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Towards a Theology of Childhood: Children's Agency and the Reign of God

James Gerard McEvoy
Australian Catholic University, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia

Abstract

This article contributes to a theology of childhood in the context of recent research in the social sciences on children's lives and the nature of childhood. The clergy sexual abuse crisis heightens the need for such a theology. First, the author offers an account of children's social agency, with particular attention to cognition and sociality, arguing that an interpretative approach affords the best account. Second, the argument takes a christological turn, examining Jesus's welcoming of children and the statement "it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Mark 10:14), to consider what can be learnt about Jesus's appreciation of children's agency.

Keywords

childhood studies, children's agency, Alison Gopnik, Judith Gundry, Jesus and children, kingdom of God, Edward Schillebeeckx, Charles Taylor, theology of childhood, Michael Tomasello

In February 2017, towards the conclusion of the Australian Government's five-year-long Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, the commission held a public hearing into the current policies and procedures of

Corresponding author:
James Gerard McEvoy, Australian Catholic University, P.O. Box 412, Torrensville Plaza, South Australia 5031, Australia.
Email: james.mcevoy@acu.edu.au

Catholic Church authorities in relation to child protection and child-safe standards.[1] During the final two days of that hearing, the commissioners questioned five archbishops as to what had been achieved in their archdioceses for the protection of children. One commissioner, Professor Helen Milroy, a child and adolescent psychiatrist, and Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Western Australia, inquired about the theology of childhood underpinning ministerial formation in those archdioceses. Professor Milroy had learned the previous week, from the evidence of seminary staff and others, "that there was no consistent curriculum around children or child development or understanding of children, nor did there seem to be an underlying theology of the child underpinning the teaching of how you deal with children in the church and its ministries."[2] The commissioner asked whether the archbishops thought that further development in this regard would be important. In response, one archbishop spoke of the work on a theology of childhood in his archdiocese, and two others said they assumed that this work was being done at the level of Catholic primary and secondary schools; the remaining two gave no response. The archbishops' responses reflect the paucity of work in Catholic theology on children's lives and the nature of childhood.

Milroy's question arises in the context of an extensive body of social science research over the last half-century on children and childhood—on children themselves, and not merely as adjuncts to the study of institutions or families.[3] The disciplines of developmental psychology and sociology feature prominently in this literature yet scholars in other fields make important contributions, including historians, philosophers, anthropologists, geographers, and scholars of law and education.

The primary aim of this article is to contribute to a theology of childhood in dialogue with the best insights from recent research in the social sciences. The argument proceeds in two major steps. The first section offers an account of children's active agency focusing on cognition and sociality. Alongside the descriptive task, I will argue methodologically that an interpretative approach, rather than a constructionist one, affords a better account of children's agency. The second section turns to Jesus's encounters with children to ask what they reveal about his appreciation of children's agency.

1. For the Final Report, and transcripts of all public sessions, see Australian Government, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/.
2. Commissioner Professor Helen Milroy, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Case Study 50, on day 255, February 24, 2017. See the transcript, pp. 26151–53, quote at 52, http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/261be84b-bec0-4440-b294-57d3e7de1234/case-study-50,-february-2017,-sydney.
3. For the United Nations "Convention on the Rights of the Child" (1989), childhood extends from 0 to 18 years. While accepting this span of years, the current essay will focus on the years 0–7. For the UN Convention, see https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx.

Taking Account of Children's Agency

In the interdisciplinary field of the sociology of childhood or childhood studies, the pivotal theoretical development has been the recognition of children's social agency, that is, children as "active participants in society."[4] Sociologists Allison James and Alan Prout claim that prior to the emergence of this body of work, those engaged in family sociology, developmental psychology, human geography, social anthropology, and other disciplines "represented childhood and children as natural, passive, incompetent and incomplete and in doing so foreclosed a series of important questions for theory and empirical research."[5] Although their criticism may not apply equally to every pre-1980s study, in the emerging field, children's lives are now seen to make an impact on social and cultural life, and sociologists study the peer cultures that children develop.[6] In the light of this work, children's lives cannot be accounted for primarily in terms of a not-yet-achieved adulthood.[7]

My main aim in this section of the article is to give an account of children's agency, with particular focus on cognition and sociality. While the literature is extensive, I will refer mainly to the work of two leading contemporary developmental psychologists, Michael Tomasello and Alison Gopnik. Tomasello led the experimental research center, Department of Developmental and Comparative Psychology, at the Max Planck Institute of Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany, between 1998 and 2017. With colleagues and students, he has published an astonishing number of papers reporting empirical research into children and great apes, and has drawn this research together in a series of monographs on the development of language, cognition, and morality.[8] Most recently, in *Becoming Human*, he has proposed a theoretical

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4. Allison James, "Agency," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*, Jens Qvortrup, William A. Corsaro, and Michael-Sebastian Honig, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 34–45 at 34.
5. Allison James and Alan Prout, "Preface to Second Edition," in *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, eds. Allison James and Alan Prout (New York: Routledge, 2015), xi–xvii at xi–xii.
6. See e.g. William A. Corsaro, *The Sociology of Childhood*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2015), esp. chs. 6–9.
7. Besides the focus on children's agency, the editors of *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies* name four further key characteristics of the new paradigm: (1) a focus on the study of normal childhood rather than of delinquency; (2) a critique of the conventional "socialization" perspective, with which sociologists accounted for the transformation of immature children into autonomous adults; (3) the recognition of children's engagement in social and political contexts; and (4) the use of social science methods in the study of children and childhood. See Qvortrup et al., "Why Social Studies of Childhood?" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*, 4–6.
8. Among several works on language, see esp. Michael Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2008); on cognition, see Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Thinking* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2014); on morality, see Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Morality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2016).

framework for explaining the work of the Leipzig center over those two decades.[9] Also prolific, Alison Gopnik leads a research group at the University of California at Berkeley and has published books both on children's creative, imaginative powers,[10] and on how this understanding of childhood could inform relationships between parents and children.[11] I will outline Tomasello's line of thought below and include key insights from Gopnik in that context.

Progress in this emerging field has been achieved not only through empirical research, but also through the identification and overcoming of philosophical and methodological limitations of earlier studies. I have already noted James and Prout's critique of the assumptions of pre-1980s studies. Their main target is the work of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896–1980), who, they argue, is concerned with children's lives only to the extent that they prefigure participation in an adult world. James and Prout argue that Piaget's focus on the stages of child development results in a future-oriented view of childhood and a neglect of children's capacities, experience, and social lives.[12] Elsewhere, I have argued that philosopher Charles Taylor offers a more nuanced analysis of Piaget's genetic psychology, proposing an approach that both values the strengths of Piaget's position and overcomes its weaknesses.[13] Taylor welcomes Piaget's genetic approach to the transformations between stages on the human journey but criticizes his instrumentalist view of these transformations.[14] In Taylor's interpretative view, children's language articulates meaning and facilitates the discovery of new meaning; he sees children growing through the articulation of

9. Michael Tomasello, *Becoming Human: A Theory of Ontogeny* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2019).
10. Alison Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us about Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009).
11. Alison Gopnik, *The Gardener and the Carpenter: What the New Science of Child Development Tells Us about the Relationship between Parents and Children* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).
12. Alan Prout and Allison James, "A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood? Provenance, Promise and Problems," in *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, 6–28 at 9–10.
13. See James Gerard McEvoy, "Theology of Childhood: An Essential Element of Christian Anthropology," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 84 (2019): 117–36 at 120–22, https://doi.org/10.1177/0021140019829322. See Charles Taylor, "What Is Involved in a Genetic Psychology?" *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1985), 139–63. Tomasello also adopts a nuanced approach to Piaget's work; see Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, esp. 298–300. In the text that follows, I will summarize my earlier argument about the benefits of an interpretative view of children's agency over a Piagetian view. However, the primary aim of the present section is to offer a fuller account of the cognitive and social nature of children's agency through discussion of both Tomasello's and Gopnik's work.
14. In contrast to a behaviorist view of human development, which sees learning proceeding through a series of simple mechanisms operating in the same way at every stage of life, in the genetic view, the pattern of cognitive growth is different at each stage.

meaning. Methodological reflection will be an important aspect of my argument in the effort to offer an insightful view of children's agency; it is also integral to the work of both Tomasello and Gopnik. We will return to this question towards the end of the current section.

Tomasello's *Becoming Human* not only charts the ontogeny of children's social and moral development but places that development within an evolutionary framework. He seeks to identify "ways in which humans are biologically prepared for engaging in their unique forms of sociocultural activity; … it is precisely this biological preparation … that makes uniquely human sociocultural activities and experiences possible in the first place."[15] Since children's agency is my immediate concern here, I will focus on the uniquely human, and take as granted Tomasello's account of the evolutionary foundations for these capacities.

Children as Cognitive and Social Agents

For Tomasello, the crucial capacity distinguishing human cognitive and social life from that of great apes is what he calls shared intentionality. While great apes can anticipate what their conspecifics want or will do, whether in searching for food or fighting, they can neither recognize that the other might hold a different perspective nor understand another's communicative intentions.[16] By contrast, humans can grasp others' communicative intentions—a capacity that, as Tomasello sees it, effects the "monumental transformation of human ontogeny."[17]

This capacity emerges in a child's first six years through two fundamental dynamics, yet it begins ever-so-early in the shared emotional bonding of early infancy through what are often called protoconversations. When, with smiles and laughter, expressive sounds and positive emotion, parents and others engage infants, they provide the emotional connection from which social and cognitive agency develops.[18] Emotional bonding, or what Taylor calls "communion," is essential for human development.[19]

In this context, at about nine months of age, infants begin to engage in the first of Tomasello's dynamics of shared intentionality, that of *joint intentionality*. At this age, infants share emotions with particular others, especially parents, about realities in the

15. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 6–7.
16. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 46–53.
17. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 342.
18. Anthropologist Sarah Hrdy argues that a unique form of childcare, in which not only mothers but a wider social group provide strong emotional support for children, was the background for the evolution of human agency. See Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Mutual Understanding* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2009). See also Kristen Hawkes and James E. Coxworth, "Grandmothers and the Evolution of Human Longevity: A Review of Findings and Future Directions," *Evolutionary Anthropology: Issues, News, and Reviews* 22.14 (2013): 294–302, https://doi.org/10.1002/evan.21382.
19. Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2016), 55.

world around them and begin to understand the other as an intentional agent. As such, they can "triangulate": they can recognize another's goals and perceptions towards an object as different from their own. Integral to the triadic pattern is its recursive social structure. As Tomasello puts it, "The infant is attending not only to the adult's attention to the object, but also to the adult's attention to her attention to the object, and to the adult's attention to her attention to the adult's attention to the object, and so on."[20] While the recursive structure is not explicit for the infant, the dynamic means that they both know they are attending to the same thing and, therefore, that the experience is shared.

Tomasello's argument is that the dynamic of joint intentionality is foundational for human cognition and gives rise to the human capacity for referential communication. At around eleven to twelve months of age, children begin to use pointing gestures to indicate an object or situation to another, thus establishing joint attention. The motivation for these pointing gestures can be expressive, informative, or requestive—either expressing excitement about a particular situation, communicating something of interest to another, or indicating a need or desire they would like fulfilled.[21] Having gained a facility with pointing gestures, between twelve and fourteen months of age children learn to use words through interaction with an adult. Conventional communication is built upon the joint attentional situation. This leads Tomasello to an important insight about the nature of language: "Word learning is thus not about putting labels on things but is about acquiring conventional means for coming to share attention with others in a variety of complex social situations."[22]

Not only does the dynamic of joint intentionality foster the cognitive and linguistic dimensions of children's lives, it also forms the basis of their social and moral lives. The recursive structure of joint intentionality means that when infants or toddlers act with an adult, they come to understand themselves as a joint agent toward a joint goal: they act collaboratively as a "we."[23] And further, Tomasello argues that, as such, joint intentionality is the ontogenetic basis for the recognition of human equality—it "leads young children to understand others as, in some sense, equivalent or equal to themselves."[24]

The second of Tomasello's dynamics of shared intentionality, *collective intentionality*, emerges between the ages of three and six years, forming children's cognitive and social lives. Indeed, as the term "collective intentionality" suggests, Tomasello's is a sociocultural approach to human identity. At around three years of age, children

20. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 56.
21. See Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 98–106.
22. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 118. Taylor offers a philosophical argument for a conception of language that supports Tomasello's developmental-psychological approach. He argues for an "expressive-constitutive" view, which he contrasts with a "designative" one. See esp. Taylor, *The Language Animal*.
23. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, ch. 7 "Collaboration."
24. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 200.

broaden their commitments beyond individual others, begin to be aware of and coordinate a range of perspectives, and eventually perceive the cultural common ground—"the way things are done here." They come to understand the conventional rules in their social location and can engage in collaborative reasoning and problem-solving. It is the dynamic of collective intentionality, Tomasello argues, that enables three-year-olds to understand pedagogy: "children trust pedagogical communication and generalize it to new items because they see its generic formulation as coming from the cultural knowledge of the social group."[25]

Through experimental observation, Tomasello shows that at three years, children are more likely than at two years to collaborate with other children and arrive at common expectations of their joint task—the sense that "we" are doing this together, as Tomasello puts it.[26] Also contained in this common stance is children's recognition of equality among partners, mutual respect, and an expectation of fairness—not merely for strategic motives but for sociomoral ones.[27] Between three and five years of age, children's capacity for collective intentionality matures, they understand themselves as part of a broader social group, and gradually grasp the significance of its social norms.

As he spells out the dynamics of collective intentionality and underscores children's agency, Tomasello turns to the work of contractualist moral philosophers.[28] The contractualist position is integral to his view both of children's cognitive lives and of their social lives. In terms of cognition, he sees children over three years of age coordinating their own and others' views to "co-construct" an objective perspective that grounds all perspectives. Children co-construct "a kind of perspectiveless perspective," he says.[29] In terms of social life, he sees this activity of co-construction as the "evolutionary and ontogenetic roots of human morality."[30] Through the activity of co-construction, children develop their sociomoral motivations and attitudes, including respect and the recognition of equality.[31] While I applaud the engaged view of children's agency developed by Tomasello, when we turn to questions of methodology and philosophical presuppositions, I will argue for what I consider a more adequate view of human agency than the contractualist one.

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25. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 151.
26. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 196–97.
27. See esp. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 232–42. Again, Tomasello establishes children's grasp of equality, fairness, and respect through experimental observation.
28. Tomasello indicates the Kantian roots of this position in his discussion of the work of Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996) and Stephen Darwall, *The Second Person Standpoint: Respect, Morality, and Accountability* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2006). See also Stephen Darwall, "Precis: *The Second-Person Standpoint*," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 81 (2010): 216–28, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2010.00367.x.
29. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 77.
30. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 192.
31. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 214–17.

Alison Gopnik gives a vivid account of children's extraordinary creativity and capacity for learning. Out of her extensive empirical research, she argues that children develop "causal maps" of both the physical and psychological world.[32] Their great love of play, pretense, and counterfactual thinking is integral to this development.[33] As young as two years old, they use their imaginations to give good causal explanations for events and entities in the physical world. Between two and six years, they begin to understand the psychological world of others, forming a "theory of mind," explaining the connection between others' beliefs and actions. From five years, "they can construct a map that connects mental states to one another and to the world outside them" and, consequently, can influence others.[34] And not only do they have the capacity to develop causal maps or models of both the physical and psychological worlds but they revise those models in the light of new evidence.

Gopnik's argument is that children's capacity to develop models of the world drives their "obsessive, tireless experimental play and their ceaseless observation and imitation of adults."[35] To explain this capacity, she turns to eighteenth-century mathematician and philosopher Thomas Bayes's work on probability. For Bayes, learning occurs through the "probabilities of possibilities": that is, in the circuitous journey of life, as children's experience amplifies, the sheer fecundity of their intellectual endeavor means that, faced with a new reality, they systematically explore the range of causal possibilities of that reality to arrive at what they see as the most probable account.[36] We will return to Gopnik's Bayesian approach in the discussion on methodology below.

Among Gopnik's further insights into children's growth, she shows how their memory differs from that of adults. Again, through empirical research, she shows that babies and children up to six years of age have episodic memory: they remember specific events, some details of those events, and their context. Yet, they do not have what Gopnik calls "autobiographical memory." They don't place events within a single life narrative, even an implicit one. As Gopnik puts it, "They don't experience their lives as a single timeline stretching back into the past and forward into the future. They don't send themselves backward and forward along the timeline as adults do."[37] Only

32. See Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby*, esp. chs. 1–3; and Gopnik, *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, chs. 4 and 5.
33. See Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby*, chs. 1 and 2; and Gopnik, *The Gardener and the Carpenter*, ch. 6.
34. Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby*, 57.
35. Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby*, 105.
36. Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby*, 78–81. For Gopnik's extended exploration of Bayesian learning models, see Alison Gopnik and Elizabeth Bonawitz, "Bayesian Models of Child Development," *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Cognitive Science* 6 (2015): 75–86, https://doi.org/10.1002/wcs.1330; and Alison Gopnik and Henry M. Wellman, "Reconstructing Constructivism: Causal Models, Bayesian Learning Mechanisms, and the Theory Theory," *Psychological Bulletin* 138 (2012): 1085–1108, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028044.
37. Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby*, 153.

after six years of age do children develop autobiographical memory: they begin to weave episodic memories into a single narrative. Gopnik argues that it is children's voracious appetite for learning in the early years that distinguishes their consciousness and, therefore, their memory from that of adults: "Children's characteristic consciousness is shaped by their characteristic agenda—learn as much about the world as you can as quickly as you can."[38] Their learning is so fast-paced, and the amount of information they absorb so extensive, that "their entire stock of knowledge turns over every few months—they go through whole paradigm shifts between their third and fourth birthday."[39]

Let me draw together the view of children's agency espoused above. It must be clear that a view of children as natural, passive, and incompetent, one which conceptualizes childhood in terms of a not-yet-achieved adulthood, is utterly inadequate: it grossly misrepresents children's cognitive and social lives. Gopnik gives a vivid account of children's extraordinarily creative, energetic cognitive activity. Tomasello focusses on the relational nature of children's growth and shows how their engagement facilitates their growth. Of course, growth could not occur outside a familial and wider social context, but the context should not prevent us from accounting properly for children's participation. Children's engagement in the process of growth begins in their early months as they are drawn to share emotional states with significant adults. It continues after the "nine-month revolution"[40] when, through the recursive dynamic of joint intentionality, they actively choose their own experiences and partially direct their own development; they come to see both themselves and others as cooperative agents who are due mutual respect.[41] Between three and six years of age, through the dynamic of collective intentionality, they both understand and engage more readily in the broader cultural group; they "create new, group-minded ways of interacting, communicating, and learning from others."[42] At this age, they engage more freely with peers, are more independent amongst them, and are able to reason with them about matters in their social and cultural context. Of course, this does not make children neurosurgeons or UN negotiators; an immense amount of cultural knowledge remains in their futures. But recognition of children's potential in the future should not prevent the recognition of what they have already enacted of their extraordinary cognitive and social capacities in their childhood.

Methodological Reflections

Catholic theology has a great deal to learn from the disciplines of developmental psychology and sociology about children and childhood and, through the study of

38. Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby*, 157.
39. Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby*, 157–58.
40. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 308.
41. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 315, 317.
42. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 318.

childhood, about human existence more broadly. Against the background of this scholarship, the almost total neglect of these questions in recent Catholic theological anthropology is astonishing. My aim in this first major section has been to offer a sketch of children's remarkable cognitive and social capacities and, in doing so, to uncover cultural assumptions about childhood. Along the way I have noted some philosophical and methodological presuppositions underlying views of children's agency. Before moving to Jesus's encounters with children, some consideration of these presuppositions should provide greater clarity about the shape and meaning of children's agency.

As already stated, much of the impetus for the emergence of the subdiscipline of childhood studies arose from critiques of the methodological limitations of Piaget's account of child development. Sociologists including Allison James and Alan Prout mount a strong critique, arguing that Piaget's view of children's lives is future-oriented and does not account adequately for their capacities, experience, and social lives.[43] Charles Taylor advances a more moderate view: he values Piaget's genetic approach to child development, for which the pattern of cognitive growth varies at each stage of the journey. Yet he challenges Piaget's view of both the innate structures of the stages of children's development and the transformation that occurs between stages. On the innate structures at work in children's acquisition of language, Taylor argues that Piaget assumes a designative or instrumentalist view of language, which fails to account for children's language being *about* something. For Taylor, language articulates meaning, and this meaning is taken up into the child's own awareness, shaping her life.[44] On the transformations between stages, Taylor argues against Piaget's view that transformation occurs through children disengaging from others' perspectives. Taylor argues that while children's sense of objectivity increases, rather than disengaging from other's perspectives, they come to greater clarity about their own point of view in a common world.[45] The process of transformation enables children to find better expression for the meaning of their situation. As Taylor sees it, children grow through the expression and discovery of meaning—an interpretative view of agency.

While Michael Tomasello values Piaget's substantial contribution to the study of cognitive development, he argues that Piaget's view of children's cognitive growth is individualistic.[46] Piaget acknowledges that children's cultural context is integral to their development yet he conceives the fundamentals of development in an inherently individualistic fashion: "the child as scientist exploring her environment and learning how things work," as Tomasello puts it.[47] Like Taylor, Tomasello's critique of Piaget's view of agency runs alongside a critique of his designative or representationalist view

43. Prout and James, "A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood?" 9–10.
44. Taylor, "Genetic Psychology," 154. For a critique of the designative view of language and an exposition of Taylor's preferred expressive-constitutive view, see Taylor, *The Language Animal*, ch. 1.
45. See McEvoy, "Theology of Childhood," 122.
46. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 298.
47. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 299.

of language. From Tomasello's "shared intentionality" perspective, Piaget's view of children's agency means that he is unable to account for the deeper dimensions of life enabled by language: "joint attention, the embedding of perspectives, and social self-monitoring."[48]

Gopnik's portrayal of children's creative intellectual endeavor contains much insight. Yet her Bayesian approach also results in an individualistic reading of children's development. She envisages children each systematically exploring a whole range of causal possibilities to arrive at the best hypothesis for the reality they seek to understand. While such an approach rightly emphasizes their lively imaginations and cognitive power, it is "insufficiently social,"[49] in Tomasello's words. The Bayesian approach conceptualizes the process of growth as happening in individual minds rather than between children and adults, children and peers, and children and social groups, as conceptualized in Tomasello's notions of joint intentionality and collective intentionality. I am arguing, therefore, for a view of Gopnik's work that locates her key insights within the context of a sociocultural approach to children's agency.

Tomasello's sociocultural approach is featured above because, in my judgement, his concepts of joint intentionality and collective intentionality give a better account of the dynamics of child development than individualistic accounts. Yet along the way, I have raised questions about his conception of children's agency within the dynamic of shared intentionality. Regarding children's cognitive agency, he envisages them living amidst a range of construals of an issue with which they are immediately concerned, and co-constructing the best solution to that issue.[50] As cited earlier, he envisages children co-constructing a "perspectiveless perspective" that can ground all the perspectives they encounter.[51] Regarding children's social and moral agency, Tomasello argues for a contractualist stance, whereby "participation in joint attentional activities creates the conditions for what moral philosophers call second-personal relations, based on respect, commitment, accountability/responsibility, and fairness."[52] That is, because a joint agent—"we"—is formed through the dynamics of joint intentionality, children treat the other with equality and mutual respect.

One of Tomasello's primary goals for his constructionist conception of shared intentionality is to value children's active engagement. He makes this point when discussing children's cognitive engagement in the dynamic of collective intentionality: "we are not talking about adult instruction or socialization; rather children construct, or co-construct, from their sociological experiences, and the general nature of these

48. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 299.
49. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 85, 300. See also Michael Tomasello, "How Children Come to Understand False Beliefs: A Shared Intentionality Account," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115 (2018): 8491–98 at 8494–95, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1804761115.
50. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 88.
51. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 77.
52. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 192. See Darwall, "Precis: *The Second-Person Standpoint*."

constructions is set by the developmental level of the children's skills and motivations of shared intentionality."[53] Yet, while valuing children's active engagement no less than Tomasello, I want to indicate that an interpretative approach can better account for children's agency than a co-constructionist and contractualist one.

Take as an example my great-nephew Patrick, at three years of age, inviting me to play in his "rock shop." Pebbles are plentiful in his backyard. So, taking the lead from his imaginative play with these rocks, Patrick's father made him a cash register from scrap cardboard that included a keyboard, scales, and a scanner. "You be the customer," Patrick says to me, assuming the "shopkeeper" role himself, and selects appropriate rocks according to color and size, cleaning and polishing them, and arranging them on the counter (garden seat). "How many?" he asks. "Two," I reply. "How much?" I ask. "Two," he says. So, I hand over two leaves. He accepts the payment, scans the rocks out, and says, "You take them off to your pretend house now, over there." So, purchase in hand, I venture in the direction indicated (between the pot plants) but fail to see the imaginary front door before he can open it for me—and I broke it! Alarmed by the damage, he runs back to the shop and (toy calculator in hand) phones a friend to repair it. But no joy; not home! So, he phones Nanna, who is ever attentive, and before I can turn around, the door is repaired.

The rock shop is Patrick's creation and is often the site of wondrous imagination. The above account relates one incident over a few minutes, and the rock shop remains open for business today, as does Patrick's imagination. My argument is that this activity is better understood in interpretative terms than in co-constructionist ones. There is no doubt about Patrick's agency here: he is the proprietor and leads the play and can creatively accommodate others' suggestions and initiatives, whether mine, his cousin Finn's, his brother Owen's, or those of many other playmates. But the context for the shop precedes Patrick. It was his fascination with the activity at the local shops that sparked the idea. The backyard and his parents' love provided much of the rest. His family's hospitable practices form the background for the broken-door scenario: "we wave people off at our house," Patrick insists as he prepares to farewell visitors. No aspect of this context lessens his agency, yet the rock shop is better understood in terms of his creative imagination developing a new "take" on the world, rather than he and I, or he and his cousin Finn, co-constructing a perspectiveless perspective.

In Taylor's terms, the crucial philosophical point here is that of "inverting the traditional priority of self over intersubjectivity,"[54] where "traditional" refers to the position inaugurated by Descartes. To use Taylor's expression, communion precedes self-awareness. While Tomasello foregrounds the relational nature of human agency with his concept of shared intentionality, when it comes to explaining an individual's cognitive activity, he turns to a constructionist view, and when it comes to explaining an individual's social and moral growth, he adopts a neo-Kantian contractualist approach. Yet there is no such thing as a "perspectiveless perspective": pairs or groups

53. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 88.
54. Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 67.

can settle upon a more (or less) clairvoyant perspective, or a more or less capacious one, but not the "view from nowhere" as in Thomas Nagel's famous phrase, cited by Tomasello.[55] When the traditional priority of self over intersubjectivity is inverted, we arrive at an interpretative view: "The maturing human self emerges out of a shared take on 'the' world, through a gradual growing sense that my take is different from yours. We grow toward a complex, two-level understanding. There is still the one world, 'the' world, but we live our different perspectives on it."[56] My argument is that, rather than constructing or co-constructing an objective perspective, children come to a more clairvoyant or capacious or creative account of the reality that has caught their attention—their own take on the world.[57] Gopnik's account of children gaining autobiographical memory and a coherent sense of self only after six years of age would seem to support this view of intersubjectivity preceding a sense of self.

From an interpretative stance, not only is children's agency valued, but so are their perspectives, their "takes" on the world. The freshness of their perspectives can command our attention, they can surprise and jolt us into new insight. Importantly, from this stance, children's lives are not viewed instrumentally, as existing primarily for the insight of adults. Rather, their lives are seen as having intrinsic value. And further, neither does the interpretative approach promote a view of childhood as a period of innocence. Heartbreakingly, children can also convey the fragility and the pain of existence. In summary: children's lives have inherent meaning, and can lead adults more deeply into human meaning.

Children in the Practice of Jesus

How can Catholic theology take account of this developing understanding of children's social agency? Could such an understanding provoke the elaboration of a fuller

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55. Tomasello, *Becoming Human*, 77. See Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1986).
56. Taylor, *The Language Animal*, 67.
57. Besides the issue of intersubjectivity preceding self-awareness, Tomasello's co-constructionist stance raises epistemological questions, which the limitations of space prevent me pursuing at any adequate depth. But briefly: as spelled out above, Tomasello envisages children coordinating perspectives with peers and constructing an objective perspective—a "perspectiveless perspective"—from these shared perspectives. Yet as I see it, an embodied view, inspired by Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, makes better sense of understanding than does Tomasello's representationalist account. Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor argue for such a "contact theory" or "unproblematic realist" view in a recent work: Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2015). In the context of children's agency, the import of a realist view is to emphasize the significance of children's "takes" on the world. Their takes are not only imaginative construals (and not simply "cute," as in popular parlance), but readings of the present that convey insight into a shared world—into human meaning.

theological account of childhood? And, if so, what lines of theological inquiry might prove most fruitful? Karl Rahner's 1963 essay "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood" advances productive lines of theological reflection.[58] In an argument that foreshadows post-1980s scholarship of childhood by almost two decades, Rahner criticizes naïve developmental views, and argues that childhood is of unique and unsurpassable value. His essay centers on a theology of grace, and begins from the Christian view of humanity's relationship to God's eternity. He points out that at every stage of the human journey individuals find themselves in relationship to eternity.[59] Eternity is not, he argues, a further chronological period appended to what preceded it, but "the enduring validity of [human] existence before God as lived in freedom."[60] This relationship of human freedom to eternity is "every bit as true of childhood" as it is of the other phases of life.[61] In their own unique way, therefore, children have a direct relationship with God. Evocatively, Rahner concludes, "The strange and wonderful flowers of childhood are already fruits in themselves, and do not rely for their justification on the fruit that is to come afterwards. The grace of childhood is not merely the pledge of the grace of adulthood."[62]

Following on from Rahner's essay, the theological meaning of childhood can be further elaborated by attending to the primary doctrinal categories of a theological anthropology—creation, grace, and original sin. I have proposed a modest development along these lines in "Theology of Childhood: An Essential Element of Christian Anthropology," turning to Rahner's understanding of the experience of God. I have argued that children's encounters with God have something to teach the broader community about Christian life and discipleship, even about the grace of God. Attention to children's lives can teach us about the fundamentally relational and inter-relational nature of existence, an understanding central to the Christian doctrine of creation.[63] And children's experiences of grace—in moments of wonder, enquiry, imagination, and affection, for example—are not only moments in which God is lovingly present to them, but are experiences in which God is revealed, uniquely, to those who share their

58. Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," in *Theological Investigations* vol. 8 (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971), 33–50. The essay was first published in *Geist und Leben* 36 (1963): 104–14. For a fuller analysis of Rahner's essay, see McEvoy, "Theology of Childhood," 123–28. See also the very fine study by Mary Ann Hinsdale, "'Infinite Openness to the Infinite': Karl Rahner's Contribution to Modern Catholic Thought on the Child," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 406–45.
59. This understanding of eternity in the present runs through Rahner's work. See, for example, Karl Rahner, "The Saving Force and Healing Power of Faith," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5 (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 460–67; Rahner, "Self-Realization and Taking Up One's Cross," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 9 (New York: Seabury, 1972), 197–217.
60. Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," 35.
61. Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," 35.
62. Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," 37.
63. McEvoy, "Theology of Childhood," 131–34.

journey.[64] As I have cited Rahner in the previous paragraph, "the grace of childhood is not merely the pledge of the grace of adulthood."[65]

In the remaining pages, I will turn to another locus of theological understanding—a christological perspective that values children's social agency. While Jesus's encounters with children, narrated in the Synoptic Gospels, are neither frequent nor extensive, they are striking. Alongside a number of actions that value children, Jesus associates them with his primary symbol of God's presence and action—the reign of God. I will consider what those encounters could teach us about Jesus's appreciation of children's agency and, therefore, how we might understand children theologically.

A christological perspective is important since, for Christians, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth reveals God. In a recent book on a very different question (the place of Christ in Creation), Rowan Williams aims for "a consistent language to speak about the Incarnation," specifically, about the unity of the human and divine in Jesus Christ. Over more than twenty pages, he first examines the complexity of Aquinas's position in *Summa Theologiae*,[66] and then seeks to articulate that position in a way that communicates to modern readers. In that regard he says, "Belief in the Incarnation is the belief that the specific concrete and historical agent that is Jesus of Nazareth simply *is* the act of God the Word in a unique sense, quite distinct from the way in which the divine is *universally* the ultimate activator of any and every finite substance."[67] In the context of my discussion of childhood, then, we can ask, What can Jesus's encounters with children teach us about God's regard for them, and about the theological meaning of childhood? Accounts of those encounters must, of course, be interpreted in their narrative context, and understood in the context of the overall meaning of Jesus's ministry. We look to that question now.

Jesus, Children, and the Kingdom

Could Jesus's actions towards children, especially his welcoming of them, and the accompanying saying "it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Mark 10:13–16 // Matt 19:13–15 // Luke 18:15–17 NRSV, used throughout), convey deep regard for children, even recognition of their agency? Of course, the concept of agency in this context belongs to our age, not to Jesus's; I am not claiming that he acted with foreknowledge of twenty-first-century approaches. Yet we can ask, Could those encounters depicted in the synoptic narratives convey something of his valuing children's gifts and capacities, valuing those children as children?

64. McEvoy, "Theology of Childhood," 134–35.
65. Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," 37.
66. Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), 12. Williams discusses Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 3, q. 1–49, esp. 1–9.
67. Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 36 (italics in original).

Over several essays, biblical scholar Judith Gundry explores the significance of children in Jesus's ministry.[68] Much can be learnt from her extensive study of this matter, as will be seen below. I will propose, however, that to fully appreciate Jesus's valuing of children, we need a broader view of his proclamation of the kingdom than Gundry provides. Gundry's first essay surveys the Synoptic Gospels to identify five ways in which Jesus, in his teaching and practice, acknowledges children's significance.[69] She highlights Jesus's images of children as: recipients of the reign of God, models of entering the reign of God, and models of greatness in the reign of God. She studies the meaning of Jesus's call to his disciples to welcome children as he does, and his statement that serving children is a sign of greatness in the reign of God.[70]

I will focus on the first of these ways, expressed in the Markan text already cited, about the kingdom belonging to children, since this seems the most important. Gundry agrees, as is clear in her comment: "A more emphatic statement of children's reception into the reign of God by Jesus could hardly be made."[71] Yet in studying what this means to Jesus, Gundry links the saying with the teaching in the Beatitudes, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20), and she concludes, "children's vulnerability and powerlessness seem to lie at the heart of Jesus's extension of the reign of God to them."[72] It is not Gundry's intention to diminish the significance that children's lives have for Jesus, indeed her essay concludes with the striking statement, "The Gospels teach the reign of God *as a children's world*, where children are the measure rather than don't measure up to adults … That is, the Gospel teaching calls the adult world radically into question."[73]

Nonetheless, in a later essay, Gundry returns to this Markan text, locating it within the purpose of the Gospel, and arguing again that the kingdom belongs to children

68. See esp. Judith Gundry-Volf, "To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God: Jesus and Children," *Theology Today* 56 (2000): 469–80; Judith M. Gundry, "Children in the Gospel of Mark, with Special Attention to Jesus' Blessing of the Children (Mark 10:13–16) and the Purpose of Mark," in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 143–76. See also Judith M. Gundry-Volf, "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 29–60.
69. Gundry-Volf, "To Such as These."
70. A rich body of work on biblical (esp. NT) views of childhood has emerged in recent decades. Alongside Gundry's essays see, among others, Reimund Bieringer and Ma. Marilou Ibita, "(Stifled) Voices of the Future: Learning about Children in the Bible," in *Children's Voices: Children's Perspectives in Ethics, Theology and Education*, ed. Annemie Dillen and Didier Pollefeyt (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 73–119; James Francis, "Children and Childhood in the New Testament," in *The Family in Theological Perspective*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 65–85; and A. James Murphy, *Kids and Kingdom: The Precarious Presence of Children in the Synoptic Gospels* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), esp. ch. 3.
71. Gundry-Volf, "To Such as These," 471.
72. Gundry-Volf, "To Such as These," 472.
73. Gundry-Volf, "To Such as These," 480 (emphasis in original).

simply because of their need.[74] For Gundry, the emphasis of this text is on the kingdom as the sphere of God's rule being inaugurated in Jesus's ministry, and children having the greatest need. She sharpens the point by referring to James Francis's conflicting reading of the passage: "It is completely unjustified to claim, as, for example, Francis does, that the subjective manner in which children receive the kingdom of God—that is (ostensibly) with the gladness and wholehearted acceptance with which a child receives a gift—is why it belongs to them."[75] Rather, Gundry argues, their immaturity and need make them privileged recipients of the kingdom. The emphasis is on God's initiative; all is given.

While Gundry rightly places strong emphasis on the kingdom as God's initiative, I propose that such an emphasis does not necessitate viewing children solely in terms of need. Edward Schillebeeckx's theological study on the historical Jesus, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, surveys the Gospels and an abundance of exegetical literature to discern the meaning of "the kingdom of God" in the key practices of Jesus's ministry—his healings, miracles, meals, and preaching— and in his rejection, death, and resurrection.[76] Schillebeeckx sees the kingdom as the basic impulse behind Jesus's message and manner of life. In exploring its meaning, he notes the strong connection in Jesus's ministry between God's initiative and *metanoia*, or what Schillebeeckx calls the actual praxis of the kingdom.[77] In terms of God's initiative, Schillebeeckx writes of Jesus seeing the nature of God "as an unconditional willing of good towards human beings, an unimpeachable quality of pure love for" humanity.[78] In terms of the praxis of the kingdom, the daily ministry of Jesus offered a concrete view of it, and Jesus calls disciples into that same practice, or "orthopraxis" (right practice), as Schillebeeckx names it: "Orthopraxis, right conduct, is the human manifestation or logical rendering of God's universal saving love, registered in practical human living. It is manifested where love knows no frontiers, no compartmentalizing and sectarian divisions, even unto enemies."[79] Encountering God's love for humanity entails doing God's will, living the practice of the kingdom.

These interrelated dimensions of Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom, as Schillebeeckx interprets it, offer a way of understanding the saying, "it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." First, the kingdom belongs to children because God's unconditional willing of good to humanity includes all without exception; God's

74. See Gundry, "Children in the Gospel of Mark," esp. 150–54. For reflection on the evangelists' various interpretations of Jesus's encounters with children, see Bieringer and Ibita, "(Stifled) Voices of the Future," 88–90.
75. Gundry, "Children in the Gospel of Mark," 152–53. See Francis, "Children and Childhood in the New Testament," 76.
76. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (New York: Seabury, 1979).
77. For his summary of the meaning of the kingdom, see Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 140–54.
78. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 142.
79. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 153.

universal saving love includes children. As such, it is God's initiative, and an utter gift to humanity. Yet, second, the kingdom could also belong to children because of their ability to reflect Jesus's practical living of the kingdom—his "orthopraxis." Indeed, the following verse in Mark's Gospel seems to express exactly that meaning: "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:15).

Some elements of Schillebeeckx's concept of orthopraxis do not apply to children's lives in the same way that they do to the lives of adults. Schillebeeckx emphasizes the political and social dimensions of orthopraxis both in Jesus's ministry and in the realm of human salvation.[80] Further, the moral agency of children under seven years of age must be understood differently than that of children over seven.[81] Nonetheless, children's practical living in response to the kingdom can rightly be understood as orthopraxis. Perhaps here, Rahner's insight that childhood, as a stage of our personal journey, is carried throughout life as a "basic condition" of human identity can highlight effectively the salvific dimension of children's lives. Rahner concludes his argument about what it means to be children of God with these words: "For if childhood (and this applies to childhood in the human sense as well) is openness, is trustful submission to control by another, the courage to allow fresh horizons, ever new and ever wider, to be opened up before one, a readiness to journey into the untried and untested … then in all this that transcendence of faith, hope, and love in which the ultimate essence of religion precisely consists is already *ipso facto* an achieved and present fact."[82]

Children's Agency and the Practice of Jesus

I have shown above that recent sociology of childhood has exposed an assumption of earlier scholarship: the assumption that childhood is a not-yet-achieved adulthood or, as James and Prout put it, the view of children as "natural, passive, incompetent and incomplete."[83] Both Tomasello's and Gopnik's research show that children are extraordinarily creative and insightful, inherently relational, group-minded, and directive of their own development. So, conceiving them in "deficit" terms misses almost all of

80. See Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 153–54, and *passim*. The social and political dimensions of orthopraxis and salvation are emphasized throughout his later major work. See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Seabury, 1980). For a summary of what he envisages, see "The System of Co-ordinates of [Humanity] and Salvation," *Christ*, 734–43.
81. For Aquinas's view of the significance of the "age of reason," see Cristina L. H. Traina, "A Person in the Making: Thomas Aquinas on Children and Childhood," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 103–33; and for reflection on Aquinas's view of childhood from the perspective of contemporary theory, see Jean Porter, *Moral Action and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995), ch. 5.
82. Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," 47 (emphasis original).
83. James and Prout, "Preface to Second Edition," in *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, xi.

what's happening in their lives. Children are individuals with agency. I have argued that their agency is best conceived interpretatively, as they engage with others and, together, come to a more clairvoyant or capacious or creative account of the reality that has caught their attention. An interpretative view of children's agency (as against a constructionist one) is essential for a theology of childhood since the view that children, alone or together, could "construct" the kingdom contradicts its very nature as God's unconditional love breaking into the world and saving.

While Jesus did not hold a twenty-first-century view of children's agency, Schillebeeckx's take on Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom, holding together divine initiative and human response, means that we can easily conceive of Jesus responding to children's extraordinary openness, their creativity, and the relational connectedness at the heart of their cognitive and social growth. Their capacities and skills, their "orthopraxis" and not their neediness alone, could be reason for their possession of the kingdom.

In this light, Professor Milroy's point, about the importance of a theology of childhood underpinning the manner in which the church and its ministers engage with children, is crucial. An informed theology would, first, lead trainee ministers beyond the assumption of childhood being a not-yet-achieved adulthood. Second, it would enable the church and its ministers to attend to children in fresh and life-giving ways: to learn from them both about our shared humanity, and about what it means to belong to the kingdom. Such learning, however, is only the beginning, since learning through children what it means to belong to the kingdom will necessarily involve the church in reforming its practices and, indeed, reforming ecclesial life.

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ORCID iD

James Gerard McEvoy https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2735-9115

Author Biography

James Gerard McEvoy, a senior lecturer in theology at Australian Catholic University, teaches a semester-length course on the theology of childhood, and is the author of "Theology of Childhood: An Essential Element of Christian Anthropology," *Irish Theological Quarterly* (May, 2019). He is also the author of *Leaving Christendom for Good: Church–World Dialogue in a Secular Age* (Lexington, 2014) and has published on related topics in *Theological Studies, Heythrop Journal*, and *Pacifica*.