***Goal: To develop a new perspective about the mind of an infant, that leads to Gopnik’s evidence based theory that babies may actually be more intelligent, considerate, and cognizant than adults.***

# *The Philosopher’s Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us About Truth, Love, and the*

# *Meaning of Life.* By Alison Gopnik, Farrar,Straus,and Giroux, NY. 2009. ISBN:13-

# 978-0-374-23196-5. 288 pp.

In *The Philosopher’s Baby,* developmental psychologist Alison Gopnik gives a clear perspective of what it’s like to be a baby. She believes that thinking about young children can bring a new perspective to ancient philosophical questions. In the past scientists and philosophers believed that babies reasoning and experiences were restricted. However, Gopnik gives an account about the scientific discoveries over the past two decades and explains the findings through the mind of an infant. This leads to her evidence based theory that babies may actually be more intelligent, considerate, and cognizant than adults.

Gopink states that preschoolers are more intelligent than adults in a variety of ways. She describes how very young children are able to observe, create, and learn more than we have believed in the past. The findings from three experiments in 2007, demonstrate her theory that young children have a high level of learning and abilities.

An example of this was shown by, Fei Xu and Vashti Garcia at the University of British Columbia. Their experiment showed eight -month -old babies a clear box full of assorted ping- pong balls that were mostly white with some red ones mixed in. The babies were surprised, and looked longer and more inquisitively at the experimenter when they saw that four red balls and one white ball were taken out of the box. Although, it was possible, producingfour white balls and one red one was a highly improbable outcome. The conclusion was that in this experiment the babies could understand probability.

Tamar Kushnir and Alison Gopnik at Berkeley University discovered that young children who did not yet have the ability to add or subtract, could use probability to discover how things work. The outcomes led the children to explore and envision new possibilities. The researchers put a yellow block on a machine continuously. The blocks randomly made the machine light up. The yellow block would make the machine light up two out of three times. The blue block would make the machine light up two out of six times. The children were then given both colors of blocks and asked to make the machine light up. The study found that the children were more likely to place the most probable yellow block on the machine rather than the blue one on the machine.

Laura Schulz and Elizabeth Baraff-Bonawitz at M.I.T. concluded that cause and effect is a process of discovery and natural exploration when young children play. Children aged three and four years old played with a toy that had two levers, which made a duck and a puppet pop up when both were pressed. Group one was shown that when they pressed one lever, the duck appeared, and when they pressed the other lever a puppet appeared. Group two noticed that when

they pressed both levers at once, both objects appeared. Group 2 did not have the opportunity to discover what the levers did when they were pressed individually. The children’s natural and curious interactions through play allowed them to discover how the toy worked.

The research showed that babies’ intelligence is not similar to adults. Babies don’t benefit from the methods learned in a focused and planned way, as taught in a traditional school setting. Students in Kindergarten and higher grades can take tests to determine that they have learned precise facts and skills successfully. Babies can’t plan or pay attention for long periods, and in the past this was the reason that their intelligence was minimized. The lever study showed that babies are open to a variety of skills and facts, anything that is unexpected or new. Adults however are not as open to new skills and make conclusions from their past experiences, or what

was a useful outcome that they previously learned. The mind of a baby continues to explore new possibilities, and the mind of an adult uses information based on past experiences. Therefore the mind of an adult is not pure in a sense it is tainted and exploited.

The reasoning for these different skills is explained by what is known about the human brain. The brain of a baby is flexible, and has more neural connections than adult brains. Over time, our brains mature and become programmed by our childhood experiences. We trim away the neural connections that we don’t use, and what remains are the faster and more automatic connections. The pre-frontal cortex controls our focused attention and planning, this part of the brain continues to grow into our early 20’s. The brain begins to hang onto selective information from past experiences and does not explore as often as the baby brain. The intelligence of babies and young children are cultivated from exploration and play. The greatest progress however

is developed and grown from observation and imagination by watching other people around them. Gopnik places an importance on the cognitive capacities that allow us to transform our biological predispositions and create entirely new environments.

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*Meaning of Life*is a creatively written book and it would make an excellent documentary or an inquiry for educators and psychology students. Additionally, what parent wouldn’t be intrigued by ways to advance their child’s intelligence? Gopnik claims that babies and preschoolers are “actually smarter, more imaginative, more empathic, and even more conscious than adults.” These claims are validated by several dozen empirical studies, many of which were conducted by Gopnik herself at the University of California. She has concluded that babies behave like scientists and their theories are determined by the people and things that they have experiences with. Babies also have free minds because they can let their minds wander, and pretend, in addition to having an open-ended awareness. Adults on the other hand must use their brains to work at their jobs and stay safe. This regiment allows the adult brain less opportunities to have free thought and explore new experiences.

The difficulty with Gopnik’s theory is that the results rely on what can be inferred from the behavioral research it is not always facts. It also relies on observing a young child’s imagination, and responses and you are asked to make conclusions about what it would be like to be a child? There are philosophical issues that are explored like love and compassion which rely on the reader to have a basic understanding of philosophy. Many of these types of experiments Gopnik conducted herself with her colleagues.

She came to the scientific and philosophical conclusion that babies behave like scientists and their theories are determined by the people and things that they have experiences with.

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Adults must use their brains to work, complete chores, and continue a daily routine of repetitive activities this changes our brains and we lose the ability to have an open-ended awareness. Gopnik as a philosopher recommends that adults try meditation or travel to

Experience once again the awareness of a very young child. The final chapters of the book focus on consciousness, and how babies as continual learners are exploring and implementing new experiences daily. Gopnik and the many researchers were not only studying babies, they were also studying themselves. As I read the book and reflected on the findings I also began to reflect on my consciousness and childhood experiences. The scientists that did the research must have also been challenged with the process of sorting through multiple realities and fragmented thoughts of their own. They would have a goal to be objective and detached from the children that they are studying. It seems that this would be near impossible to achieve because wouldn’t their past experiences have an effect on the outcome? The object being studied is the child and their human consciousness. I find it difficult to believe that the experimenters were able to discriminate without bias because they were also part of the experiment. Gopnik gives a vivid example in the first few chapters that describe the interactions with her mother and brother when she was two years old. She validates her theory that young children are natural scientists by giving an example of her own imaginary playmate called Dunzer when she was 2 years old.

She concludes that imaginary friends, and playful freedom help children to become little scientists and learn how to make sense of their world and discoveries.

I would recommend this book to graduate students it provides both a creative philosophical approach and evidence based experiments to show that babies truly are smarter than we think or could imagine.

Alison Gopnik gave many convincing examples from a philosophical point of view. “Imagination depends not just on knowledge, but equally on love and care for others.”

When children are protected and loved by adults they are free to use their imagination. She concludes that very young children can make decisions and moral responses. A toddlers’

ability to determine right from wrong, or avoiding harm are responses that show evidence of loving, empathic, and generous interactions between the child and their caregivers.

The Science and philosophy in her book are based on the accomplishments of several thousand child development experiments completed during the past thirty years. Gopnik is bringing the evidence based on her work and that of many others into the forefront of our thoughts so that we can change our lenses, and the way we have viewed babies in the past and the future.

How babies learn, and why they continue to get this new information right shows that there is plenty to learn about developmental psychology, and cognitive development in babies and young children. Do babies in fact learn about their social world by learning to read their caregiver’s mind as Gopnik suggests? Developmental psychologists have concluded that from birth, infants’ emotions are linked with those around them. This is shown by imitating actions, and facial expressions, allowing them to understand the notion of love.

Understanding how the minds of young children work also gives us an insight into the operations of our own adult minds. Young children develop a causal map of their mind, and at the same time they also begin to develop capacities for executive control. This is the ability to control one’s own feelings, actions, and thoughts. Psychologists have proven from their studies that the strategies used for executive control are also effective evolutionary mechanisms. It is a method of visualizing different choices, allowing us to implement them, and control or change the outcome through our actions. Developmental researchers have studied and developed the story of our evolutionary process of social intelligence from infancy to adulthood.

“Finally, love depends on imagination and knowledge. Babies are helpless and dependent on others, and for them love is the most important theory. This theory will in turn shape the way these babies will care for others when they grow up.”