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[See table of contents](#)

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Review of

## *Gareth B. Matthews: The Child's Philosopher*

eds. Maughn Rollins Gregory and Megan Jane Laverty, London: Routledge, 2022

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*Gareth B. Matthews: The Child's Philosopher* is a timely and much-anticipated anthology of topical essays by Gareth B. Matthews and scholars of Matthews' groundbreaking work in the fields of philosophy of childhood and philosophy for children. The front matter includes two essays by the series editors, Maughn Rollins Gregory and Megan Jane Laverty: an introduction and an essay with background on Matthews' work and its significance in the philosophy of childhood and philosophy for children movement.

This volume includes essays that recount Matthews' journey of inviting children to an intergenerational dialogue within the philosophical tradition as a "shared space" (p. 1). The editors, Laverty and Gregory, credit Matthews with initiating (or helping to initiate) three fields in philosophy: children's literature, philosophy for children, and philosophy of childhood, all of which are represented in thematic sections of the anthology. The three subdisciplines have long been received by the philosophical world with limited acknowledgement of the significance, productivity, and value of the subject matter. Currently, the three areas of progressive scholarship are attracting interdisciplinary scholars who are introducing lively, and sometimes controversial, directions and methods to philosophy.

The book is divided into five sections, each introduced by specialists in Matthews' work and followed by relevant essays composed by Matthews. Part 1 focuses on children's literature (Karin Murris), part 2 is on children's philosophical thinking (Stephanie Burdick-Shepherd and Cristina Cammarano), part 3 addresses Matthews' Socratic teaching (Peter Shea), part 4 deals with developmental psychology (Jennifer Glaser), and part 5 discusses Matthews' philosophy of childhood (Walter Omar Kohan and Claire Cassidy). Part 5 also includes the preface to the book *The Philosopher's Child* written by Matthews and Susan M. Turner, and a transcript of a conversation between Matthews and Susannah Sheffer that focuses on Matthews' own overview of his work in philosophy of childhood and philosophy for children. The anthology concludes with an afterword by Jana Mohr Lone and an extensive index.

Matthews, who was a highly regarded scholar in ancient and medieval philosophy, recounts his first incursion into philosophy for children/philosophy of childhood when he was a professor of philosophy at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and a father of young children. Matthews realized that he often engaged in spontaneous and sometimes playful philosophical conversations with children that addressed topics that he was introducing in his undergraduate classrooms. At around the same time, Matthew Lipman, Ann Margaret Sharp, and Frederick Oscanyan were developing a structured method for introducing children to philosophical discussions and incorporating the method into the standard course curriculum, generally referred to as philosophy for children. Whereas the approach of Lipman et al. was directed toward educators and primarily designed to introduce philosophy and philosophizing into the school curriculum, Matthews' approach followed a different path by acknowledging in children their capacity as natural philosophers and accepting them as participating members in the philosophical community. Matthews preferred to engage children in unstructured discussions, often prompted by reading stories with them and pondering philosophical incongruities or

perplexities, or constructing thought experiments together. Matthews was captivated by the naïve, open, and authentic philosophizing of young children who had not yet been socialized into conventional thinking.

Matthews envisioned philosophy of childhood as a normative subject that addressed competing conceptions of the child and childhood, children's rights, and philosophical thinking in children. He understood that this area of study would also incorporate applied philosophy in traditional philosophical subdisciplines: epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, and political theory with a focus on children. A topic that runs through Matthews' own essays in the book and the topical essays by scholars of his work is Matthews' inveterate originality in his interpretation of children's thought and his playful and gentle engagement with children. He is ever quick to perceive the perplexities that children confront regarding language use, perceptions, and whimsical interpretations of words and phrases, and he joins in the fun. Two salient ideas emerge from a careful reading of the collection. The first is Matthews' sense of moral repugnance over adult condescension toward children and his view that "addressing the ageless questions of philosophy [together] is itself a renunciation of condescension [and] a celebration of the humanity we share with our children" (p. 77). The second is Matthews' dedication to including children's own voices in the conversation. Recognition of the value of Matthews' work in these areas of study is long overdue and this anthology makes a significant overture to that end.

Stanley Cavell's essay, which is included in the introduction, identifies Matthews' work with children and philosophy as proximal to the work of philosophers such as Emerson, Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, J. S. Mill, Saul Kripke, and Nietzsche, who were concerned with the loss of autonomy as children become adults. Cavell references Matthews' opening chapter in *Philosophy of Childhood* (1994), which affirms that "philosophy is an adult attempt to deal with the genuinely baffling questions of childhood" (p. 30). As a scholar who specialized in the work of Wittgenstein, Cavell sees in Wittgenstein's writing intimations of Matthews' project, which he characterizes as an interest in the sudden outbursts of childhood in the midst of "adulthood." In *Philosophical Investigations*, for example, Wittgenstein issues a call for philosophers to "remember the days of their youth and of its childhood" (p. 36), which aptly captures the trajectory of Matthews' work in children's philosophy.

Morris reflects on Matthews' fascination with children's literature as a spark for philosophical thinking and a way to stimulate philosophical conversations with children (and adults). He initiated rich discussions with children about time, dreaming, personhood, biology, paradoxes, and more, based on seemingly innocuous topics in children's stories, such as hibernating bears, gardening, and gazing at the moon. He often used these stories, which introduced practical philosophical topics, thought experiments, and fantasy, to introduce advanced philosophical concepts to his university students and encouraged philosophers to associate philosophical topics in children's literature with standard philosophical texts.

In a discipline that has long focused on exclusivity, Burdick-Shepherd and Cammarano discuss Matthews' gift for detecting philosophical ideas in children's talk and having some good philosophical fun trying on philosophical concepts with them, reasoning through the deep questions of human life, and appreciating one another as coequal moral persons.

Shea suggests that Matthews' teaching strategies led him to draw children into engrossing philosophical conversations, which is demonstrated in his book *Dialogues with Children* (1984). He found that children are capable of doing the work of philosophy, from ethics to metaphysics to epistemology. Matthews also challenged the intellectual "orphaning" of children by philosophers in ways similar to the severance of women from the philosophical tradition. Observing their shared marginalization, Matthews discussed childhood in the context of feminism, with his focus on "struggles for women's and children's liberation" (p. 216). In addition, as Glaser indicates, he fervently challenged the biologically determined deficit model of childhood, both developmentally and morally, and believed that children are well able to operate in authentic, reciprocal relationships with adults. Matthews' life's work was, ultimately, a matter of sharing in the philosophical enterprise with many demographics: preschoolers, young children, adolescents, and adults, and his legacy has sparked a movement that now introduces philosophy in "youth detention centers, prisons, hospitals, homeless shelters, refugee camps, etc" (p. 139).

Lone concludes the anthology with an overview of Matthews' legacy. She begins her essay with a quintessential quote from Matthews' 1984 work, *Dialogues with Children*: "What has not been taken

seriously, or even widely conceived, is the possibility of tackling with children, in a relationship of mutual respect, the naively profound questions of philosophy” (p. 257). Lone recounts personal interactions with Matthews as a graduate student, professional philosopher – and mother. Lone remarks that Matthews hoped that his philosophical and pedagogical innovations would be advanced by other scholars. In so many ways, as Lone notes, this anthology is testament to active scholarship in the domains he helped to initiate: philosophy of childhood, philosophy for children, and philosophical investigations of children’s literature. Without a doubt, Matthews has graced our philosophical lives and indelibly advanced the philosophical project to embrace children and childhood.

### **About the Author**

**Karen Mizell** is professor of Philosophy and director of the Ethics Minor and Ethics Certificate programs at Utah Valley University. Her areas of interest and specialization are Philosophy of Childhood, Philosophy for Children, Philosophy of Education, and Philosophy of Law. She is the co-editor of an anthology, *The Ethics Bowl Way: Answering Questions, Questioning Answers, and Creating Ethical Communities* (2022).