Book Review

Gareth Matthews, The Child's Philosopher

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Review by Wendy C. Turgeon

This new book from the Routledge series, Philosophy for Children Founders, is a masterful and completely engaging account of the impact Gareth Matthews had on the movement(s) loosely labeled "Philosophy for/with Children." I was familiar with Matthew's three main books, *Philosophy and the Young Child* (1982), *Dialogues* (1984), and *Philosophy of Childhood* (1996) but I discovered in this volume a wealth of new reflections about Matthews's work, his own carefully crafted arguments and connections to Greek philosophy, and thirdly, how his legacy lives on in the scholarship and practice of his "philosophical descendants."

The first thing to note is the lengthy section of quotes from early readers who advocate for this text; renowned philosophers, educators, administrators, P4C practitioners, and authors from around the world comment on the value of this collection of carefully crafted essays. While most books come with a couple of endorsements from scholars in the field, this one conveys a level of genuine enthusiasm and engagement from widely diverse academic areas. They invite the reader to take it seriously and demonstrate how wide is his audience.

The two editors have organized the text into five sections: Matthews on philosophy and children's literature, on children's philosophical thinking, his approach to being a Socratic teacher of a particular sort, his astute criticism of developmental psychology, and finally, his introduction to the new field of philosophy of childhood. Each section opens with an essay that explores how Matthews approaches the topic at hand. The authors of these essays often knew him personally and the warmth of their relationship comes through their account, but they always take a careful look at his extraordinary strengths and sometimes misses in each account. Each contributor is an acknowledged scholar and recognized practitioner in doing philosophy with children. These authors hail from around the world, signaling the impact of this one pioneer in child philosophy. Following the introductory essay in each section are two or three essays by Matthews himself, chosen from his many books and articles, including an interview as the final excerpt.

What is particularly striking about this volume is the interconnectedness of the essays. The invited authors reference one another's work here as well as the included writings by Matthews. This creates a seamlessly integrated text that draws the reader into a living conversation among all contributors. Unfortunately, as Matthews passed away in 2011, he cannot join in the conversation except through his published work. I can imagine him patiently wanting to engage and respond to each author.

Before entering the five thematic sections on Matthews, the reader will encounter two important "doors" to pass through. Editors Gregory and Laverty have collaborated on an introduction which shares the life and scholarship of Matthews, and details his impact through three channels: how children's literature captures "philosophical whimsy" (Matthew's own word), his unique approach to philosophy for children as contrasted with the Lipmanian approach, and thirdly, his development of the field of philosophy of childhood, especially in opposition to the denigrating effects of developmental psychology which privileges the adult (often male) experience as normative. This opening essay will serve to orient the readers who may not be familiar with Matthew's work but also will assist those who are so familiar to stand back and appreciate the shape of Matthew's thinking about philosophy and about children. A quick perusal of their sources at the end of their piece will serve to guide novice readers into the significant work published in philosophy with children.

The second introductory essay, "Time and place for Philosophy," is by the noted philosopher, Stanley Cavell. Cavell opens with an account of his long-term relationship with Matthews and their shared interest in human reflection and how one stage of life connects to another in terms of thinking both in process and content. In this essay, he ranges across open topics such as teaching, the child as proto-philosopher/scientist, and Wittgenstein's contributions to these questions. What Cavell's essay contributes to this volume is the important commentary that we must be cautious about assuming we understand children, adolescence, even adulthood simply because we have (most likely) lived all three "stages of" or passages through these regions of human experience. He also demonstrates the seriousness with which we must take the work of Matthews and not corral it into a ghetto of "philosophy with children" as if that had no relevance for the larger philosophical community. Matthews himself, as a respected scholar of ancient and medieval philosophy, worked hard within professional philosophical circles to signal the importance of childhood and philosophy by children for all of us. Cavell hits that message home.

The following five sections explore the themes mentioned above. Part One begins with an essay by Karin Murris whose own work in children's literature is well known. While she offers a masterful account of Matthew's use of children's literature to explore problematic issues and enjoy philosophical whimsy, she offers a thoughtful critique of both why Matthews contributions are so very important but also where they might fall short. She brings in her own research on the ways in which childhood has been colonialized and objectified so as to deny the child agency or assume what that agency can or should be. While remaining a staunch advocate for using children's stories, she reminds us to be watchful for the ways we adults can shape the reading to suit our fixed conceptual understandings of what childhood is. Matthews, using primarily Western/American stories, may have missed opportunities to problematize the reading of the stories and the importance of the images that usually accompany them. Despite her caveat, she offers a clear portrait of Matthews' groundbreaking work

promoting children's literature as genuinely philosophical and entertaining seriously the ideas of children as thinkers. Following her introductory essay are three reprints by Matthews which explore, in turn, the naturalness of the philosophical impulse for (many) children as captured in the stories they enjoy, a range of examples of traditional philosophical questions (thinking about causality, religion, meaning of life, ethics) as captured in popular children's stories, and finally, three of his columns on stories and how they exhibit opportunities to explore such questions.

Part Two focuses on Matthews' view of the child as philosopher. This indeed is the opening essay by Stephanie Burdick Shepherd and Cristina Cammarano. The opening dilemma is the debate over whether philosophy for children must be grounded in a philosophical tradition with clearly trained philosophers leading the path or whether anyone can do philosophy with children using regular language through engagement with narratives. They depict Matthews as countermanding this conflict through his own work and writings. They present three key points: an awareness of the philosophical tradition allows one to recognize the child as philosopher; the tradition can offer those wonderful puzzles captured by adult philosophers for children to ponder; and thirdly, seeing the child as a philosopher returns philosophy to the idea of a mode of living, not simply an academic subject available to few (p. 87). In their essay, they walk the reader through Matthews' reasons for why he claims that children are natural philosophers, and they follow that up with a careful look at some critiques of his approach, generally weighing the arguments in favor of Matthews. Matthews does not deny that there are some differences between what adult and child philosophers are doing but we are presented with reasons not to see these as adversarial or even as moving towards some normative standard so much as being complementary. One of the ideas the authors introduce and focus upon is the power of philosophy to "allow for the cultivation of an emerging grandparent self as well as an eternal child-self" (p. 99). In some ways I am reminded of Murris' warning not to segregate human experience into categories but to be more fluid and open. Burdick Shepherd and Cammarano end their review with an honest consideration of the challenge that doing philosophy with children could be detrimental to them. But here too Matthews has considered this and reminds us that children, like adults, have different experiences and following their lead, rather than some age-developmental chart, is the honest way to acknowledge their genuine curiosity and thoughtfulness.

The paired essays by Matthews explore Matthews' experience with a discussion with seventh graders on holiness sparked by a reading of Leviticus and the Euthyphro and a delightful foray into ancient philosophy (excerpts from Lucretius, Plato, and Zeno) and how young people offered cogent and startling creative resolutions to these classic quandaries. I was particularly struck by the young girl, Anna, who responded to the ring of Gyges story: "…but then, with a magic ring like that some of us would also do some good things we might not otherwise do" (p. 117). I have never had an undergraduate offer that more positive point of view about humankind!

In the third part of the text, the theme is the nature of the Socratic teacher, a term often used but with many different interpretations. Peter Shea, former student and lifetime friend of Matthews, offers a personal portrait of Matthews as teacher. Matthews himself distinguished between Socratic instruction (asking questions in shared ignorance) and Socratic elenchus (the drawing out of answers by a skilled and knowledgeable mentor (p. 128). Shea offers an insightful contrast between the approaches of Matthews and that of Lipman. While Lipman's curriculum is designed to have children

offer the questions and set the discussion agenda, Matthews was more directive with a determined path for exploration set by him. Shea points out that the two scholars may have had different audiences in mind in terms of making the argument for the value of philosophy. For Lipman, it was the educators who would welcome critical thinking as a worthwhile goal while for Matthews his audience was philosophers who would be skeptical of the nature of the discussion as genuinely philosophical. Building upon Matthews' dedication to ancient philosophy and his careful reading of Plato, Shea goes on to explore how Matthews adopts and adapts the Socratic "midwife" analogy to his own work with children. The next urgent point Shea makes is the impending death or at least marginalization of philosophy in academia and how Matthews approach reminds us that philosophy has the "power to nourish the soul" (p. 136). The recent movements of philosophy into public life underscore the ways in which philosophy needs to come out of the ivory tower and serve both the greater good but also the very personal needs of people hungry for and searching for meaning. Here he mentions the fine work of the two editors of this entire text (Gregory and Laverty) to this end. The Socratic message that philosophy is learning how to live towards death gains new urgency in our pandemic-encompassing and divisive world. Shea references the opening essay by Cavell throughout his own contribution and offers us ways to see the ongoing complexity of how philosophy presents itself throughout one's life. Shea's essay is particularly rich in offering some comments which help the reader both navigate the admittedly dense Cavell opening piece and also appreciate the differences between Lipman and Matthews. At times, I see him as a bit unjust to the work of Lipman but I respected his analysis of their differences. For example, Lipman does address the value of closure in a discussion.

Again, the two following essays by Matthews himself illustrate the points offered in Shea's commentary. The essay entitled "Socratic children" was particularly insightful as a way to read Plato's understanding of and use of Socrates throughout his dialogues, early into late period. As Plato had Socrates reject doing philosophy with young people in the *Republic*, it is intriguing to read Matthews' interpretation of the return of the 'child' in the later dialogue, the Theaetetus. This argument is further expanded in the second Matthews article, "Whatever became of the Socratic elenchus?" Both of these readings are rich in analysis of the evolution of Plato's own philosophical thinking as well as building a case for doing philosophy with young people.

The following section, Part IV, tackles Matthews' views on developmental psychology. Here our introductory essay is by noted scholar and practitioner, Jen Glaser. Piaget's developmental schemes for cognition have an iron hold on educators to this day. Even as psychologists have backed off full endorsement, educators treat developmental stages as Truth and use them to design everything from testing to "age-appropriate" book labeling. I have always appreciated Matthews careful analysis and critique of Piaget as found in two chapters in his text *Philosophy of Childhood*, and Glaser's essay here brings out clearly how effective and comprehensive Matthews' challenges are. She separates them into two groups: critiques on Piaget's methods and on his theory. Psychologists themselves have mounted some serious challenges to Piaget's methods but here Matthews' focus is presented as highlighting the ways in which Piaget ignores or redefines data that challenges his cognitive model. When it comes to the actual theory, the critique zeros in on the relationship between language and thought, that is—which comes first. While Piaget assumes "that children's words are necessarily inadequate to convey

their world of thoughts", Matthews argues "that young children only acquire concepts as they become inducted into a language community" (p. 171).

Glaser then introduces Kohlberg who developed a popular theory of moral development, inspired by Piaget's schemas for cognitive growth. It is worth noting that Piaget himself rejected any developmental model for moral development in the one book he wrote on this topic but Kohlberg's model has also taken hold of the educational community and continues to be taught as if it were fact. Matthews offers another devastating analysis of those alleged stages of moral development and if accepted, the conclusion would seem to be that no one acts morally before adulthood, if even then! The genuine danger of either developmental theory (for cognition or moral thinking) is that it privileges the higher stages as norms and any stage prior to those high ones are defined by their inadequacies. Aligning children with "primitive cultures," as Piaget and Kohlberg do, reveals the blatant Western bias that alas, too often still operates in terms of our understandings of and appreciation for different ways of living. Glaser goes on to detail Matthews' alternative approach to ethical growth through dimensions, not stages, and she skillfully applies these to cognitive growth as well. I found that section of her essay to be particularly creative and thoughtful.

In this section, Glaser's article is followed by an extensive critique of Piaget's cognitive theory and Kohlberg's moral development theory by Matthews himself. He introduces his model for moral growth as across the four dimensions of choosing paradigms, offering defining characteristics, exploring the range of cases that fall under a particular moral concept, and the judgement among varying competing moral claims (pp. 193-194). In his later writings, he will add the dimension of moral imagination. The main problem with Kohlberg's schemas, as Matthews details it, is the unavoidable conclusion that any moral reason given before the higher stages is really premoral. I would claim that in these early stages "right" means simply doing what I want, avoiding punishment, or garnering praise and acceptance. None of these really capture the idea of doing what is right because it is right. Kohlberg's emphasis on universalizability and impartiality leans in a clearly Kantian direction and were justifiably critiqued earlier by Carol Gilligan who claimed that another approach to ethical decisions would focus on care and familiarity with the individuals involved. At the very least, we do not consider our obligations to others as completely equal in that I owe more care and concern to my family and friends before total strangers—not that such allows me to discount those strangers. The second essay by Matthews, "Children, irony, and philosophy" considers the claim by Ellen Winner (notably associated with Howard Gardner and his work on creativity in young children) that young children cannot understand the cognitive complexity of irony. But Matthew's rejoinder is that many children's stories clearly ask of their readers to appreciate irony in terms of what is said can be understood contrarily. Perhaps children do not get sarcasm where the speaker intends the listener to hear her words as implying the opposite, but they certainly can appreciate the many examples where the speaker in the story says one thing but we know the opposite to be true. One of my favorite examples of this kind of irony is found in the picture book, *Boodil my dog* (Pija Lindenbaum, 1992), where the narrator praises her bull terrier for his courage, caution, and other virtues, all of which is completely belied by the images of said Boodil demonstrating the exact opposite of each attributed virtue. Children get the irony on every page. Matthews uses his favorite series of stories by Arnold Lobel, the Frog and Toad collection, to demonstrate how often irony comes into play and how his

collaborative young philosophers get the humor. He also offers several other examples of children's stories that use irony to drive their message.

The final section of the text invites the reader to explore how Matthews created and shaped the field of "philosophy of childhood." The title of the opening essay, by Walter Omar Kohan and Claire Cassidy, "Philosophy of childhood or children?" hints at their line of questioning. They trace how Matthews himself began to think about philosophy of childhood as a distinct field in philosophy and they review his initial set of "desiderata" or goals for such an area and then offer how he reshaped his criteria along his normative claims (see pp. 216-217). Along with some of the other contributors to this volume, Kohan and Cassidy point out the influential role that his work in ancient philosophy and the analytic bend that Matthew uses in his own philosophical analysis of concepts play in how he approaches the crafting of this new perspective within philosophy. They take the reader through each "desiderata" or criteria for a philosophy of childhood as outlined by Matthews, both unpacking his own thinking but also offering their own commentary that, to some extent, his views are culturally limited to Anglo-American methods of doing philosophy—perhaps a quite important point. They end with an acknowledgement of the burgeoning interdisciplinary studies of childhood as well as the continental European traditions that have begun to consider "childhood" beyond children and indeed the notion of multiple childhoods. (This parallels to my mind the move from second to third wave feminism when we realized not all women have the same experiences, needs, or interests.) While their accounts of some new directions are brief, the reader will find enlightening, inspiring, and provocative their overview of such recent and alternative views of childhood from David Kennedy, Lyotard, Agamben, Deleuze and Guattari, as well as the extensive work by Kohan himself, and Karin Murris with her notion of the posthuman child. This essay serves as a perfect pointer to indicate the next steps beyond Matthews' groundbreaking work on philosophy of childhood and signal the rich heritage of ideas and questions generated by Matthews.

The first Matthews excerpt illustrates precisely the trajectory of his own thinking about philosophy of childhood as charted by Kohan and Cassidy. He ends his account with the claim that he is suggesting "a mirror image model that will invite the sharing of perspectives and the enrichment of both adulthood and childhood alike" (p. 245). Following this is the short introduction by Matthews and Susan M. Turner to their edited volume of essays on the ways in which some Western philosophers have depicted children and childhood. This volume is essential for an excellent overview of (some) of the ways in which the recognized giants of the Western philosophical tradition have reflected their own culture's attitudes towards children and how they crafted their own theory of human nature. The final essay by Matthews in this volume is an interview with Susannah Sheffer in which he eloquently advocates for the rights of children to be heard, to be taken seriously and with respect.

But the last word in this volume is by Jana Mohr Lone, an American theorist and practitioner of philosophy with children. She shares her personal relationship with Matthews as instructor and ultimately mentor as she began her career in precollege philosophy. She echoes the constant theme offered in each essay of how influential Matthews was, how inspirational as philosopher and as a person, and finally how passionately he advocated for children. I would add that his advocacy sounds out in a society which professes to be all about "family values" but in fact denigrates and dismisses the

child in both policy and practice. The warmth of her astute observations offer a fitting book end to the opening introduction by Gregory and Laverty.

To close this book review, I would highlight the index provided—always an excellent way to explore specific themes or references throughout all of the articles. Finally, I would like to reiterate the holistic nature of this book. Each contributor is actively engaged with the others in weaving together a rich accolade to Matthews, while at the same time, maintaining a critical stance to invite further work in this field. I found this to be the most impressive aspect of this volume and attribute it to the work of the two editors, Gregory and Laverty, both experienced leaders in running a "community of inquiry." I can easily imagine Gareth Matthews would entirely approve and, if he were with us, would eagerly enter into the conversation.

Address Correspondences to:
Wendy C. Turgeon,
St. Joseph's College-NY
Email: wturgeon@sjcny.edu