ergo sum* is the inner core. Descartes means it when he says that childhood is an unfortunate necessity; he thinks we would be much better without it, if it were not for the tiresome necessity that we have to be brought up:

... because we were all children before we were men and because it was necessary for us to be governed for a long time by our appetites and our supervisors, who were often at odds with each other, with

neither of them perhaps advising us always for the best, it is almost impossible that our judgments are as pure and solid as they would have been if we had had the total use of our reason from the moment of our birth and had never been led by anything but our reason.ⁱ

Childhood is, from the point of view of knowledge, a liability because being your own boss, making up your mind, seeing things clearly for yourself are essential to understanding. It is another instance of the continuity problem: how can there be middle ground between the infant who depends on others for everything and the philosophical hero who stands on his own two cognitive feet?

Spinoza went even further. He wrote:

So ... we see that no one pities an infant, because it cannot speak, walk, or reason, or lastly, because it passes so many years, as it were, in unconsciousness.ⁱⁱ

He suggests that children are not really conscious for the same reason that, notoriously, Descartes denied consciousness to animals altogether. He thought that experience without rationality was equivalent to unconsciousness.

It is tempting to think that this downgrading of childhood experience is a peculiarity of ancient philosophers which is of no relevance to the way we think nowadays. But that would be a mistake. There are contemporary theorists who go in the opposite direction - that is, they have a higher opinion than the philosophers I have cited, of the capacities of the very young - but they share the same underlying logic of the traditional down-graders. Their strategy is to defend the cognitive wealth of childhood experience, by upping the ante on the child's rationality. For example, recent research shows that babies are aware of and interact with other people much earlier than had been thought - at least than had been thought by previous researchers. To explain their communicative competence it seems we have to attribute to them a Theory of Mind. That is, the infant interacting with its mother has to have a concept of belief and a *theory* about the beliefs held by its mother. This explains why Alison Gobnik, a leading researcher in developmental psychology, says, with malice aforethought, in a lecture you can find on Youtube, that a baby's thinking is *like the thinking of the most brilliant scientistⁱⁱⁱ*.

Why have theorists painted themselves into this corner - unable to decide whether babies are unconscious or brilliant scientists? Partly because of the tendency to identify experience with rationality (defined in a particular way); and going along with that, a rejection of the cognitive value of up-bringing. In infancy we assimilate opinions which are produced in us from a source of which we have no knowledge and over which we have no control; we acquire habits of thinking and feeling acquired God knows how. Infancy is an outrage to thinkers like Descartes and Spinoza because it is a stage of non-rationality out of which a rational being develops. Plato and Alison Gobnik, on the other hand, think that babies are, like the Scarlet Pimpernel, damned, elusive theorists in disguise.

The attempt to avoid this dilemma reveals weaknesses not just in our accounts of childhood but in our general theory of mind. Rethinking childhood encourages us to re-examine how we become and remain embedded in the world; it brings home to us how dependent we are on others not just for our survival but for the way we think and act. In general, it forces us to think of ourselves in less individualistic and rationalist terms.

Domiciled in the world

During childhood the fundamental structures of our orientation to the world and to other people are put in place. The child grows to have confidence in the people around her and to fit more or less comfortably into her environment. But infants are not intellectuals; they do not draw conclusions about the physical and social world on the basis of evidence. Their embeddedness in the world does not consist in evidence-based beliefs reaching all the way down. Professor Dawkins said in the programme *Beautiful Minds: The only reason you should believe X is because there is evidence for X*. The problem is that structural elements of our knowledge and belief have to be in place before we can ask for evidence or draw conclusions. If the psychological development of childhood cannot be captured in terms of acquiring more and more beliefs then the changes infants undergo, the transitions they are caught up in, cannot be expected to answer up for themselves in the same way as beliefs.

Traditional approaches to developmental psychology assume that, on the basis of its encounters with the physical world, the child constructs its idea of the social world: it argues from the impersonal to personal. But perhaps the

personal comes first: we are shaped from birth by constant, insistent, personal interactions which provide the basis on which we arrive at objective accounts of the impersonal world?

The mediation of others

The child comes at the world through the mediation of other people. It cannot get to know the world unless it is introduced to it. The mother presents things to the child; she picks the child up and turns it towards interesting objects; she introduces it to other people and the dog. Recently there has been a lot of research into what is called 'joint attention'. Up to the age of 4 to 5 months infants look mainly at their mothers. Between 6 and 9 months, their gaze alternates between objects and adults and the child begins to follow the gaze of those with whom it interacts. From 10 to 12 months, pointing and more sophisticated forms of gaze-following develop, the child's attention moving from adult to object and from object to adult. All of this occurs before the age of 2 when, it is generally accepted, a child is capable of expressing opinions which it understands might be true or false, about objects even in their absence. These observations suggest that the child's sense that there are objects distinct from itself develops out of its interaction with other people. The triangle between infant, mother and object is closed by endorsements and validations not by exchanges of information or belief. Childhood experience is essentially familial and communal. The Kantian challenge *Dare to know* does not apply; it is more like an invitation to belong. We can learn eventually to think of the world in increasingly non-personal terms but only if we have first been domiciled within it.

Language

There seems to be a tendency among philosophers to represent us as sight-seers who have just dropped into the world for a look around. The acquisition of language is an important case in point. Thomas Hobbes, for example, did not believe a word of the Genesis story of creation but he still thought the inaugural moment of language was well represented by the image of animals trouping past Adam so he could give them names: *The first author of speech was God himself, that instructed Adam how to name such creatures as He presented to his sight.*^{iv} The pre-linguistic Adam is a disinterested observer of the scene and he invents language by bestowing names on things that appear before him, as if God had employed him to make an inventory of the animal kingdom.

But children are not so disengaged. The toddler totters with grim determination and boundless energy into the upright world; she struggles equally hard towards the speaking world. As Paul Cellan says: *I went with my very being toward language.*^v We get to a *second* language through our first language; but how do we get to our first language?^{vi} Wittgenstein complains that philosophers think that children come to speak in roughly the same way we learn a foreign language:

as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one. Or again: as if the child could already think only not yet speak. And "think" would here mean something like "talk to itself".^{vii}

One thing is certain: we are not *taught* our mother tongue. The educationalist William Hull says: *If we taught children to speak, they'd never learn.* Nor do we *train* children to speak. We train them to do some things. Potty training for example. Or how to use a spoon. These are particular activities and we produce the desired behaviour through repetition reinforced by incentives and disincentives. But that is not how we acquire language. If children are not taught nor trained to speak, do they pick it up through imitation, like a mynah bird? Certainly our ways of speaking are moulded by those around us. Aspects of speaking come through imitation, a Geordie accent for example. But a child does not become a language-user through imitation but through interaction. She gains a voice by playing a part in the various dynamics of personal communication: asking and answering questions; giving instructions, telling off; consoling; joking. She adopts the tone of voice before she acquires the vocabulary. The vocative case comes first. She is a conversationalist before she is a reporter.

The American philosopher Stanley Cavell has a nice observation about the quality of the child's language: how world-involving and how animated it is, even when the vocabulary is small and the grammar simple:

The child's language has a future. But when I try to imagine adults having just these words ... I find that I imagine them moving sluggishly, as if dull-witted, or uncomprehending, like cave men ... in contrast [there is] the way the child 'says' its four words - with what charming curiosity, expectation, excitement, repetitions.^{viii}

The child does not build her language piece by piece; she lives it, lives in it and through it, from the start.

Entitlement precedes justification

As the child develops she is not just gaining more information but acquiring a new status. She is establishing her place in the conversation. She has to have the right to express herself first in pre-linguistic behaviour and then she has to acquire the right to speak. The people around her recognise her authoritative stance in communicative relationships, including eventually the institutions of language. Here Wittgenstein's remark kicks in: ***To use a word without justification does not mean to use it without right.***^{ix} The child has a right to speak up for itself before it is in the game of justifying anything it says. The mother's first task is to bring the child to stage when she can say 'hello', wave goodbye and tell us where it hurts. The mother does not wait. From the first day she addresses the child and until it responds for itself, she responds for it. She invites the child into the liminal territory of language. She does this not by reasoning but by acknowledging the infant as the new kid on the block.

Language fits

Wittgenstein wrote in the *Philosophical Investigation* §336: ***A French politician once wrote that it was a peculiarity of the French language that in it words occur in the order in which one thinks them.*** He was being funny but there is something right about it: we do not just like our native language. It fits us like a glove. Better: we come to fit our mother tongue.

Paul Celan, in his poem 'Voices', captures in concrete imagery the depth and diversity of the grip that language has on our sensibilities. He lists ways in which we engage with language and language engages with the world:

Voices nicked into/The green of the water's surface
Voices from the nettle path
Voices from which your heart/Shrinks back into your mother's heart
Voices guttural, in the rubble
Jacob's voice^x
Voices in the bowel of the ark.
No voice.^{xi}

Stephen Fry's recent programme about intonation (23/8/12) in his series 'English Delight' emphasised the importance of intonation to the meaning of what we say. But even there he slipped into a distinction between language proper and the emotive force of language. By 'language proper' I guess he means those aspects of language that the early analytic philosophers focused on: sense and reference, the functional bits of language understood as an impersonal system that allow us to identify items in the world and say something meaningful about them. The idea is that once that machinery is in place, we can turn our attention to the aesthetic aspects of language.

But to be able to speak a language involves much more than learning a vocabulary or mastering some syntactic rules. We have to assume the dynamics of language: we have, for example, to acquire a sense that some things *must* be said, 'please', 'thank you', 'sorry'; and some things that *must not* be said - words which are too rude to be voiced but which hide there in the language with the power to subvert. Obscene and polite words lie on the page equally but we relate very differently to them. We develop a sense of the power of language: it is not a neutral medium of communication waiting to be used, but an interpersonal flow with its own currents and eddies. We come to modulate the way we speak, acquiring different tones of voice. We get to know how we must talk among friends, parents or teachers. It is curious that infants acquire many aspects of these dynamics and rehearse them before they acquire vocabulary or grammar.

The quality of childhood experience

Language, like our other ways of acquiring a self-conscious understanding of the world, is not a spectator sport; it requires active and passionate engagement with the physical and social worlds. Our experience of the world is from the start emotionally charged. This indeed is one of the main reasons Rationalist affect disdain for childhood: before the age of reason, they thought, children are ruled by desire and emotion. But the affective entanglements of childhood are not dysfunctional; they form the basis for later more cerebral management of our life - a basis to which as adults we try, with mixed success, to return. The affective connections to people and places that we build during infancy and childhood are what make us feel we belong inside life.

In *Zettel* Wittgenstein writes: ***Nothing could induce me to put my hand into a flame--although after all it is only in the past that I have burnt myself. The belief that fire will burn me is of the same kind as the fear that it will burn me. I shall get burnt if I put my hand in the fire: that is certainty. That is to say: here we see the meaning of certainty. (What it amounts to, not just the meaning of the word "certainty".)***^{xii}

This apprehension of the environment as dangerous is bedded down into the mind and personality of the animal or child. Our conviction shows itself as an emotion or a belief depending on the circumstances.

We mustn't overlook the intensity of these first experiences; the way the environment and body collude in early experience. The shapes, appearance, smells and textures weave themselves into the fabric of our personalities. As Howard Eiland says, ***the child is initiated into the secret life of ordinary objects.***^{xiii}

Long before we can verbalise any of this, as Walter Benjamin puts it ***the rustling of the branches initiated me into a knowledge to which I was not yet equal.***^{xiv} Indeed we may never become equal to it, never be able to achieve explicit understanding.

The liminal child

The child is constantly moving through border territory. She is aware of the shifting ground and of her own liminal status. She is unstable and dependent; the world she is moving into is partially understood. She is in transition and she knows it. This is the condition of early experience that philosophers find difficult to acknowledge, let alone describe. Compare this sense of being-in-the-making with two classical accounts of our awareness of our finitude.

The sense of our limitation is at the dead centre of Cartesian philosophy. It begins as an epistemic notion: we are aware of ourselves as doubting consciousnesses; the experience of uncertainty and the search for foundations, the yearning for intuitive knowledge and total clarity finally condenses into the

contrast between our finite selves and the infinite God. The sceptical dynamic of First Philosophy ensures that we cannot mistake ourselves for God; and it resolves itself into the contrast between the self-knowledge of the *Ego Dubitans* and its innate idea of the Perfect Being.

John Locke, on the other hand, has a more down to earth view: the child's understanding is objectively limited but subjectively complete. He takes the example of what we understand by the word 'gold'. From an objective point of view the child knows little about gold; but what she understands is, from her point of view, complete.

This is so necessary in the use of language, that in this respect the knowing and the ignorant, the learned and the unlearned, use the words they speak (with any meaning) all alike. They, in every man's mouth, stand for the ideas he has, and which he would express by them. A child having taken notice of nothing in the metal he hears called gold, but the bright shining yellow colour, he applies the word gold only to his own idea of that colour, and nothing else.^{xv}

I have read that passage to myself and students for decades. Only quite recently did it strike me that it is seriously wrong. The child and the adult are not 'all alike' 'in the use of language' or in any other way of making sense of the world. When the child engages with the world she is not engaging with her idea of the world, complete as far as it goes and with 'nothing else'. She is aware of the fact that she is experiencing a world she barely understands through the gift of other people. Being aware of her cognitive dependence and instability is part of her experience. It is not innately constructed through divine coordinates, nor by a reference, which becomes possible only much later, to the more extensive knowledge of experts.

Border territory

If the child is going to be inducted into the human world, she has to be able to move into it. The cultured world does not just surround the child, it becomes available; it is made available. The child cannot be dropped by parachute into the cultured world.

Our socialisation, including acquiring our first language, is not like learning a formal system like chess. The chess world cannot be entered gradually. Understanding any bit of it involves understanding the whole system. You cannot know, for example, what the King is without understanding checkmate and castling. It's all or nothing. In a sense, you have to be parachuted into chess, because the game has to be taken on as a whole. Like an enemy agent you are dropped into alien territory and you have to adopt a new identity at one go. If you are detected in transition, you will be as gauche as the British pilots in 'Allo, Allo'.

It helps if you have mastered other simpler games before learning to play chess but there is no point at which the rules of snakes and ladders morph into rules of chess. You may be attracted to the game for all sorts of reason but they will not be chess reasons. When she was 4, my grandchild, Edith, liked to play chess - but without the board, which she thought a silly limitation on what she could do with the pieces. She liked the shinny, unusual shapes or she imagined the pieces were characters in a story. She may be drawn into learning the game through this make-believe and fantasy. She can have the ambition to win at this new game which she does not know how to play because she has played other games and likes winning at whatever. But she cannot want to checkmate her opponent until she has understood what the point of the game is. And the point of the game is internal to game^{xvi}. She has to take it on trust until she has mastered the essentials.

But the child acquiring her first language does not take anything on trust. She is a paid up member of the club from the start. Baby talk is talk from the word go. There is no chess equivalent of baby talk.

The role of imaginative play

The way children manage to live in these border lands is through play and imagination. I don't mean by going off in a reverie but by engaging freely with the world around it.

Walter Benjamin has some illuminating observations along these lines:

For children are particularly fond of haunting any site where things are being worked on. They are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognise the face that the world turn directly and solely to them. In using these things, they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artefact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their small world of things within the greater one.^{xvii}

The child is not just experimenting with the detritus left around by adults or with toys, detritus deliberately designed for their use. She is testing herself in various roles - mother, carpenter, gardener, chess-player. Her thinking emerges in the form of analogies, allegories, associations, attitudinal and emotional contiguities.

I started off by comparing the problem of understanding children to the problem of understanding animals. We find it difficult to talk about animal minds because their experience, we assume, is very different from our own. It is as if we are trying to build a bridge over from us to them but we cannot survey the ground on the other side. But with children the problem lies deeper: their experience is not just different it is unstable. And worse than that: it is not just that their experience that is unstable, they themselves are in the making. The other side is under construction at the same time as the bridge. We mustn't discount infant experience because it is transient, dependent or preparatory. We must not minimise its value because of the expectation that it will soon give way to more independent forms of experience.^{xviii} One reason is that we do not leave behind this infant grounding in the world; it remains the framework of our thoughts and feelings throughout life.

Appendix

Abstract

1. There is a continuity problem concerning childhood.
2. Philosophers have discounted childhood and upbringing
3. Rethinking childhood:
 - How we are embedded in the world
 - How we depend on others
4. Our relationship to our environment
 - is not evidence-based
 - moves from the personal to the impersonal
5. Language:
 - conversation before reporting
 - conversational rights
6. Experience: affective and engaged
7. Childhood: limited and liminal.

ⁱ Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Part II

ⁱⁱ Spinoza. *Ethics*, Excerpts Part V, Of the Power of the Understanding, or of Human Freedom

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.ted.com/talks/alison_gopnik_what_do_babies_think.html

^{iv} Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Ch. IV Of Speech

^v Paul Cellan, John Felstiner, 1995, p. xvi

^{vi} St Augustine, *Confessions*: 1.8.13 *Passing hence from infancy, I came to boyhood, or rather it came to me, displacing infancy. Nor did that depart - (for whither went it?) - and yet it was no more. For I was no longer a speechless infant, but a speaking boy. This I remember; and have since observed how I learned to speak. It was not that my elders taught me words (as, soon after, other learning) in any set method; but I, longing by cries and broken accents and various motions of my limbs to express my thoughts, that so I might have my will, and yet unable to express all I willed, or to whom I willed, did myself, by the understanding which Thou, my God, gavest me, practise the sounds in my memory.*

^{vii} PI §32

^{viii} [Cavell 1996 pp. 278, 294]

^{ix} Op. cit. §289

^x And Jacob went near unto Isaac his father; and he felt him, and said, The voice *is* Jacob's voice, but the hands *are* the hands of Esau. Genesis 27: 22

^{xi} Felstiner, p. 98

^{xii} Wittgenstein, Zettel, §466 – 474

^{xiii} Eiland, Preface to *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, p. xiv

^{xiv} *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, Walter Benjamin, Harvard 2006, p. 39

^{xv} Locke, *Essay on Human Understanding*, Bk III, ch 1

^{xvi} Does a man think, then, because he has found that thinking pays? - Because he thinks it is advantageous to think? (Does he bring his children up because he has found it pays?) PI §467

^{xvii} Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Harvard, 1996, Vol. 1, p. 408

^{xviii} *in identifying the intentions and thoughts of a little child there can be some room for doubt which we minimize by pointing to the expected future verbalizations of the child.*

Tove Österman, 'MacIntyre and Meaningfulness: On the Continuity between Human and Animal Rationality' Forskarseminarium i filosofi 18.9 2006, Filosofiska institutionen, Åbo Akademi