

# Prof. Rex Li's Writings

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**Title:** What Do I Learn From Alison Gopnik's *The Philosophical Baby*

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**Summary/ Abstract:** Gopnik's book was able to update me on some infant research of the last 2 decades.

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## What Do I Learn From Alison Gopnik's *The Philosophical Baby*

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### (A) Family and Children

Alison was brought up from an atheist family (p. 234). She read Plato at age 10 and wanted to become a philosopher. In her words:

When I was ten, I read Plato for the first time and it changed my life. I still vividly remember the battered Penguin paperback that made me want to become a philosopher. But even in that very first encounter with philosophy there was a catch. The argument in the Penguin Plato that impressed me the most was Socrates' case for immortality in the *Phaedo*.

(p. 235)

From then on she's in love with philosophy, as well as critical of the missing piece of children, as she recounted, "What struck me about the argument was that there was no mention anywhere of children". (p. 236)

### (B) Sappy Story of Child-rearing and Morality

Imagine a novel in which a woman took in a stranger who was unable to walk or talk or even eat by himself. She fell completely in love with him at first sight, fed and clothed and washed him, gradually helped him to become competent and independent, spent more than half her income on him, nursed him through sickness, and thought about him more than about anything else. And after twenty years of this she helped him find a young wife and move far away. You couldn't bear the sappiness of it. But that, quite simply, is just about every mother's story. And it's also the story of every human community—every constellation of mothers and fathers and socially monogamous mates, every group of siblings and babysitters and alloparents. It's not so much that we care for children because we love them as that we love them because we care for them.

These moral intuitions about childrearing aren't captured in most philosophical traditions. The classic philosophical moral views—utilitarian or Kantian, libertarian or socialist—are rooted in intuitions about good and harm, autonomy and reciprocity, individuality and universality. Each individual person deserves to pursue happiness and avert harm, and by cooperating reciprocally we can maximize the good of everyone—the basic idea of the social contract. But individualist, universalist, and contractual moral sys-

tems just don't seem to capture our intuitions about raising kids.

On the other hand, this combination of particularity and selflessness is much like the love and concern that are part of our spiritual intuitions. We capture it in stories of saints and bodhisattvas and tzaddikim. They are supposed to feel that combination of singular, transparent, particular affection and selfless concern for *everybody*.

(p. 242 – 243)

### (C) Spiritual Intuition and Awe

I don't know about the spiritual intuitions that accompany mystical experiences or religious ceremonies. But I do think that the sense of significance that accompanies the experience of raising children isn't just an evolutionarily determined illusion, like the man in the moon or the terrifying garter snake. Children really do put us in touch with important, real, and universal aspects of the human condition.

(p. 238)

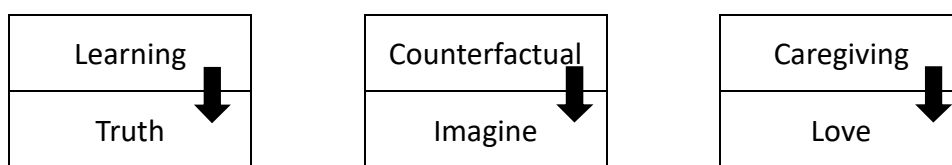
One classic kind of spiritual intuition is awe: our sense of the richness and complexity of the universe outside our own immediate concerns. It's the experience of standing outside on a dark night and gazing up at the infinite multitude of stars. This kind of awe is the scientific emotion par excellence.

(p. 239)

I've argued that babies and young children experience this kind of feeling, this lantern consciousness, all the time. They may feel this way gazing up at a Mickey Mouse mobile instead of at the Milky Way, but the experience is very much the same.

(p. 239)

### (D) How Can Human Beings Change?

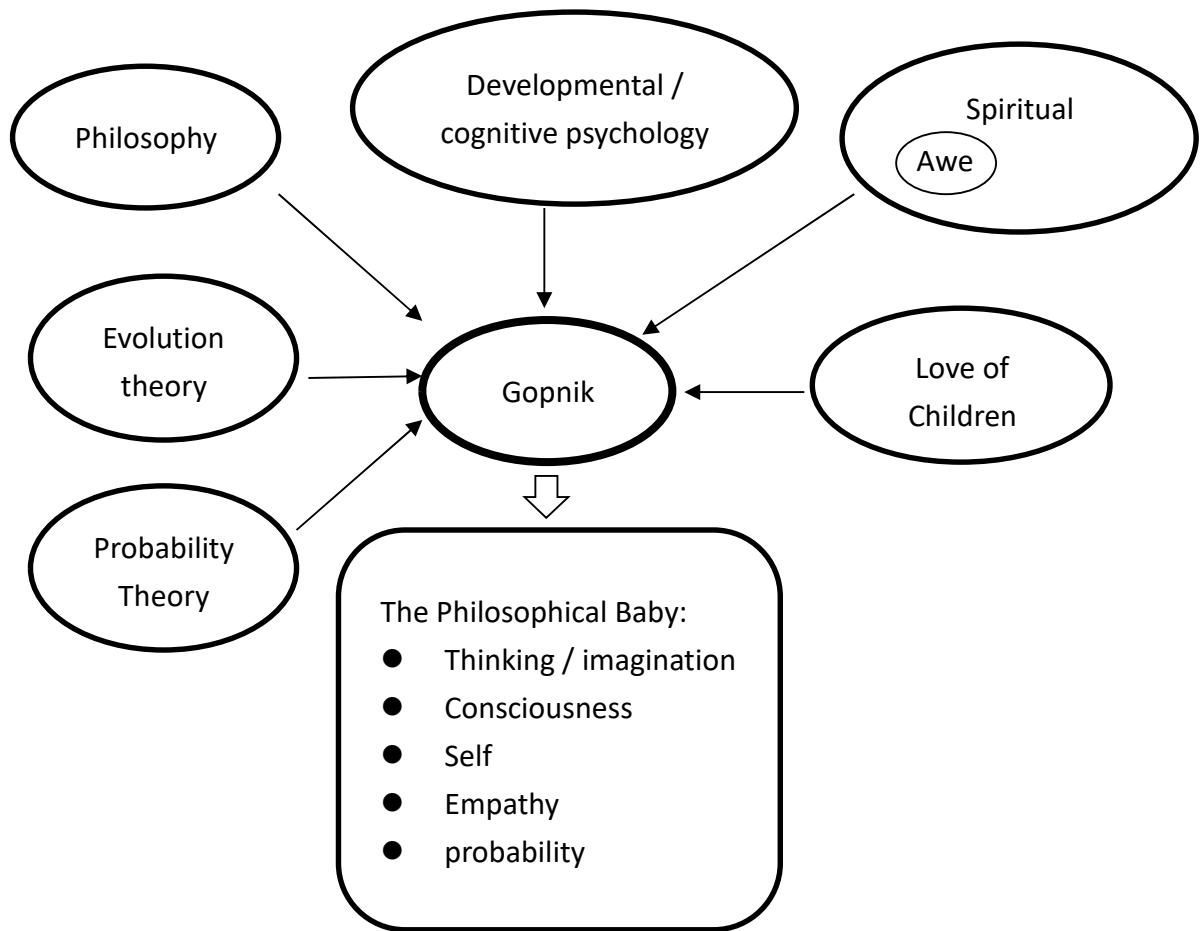


Alison thought about immortality and self-satire as cliché:

"But what about immortality?" ten-year-old Alison asks. I suspect that she, like Woody Allen, would have said that she didn't want to achieve immortality through her children, she wanted to achieve it through not dying. Failing that, though, children aren't bad. One of the worst things about writing about the importance of children is that practically everything you say turns out to sound like a greeting card. Still, clichés often get to be clichés because they're true, and the cliché that children are our future is no more than simple, literal truth.

(p. 247)

**(E) The making of Gopnik**



**(F) 13 Facts about Baby Capacities (age 0 – 6)**

	Research (page)	Children capacity	Implication	Generalization / Summary / Review
1		Probability thinking	Prediction	Thinking
2		Counterfactual thinking	Imagination / creativity	
3	Blicket (p.43-6, 84-5, 88-90)	Causal reasoning	Action and change	
4		Imitation	Learning	Learning
5		Follow / make rules	Higher order thinking and learning	Law and orderliness, morality
6	Smetana Study (p.224)	Rules and Harari	Normative understanding	Morality
7		Facial recognition	Linking vision with life events	Sociality
8		Attachment	Love	
9	(p.230)	Feel for others	Empathy	
10	(p.217-8)	Differentiate human from objects	Humanity	
11	(p.219)	Group differentiation	Group identity, competition and intolerance	
12		Understand human feelings / intention	Recognizing intentionality	Psychological world
13		Memory / attention	Consciousness, self	