Alison Gopnik

Introduction

“The Mind is the seat of perception of the things we see, hear, and feel. It is through the mind that we see the beauties of the earth and sky, or music, or art, in fact, everything. That silent shuttle of thought working in and out through cell and nerve weaves into one harmonious whole the myriad moods of mind, and we call it life.

---Charles Filmore, The Revealing Word

Before you begin your reading of The Philosophical Baby and each of the nine chapters, please take some time to carefully and slowly scan the table of contents as well as the Notes, Bibliography, and Acknowledgements at the end of the book. A look at the Index will be helpful too because you will probably have to consult it as you read, and, certainly, as you review and write. And don’t overlook the 229 notes at the end of the book. A quick review of them prior to and while reading the text will familiarize you with the more detailed landscape of the investigation.


--Pablo Casals, Spanish Cellist and Conductor

Learning occurs only in the presence of contrasts. Our Lebenswelt (life-world; leben-life; welt=world) is a dynamic matrix of contrasts. Contrasts compel attention, sustained attention generates reflection, and reflection, coupled with wonder, creates the quest for understanding so that one may live a better and more satisfying life.

Stop a moment and reread or reflect upon the insights described in the section on writing. There I am talking about stark contrasts between two lived worlds, two lived persona. Contemplating those contrasts makes you more aware of who, what, and why you are and the ways you interact with the world and with other embodied consciousnesses. And that awareness enhances you as a human being. You play two roles, or more, adapting yourself to different situations and different people to maximize relationships, communication, and creativity without giving up your authenticity.

Philosophy and Psychology, and the natural and life sciences, always occur in the matrix of civilizations and cultures, which create and exemplify historical and institutional patterns of action and thought. Each culture constructs its distinct Weltanshauung (world outlook; welt=world, shau=view, insight; anshauen=look, intuitive knowledge, opinion) and Lebenanshauung (leben=life; anshauen=approach, intuition). A civilization’s philosophers, scientists, artists, and sages both create and reflect these Anshauungen as they live and ponder human experience in order to make sense of their lives and discover as well as disclose what we call inhabitable views of reality. You are in your own inimitable way philosopher, scientist, artist, and sage.

It is vitally important that you keep all these insights and perspectives in mind as you work with The Philosophical Baby: What Children’s Minds Tell Us About Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life.
The Philosophical Baby is one of latest contributions to decades of research and debate about the nature of the child, childhood, and children’s neurological, cognitive, emotional, mental, and moral development. This continuing debate often includes a sharp contrast between brain vs. behavioral explanations of child and adult behavior and development.

Gopnik is both philosopher and psychologist. She turned to psychology and neuroscience when she realized that the philosophers’ theories of the human mind and behavior lacked any real grounding in empirical and experiential evidence about the real lives and development of children. She and her colleagues have created novel and increasingly accurate portrayals of how children from birth (and even as fetuses) function creatively and successfully in developing themselves physically, psychologically, and socially—in short, take on the world.

There are sometimes sharp contrasts between the proposals of Gopnik and her colleagues in the field, but those contrasts lead to new ideas and discoveries. One of the premier intellectual television talk-show hosts, Charlie Rose, recently did a Brains Series of three episodes featuring top researchers and thinkers in the fields, including Alison Gopnik, who had then co-authored a book with Andrew Meltzoff and Patricia Kuhl, The Scientist in the Crib: Minds, Brains, and How Children Learn. One of the participants, John Bruer, authored The Myth of the First Three Years. Those discussions revealed the existence and creative/productive function of contrasts and consensus.

Their work has dislodged and replaced the many myths about infants and children that are still the currency of so much parental and professional theorizing regarding childhood development. Most of the mythic descriptions and mythmakers of childhood development in the world I grew up in got it all wrong. Newborns, toddlers, and young children are not blank slates on which parents, pediatricians, and teachers imprint the accumulated knowledge and practice of the human species. Rather, children from advanced fetal states to toddlerhood, and beyond, bring extraordinary resources, skills, and talents into the world. In fact, they conduct and construct their own development and lives with remarkable inborn expertise, bringing into being the worlds of objects, people, causal sequences, self-observation, and “moral” distinctions, just to name a few of their amazing accomplishments.

You, the engaged reader of this syllabus and the book, were once that newborn baby, that developing infant, that toddler, that child, that adult emerging through the metamorphic evolution from conceptus (fertilized egg, embryo, or fetus) to grownup. As I emphasized in earlier sections of this syllabus, Gopnik’s book and the work of all the other researchers in these fields describe and explain to a great extent You as a conscious, evolving, human being on this planet. But Gopnik doesn't leave you stranded in the myriad scientific details of child development. She knows that you may feel like a stranger in a strange land in the face of all the science speak and experimental details. She provides relief with abundant illustrations of the blood, flesh, and behavior of actual children who are engaged in the dynamic process of self and world creation, and whose creative acts transform both world and themselves in the magical alchemy of human living. Many of the accomplishments of the children she describes may seem so unusual that you can't imagine yourself having done the same in your early years. But Gopnik assists you by drawing on the experience of raising her own children, providing intimate, personal insights into their development process. All these examples and illustrations demonstrate that You are a familiar, not a stranger, in this strange and wonderful land of human thought, belief, and action. Strangeness and familiarity are the hallmarks of human existence. But the strange becomes the familiar, while the familiar often yields to the strange, and so on. Growth into all that we become emerges from this dance.

Gopnik, in short, provides you with a rich feast of ideas, experiments, and experiences that will deepen your self-understanding, heighten your practical intelligence, and advance you to new levels of accomplishment and proficiency.

In your reading of The Philosophical Baby, you may find Gopnik and her research colleagues and their experiments a bit intimidating. But Gopnik has attempted to translate her and others’ work into
concepts and language we lay persons can comprehend. I think her effort is quite successful. You will find some of the material challenging, but careful and repeated readings will be stimulating and rewarding. Please, never forget as you wend your way through the book’s intriguing findings--It’s all about you! This book, as well as many others you will encounter in this online program, exemplify the subtitle of a paper I delivered many years ago: “Holding a Mirror Up to Myself.” You may think you’re holding up a book to read, but you’re really holding up mirror that reflects you back to you.

**Course Objectives**

The objectives of this course can be understood at two levels: the immediate and the overarching.

**IMMEDIATE GOALS:**
A careful examination of the ways children experience and frame the great questions of human life. Increase the student's ability to articulate those issues, as demonstrated in book report.

**OVERARCHING GOALS:**
Philosophy, Psychology and the Natural and Life sciences address three fundamental questions, doing so with methods native to their conceptual habitats. Those questions are:

(1) We possess the gifts of self-consciousness, self-observation, and self-knowledge. These endowments require that we be attentive to all the occurs in our consciousness at all times. So, we must ask at any moment: What is present before our consciousness, both subjectively and objectively, both inwardly and outwardly.

(2) Given these facts about our awareness and the way it seems to operate in our lives, how, truly, is that we can and do know anything? What do we actually know about ourselves, others, and the world? What are the ways in which we know?

(3) So, who are we who are conscious and self-conscious and know so much about so many things? How do we fit in?

Different disciplines and different people propose sometimes radically different contexts for and answers to these questions. These books will help you understand some of those contextual variations and disparities and will tease your mind with wonderfully diverse and absorbing answers.

This course is also intended to help you find within yourself the attentivity, the sensitivity, the skillful means, and the heart necessary to comprehend and incorporate useful elements from philosophical and psychological portrayals of the human being and human development.

This course endeavors also to open your eyes and mind to the profound comparative process of exploring philosophy, science, and culture together without which you cannot begin to understand the significance of questions and answers about human development, human consciousness, and human action in our contemporary world.

Since Philosophy, Psychology and the sciences should (but often do not) place a premium on learning how to learn as well as learning itself, a further objective of this course is to create environments and tools in which and with which both levels of learning become simultaneously possible for you. Your mental concentration and even-mindedness in all areas of your life depend on the cultivation of learning how to learn as well as learning itself. Your education, particularly in school and on the job, focuses primarily on the mastery of subject matters and skills, while ignoring that the first and continuing task is to assist you in learning how to learn. The latter enlarges the scope of your endeavors and accomplishments, opening up
universes of action and understanding. The former only fills your toolbox with specific tools for specific tasks in very specific contexts. You need both to overcome failure and to succeed in this life.

**Evaluation and Grading**

World University’s book report and guided research courses are evaluated and graded 80% on the basis of the 15- to 20-page written report, submitted at the end of the course, and 20% on the weekly, 1-page, Progress & Questions reports submitted by the student to the mentor.

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**Thought Questions**

1. Alison Gopnik and her many colleagues in Psychology and the Neurosciences have committed most of their professional lives and energy to exploring the human mind, brain, and behavior. Children’s brains and development occupy their attention almost exclusively now. Why do you think Gopnik and the others have devoted so much time and energy to these subjects? Do you think their efforts are important and worthwhile?

2. Gopnik graduated from McGill University in Canada with the intention of becoming a philosopher. She did her graduate work in Psychology at Oxford. But as she studied, she realized empirical evidence could answer the questions she was interested in. She says, “It is literally true that what I wanted to do didn’t change at all from the time I was an undergraduate doing philosophy through the rest of my career. It just seemed that instead of asking questions, you might want to answer them. Studying development was a good way to answer them.” Can you imagine yourself undergoing a similar transformation, following your interests and passions instead of a predigested course of education? What path have you followed to date and what do you think your future holds for you?

3. How would you begin to summarize the overall subject and the meaning of Gopnik’s portrayal of child development? The book’s subtitle is: What Children’s Minds Tell Us About Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life. Does this subtitle capture the central thesis and heart of her approach to the lives of children?

4. Were you convinced of the truth and relevancy of the many claims Gopnik makes? Are you just intrigued by some of the proposals without judging truth or relevancy?

5. If you are skeptical or critical about some of the proposals made in the course of the presentation, what are those claims and why are you skeptical or critical? What are your own particular points of view or experiences on the basis of which you are skeptical or critical?

6. Of all the ideas and discussions in Gopnik’s book can you pinpoint some that you find truly interesting and perhaps meaningful in your life and in your way of looking at the world and living in it?

7. As you reflect on the book and your experience and background, do you find connections between your life and the ideas presented in the books? Also, do you find that the books contain some ideas, views, or proposals that are at odds with your experience, beliefs, life, or ideas about yourself and the world?

8. I have stressed the importance of self-observation in many parts of this syllabus. Self-observation is vital in your relationship to these books. Gopnik’s presentation, particularly in the
last chapters, was consciously and self-consciously about consciousness. She never forgets she is first a philosopher. What do you observe in yourself about your responses and reactions to the books?

(9) Does the book leave you with unanswered questions about childhood and child development, the relation between brain and behavior, and the threads, themes, and lifelines between you as an infant and as an adult?

(10) Take some time to recall events, experiences, and memories in your childhood and while growing up that resemble the features of consciousness, behavior, and development addressed in the book. What are the events, experiences, and memories that come to mind?

(11) Are there ideas, descriptions, and/or accounts in the book that seem alien to you and are at odds with what you have experienced, or believe regarding childhood and human development?

(12) How would (or how does) the content of this book change the way you think, act, hope, feel, and/or relate to others? Have the books expanded your awareness and self-awareness? Do you have a better or fuller sense of what and who you are as a conscious human being who lives and grows in the developmental stream of life from conceptus (embryo or fetus with surrounding tissue) to adulthood?

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**STUDY GUIDE**

“Adults are always asking little kids what they want to be when they grow up because they’re looking for ideas.”

--Paul Poundstone, American Comedian

Pay attention to Gopnik’s Introduction. You may want to read it several times to get a map of the book’s contents. It will help you navigate through the complexities of each chapter as well as the thematic flow of ideas, insights, and research findings binding the nine chapters together.

You may feel like a stranger in a strange land as you move through Gopnik’s reviews of psychological literature and her extrapolations from those intriguing findings. But slow, attentive reading and reflection will eventually transform you into a Familiar in a strange land. I recommend that you do a quick reading scan of each chapter, highlighting works, sentences, and passages, making marginal marks and notes where you think you need more work to understand the ideas or where you have puzzlements and questions. Then go back slowly through the chapter, pausing and reflecting on words you might have underlined, phrases or paragraphs you marked, or passages that you highlighted. Don’t be surprised if there are words, phrases, and passages whose meaning you don’t immediately grasp. Just try to comprehend as much as you can, asking yourself questions about what a word or passage means and definitely interrogating yourself about your own capacities, limitations, and biases that make comprehension easy or difficult. It is absolutely crucial here that you bring your own background, views, biases, and commitments to the surface. You can’t comprehend and critique another’s views until you have made some attempt to acknowledge and examine your own views.

“We call a child’s mind ‘small’ simply by habit: perhaps it is larger than ours is, for it can take in almost anything without effort.”

--Christopher Morley, American Writer and editor

Always keep in mind that *The Philosophical Baby* is about *You* as well as the subjects and scientists Gopnik cites and the captivating. You were once one of those babies -- round the clock learners confronting and integrating experience. Although you grew up, comprehending, integrating, and using all that you experienced, you, as that baby, still exist within as the neural/musculature/brain and behavioral
patterns acquired through all those years. Newborns have memories and an amazing ability to grasp what’s around them and in them.

For example, how many of you avoid touching hot surfaces because you had direct, painful experience as a child? How many of you show love and affection for others because your Mother/Father exhibited the same qualities for you? How many of you translated your child’s ceaseless, driving curiosity about self and the world into creative outlets and professions? How did Sesame Street and Star Trek shape your choices of education and career? Alison Gopnik and all the researchers whose work she uses are the same integrated, whole human beings you are. When Gopnik and her colleagues study babies and children they are studying themselves. As you read and incorporate Gopnik’s ideas you, too, are studying yourself. Each of us exists as an embodied human consciousness with lives and histories we enact and transform. Gopnik and each person she cites are employing their own embodied, enacted consciousness in order to explore the extraordinary world of childhood. Gopnik and her colleagues don’t often acknowledge that their study of the “other” is also of study of themselves. Scientists like to be “objective” and detached from their object of study. But when the object study is the human being and human consciousness, the experimenter is always part of the experiment.

Consciously observing and reflecting on your own embodied, enacted consciousness as you are using it can be truly exciting but also confusing. Also keep in mind that no matter how confused or puzzled you are as you wade through Gopnik’s book, there is a first-person focal point of view (“I”) within you that is not confused. Even if you feel totally confused, you are the observer of your own mind and experience; the part that observes the confusion is not confused. If it were, you’d never find your way out of the mess.

We conscious human beings are embodied in flesh, but are in the privileged position of awareness and self-awareness—our bodies occupy space, but we as consciousnesses and mind haunt space. For example, the body you see in the mirror is similar to the space-occupying body an examining physician sees, but the “I” observing it is not in the mirror. French Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty made this significant distinction 70 years ago while introspecting and analyzing his own consciousness. If you keep these insights about embodied consciousness in mind (self-observation) as you contemplate Gopnik’s intriguing book, you’ll find your exploration a lot easier and great deal more enriching.

“There’s nothing that can help you understand your beliefs more than trying to explain them to an inquisitive child.” --Frank A. Clark

As you prepare to write about Gopnik, reflecting on what you have read, thought, and felt I recommend that you just start by writing what comes to mind in whatever form it takes, however formally or informally, organized or not. Think of the process as having a conversation with yourself. The words you put on the page (screen) are expressions of you and your thoughts. People, including teachers and professors, will often say (if they’re honest and self-honest) that they don’t really know what they know until they talk it out or sketch it on paper. My own 40-year experience in the university classroom illustrated this daily, especially as I was talking to/with students seated before or with me about some ideas or experiences that became the stuff of the class session. My students almost always came to the same realization. Here’s some important points about the many persona (assumed identities or roles) and realities you occupy that have a lot to do with your writing and what you submit to me.

The moment you enter school for the first time, you immediately confront different language and behavior demands. You see that the language you use on the street and at home isn’t really acceptable in the classroom. The free and easy speech you’ve encountered and mastered from birth doesn’t fit the Standard English matrix your teachers impose. You have to develop a new persona, one of many personalities you construct as you grow up and bounce off the people and world around you. Philosophers and linguists call this the process of simultaneously occupying multiple realities and persona.

The free and easy talk (usually sentence fragments or single words) quickly gives way to Standard English requirements. When you walk into the classroom (K-12, college and beyond) you rapidly learn to become formal, self-conscious, studied and you do your best to speak and write in accordance with the rules and forms of Standard English. Your writing assignments become formalized and organized, conforming to those rules and standards and organizational styles, sometimes at the cost of what you really wanted to say. In short, you adopt another persona when you enter the classroom, leaving behind the persona displayed on the street.
Street talk with friends is very casual. Stop a moment and think about text messaging and its abbreviated forms. Or think about Twittering (140 characters) or similar forms of communication. There’s a world of difference between the way we communicate on the street and the way we do or must communicate in a formal classroom or at work.

Just pause and reflect on the prose you are reading on this page. It’s formal, organized, and exemplifies the rules and forms of Standard English. I would never communicate in the same way on the street, although years of classroom speech begin to contaminate my street speech. Ordinary people in ordinary situations often said (or say) to me, “You’re talking like a professor.” And I would try to avoid using much street talk in the classroom.

So my suggestions are that you do your initial drafting in something like the ordinary speak of the street, then begin to progressively tighten it up, organize it, and build the flow of ideas and themes into a coherent stream of organized presentation. You might try drafting your ideas as text messages or as Twitters (Twitters force you to really compress and distill meaning; it’s kind of like writing Japanese 17 syllable Haiku poetry). This way you will be expressing yourself initially in a genuine, individualized way and then creating the more formal character that will be different from the “Street” but will, at the same time, embody what you really want to say. There’s another example of this process that I’m sure you can relate to: The struggle to find just the right word to express something. We all do it all the time and we intuitively know what words are wrong and what words are right for capturing what we know we want to mean. Let your words mean what you want them to mean. The right word has a “zing” to it; the wrong word falls flat. In your progress reports and final report I want you to keep these observations in mind. Let the final product reflect what you really mean rather than what you think you ought to write because you’re writing for me, trying to please me. I always know the difference and reward the genuine, thoughtful product with affirmation and higher grades.

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**Resources for Further Exploration of Brain, Consciousness and Human Development**

“Children love to be alone because alone is where they know themselves, and where they dream.”

--Roger Rosenblatt

**Alison Gopnik**

Her website is: [http://www.alisongopnik.com](http://www.alisongopnik.com) where you will find a biography and lists of her publications and activities.

The 229 notes at the end of *The Philosophical Baby* provide a wealth of explanatory phrases and literature citations.


Gopnik contributed to a number of other books in the field with a variety of authors.

She also was Stephen Colbert’s special guest on Colbert Nation, October 7, 2009: http://www.colbertnation.com/video?keywords=alison+Gopnik

She was interviewed by the East Bay Express’ Timothy Beneke. Her comments really get to the heart of our understanding of child development. She pointed out how strange it is that philosophers have spent so little time thinking about how children learn. “The very first discussion we have of how we understand the world is in Plato’s Meno where Socrates asks mathematical questions of a slave boy. Then, for 2000 years, it stopped. Part of the reason probably has to do with the lack of respectability associated with studying children. There’s a sense that if you’re working with babies, you are not doing serious science . . .”


Other Researchers and Authors of interest

John Bruer.

His contribution to the Charlie Rose Brain Series episode is: http://www.charlierose.com/guest/view/3284

His most important recent book referenced on the Charlie Rose program is: The Myth of the First Three Years: A New Understanding of Early Brain Development and Lifelong Learning. He cautions educators and parents against drawing fast conclusions from brain science research.

You’ll also find much stimulating information in his book: Schools for Thought: A Science of Learning in the Classroom.

http://brainconnection.positscience.com/topics/?main=conv/bruer A three page interview here provides an enlightening glance into Professor Bruer’s research world.

Professor Bruer, like Professor Gopnik, began his academic study in Philosophy.

Charles Nelson

Professor Nelson is a Harvard Professor of Pediatrics, engaged in diverse efforts to uncover the secrets of the child’s brain and behavior. A good website is:

http://developingchild.harvard.edu/faculty_and_partners/faculty/faculty_spotlight_nelson/

A second informative site is:
http://www.childrenshospital.org/cfapps/research/data_admin/Site2204/mainpageS2204P0.html

Professor Nelson is also a significant contributor on the Charlie Rose show already cited.

Kyle Pruett

Professor Pruett is a Yale child psychiatrist who has researched and written extensively on child development. He is also a panelist on the Charlie Rose show:

http://www.charlierose.com/guest/view/3285

One book that might catch your interest is: Me, myself and I: How Children Build Their Sense of Self 18-36 Months.

Ashley Merryman & Po Bronson
**Nuture Shock: New Thinking About Children** (2001). These award-winning authors provide a truly readable book about the research mentioned in some of the other author citations.

**Lise Eliot**

Dr. Eliot (Ph.D) is associate professor of neurobiology in the Department of Cell Biology and Anatomy at the Chicago Medical School. Her book: *What’s Going on in There?: How the Brain and Mind Develop in the First Five Years of Life* contains a wealth of important theoretical and practical information. But her book that has really caught the attention of professional and lay readers is: *PINK BRAIN, BLUE BRAIN: How Small Differences Grow into Troublesome Gaps—and What We can Do About It.*

An exciting conversation with her is found at: [http://www.mainstreetmom.com/preg/lise_eliot.htm](http://www.mainstreetmom.com/preg/lise_eliot.htm)

**Joseph Chilton Pearce**

He has written and lectured extensively. Two of his earlier books are relevant to the subjects covered by Gopnik and her colleagues:


**Laura Miller**

Ms. Miller is the cofounder of [Salon.com](http://www.salon.com) (A comprehensive and intelligent news and features site. She has written extensively for many news publications and is currently the editor of [The Salon.com Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Authors](http://www.salon.com). The book of hers that I recently came across is: *The Magician’s Book: A Skeptics Adventures in Narnia*. She has an unusual take on C. S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*, but has so much insightful analysis of children’s tales and their impact on us as adults.

**Fynn**

After Anna died on the eve of World War II, Fynn, who was a British combatant in the European campaigns, couldn’t bear to talk or write about her for 30 years. Finally, in 1974, he was able to publish *Mr. God, This is Anna*. The book was a sleeper, found mostly in grocery store racks, but quickly became a sensation. I used it in a number of courses during my university teaching years (1967-2005). Fynn later released *Anna’s Book*, a wonderful collection of Anna’s own words from her diary. The third book is: *Anna, Mister God, and the Black Knight*. The Black Knight was Fynn’s own teacher. I first read *Mr. God, This is Anna* in one sitting in the university dining hall in 1976.

**Thomas Kuhn**

Kuhn was a physicist who devoted his attention to the history and structure of science. His groundbreaking work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was published in 1962. He introduced readers (everyone else since) to the seminal concepts of *Paradigm* and *Paradigm Shift*. He used these concepts to describe the major changes that take place in science and in the presuppositions scientists inhabit in order to do science. I include Kuhn here because his work applies to all scientific process (and much more), including the monumental shifts represented by Gopnik and her colleagues.

**Paul Tough**

*Whatever It takes: Geoffrey Canada’s Quest to Change Harlem and America*

Go to: [http://www.hcz.org/](http://www.hcz.org/) to look at the astonishing work of Geoffrey Canada in Harlem to successfully educate children and parents in low income neighborhoods. They call one of their many successful efforts *Baby College*—an 8-week program where young parents and parents-to-be how to help their children get the education they need to be successful.