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‘In Charge of the Truffula Seeds’: On Children’s Literature, Rationality and Children’s Voices in Philosophy

VIKTOR JOHANSSON

In this paper I investigate how philosophy can speak for children and how children can have a voice in philosophy and speak for philosophy. I argue that we should understand children as responsible rational individuals who are involved in their own philosophical inquiries and who can be involved in our own philosophical investigations—not because of their rational abilities, but because we acknowledge them as conversational partners, acknowledge their reasons as reasons, and speak for them as well as let them speak for us and our rational community. In order to argue this I turn, first, to Gareth Matthews’ philosophy of childhood and suggest a reconstruction of some of his concepts in line with the philosophy of Stanley Cavell. Second, in order to examine more closely our conceptions of rationality and our pictures of children, I consider the children’s books, The Lorax and Where is My Sister? and Henrik Ibsen’s play, The Wild Duck.

INTRODUCTION

How can professional philosophy with its sophisticated expressions and forms of reason speak for children or give children a philosophical voice? How can children have a voice in philosophy? Gareth Matthews’ texts implicitly respond to these questions. His conversations with children show how philosophy can speak for children and how children speak for philosophy. This article can be read as an attempt to reconstruct Matthews’ philosophy of childhood in the light of these questions. I suggest that we can acknowledge children both as rational beings who can actually contribute to philosophy by educating philosophers and as learners who sometimes can be reached by the sophisticated language of philosophers. I further claim that if philosophy turns to children’s literature as a source for its investigations it is possible to embark on a search for children’s voices in philosophy as an education for both philosophers and children. This is vital to any attempt to philosophise with
children because it demonstrates how we, in many ordinary contexts, actually acknowledge children as rational conversational partners who contribute to our understanding of ourselves as rational beings. Or, put differently, children’s literature becomes a way to explore not only our relationship with children, but also how such relationships can be a philosophical education for both children and adults. This emphasises both the role philosophical reflection can play in establishing a rational community encompassing children and adults, and how this is possible through an acknowledgement of children’s rationality. Clearly, if there is something to these suggestions, doing philosophy with children has, at least on the face of it, a role in establishing this community.

THE LORAX AND RESPONSIBLE CHILDREN

In Dr Seuss’ *The Lorax* (1971) the Once-ler gives the last seed of the Truffula Trees to a child; a seed with which the child can re-establish the paradisiacal world once destroyed by the Once-ler’s greed. The Once-ler says,

You are in charge of the Truffula Seeds.
And Truffula Trees are what everyone needs.
Plant a new Truffula. Treat it with care.
Give it clean water. And feed it fresh air.
Grow a forest. Protect it from axes that hack.
Then the Lorax and all his friends
may come back.

This gesture seems to suggest that children, this child, may be responsible agents that can handle such a task. We can respond to such gestures in children’s literature in at least two ways: (i) We can take this as an illustration of an empirical possibility. We may accordingly be inclined to investigate whether this is a real possibility. Do children demonstrate or manifest the ability to take such responsibilities? (ii) We can take this story as an invitation to imagine that we are can acknowledge children as responsible and rational agents, which means that our attitude to children is as vital for our conception of them as rational as their ability to demonstrate rational capabilities. This also means that the child and the Once-ler share the same fate; they both bear the responsibility and the consequences of one another’s lives and actions.1 The Once-ler’s instructions to treat the seed with care, ultimately giving the seed to the child, can be seen as an acknowledgement of that shared fate, or as I shall put it: speaking for the child and letting the child speak for him.

To my mind there are several things in *The Lorax* that prompt this second kind of response. The figure of the Once-ler is clearly an adult. For instance, he opens up a successful shop, and he starts a corporation and establishes a factory with many employees. When the Once-ler first comes to the Land of the Truffula Trees, however, it is depicted as an Eden where fantastic animals play while the Once-ler enjoys nature. Inspired by his
new environment and using a Truffula tree, he creates his first Thneed, the production of which eventually destroys the Truffula trees, along with the beautiful landscape, and exploits its resources. One moral of *The Lorax* is that the child has to take responsibility as a result of the irresponsibility of adults. The message seems to be that we have to trust our children, that they are our only hope. How can we even think otherwise? Who else will take responsibility for the future of humanity? But are we justified in giving children this form of responsibility? Is it a responsibility they can fulfil? In what sense can we understand children as rational responsible beings, and in what sense do we speak for children as sharing our fate?²

The hopes and doubts expressed in these questions are related to how we live with children as rational beings and moral agents, and to children’s roles in our form of life. Our children are the future of humanity, and in some sense the future of rationality. If, as I suggest, our response to children’s literature can be conceived as an acknowledgement of a shared responsibility or community of reason, then children’s literature can help us to acknowledge the kinds of life we can live with children as co-representatives of our community of reason, as co-founders of our forest of Truffula Trees, our restored future world. If our response is one of acknowledgement, we need to pay attention to how children’s literature can help us to be honest about the lives we live and may live with children.

**RECONSIDERING GARETH MATTHEWS’ PHILOSOPHY OF CHILDHOOD**

In an early paper ‘Philosophy and Children’s Literature’, before his ground-breaking work on the philosophy of childhood, Gareth Matthews surveys how philosophical thought, what he calls ‘philosophical whimsy’, is presented in children’s literature. By referring to a few empirical examples of children raising the same philosophical questions and making the same philosophical claims he finds in children’s literature, Matthews argues that ‘what philosophers do (in rather disciplined and sustained ways) is much closer than usually appreciated to what at least some children rather naturally do (albeit fitfully, and without the benefit of sophisticated techniques)’ (Matthews, 1976, pp. 14–15). As he proceeds in his work on philosophy of childhood and philosophy for children, Matthews extends his empirical examples of children’s philosophical reasoning. This allows him to make the forceful claim, against Piagetian research on children’s development, that our interactions with children really ought to be understood as interactions with rational beings or moral persons (Matthews, 1996, p. 27). Matthews justifies his claims by finding empirical evidence of children demonstrating philosophical abilities.

Although I agree with Matthews’ conclusions—that children’s thoughts may be closer to what philosophers do and that we ought to acknowledge children as rational beings and moral persons—I believe that his claims
can be strengthened if we take a different route from our readings of children’s literature. This route not only re-evaluates children’s assumed or denied rationality but also reformulates how rationality is to be pictured. It involves reading children’s literature not only as illustrating and presenting philosophical issues that children may think of, but as a philosophical expression of the existential problems that are latent in our relationships to children: this elucidates how we in fact live with children and how we might live with them. In the light of this it is possible to reconsider Matthews’ conversations with children. These conversations do not have to be understood primarily as empirical evidence for children’s philosophical abilities but rather as illustrations of how philosophical conversations with children can demonstrate our acknowledgement of children’s voices as making claims to be involved in our community of reason. Different philosophy for children programmes may offer ways to emphasise this communality.

In this article I propose that children’s literature can invite us to acknowledge children as rational responsible beings. I argue that the basis for children’s capabilities to reason lies as much in our acknowledgement of them as reasonable as in their attempts to reason with us. Such an acknowledgment means to speak for children as rational beings. To speak for children as rational we are not dependent on children manifesting empirical evidence of reason. Instead, such acknowledgement is a claim to community with children and as such a claim to shared rationality. Reading children’s literature philosophically can be a way to help us see more clearly our role in giving the children a voice in our communities of reason. If we are blind to our role in our rational communities with children, we are also blind to their role in those same communities. We are blind to their rationality. We ‘are missing something about [ourselves], or rather something about [our] connection with these people, [our] internal relation to them’ (Cavell, 1979, p. 376).

**IMAGINATION, COMMUNITY AND LITERATURE: LIVING WITH ANIMALS**

The imagination called for by stories is significant with regard to the acknowledgment of children’s voices. Consider the reply that is given by J. M. Coetzee’s character, Elisabeth Costello, when, having just spoken of Ted Hughes’ poem ‘The Jaguar’, she is asked about how far we can imagine the inner life of an animal:

I would reply, writers teach us more than they are aware of. By bodying the jaguar, Hughes shows us that we too can embody animals—by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will. He shows us how to bring the living body into being within ourselves. When we read the jaguar poem, when we recollect it afterwards in tranquillity, we are for a brief while the jaguar. He ripples within us, he takes over our body, he is us (Coetzee, 1999, p. 53).
A major setback in Costello’s reasoning is that it immediately invites a sceptical reply. In what sense can a reader of ‘The Jaguar’ actually get inside the jaguar? We may simply notice that since the jaguar’s senses and expressions are so different from ours, we can ask whether it is possible to come close to anything-like embodying the animal. The poem may create an illusion (if even that) of our coming closer to the jaguar experience, but can we really tell whether we have come any closer?

Nonetheless, Costello’s reading of Hughes’ poem can give us another kind of answer. It shows us the power and importance of human imagination. It is only in philosophising or in intellectualising Costello’s response that we would raise the question of the actual embodiment of the animal (see Diamond, 2006, pp. 103–105). Both the example of Costello’s reasoning and ‘The Jaguar’ are works of literature. We know that Costello’s reasoning is imagined and that the sense of the jaguar rippling within us when reading Hughes’ poem is imagined. We do not know anything about Costello outside of our and Coetzee’s imagination and we do not know anything about the jaguar’s experience besides what Hughes invites us to imagine.

The apparent illusion of understanding the jaguar is not an illusion at all. This imagining of the other is all we have to go on if we want to understand one another, whether an animal or a human. Even though some philosophers may have claimed to overcome sceptical arguments about other minds, we do not usually think of those (most of us do not know them) when we engage with others. In interacting with others we do not act on a certainty of understanding the other or of being understood by the other. Rather, this interaction is a matter of attuning ourselves to the other by acknowledging their words and actions as our words and actions—which means making a claim to a shared community. Understanding the other may thus be conceived as having a clear overview of how we live and possibly can live with that particular other—how we live with a jaguar, how we live with a child, even how we live with ourselves.

Costello shows that Hughes speaks for the jaguar; he gives the jaguar a voice in a human language, as Coetzee gives voice to Costello and her equally wild sensitivities. This is remarkable about poems like ‘The Jaguar’. Hughes not only invites us to imagine being the jaguar, he makes this possible by using his words in such a way that we can imagine being a jaguar. Other words may not succeed in this. Indeed, Hughes’ words, or Costello’s use of them, may not do this to all of us. That does not even happen in the story about Costello: she is quite alone in her approach to animals. However, in speaking for the jaguar, in trying to put the jaguar’s experience into words, Hughes also claims that we have enough in common with the jaguar to understand it, enough in common to put its experience into words. This is what ‘speaking for’ means here; it is a claim to a shared community (Cavell, 1979, p. 20). It is an acknowledgement of the other.

Although in reading ‘The Jaguar’ our imagination appears to help us acknowledge what we share with an animal and to find something in
common with it, can it be said that we share what might be called a **rational**
community with children? We are certainly not always inclined to think so, as shown by the helplessness of our reason in the face of children’s
dissonance (see Johansson, 2010). Children’s literature can challenge
the stability of our reason and challenge our inclination to respond to
children in certain ways. Children’s literature may even lead us to
identify imaginatively with or to embody the central (child-)characters
and to follow their ways if reasoning. Just as Costello is affected in
reading Hughes’ poem, so we also may be affected by reading about
Costello.

Though we may recognise that some children do reason and express
themselves comprehensibly, it seems much more difficult to acknowledge
them as persons that we can reason with about the same issues as adults.
We live as if some human beings were children; we project that aspect
onto young human beings. To be sure, there is nothing wrong in seeing
some human beings as children, but some of our ways of picturing
children may blind us to other aspects of our lives with children. For
example, as Dewey notes (1916, p. 46), our understanding of children as
immature may lead us to focus on capabilities they lack rather than
capabilities they have. Our (mis)understanding of children, at least for
some of us, is then similar to our (mis)understanding of animals. Because
they are different from us, and of course children are not as different from
adults as animals, we do not always see the shared features that can
establish a community of reason. We do not always recognise how we
actually live with children. Although in some respect we live with children
as if they were human, in other respects we may fail to acknowledge
that children are a part of our communities of reason. We lack a clear view
of our lives with children (Wittgenstein, 1953, §122). We attempt to
teach children our ways of reasoning, but we are blind to children’s ways
of reasoning. Thus, it seems fair to assume that the asymmetry between
the child and the adult in the ability to reason in particular contexts may
give us a limited picture of children, a picture that may obscure other
possible ways of living and reasoning with children. Pictures of
such asymmetries, if these are the only pictures we have of childhood,
feed our tendency to think of children merely as uncompleted adults or
rational not-yets.

**RATIONALE AND CHILDREN’S LEGAL RIGHTS**

An example of how talk of rational abilities may blind us to other aspects
of our community with children, which distinguishes my position
from Matthews’, is to be found in his discussion of children’s legal
rights. Matthews raises this issue through the illustrative example of the
Gregory Kingsley case, where, in a Florida State court in 1992, a child
claimed a standing legal petition to terminate his biological parents’
legal right to him. This finally led to a divorce between Gregory and his
biological parents. Is this reasonable? Can we give children the legal right
to petition on their own behalf? Matthews and I are in agreement in saying yes.

Matthews maintains this position by asking two principal questions: (i) Is the child sufficiently rational, or rational in the right way, to be able to be self-determining? (ii) Would it be in the child’s own interest to restrict the child’s ability to be self-determining (Matthews, 1996, p. 70)? Matthews’ answer to both these questions is: ‘It depends’. Some children would be sufficiently rational, and then it would not be in their interest to restrict their ability to be self-determining. He suggests that children become gradually more self-determining as their rational abilities mature and that Gregory demonstrated a sufficient rational ability to be self-determining in this case (p. 79).

I think Matthews’ argument is misleading. It is not solely a matter of the child’s rational ability, or his power to demonstrate that ability. In fact, talk about rationality solely as an ability seems confused. Rather we should acknowledge the child as a human being and a rational conversational partner. In Stanley Cavell’s words, ‘the basis of it seems to lie in us’ (Cavell, 1979, p. 433). I understand this to draw out part of the moral aspect of Wittgenstein’s saying: ‘My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the opinion that he has a soul’ (Wittgenstein, 1953, Part II §22).

But still, rational? Can we really acknowledge small children as rational? If Hughes can have some of us imagine that we have enough in common with a jaguar for us to imagine that we become a jaguar, can we not imagine children sharing enough with us to be a part of our rational community? It all depends on whether we speak for children and acknowledge them as having a voice of their own in our community. Of course, this is not wholly independent of children’s abilities. Even though the basis of acknowledgment lies in us, we cannot share a human form of life with just anything without risking our sanity. If I insist on treating rocks as moral persons and trying to involve them in rational deliberation, it is reasonable to question my sanity, or at least my understanding of certain language-games. I find it tragic that my sanity may be similarly questioned if I do the same with children. We seem to need a clear view of our lives with children to understand the extent of our actual acknowledgment of children’s voices and possible future lives with children—that is, a clear view over the multifarious different ways in which we respond to children’s expressions as rational or not.

Dr Seuss’ gesture can remind us how we do in fact live with children—that we do share a fate, a future world and a community—as is evident in the way that Seuss lets Once-ler teach the child protagonist how his world became desolate. This gesture also allows us to picture the possibility of a new kind of life: it allows us to picture a mythology of a paradisiacal forest of Truffula Trees where the animals’ joyous games and practices are acknowledged as valuable. We imagine a possible life depicted as a return to the colourful world of childhood fantasy. This return to childhood fantasy, as a way of reasoning, can be realised if we (re)turn to children’s literature.
CHILDREN’S LITERATURE AND CHILDREN’S REASONS: WHERE IS MY SISTER?

Remember how Costello begins her clarification of her reading of Hughes poem by saying ‘writers teach us more than they are aware of’. This shows how Costello reads the poem as more than a text, as something that establishes a commonality with animals, illustrating how literature can challenge our imagination by inviting us continually to look beyond the text and towards what the text does to us when we read it. Children’s literature can invoke similar challenges. As Hughes’ poem suggests our common fate with animals, reading children’s literature may draw our attention to particular aspects of children’s reasoning. This may challenge our understanding of rationality, a challenge brought home to us by the dissonance between the established logic in adults’ reasoning and the whimsical expressions of children’s play and imagination. (Are children’s ‘whimsy’ and grown-ups ‘sophistication’ expressions of different modes of rationality?)

In the picturebook Var är min syster? (Where is my Sister?), the Swedish writer and illustrator Sven Nordqvist (2007) invites us into a child’s world (or two children’s worlds). As in Coetzee, this is an example of a fictional character giving an account of another’s reasoning. Even though the child-protagonist in this story is an animal, this book can be read as a conceptual investigation of our acknowledgment, acceptance and responses to the other as a human being.

A small animal, most likely a mouse, asks an adult elderly animal, possibly a mole, to help him look for his big sister. They take off on a journey through an extraordinary landscape in a balloon in the shape of a pear. The bulk of the story is told through a series of fanciful pictures of landscapes, with mixed perspectives, varying scales and seemingly out-of-place objects. The illustrations, which remind me of how I played in my own childhood and of how I now enjoy playing with children, seem to be of what goes on in a child’s mind when playing a role-game or letting their imagination flow as they discover the world: a truck is needed to pick up a spruce cone; a knight rides a snail in a medieval joust; someone really small uses an axe to harvest carrots. The words accompanying the story told by the pictures share these characteristics. Reading the book with the pictures is not only a matter of reading the text, but also of playing with pictures and language in conversation with the child (the child we are reading with or the child in ourselves, in me). The book both depicts and enacts children’s play.

In giving an account of what his big sister has told him, the younger brother says:

If we are among the clouds
we can fly, she says.
Because if one won’t do that one will fall,
and if one falls one will die,
but we cannot die
because first we shall grow old,
so we can fly
if we are among the clouds.\(^4\)

Some of the premises in this ‘argument’ are obviously false and its logic does not fit adults’ established ways of reasoning. It appears as if the adult and the child in this story are at a moment where Wittgenstein would say that reasons come to an end (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953, §211). There is a dissonance between the adult’s and the child’s practice of reasoning. The fully-grown animal’s incredulous answer is not very surprising.

She reasons in her own way, your sister.
Just don’t believe everything she says.
It is probably good to begin by practicing flying
no more than a yard above the ground
and have someone on the ground catch you
if it does not turn out well (Nordqvist, 2007).

This response, by actually responding to the child’s thinking, acknowledges that the child’s reasoning is a way to reason even though it may not be a very reliable one—if acted upon, it might even be dangerous. The child’s argument, if we can call it that, does not need to be a valid argument according to our adult standards for it to enter into the ‘space of reasons,’ to use Wilfred Sellars’ term (1963, p. 169). Of course, grown-ups, philosophers even, also frequently reason poorly. Hence, by responding to the child’s reasoning as reason, good or bad, we acknowledge the child as taking a position in our rational community. Even if we have standards for good reasoning, those standards do not necessarily have reasons themselves (Wittgenstein, 1953, §§477–85). Thus, our reasons come to an end when we realise that nothing more, nothing less, than our actually acknowledging the child’s reasoning as reason initiates the child in our community of reason. This is how our community of reason is born and reborn (Cavell, 1979, p. 125).\(^5\) Within such communities we can raise questions about good or bad reasoning, we can correct the child’s reasoning and often be right to do so, and the child can question our reasoning. But it is nonsense to think of this child’s reasoning, or ours, as good or bad if we do not acknowledge what the child does, and what we do, as reasoning.

Nevertheless, it is not enough to speak for the child or let the child speak for us as members of a community of reason since we have doubts about the rationality of the child’s actual argument. We may find it difficult to see the point of the child’s ways of reasoning even if we accept it as such. The combination of pictures and words in Nordqvist’s book may help us overcome this and actually enter into the child’s world, which is visible in these words and pictures. It becomes clearer as the characters continue through another landscape and the young animal tells us something about his sister that may give us a clue about where to find her. Our mouse explains:

\(^4\) 2011 The Author
\(^5\) Journal compilation © 2011 Journal of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain
Then she was gone the whole day
But she came home when it was dark.
She said that she had seen a road
that maybe led to Africa
and China or Greenland
or maybe around the whole world.
Another time I shall go there, she said.
It was behind a couch.
A blue road. Or a yellow road
behind a green chair.
Or maybe it was a great ocean,
I don’t really remember.
–It would be good to know
if we shall look
behind an ocean or a couch.

The pictures in the book are the source of these bewildering thoughts. As noted, they depict the child’s description. Or, rather, the reverse: the child’s words describe something we find in the pictures (the pictures tell the story and the words depict the pictures), pictures that appears to mix up scales and perspectives, fantasy and reality. This is important, if we notice that after flying through the child’s landscapes, the child’s world, the adult animal is now more humble in his response. He acknowledges the child’s fantasy worldview and seems to realise that the quest is as much a game, or role-play, as it is an actual search for the sister. He can see a reason or a point in the child’s whimsical sentences. His response thus become a way of speaking for the child—an acknowledgment that, as they both become attuned to this game, the question as to whether they should search behind a couch or an ocean is critical.

To follow the story, both in the pictures and in the words, we must be able to imagine what the child sees, to enter into the child’s fantasy. Letting ourselves do this is not so much a matter of attuning the child to our practices but of attuning ourselves to the practices of the child. In this way, reading children’s literature with children and entering those imaginative worlds together is making a claim for community. Reading children’s literature with children is a step towards such community, but of course we may also enjoy reading children’s books by ourselves and such solitary reading is also a way to explore our lives with children.

This kind of philosophy or way of philosophising seems to me particularly fruitful both for attempts to philosophise with children and for any philosophy that claims to say something about our relationships with children. Children’s literature can awaken the imagination that is needed to see the whimsical thoughts of children as autonomous thought; it can awaken the imagination we need in speaking for children. This makes it possible for us not only to become attentive to children’s voices, but also to awaken the imagination needed for us to grow into autonomous beings, constantly transforming our mutual attunement and reclaiming our community of reason. Philosophy for children and philosophy of childhood are thus ways of coming to clarity about the life we live with
them and our shared fate in that life, as well as of achieving clarity about
the life with children we want.

PHILOSOPHY AND CHILDREN’S VOICES: ESTABLISHING A
COMMUNITY OF REASON

If speaking for a rational community and letting participants in that
community speak for us is crucial, can philosophy have a role in this? Can
philosophy speak for children? We have seen that in reading children’s
literature we can give voice to children, but can I give a philosophical
account where I speak representatively for children without writing for
them as my readers? Can philosophy speak for children? If, as Cavell
suggests, philosophy can be an ‘education for grown-ups’ (1979, p. 125),
can it also be an education for children? What does it take for philosophy
to be an education for children?

I do not think these questions can be dealt with without acknowledging
the separation between children and their elders. Let me explain. Cavell
ends The Claim of Reason by saying that Shakespeare’s Othello and
Desdemona, lying dead on their sheets, form an emblem of the truth of
scepticism. They form ‘an emblem of human separation, which can be
accepted, or granted or not’ (Cavell, 1979, p. 496). Perhaps poetry or
literature can find redemption for them, by, as Cavell suggest, making
‘room for hell in a juster city’ (ibid.), room for separateness. But then
again, is such redemption acceptable to philosophy if philosophy still
hopes to overcome the scepticism of other minds, that is, to overcome the
fact of human separation, rather than acknowledging it? Does this mean
that philosophy should become literature? Cavell ends The Claim of
Reason with a question. ‘But can philosophy become literature and still
know itself’ (ibid.)?

I turn Cavell’s philosophy (as an education for grown-ups) to work on
our relationships with children, to our lives with children and by doing so
sketch out how philosophy also can be an education for children. This
interest corresponds to Cavell’s attention to the educative aspects of
acknowledging the separateness in relationships in adult marriages. In
Cavell’s readings this acknowledgment fails in marriages such as Othello
and Desdemona’s, or Nora and Torvald’s in Ibsen’s A Doll House, and is
successful in what he calls remarriage comedies (Cavell, 2005, p. 122). If
reading these films and plays and noticing the education or lack of
education these couples provide for each other may be a philosophy for
grown-ups, then can readings of children’s literature be philosophy as
education for grown-ups? Can philosophy become children’s literature
and still know itself?

Philosophy, Cavell maintains, can be an education for grown-ups. I
claim that philosophy also can be an education for children. This does not
only mean a philosophical activity that involves philosophical conversa-
tions with children in schools. It also means that philosophy itself can give
voice to children and educate children. I introduce this idea as a way to
extend Wittgenstein and Cavell’s philosophy in order to rethink why we want children to be involved in philosophical practices and why we need philosophy in schools.

Consider how Cavell calls our attention to some aspects of learning languages in the opening of Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*. There, famously, by referring to St Augustine’s *Confessions*, Wittgenstein introduces the idea that philosophical pictures of language may mislead us. Continuing the confessional mode of both Augustine and Wittgenstein, Cavell asks, ‘But what happens if “my elders”, all of them (those bigger people from whom, according to Augustine’s passage, I learn to use words), will not accept what I say and do as what they say and do? Must they? Is it only natural to them? Is it their responsibility?’ (Cavell, 1979, p. 28) Notice Cavell’s wording and the voice he is expressing here. It is as if a child were saying this. Cavell is using a child’s wording. He says ‘my elders’ (which are Augustine’s words) and, ‘those bigger people’, emphasising that there are people bigger than he is. Notice also that Cavell continues Augustine’s confessional use of the first-person. Giving voice to his own childhood worries (cf. Cavell, 2010, pp. 19–21, 30–31, 100, 110), Cavell speaks representatively for children, lending his voice to express the doubts of a child being initiated into a linguistic community.

Emphasising how tragedy (scepticism) and the problem of representativeness are interlinked he continues,

I would like to say: If I am to have a native tongue, I have to accept what ‘my elders’ say and do as consequential; and they have to accept, even have to applaud, what I say and do. We do not know in advance what the content of our mutual acceptance is, how far we may be in agreement. I do not know in advance how deep my agreement with myself is, how far my responsibility for the language may run. But if I am to have my own voice in it, I must be speaking for others and allow others to speak for me. The alternative to speaking for myself representatively (for someone else’s consent) is not: speaking for myself privately. The alternative is having nothing to say, being voiceless, not even mute (Cavell, 1979, p. 28).

There is a lot going on in this passage. I shall bring out a few ideas that are relevant for my purposes here. It is still the child, Stanley Cavell, who speaks. Cavell is giving voice to those who seldom have a voice in philosophy. When Cavell says, ‘I would like to say’, it is as if he gives voice to a child’s anxiety over whether he will be able to speak comprehensibly together with his elders. However, the child Cavell realises that this uncertainty, or anxiety, about whether agreement will be reached is not only his, but also his elders’. What the child expresses, and in a way discovers, is a separateness between him and his elders.

Henrik Ibsen explores such separateness in the relation between a child and her elders in his play *The Wild Duck*. In the final act, Hedvig, a fourteen-year-old girl, shoots herself to show her love to her doubting father, Hjalmar. Hjalmar doubts whether Hedvig actually is his daughter.
Hedvig overhears him saying, ‘Oh, what proof could she give me? I don’t
dare hope to be reassured from that quarter’ (Ibsen, 1884, p. 211). This
drives Hedvig to take extreme measures to have her love acknowledged.
Nonetheless, the cause of Hjalmar’s doubts is not Hedvig herself, but an
early affair that his wife, Gina, had. To Hjalmar, this confirms a
separateness in his family and brings his doubts to the fore. It introduces a
distance, a difference, between him and his daughter that his (dogmatic)
picture of the ideal family does not allow for.

Hedvig not only struggles with having her voice heard and acknowled-
ged by her elders, especially her father. She also has to struggle with her
erlers’ tendency to use vague metaphors about idealistic moral ideas and
to speak outside the everyday contexts of language. Her elders’ confused
talk makes her simple questions unanswerable. Likewise she struggles
with Hjalmar’s tendency not fully to mean what he says. This makes her
subject to the whims of her elders, to not being able to trust them (Moi,
2006, pp. 263–64). In both cases, her elders are reluctant to take full
responsibility for their words, which means that no one speaks for Hedvig.
It means that no one can speak for her.

When Hjalmar discovers that his life with Hedvig does not fit his picture
of their relationship, he seems unable to respond to her, unable to speak
for what could have been a community between them. Why should he
speak for her: they are separate, and she is other? Hedvig and Hjalmar are
separate, she is other, and as long as Hjalmar (falsely) takes himself as ‘the
man of the house’, the breadwinner and the one who decides the point of
their speech, Hedvig is voiceless. Her words not so much lack meaning,
but they have no room, no point, in Hjalmar’s world where father and
daughter are one. What is the point of speaking if we are not separate?
And further, what is the point of speaking if the other is completely
separated or without any ability to understand us? This is part of Cavell’s
struggles in speaking as a child. It is a struggle with the language of our
erlers. It is a language that gives us the possibility to speak in community
and to express our position, it gives us a voice—but on the conditions of
our elders’ conventions for speech, for judging what is worth saying,
which means that those conventions may also limit our room to express
our position and limit our voice and our humanity.

Unlike Hjalmar (more like Hedvig) the child Cavell, like most children,
accepts what this separateness demands of him if he wishes to enter the
linguistic community of his elders and find his voice in that community.
(This is not necessarily what he wants to do or should do. There are many
reasons for children to detach themselves from their native community.)
The child, in Cavell’s passage, knows that, in speaking, he is also speaking
representatively for his community; he speaks as if they do what he does.
But he also lets his elders speak for him, speaking as if he does what they
do. The education, taking place when a child learns to speak and enters a
linguistic community, is consequently both for the child and the elder.
Both of them strive to find their voice in the community that is becoming
theirs as they acknowledge each other’s words as words. Hence, acknowledging
the child’s reasons and words as our words is not a
matter of translating their language into our language, or our reason into their reason, as if we spoke two different languages. Rather, it is to acknowledge their reasons as reason and their language as language, just as we recognise the jaguar’s experience as our experience. Of course there is a limit to what we can recognise as our language or as our experience; few, if any, of the jaguar’s expressions will be taken as language. But such limit is not set a priori. Rather it is something we will have to experience in our conversation with others.

Nonetheless, in this passage, Cavell never loses sight of the possibility of a sceptical outcome of the child’s and his elder’s interactions, an outcome where they do not, or cannot, acknowledge one another. Cavell says things such as ‘If I am to have a native tongue’, ‘if I am to have my own voice’, ‘We do not know in advance’ and ‘I do not know in advance’, indicating that he continual struggles with his uncertainty over how far (even if) he and his elders can go on together (Cavell, 2005, p. 203). Cavell invites us to read his text as he reads Wittgenstein: ‘Now it is becoming clear that each of the voices and silences of the Investigations ... are meant as ours, so that the teacher’s and the child’s positions, among others, are ours, ones I may at any time find myself in’ (Cavell, 1990, p. 83). Sceptical voices are not only expressed and heard by philosophers, but also in literature and in everyday life. Here we find that the sceptical voices are both heard and expressed by a child struggling to find a native tongue. In reading Cavell the teachers’, the elders’, and the children’s voices are ours. Their struggles with scepticism are our struggles. Thus philosophising with children is not only about enhancing children’s philosophical abilities: it is also about struggling together with the doubts we are faced with in philosophy, in literature and in our everyday interactions with others; it is about acknowledging that human life is inherently subject to scepticism.

In such a philosophy of childhood, the philosopher speaks representatively for the child and the child speaks representatively for the philosopher. That is how philosophy can be an education both for children and for grown-ups. In a sense, in speaking representatively for children, philosophers of education allow themselves to become children or recognise children’s voices in themselves the same way that Costello uses Hughes’ poem in order to think herself into the being of a jaguar (Diamond, 1991, pp. 42–48). They acknowledge the child in themselves and children’s struggles with the discovery of being separate from others. The philosopher struggles with the sense that others are enigmatic and incomprehensible, that we are not understood by others (Cavell 2002, p. 263; 1990, p. 23). The education of the philosopher and the child consists in the ways that their voices form a community of reason, thought and language, and their transformations of one another’s voices in participating in this community. When reading Var är min syster? or The Lorax and letting them speak for our possible rational community with children, we do not only educate ourselves. Because our reading may transform our conversations with children, which changes the conditions for children’s voices in our community, this can also be an education of children even
when we read children’s literature without them present other than as characters in books. This is not an education of a particular child or a particular philosopher, but an acknowledgement of our shared community and of the ways that such community can transform itself in our conversations when we speak for one another. That means that philosophers of childhood, as so much children’s literature (though clearly not all children’s literature invites such readings), should not only speak with children and about children, but also for children and as children in order to give voice to their struggles to become part of our communities of reason.

TELLING A STORY ABOUT CHILDREN AND PHILOSOPHY: MATTHEWS AND CAVELL

I may seem unfair to Matthews’ struggles to argue for children’s rationality. Admittedly, I am impatient with his claims when he speaks as a philosopher trying to argue his position. My point has been rather different from his. The question of children’s rationality becomes a real worry because it leaves us in a position where our arguments lose their force. If we cannot acknowledge children’s expressions as reasons despite our worries about how well they reason according to our standards, then we have no common ground, our reasons come to an end, and there is no point in arguing with them. We acknowledge children as reasoning with us and in doing so we create a common ground from which we can advance conversations and sow doubts about our and others’ arguments. (‘She reasons her own way, your sister. Just don’t believe everything she says.’). This means that the question of rationality becomes a different question from what Matthews may have had in mind. Whereas Matthews appears to claim that, since some children can reason philosophically, we should involve them in philosophical conversations, my claim is that we involve children in philosophical conversations to establish a community of reason, to make a claim of reason.

Nonetheless, when Matthews speaks for or lends his voice to children, a different scene is played out. Then his approach is transformed into a serious acknowledgment of children’s thoughts. He actually demonstrates the kind of conversation with children I call for, both in his ways of writing, in speaking for children in his books, and in the actual conversations with children that motivate his writing. My worry is that what his philosophical style tells us is not fully compatible with his claims as a philosopher.

In Dialogues with Children, Matthews tells us a multi-layered story of his philosophical conversations with the children at a Scottish music school. Though this story evidently is based on his actual study of these children, Matthews does not present his findings as conventional empirical research (e.g. as a developmental psychologist might do). Rather he chooses a narrative structure with which he can engage his readers in a more literary manner. The tone of his prose, although interposed with
some ‘adult’ philosophical terminology, is suggestive of the conversations he has with children, as if his readers were also children. Thus, Matthews invites us to acknowledge children’s reasoning, or, so to speak, their philosophical language-games. However, this is only audible to us as long as we allow ourselves to take both Matthews and the children’s accounts seriously, despite their lacking ‘the benefit of sophisticated techniques’. This means acknowledging the account as a philosophical account, is an invitation to enter into discussion with children and with Matthews as a child, as well as an invitation to speaking for a shared community with them.

On a further note, Matthews’ worry is not merely that the complexity and even geniality of children’s philosophical thoughts are not acknowledged. He is also worried about the lack of philosophical thought in adults’ lives in general, which may cause adults and psychologists (and perhaps even teachers) to fail to acknowledge philosophical aspects in children’s thinking (Matthews, 1992, pp. 116–19). When we encounter the philosophical thoughts of children, we do not always recognise them as such, not only because of their at times unsophisticated expression but also because of our unfamiliarity with philosophy. In Matthews’ words: ‘What we as adults don’t do, when we talk to children, is discuss matters we ourselves find difficult or problematic’ (pp. 1–2). It seems as if we—at least in Western cultures, in our established ways of adulthood—avoid philosophical examination of our lives.

Cavell puts a similar idea somewhat differently. Referring to Wittgenstein’s discussion of children who respond to their teachers’ instruction in a non-conventional, dissonant way, Cavell writes (now as if he were the teacher or the adult):

> When my reasons come to an end and I am thrown back upon myself, upon my nature as it has so far shown itself, I can, supposing I cannot shift the ground of the discussion, either put the pupil out of my sight—as though his intellectual reactions are disgusting to me—or I can use the occasion to go over the ground I had hitherto thought foregone. If the topic is that of continuing a series, it may be learning enough to find that I just do; to rest upon myself as my foundation. But if the child, little or big, asks me: Why do we eat animals? or Why are some people poor and others rich? or What is God? or Why do I have to go to school? or Do you love black people as much as white people? or Who owns the land? or Why is there anything at all? or How did God get here?, I may find my answers thin, I may feel run out of reasons without being willing to say ‘This is what I do’ (what I say, what I sense, what I know), and honor that (Cavell, 1979, 124–25).

Here the child’s questions and resistance become existential. Matthews helps us to acknowledge the reality of children asking these questions, which means recognising children’s questions as having philosophical depth and importance. Nevertheless, most of us do not have straight answers to these questions. Some of us might even believe that no one has an answer to these questions, and yet we are not satisfied. Such
dissatisfaction may lead to a disgust, not only for the child’s questioning of our way of life and thought, but for philosophy as such. I am inclined to think of this as an anxiety over the groundlessness of our practices. The authority of adulthood’s established ways is in question if we take the child’s philosophical questions seriously.

There seems to be at least two ways out of this reluctance to children’s philosophical questionings. (i) One way would be to continue our resistance to philosophy. We can hold that the philosophical thoughts of children are nonsensical, irrelevant and essentially confused. Thus, we may claim that children should be educated out of their philosophical confusion to leave philosophy as it is and help children (and ourselves) to do other things than ask these seemingly confused questions. (ii) The second route, which I embrace, would be to acknowledge philosophical worries, whether in children or adults, as a part of the human condition. We may, as Cavell and Matthews emphasise, feel lost in the face of children’s philosophical questions. Nonetheless, this loss puts us in a position where we can find and found our communities and ourselves again, where we can re-establish our communities and ourselves. This means that we engage in conversation with children not to establish set answers to their questions (building new moral and metaphysical systems), but to found a way, as Cavell puts it, ‘on the way, by the way’ (Cavell, 1981, p. 137). To borrow and freely to adapt phrasing of Naoko Saito in respect of Cavell: Philosophical conversations with children involve the task of founding a community (see Saito, 2005, p. 134). Then, indeed, children do speak for philosophy.

Thus, we can read Matthews’ attempts to promote philosophy with children as an acknowledging of a shared fate with children, as if our acknowledgment of children’s philosophical questions established that they shared our deepest human concerns. When children raise questions about knowledge, scepticism, reality, ontology, beauty, morality, the meaning of life and so on, and we, despite their, to our adult minds, unsophisticated expression, acknowledge those questions as pertinent to us in our human condition, we enter into a conversation that reshapes or revolutionises the very foundations of our communities. In such conversations we speak for a transformed community where children are invited to found our ways of speaking, thinking and living. To philosophise with children is to say, ‘You are in charge of the Truffula seed’, or ‘you and I are responsible for our future community of speech and reason’. I believe this is something philosophy for children programmes, depending on their design (one may certainly question if a ‘programme’ is the right way to go about it), could do, but also that this something we can do in many, perhaps more ordinary conversations with children, if we take their questions and assertions seriously.

I have suggested that philosophy related to childhood can be a speaking for children and an education of children by the reforming of our shared fate and community as much as a speaking for adults and educating them. Read and written in this way, children’s literature will become a call for acknowledging the rationality of both children and grown-ups and serve as
philosophical education of both. Children’s literature can open our ears to children’s philosophical thoughts and invite us to philosophise with children. Being engaged in philosophy for children is being engaged in our community of reason.

Perhaps one can summarise this text as an attempt to show how an acknowledgment of children as rational beings is an acknowledgement of children as human beings that we educate and are educated by. As human beings, they are both responsible for and subject to our community of reason and our shared future. If the questions we recognise as philosophical (questions of knowledge, or morality, or justice, or being or meaning) are essential to how we live and shape our communities, then philosophy for children programmes can be a way to acknowledge that children are both participants in and responsible for our lives and communities.7

Correspondence: Viktor Johansson, Department of Education, Stockholm University, Fack 710 400, 106 54 STOCKHOLM, Sweden.
Email: Viktor.Johansson@edu.su.se

NOTES

2. Admittedly, The Lorax is a text much about environmental issues. The reading that I suggest of the text as being about our moral lives with children is not separable from its environmentalism. Rather the environmental issue strengthens my attempt to show that we share a fate with our children, that we share a responsibility for a future world and that our actions and expressions form our shared future.
3. The second half of the poem is what seems to illustrate Costello’s point. It reads,

But who runs like the rest past these arrives
At a cage where the crowd stands, stares, mesmerized,
As a child at a dream, at a jaguar hurrying enraged
Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes
On a short fierce fuse. Not in boredom—
The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,
By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear—
He spins from the bars, but there’s no cage to him
More than to the visionary his cell:
His stride is wildernesses of freedom:
The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.
Over the cage floor the horizons come. (Hughes, 1972, p. 3)

4. This and the following excerpts from Var är min syster? are my own translations.
5. This paragraph is partly a response to some worries raised by in conversation with Michael Peters.
6. The original reads: ‘Philosophical writing, then, involves the task of “founding a nation”’ (Saito, 2005, p. 134).
7. Most of this article was written during a stay at Department of Education Policy, Organization, Leadership, University of Illinois, funded by the Fulbright Commission. I have benefited from the comments of Nicholas C. Burbules, Michael A. Peters, Pradeep A. Dhillon, Klas Roth, Martin Gustafsson and Adrian Thomasson, Paul Standish and the editors of this issue. Early
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