

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

From Saturday's Books section

Every child a Socrates

Alison Gopnik says toddlers are so much more than unsophisticated little Mini-Me's drooling their way through the day. They are, in fact, nature's best thinkers

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Imagine that you're executing some automatic task, like dicing onions, flossing or driving home from work. Your brain is on autopilot, juggling countless crucial judgments and adjustments, while your thoughts traverse well-worn neural grooves, replaying that annoying conversation you had with a colleague, or re-reviewing all the items on your to-do list. It's all very banal when you think about it, and the tape loop keeps iterating until some zinger of an experience or a question jolts you out of your stupor. At that moment, you're hit with some transcendent truth, like, oh, so this is what love is, or that's the reason why I'm here.

Those epiphanies are rare. We try to kick-start them with religion, novels and yoga, through visits to art galleries or to remote destinations. But transcendence is readily available to babies and very small children, according to cognitive psychologist Alison Gopnik, because novelty is a regular feature of their daily experience. Ergo, their brains are built for invention and revelation.

As she writes in *The Philosophical Baby*, they're the "R&D department of the human species, the blue sky guys" whose job it is to make big discoveries, while we adults are simply day labourers, the production and marketing folks who manufacture and flaunt widgets, who put food on the table. And if only we paid closer attention to what makes babies and toddlers tick, we'd know more about ourselves. "Many profound questions about human nature can be answered by thinking about children," she writes, such as how do we understand the way the world works, what will happen in the future and what do other people believe?

If a two-year-old can't answer those questions, he or she at least thinks about them a lot of the time. Anyone who has spent time with the preschool set knows how much experimentation and idea-testing – not to mention practice, practice, practice – goes into every waking moment. What would happen if I dropped this spoon off my tray? Put the bowl on my head? Climbed on the coffee table. And did it again and again and again, changing the conditions slightly each time? Would my mother's face change if I cried? Ate a cigarette butt? Banged her computer with a block? What would happen if I pretended an inanimate object had appetites like my own, or imagined the world to be different than it is?

Using scientific evidence from her own lab at Berkeley, among others, Gopnik argues, in brisk, clean prose, that a young child's thought processes are not really clumsy, irrational versions of adult thinking. Instead, they're evidence of a unique baby consciousness, one governed by learning through statistical computations of cause and effect, by theories about other people's beliefs, and by hypotheses about possible worlds. She calls these three organizing principles of baby consciousness causal maps, care-giving and counterfactuals.

Despite the “philosophy” in the book's title, what Gopnik means by counterfactuals is not the philosophical-legal sense of statements that contradict the known facts (if the gun hadn't been loaded, I wouldn't have shot him), but what-if ideas that let children try ideas on for size. By altering reality, changing the conditions only slightly, young children get to learn about the psychological as well as the physical world. Such as, what if there were an unpredictable little man in my crib named Dunzer? (Dunzer is baby Alison's imaginary companion, who was friendly at first, but then became scary – so scary, in fact, that even one-year-old brother Adam was spooked).

“ Gopnik's ability to marshal the empirical facts adds clarity to what can seem downright inscrutable ”

Or, what if there were a planet I could create named Rho Ticris, inhabited by huge, sentient animals called dune dogs? Imaginary friends and imaginary worlds seem peculiar to adults, but Gopnik explains that they are central to a young child's developing ability to fathom other people's desires – to make sense of the social world. The same ability allows us to create and inhabit the realm of fiction, where we get inside the heads of a whole cast of imaginary characters. Once it's put that way, Rho Ticris makes a lot more sense.

Gopnik's ability to marshal the empirical facts adds clarity to what can seem downright inscrutable, if not frustratingly nonsensical, about the way small children think. In her delightful chapter, *What Is It Like to Be a Baby* (a sly wink at Thomas Nagel's famous essay on subjective experience, *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?*), she explains that compared with adults, babies pay attention to different features of the world. Their vantage point is both scattered and panoramic, more like the diffuse, inclusive light of a lantern than the focused spotlight of adult attention. This broadband-style consciousness gives them access to basic truths.

Still, getting at baby consciousness is no simple matter. Like the bewildered baby-subjects, the reader has to wade through a thicket of weird experiments. Babies are confronted by blicket machines (a box that flashes and plays music when the right block, or “blicket,” is placed on top of it), and researchers wrapped in blankets who tap their heads on other boxes to make them light up. When toddlers are asked, “Why did that happen?” I wondered whether they were really elucidating a *Romper Room* version of causality, or just offering up some answer – anything – to make these strange adults shut up.

Even if consciousness isn't “a transparent and lucid Cartesian stream,” but a “turbulent, muddy mess,” according to Gopnik, her writing is reassuringly tight and persuasive – like getting between fresh sheets. Still, sometimes the real world data are messier than she lets on. For example, how could babies and toddlers have such a pure sense of ethics, if the age of 4 is the apex of childhood aggression? Left to their own devices, a half-dozen preschoolers are less Gandhi-like selflessness and more Hobbesian nightmare than Gopnik cares to admit.

The reason for these elisions, I suspect, is that though the author portrays herself as a flint-eyed scientist, “a living cliché of the absent-minded professor,” she is also a romantic. Sentimentality is one pitfall when writing about children, especially when your theme is how clever they are, and in spite of herself, Gopnik occasionally dips one toe into treacle. What surprised me is that I mostly didn't mind.

After all, as she repeatedly tells the reader, she's not only a cognitive scientist, but a mother. At heart, this book is a tribute to the author's three grown children and their now lost childhoods. Scientific evidence is ostensibly our guide, but via Gopnik's own children (and of course her test subjects) we learn a little more than we knew before about “intuitions” we call love.

This isn't moral philosophy the way most of us understand it. Even so, Gopnik's thesis is intriguing. It also jostles our assumptions. Gopnik takes pains to show that three-year-olds have no inner observer – they can't

self-reflect. So, if small fry live in the moment, and can't send themselves backward and forward in time, why do we make deals with them, as in, "I'll let you watch *Scooby-Doo* now if you'll go to bed later without making a fuss?"

It's instructive to learn that preschoolers don't have that stable autobiographical "I" in mind that allows them to remember how they were feeling 15 minutes ago, or predict how they will feel some time in the future. What they have instead is a free pass to inventiveness, one that permits them to circumvent the mundane. That's why my four-year-old could ask as we were driving to the doctor's, "Mom, what will there be after humans?"

"What?" I said, eyeing him in my mirror sucking on his juice box.

"Well, you know, first there were tiny sea creatures, then there were dinosaurs, and then there were humans. So what's gonna happen after all of us are dead?"

This philosophical question can stop us in our tracks, or at least shift your thoughts from yourself while you're idling at a light. With similar zing, Alison Gopnik's book reminds us that our children are not just Mini-Me's – pint-sized, more adorable versions of ourselves. Neither are they inert blobs, waiting to be waited on and totted up with knowledge. Instead, they're more efficient learners than we are by a mile, and great little teachers about love, consciousness and everything profound.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and Globe and Mail columnist, whose recent book, *The Sexual Paradox*, was just given the William James Book Award.*

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