

# The Unsurpassable Significance of the Child

D. C. Schindler

Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Vintage Books, 1994).

Gareth B. Matthews, *The Philosophy of Childhood* (Harvard University Press, 1994)

Anthony Krupp, *Reason's Children: Childhood in Early Modern Philosophy* (Bucknell University Press, 2009).

According to Charles Péguy, all genuine beginnings possess a certain freshness, a novelty, an energy, that typically does not remain. Hence, the child has an unsurpassable significance. Péguy saw the child as revealing something fundamental about human nature, something that is not so immediately obvious in the adult (though perhaps comes to a certain expression again in the elderly, precisely because they are, for Péguy, closer to the birth into the eternal youth of the resurrection). This is not to say that Péguy was a romantic who saw adulthood simply as a fall from everything good and wholesome; instead, for him, with growth and maturity something is both lost and gained. The full meaning of human life is unfolded, as it were, gradually – childhood, maturity, old age – each stage of which is in a sense better than the others.

In 1962, a French historian named Phillipe Ariès provoked the emergence of a new field of research in the humanities that has come to be known as “childhood studies.” Ariès’ book, *Centuries of Childhood*, made the surprising claim that “childhood” is largely a modern invention. The evidence of the literature and art from the pre-modern world suggests, according to Ariès, that until fairly recently children were typically thought of as little more than “pre-adults,” whose lives remained at the margins of the significant world of the adult until they reached the capacity to participate in that world themselves. It was not until the Renaissance that things begin to change, and only in essentially the Victorian era that childhood is taken to be a special period of life that needs to be sheltered, protected, and cultivated for its own sake, prior to one’s entry into the adult sphere.

## Childhood and Literacy

This thesis has always been controversial, and indeed makes a number of questionable assumptions, but the gist of it has been taken over by the well-known writer and communications theorist Neil Postman (*Amusing Ourselves to Death, Technopology*) as the background to a book that appeared in 1982 and was reprinted with a new preface in 1994 under the title *The Disappearance of Childhood*. Postman claims that, of all of the (many) books he has published, this particular book, which offers a thesis about the decline of this “modern” idea, has remained his favorite. It is evident why this would be so: the book gathers one of the themes that has most occupied Postman, the extensive cultural implications of modern media and technology, around the vital human question concerning the fate of the very idea of the child. In doing so, he proposes a *reason* for Ariès’ historical thesis.

According to Postman, there is a connection between childhood and literacy. This connection is confirmed, he says, by the facts: there was a “glimmer” of the notion of childhood in ancient Greece when the advent of writing transformed what had been an essentially oral culture. This glimmer was preserved by the Romans but all but snuffed out after the fall of Rome when literacy ceased to be (in Eric Havelock’s terms) “socialized” and became instead a “craft,” that is, something reserved for experts. Childhood returned more or less with the advent of the printing press, when reading once again became a social phenomenon, but it had its zenith in the Western world, according to

Postman, essentially between 1850 and 1950, during which time literacy was a virtual given. Postman's thesis about the origins of the idea of childhood also then explain why it seems now to be disappearing: in what he calls the "Age of Television," the written word is being supplanted by the visual (and aural) image as the primary vehicle of popular culture.

Why does childhood seem to stand and fall with *literacy*? According to Postman, it is because the capacity to read is not something one is born with, but requires a period of training. To read well is an ability belonging to adults. While children can learn to speak at a fairly young age, something more is required for their being able to read. This simple fact has two implications. First, it allows a certain evident boundary to be drawn between the world of children and that of adults, and it moreover establishes a distinct period – the "school-age years" – that is set apart from infancy but is not adulthood. Because of its distinctness, childhood acquires its own ethos; it is kept apart from the world of adults and the "secrets" reserved for that world, especially the secrets of sex, though also secrets regarding the cares of adulthood, "what the world is like," the reality of death, and so forth. Shame and modesty appear for the first time as virtues, precisely because they indicate that there are certain things appropriate for children and certain things that are not.

But this boundary has implications as well for the meaning of adulthood: in laboriously acquiring the capacity to read, one learned as well to discipline one's mind, to focus one's attention, to make proper distinctions, to determine relative importance, to be alone with one's thoughts, and so forth. These are, of course, the capacities we would expect of a mature human being. But – so Postman's thesis runs – these very capacities are beginning to fade precisely because the growing importance of communications technologies are blurring the boundary that made them necessary. Postman describes television as the "total disclosure medium": it "broadcasts" everything without significant distinction and it addresses everyone indiscriminately. (Postman refers to a TV host who shouted to the audience in the rush before a commercial break: "Don't go away. We'll be back with a marvelous new diet and, then, a quick look at incest.") What we have as a result of the loss of boundaries, he observes, is the increasing phenomenon of the "adult-child," namely, the grown-up whose intellectual and emotional life is not significantly different from that of a child. The flip-side is that "childhood" also begins to lose its distinctive ethos.

Postman is at his best when describing the cultural implications of technology, and *The Disappearance of Childhood* makes some thought-provoking observations in this regard. What is less compelling is his general thesis, namely, that the invention of the printing press more or less led to the invention of childhood. Not only has the history behind this thesis been widely challenged, especially by medievalists, but one must also criticize what could be called the "sociological reductivism" this thesis implies, i.e., that it accounts for a spiritual reality in terms of what is essentially a material fact. Postman's book describes, we might say, the symptoms of a problem the significance of which cannot be overstated, but it requires one to go beyond its horizon to think through more adequately its diagnosis. It is indeed quite plausible to think that the disappearance of childhood and the immersion in technology are both due to some more fundamental cause, determining the nature of which would belong to a more fundamental science: that of philosophy.

### **Childhood and Philosophy**

Gareth Matthews, who passed away just recently after a long career, was a major advocate of the notion of childhood as an object of philosophical study, and devoted several books to the subject, of which we will here consider one: *The Philosophy of Childhood*, published originally in 1994 but reprinted many times. His book is not concerned, like Postman's, with the cultural phenomenon of

childhood and its origins, but it is similar in that it seeks to encourage respect for childhood. The basis for that respect, however, could not be more different: while Postman makes a plea to preserve the boundaries between the adult and the child, Matthews argues that an over-emphasis on the difference between them leads to a disparagement of children.

Rather than a historical or systematic study, Matthews' book offers a series of philosophical reflections (roughly in the analytical style) on the views of children implied by various models of childhood and theories of moral and psychological development (Piaget, Kohlberg) and then on children's role in or relation to a number of areas: rights, literature, art, and the problem of mortality. He is concerned that we tend to be condescending toward children, and this happens essentially because we take a certain model of adult behavior and thinking to be normative, and then interpret the child as possessing a lack of capacity for this norm that needs to be remedied through education and other forms of socialization. Such an assumption, for example, would disincline one to introduce philosophy to young children because it entails a kind of rigorous, conceptual thinking that children are not yet capable of. But to accept this would be to overlook their ability to surprise us with genuine insights, reminiscent of some of the theories of the great ancient thinkers.

Matthews presents several different strategies for overcoming this tendency toward condescension. First, he argues that the standards we set are themselves often question-begging. All of the criteria that Piaget posits for mature rationality, for example, have been challenged in one way or another by developments in modern science. This means that the "adult" reasoning is in some ways just as naive as we take the child's reasoning to be. Second, along similar lines, Matthews points out that the child's way of doing things – whether it be in reasoning, in art, or in other areas – represents something that *ought* to belong to adult behavior and thinking, but rarely does because we have lost a sensitivity to its value. We assume that philosophy is about rigorous, conceptual thinking, and forget that it is also about asking big questions and imagining alternatives. We assume that art is about the mastery of technique and the sophistication of conception, and forget that it may also be about spontaneity and the immediacy of perception. Genuineness and naivete, indeed, are not entirely unrelated.

Third, by contrast, some of the very things we take to belong to maturity can be found already among children, as long as we are attentive and open to the possibility. Matthews argues that children often demonstrate more of the kind of empathy and other-centeredness that lies at the root of morality than we give them credit for, and they sometimes exhibit striking examples of reflectiveness and courage in complex situations. All of this leads to what may be cited as the general thesis of the book: "Children are people, fully worthy of both the moral and the intellectual respect due persons. They should be respected for what they are, as well as for what they can become" (p. 122).

A problem at the root of Matthews' argument is that he seems to operate with the general assumption that the way to assure respect for children is to show that they are not as different from adults as we think. In other words, he takes for granted that *difference* entails morally offensive inequality. He thus appears to be operating with what may be called a "liberal" notion of the person – as most essentially a "rational chooser" – and seeks to show that children already possess the traits that characterize this notion, or at least ought to be treated as if they did. This becomes most evident in the case he makes for children's rights in relation to their parents: *rational* (as opposed to arbitrary) authority ought to be able to justify itself by proving it is adequately carrying out its responsibility, and thus a child who can demonstrate maturity should be able to call his parents to

account in the courtroom. Matthews also presents arguments that children's philosophy ought to be published and children's art ought to be hung in museums, so that it receives in an institutional way the recognition that it possesses (at least to some degree) the type of importance we accord the work of adults.

Matthews would certainly accuse Postman of being paternalistic in his desire to protect children from the mass media. But this simply reinforces doubts as to the adequacy of Matthews' conception of the child. The impulse to preserve and cultivate a difference between children and adults is condescending only if we cannot conceive of difference as such as something inherently good. Matthews does wish to show how the distinctive behavior of children is valuable, but he almost always does so by comparing it to adults (the pre-Socratic thinkers in philosophy or Paul Klee in art). A more adequate discussion of childhood and philosophy would require an inquiry into the essential matters: *what is* a child, after all, and *what is* philosophy?

### **Childhood and Reason**

Anthony Krupp begins to approach these questions in *Reason's Children: Childhood in Early Modern Philosophy*, though his book is much more constrained in scope, limiting itself to a historical study of the notion of childhood as it appears in Descartes, Locke, Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten. This book is more directly scholarly than the other two, and is indeed encumbered by a lot of the ideology of the contemporary academy (it explicitly denies that it will attempt to judge the truth of any of the ideas it presents, it avoids at all costs an "essentialist" interpretation of things, it betrays a hypersensitivity to the mention of gender in the literature, and so forth). Nevertheless, the historical study reveals some of the roots of the conception that seems to lie behind Matthews' book, and perhaps gives some indication of the deeper reason for the disappearance of childhood.

Although Krupp does not argue for any particular thesis, his discussion of these figures reveals quite clearly a connection between one's view of childhood and one's view of human reason: the assumptions one makes about the nature of the rationality that defines personhood has implications for the status and dignity one accords to children. Of this list, Leibniz and Baumgarten (especially the latter) have the most "capacious" sense of reason, and they also evince the most respect for children and childhood. Leibniz understood reason as an implicit grasp of the whole, which could then discursively be made explicit. Children, then, ought to be seen as possessing reason implicitly, so that, though they may not yet be able to say "I" themselves (which is what defines personhood for Leibniz), they nevertheless *are* already implicitly an "I", and so it can be articulated for them, on their behalf.

Baumgarten is perhaps the most interesting of the lot (though for some reason the chapter devoted to him is the shortest of the book). Baumgarten, the "founder" of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline, affirmed the reality of a kind of sensuous knowing that is analogously rational though irreducibly different from the conceptual sort. As Krupp observes, Baumgarten seems to be a forerunner of the "whole person" anthropology, which was explicitly championed by Herder and became a significant part of the late modern reaction to the Enlightenment tendency to dualism. It is not a surprise, then, that he should value the particular way of knowing demonstrated by children, who so spontaneously seek to imitate the beautiful when they perceive it.

Baumgarten's perspective could not be more opposed to that of Descartes, who not only had little regard for the beautiful, but also had no place in his philosophy for children. The crux of the matter is Descartes' absolute body-soul dualism. Given that the soul is, for him, a purely conceptual

activity that operates independently of the body, Descartes faces the awkward question of why children are not perfectly rational: why should an immature body have any influence on the “thinking thing” that is the human soul? Descartes’ various attempts to respond to this question are inconsistent and unconvincing, but the thrust of his thought was to develop a *method* in strict opposition to the sorts of receptivity that characterize childhood, such as memory, tradition, spontaneous trust, imagination, and so forth. Although Krupp qualifies the charge, he cites a French scholar’s assessment that Descartes’ philosophical method amounts to “an infanticide” (p. 25). Wolff, a rationalist like Descartes, though perhaps not as radical, similarly treated childhood as little better than a deficit to be remedied through a proper training and education. In fact, according to Krupp, Wolff compared the state of childhood to the state of inebriation: in both cases, one acts like an animal without the capacity to reason in detachment from sense experience.

Perhaps most surprising in Krupp’s book is what he reveals about John Locke. One might think that Locke, as an empiricist rather than a rationalist, would have greater regard for children. And in fact Locke wrote one of the only sustained works on childhood to come out of the Enlightenment period, namely, his *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*. But Locke turns out to be the most brutal toward children of all these figures. Although Krupp does not inquire into the reason for this, it seems to be due to the fact that, although Locke accepts the general Enlightenment notion that personhood is defined by rationality, his empiricism leads him to accept rationality only in those beings who actually demonstrate a capacity to exercise it. A child may be a “Man,” insofar as he exhibits the physical form of a human being, but he is not yet a person until he can act like a rational chooser. But there is a further, more disturbing, implication to Locke’s view: as Krupp shows, Locke not only denies personhood of what he calls “changelings” – i.e., mentally handicapped and deformed children – but he also does not classify them as human beings at all, since they do not properly exhibit the shape of man. Thus, Locke takes their murder to be morally permissible. (So much for tolerance!)

As the place of the child in the Enlightenment suggests, it does not suffice to link the notion of childhood simply to the existence of social literacy, or to defend the child by demonstrating more continuity between adolescence and adulthood. What is needed is a more profound reflection on the nature of man, one that begins, like Péguy, with the notion that being is a gift, and so one able to interpret the special qualities of the child – wonder, dependence, receptivity, naive assent, and so forth – as genuinely positive, even if they do not come as easily to adults. (For reflections of this sort, see Ferdinand Ulrich, *Der Mensch als Anfang: Zur philosophischen Anthropologie der Kindheit*, and Gustav Siewerth, *Metaphysik der Kindheit*.) In this respect, just as it falls especially to Christians, as Hans Urs von Balthasar famously observed, to be the “guardians of being in our age,” for a similar reason they must also be the guardians of childhood.

**D. C. Schindler is associate professor of philosophy in the Humanities Department at Villanova University, an Editor of *Communio: International Catholic Review*, and author of *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth* and *Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason*.**