

Prof. Rex Li's Writings

Category: Psychology

Sub-category: Thinking and Learning

Code: Psy 02-009

Title: Reading Notes on Alison Gopnik (2010): The Philosophical Babies - Chapter 1 Possible Worlds (p. 19 - 46)

Year Written: 2022

Summary/ Abstract: Alison Gopnik (1955 -) studied philosophy but soon turned to psychology. Jerome Bruner was her doctoral supervised in Oxford (1980). She was on UC Berkeley faculty since 1988.
In 2010 Gopnik turned out a book on child development for the educated reader, *The Philosophical Baby*. I found it educative and enjoyable. In a way she has pieced together infant development with philosophy with the later answering some problems of the former.

© Rex Li 2021

All rights reserved. To quote or cite, please acknowledge the author (Prof. Rex Li) and source of retrieval from this website (www.profexli.com).

For quotes or citation of over 100 words, please write to the author for written permission.

Reading Notes on Alison Gopnik (2010): *The Philosophical Babies*

Chapter 1 Possible Worlds (p. 19 - 46)

(A) Summary

The book is written with general readers in mind. It constantly challenged Freud and Piaget's old "wrong" version of children thinking, replacing it with cognitive scientific findings (p. 20). In fact, the latest discoveries detailed in this chapter are within the paradigm of present-day informed understanding. It is improving and supplementing the past. Gopnik stressed imagination (p. 20, 24), counterfactual / alternative thinking (p. 22) and causality. She quoted a few researchers:

- Paul Harris (p. 26) - imagination
- David Lewis (p. 32) - counterfactual thinking
- Henry Wellman (p. 35 -) - CHILDES program
- Hatano and Inagak Kayak (p. 36) - vitalism
- Clark Glymour and Judea Pearl (p. 42) - causal graphical models
- Every day theories of the world (p. 38)

She also offered her own research on "blicket detector" (p. 43 – 45) to study causality.

(B) Lab Research Findings

Page	Researcher	Description	Findings / Implication
21	Kahneman	Upset experiment (catching flights)	Emotion / possible worlds
22		Facial expression of medalists	
24	Gopnik	Taped ring experiment (15 to 20 months old)	Imagination
26	Paul Harris	Ducky muddy boots	Counterfactual thinking
26	Gopnik	Story line experiment	Counterfactual thinking
28	Gopnik	Listen to baby talk	
30	Woolly	Pretense	Child know and differentiate reality / fantasy

Page	Researcher	Description	Findings / Implication
31	Rozin	Cyanide experiment	Words affect emotion / action
35	Wellman	CHILDES Child talk about causality	
37	Harris	Pretend game	
38		Prediction	Children know possible worlds by physical act
42	Glymour and Pearl	Causal graphical model	
43	Gopnik	Blickets	

(C) Review

Gopnik was a student of Bruner in Oxford days (1980s). She's very passionate about children and so the future world. Her writings are lucid, informative and the ideas are clear: she's able to put complicated ideas / research into simple understandable language.

A wonderful resource / beginner's book if each chapter comes with 10 – 20 experiments / findings, i.e. over 100 "facts". It is enjoyable reading..

I'm not quite sure Gopnik and her colleagues have striking new findings that are paradigm shifting. When Piaget discovered object permanence, Gopnik is reinterpreting it with counterfactual thinking. What Piaget called egocentrism, she named it imagination.

It is clear that children slowly grow over the years, and their conception of the world may grow from plasticity / flexibility to fixation.

Imagination can be seen as flexibility.

Children do grow from intuitive (thoughtless) thinking into more logical reasoning, slowly establishing causality and adjusting it to reality. Gopnik once quoted that children insist bringing a doll to eat in dinner. This is indicative of their partial understanding of the reality and the doll during their growth process. She also mentioned children's probability thinking (Bayesian Network).

Object impermanence	→	object permanence
Egocentric	→	decenter
Intuitive	→	logical
Flexibility	→	fixation
Imagination	→	reality-bound
Fantasy	→	reality
Amorphous world	→	vitalism / causality

Adults grow out of children and adults may be more capable than children in many ways, but as we grow, we lose some children capacities, such as visual discrimination (12 months) and imagination (3 – 6 years). Even our body is not as physically flexible as children's. In chapter 4 of this book, Gopnik explained that children have more awareness (lantern consciousness) (p. 129) than adults (spotlight, focus consciousness). Children feel more acute, experience more deeply than adults.

Lesson: don't under-estimate or over-estimate children.