

Philosophizing as children

Practicing thought beyond the logic of maturity

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31 Jan 2026

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Abstract

This article proposes “philosophizing as children” as an epistemic stance that challenges the adultist assumptions embedded in the philosophical tradition. Rather than viewing childhood as a stage preceding rational thought, it argues that traits associated with childhood—curiosity, openness, and dependence—are fundamental conditions for the act of philosophizing itself. Drawing selectively on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception and Ahmed’s phenomenology of attention, the paper describes a mode of thinking that remains in relation to the unknown and resists gestures of mastery and closure that characterize adult rationality. In dialogue with Tronto’s ethics of care and Lugones’s notion of world-traveling, it suggests that thinking as children entails a relational and affective commitment to others. Philosophizing as children entails an intentional infantilization of philosophical thought, understood as a refusal of adultist norms of mastery, closure, and epistemic self-sufficiency in favor of wonder, relational responsibility, and openness to alterity.

Keywords: philosophy of education; childhood; epistemology; phenomenology; decolonization.

We never cease to be children; only the games change.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

Introduction: Setting the stage for “philosophy as children”

Modern Western academic philosophy has depended on a particular conception of who counts as a knower. The image that endures within this tradition is that of an autonomous, self-regulating adult who has achieved detachment from the immediacy of experience. This figure defines reason by contrast with what is presumed to precede it: the child, imagined as dependent, impulsive, and unformed. The exclusion of the child has therefore functioned as one of philosophy’s constitutive gestures.¹ It sets

¹ I use ‘philosophy’ throughout this article to refer to the tradition that has institutionalized itself in European and North American universities and that has been exported globally through colonial education systems. This is the philosophy that produces the P4C movement, that trains most professional philosophers, and that structures academic philosophical discourse. Naming this tradition is complicated: ‘Western philosophy’ risks geographic essentialism and obscures philosophy’s internal diversity; ‘Eurocentric philosophy’ captures the centering gesture but may imply all European thought shares these features; ‘colonial-modern philosophy’ names the violence but risks temporal boundedness. I use ‘philosophy’ without constant qualification, understanding that this refers specifically to the dominant institutional tradition, while acknowledging that this very naming reproduces a problematic universalism. Other philosophical traditions—Indigenous knowledges, African philosophies, various Asian

the conditions for what kinds of questioning and what forms of attention are recognized as genuinely philosophical. The analysis developed here is therefore not a claim about philosophy as such, nor about all traditions of thought that might reasonably be called philosophical. It addresses a historically specific configuration of philosophy as it emerged in modern Eurocentric academic contexts, where autonomy, maturity, and independence function as epistemic ideals. Relational, Indigenous, and non-Western philosophical traditions often resist these ideals in ways that resonate strongly with the posture described here. Rather than surveying those traditions, the argument isolates adultism as a structuring feature of modern Western philosophy in order to show how it might be unsettled from within its own conceptual vocabulary.

Efforts such as Philosophy for Children (P4C) were designed to challenge this exclusion, but they frequently reproduce the hierarchy that grounds it. Matthew Lipman's (1988) original formulation cast philosophy as a democratic practice open to all, yet the project presupposed an adult educator who could translate children's experiences into the language of reason. The philosophical subject remained the adult. Gareth B. Matthews (1994) argued that children are capable of posing philosophical questions, but even this acknowledgment placed adults in the position of recognizing philosophical value on children's behalf. The structure of validation remains the same. The child's thought becomes noteworthy only when it approximates adult standards of coherence or rigor.

Recent work in philosophy of childhood has sought to undo this asymmetry more radically. Walter Omar Kohan (2020) describes philosophy as a "practice of life," a mode of existence rather than a pedagogical content to be delivered. His approach refuses the distinction between philosopher and pupil, insisting that philosophy is enacted in the relation itself. Karin Murris (2018) develops a related insight through posthumanist frameworks, arguing that listening to the child is a transformation of epistemic relations rather than an act of benevolent inclusion. Listening to the child, she argues, accepts that thought is always already plural and entangled. The adult's authority is unsettled not by argument but by the recognition that meaning emerges from relation rather than mastery.

The expression "philosophy as children" arises within this context. It distinguishes itself from both "philosophy for children" and "philosophy with children" by shifting the prepositional ground of the inquiry. The term "for" maintains a direction of instruction; "with" suggests collaboration but often retains the adult as facilitator. "As" indicates a different posture entirely. It names a way of philosophizing that takes the perspective

traditions—often do not position the autonomous adult as the measure of rationality or organize thought through exclusions of the child (see Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000). My focus on the dominant tradition is strategic: it is this philosophy that has claimed universal authority while marginalizing other ways of knowing, and that therefore requires the most urgent decolonial intervention. The adultism I critique is not an accident of 'Western' geography but a feature of philosophy-as-colonizing-project—the tradition that has named itself simply 'philosophy' while treating other epistemologies as pre-philosophical or non-philosophical.

of the child not as an object of study or imitation but as an epistemic stance. Thinking as children inhabits a relation to knowledge characterized by curiosity, receptivity, and dependence. These are precisely the qualities philosophy has historically marked as childish in order to authorize itself as mature, autonomous, and serious, and it is that authorization that philosophizing as children seeks to unsettle. Such a stance interrupts philosophy's attachment to mastery. It invites a form of inquiry that remains open to surprise, that does not secure itself through closure or finality. This gesture can be understood, in Walter D. Mignolo's (2007) sense, as a kind of delinking: a refusal to organize thought through inherited hierarchies of maturity and rational control. Delinking here does not invoke a separate theoretical system but signals an effort to unlearn the epistemic habits that associate understanding with domination. The task is not to recover some lost innocence but to recognize the conditions of thought that philosophy has long repressed.

The choice of "philosophy as children" rather than "philosophy as childhood," "philosophers as children," or "philosophizing as chiding" requires explanation. Each formulation carries distinct implications. "Philosophy as childhood" risks reifying childhood as a discrete stage or condition, when the aim is to describe a stance that adults can cultivate without claiming to occupy childhood itself. "Philosophers as children" centers individual identity in ways that may reinforce the autonomous subject this approach seeks to unsettle. "Philosophizing as chiding" is conceptually appealing for its emphasis on process and becoming, but it introduces a gerund form that may obscure rather than clarify the posture I wish to name. "Philosophy as children" preserves the plural and relational dimension: not a solitary thinker imitating a child, but a community of inquirers who adopt collectively the stance of those who do not yet know, who remain curious, who depend on one another. The formulation also signals that this is not about individual adults becoming childlike but about philosophical practice itself being reconstituted through engagement with modes of attention we associate with children.

Philosophizing as children is therefore to return to the vulnerability that precedes certainty. Children question without assuming that answers will secure them; their inquiries are driven by the discomfort of not yet knowing rather than by the desire to master. Matthews (1994) observed that the philosophical value of children's questions lies precisely in their openness, their refusal to naturalize what appears obvious. Kohan's (2020) notion of philosophy as a lived practice and Murriss's (2018) account of relational listening both articulate this openness as a mode of being rather than a stage of development. "Philosophy as children" names the effort to sustain that mode within philosophical life itself. It challenges the presumption that thinking begins with independence and maturity, suggesting instead that philosophy becomes possible only when thought acknowledges its own dependence.

Philosophy's adultism: the problem of epistemic maturity

Western philosophy regularly scripts the knower as an already mature agent who reasons, decides, and authors a life without fundamental dependency. That scripting appears in the canon's favored portraits of autonomy, but it also saturates the temporal assumptions that govern who counts as a full participant in inquiry. Development becomes the background theory that sorts minds into more or less legitimate exemplars of rational agency. Erica Burman's genealogy of "development" shows how that framework grew with psychology's rise and then migrated far beyond psychology into public common sense, where it functions as a moral narrative rather than a neutral description of change across time (Burman, 2008). Gabrielle Owen (2020) gives the historical hinge for the modern figure of the adolescent, a category produced through expertise and institutions that needed a distinct stage between child and adult in order to coordinate schools, clinics, and families. The key point is not a new label but a new power to discipline time itself, since "developmental time was not merely descriptive; it was disciplinary" (Owen, 2020, p. 11). Passages from Owen's introduction make the mechanism legible, as adolescence appears not as a transparent age bracket but as a regime that ties psychobiological maturation to civic legibility and moral standing, while treating deviations as errors in timing rather than alternative temporalities. The material traces of that regime show up in the historical consolidation of "developmentalism," where the adolescent becomes a figure whose future must be steered and whose present must be supervised, and where departures from the expected schedule read as pathologies to be corrected rather than as variations to be interpreted (Owen, 2020, pp. 6–13).

Political and moral philosophy have historically sustained this epistemic adultism. Joan C. Tronto (1993) traces how moral theory constructs the ideal subject through the exclusion of dependency, defining care as secondary and peripheral to the life of reason. Aníbal Quijano's (2000) concept of the modernity matrix clarifies how such exclusions organize social hierarchies: rational autonomy becomes a marker of value and development, while relationality and care are treated as signs of backwardness. The political philosopher Toby Rollo (2018) shows that the child-adult distinction operates at the very foundation of modern political thought, defining the child as a being without full speech or standing. The adult, by contrast, occupies the domain of political reason and moral responsibility. The binary is thus not natural but constitutive of what counts as rational agency, embedding dependence within the margins of civic and philosophical life. The institutions of philosophy reproduce this division when they require the figure of the independent knower—the philosopher who must think alone—as a condition of seriousness.

The effort to include children within philosophical inquiry has often failed to challenge this structure. Matthews's *The Philosophy of Childhood* (1994) established the

field by taking children's questions seriously as philosophical in their own right. He argued that children are not "proto-philosophers" but genuine thinkers who approach questions of knowledge, justice, and identity with intellectual integrity. Yet even sympathetic readings of Matthews often reproduce the assumption that philosophy begins in childhood only to reach completion in adulthood. His dialogues with children reveal the opposite: that philosophy's vitality depends on its capacity to remain childlike in curiosity and wonder, not on transcending those states. The transcripts he presents show children's reasoning as simultaneously playful and rigorous, unsettling the developmental hierarchy that philosophy itself presupposes (Matthews, 1994, pp. 3–7).

Later thinkers such as Kohan (2020) and Murris (2018) expand this reframing. Kohan treats philosophy as a *form of life* rather than a discipline that belongs to the adult world. He describes philosophizing as a practice of living with questions, not a method for securing answers, and he resists the assumption that rationality requires a distance from dependence or affect. Murris (2018), working through posthuman and feminist theory, further argues that childhood should not be understood as a developmental stage but as an epistemic condition of openness to alterity. Thinking "as children" does not imitate childishness but to inhabit a mode of curiosity that recognizes relation as constitutive of knowledge. Both thinkers make clear that the child does not stand outside philosophy; the child names a stance within it that refuses the adult fantasy of epistemic closure.

The persistence of adultism within philosophy reveals an anxiety about vulnerability and unknowing. By idealizing maturity as detachment, philosophy distances itself from the affective and relational dimensions that make inquiry possible. As Matthews, Kohan, and Murris each show, to take the child seriously in philosophy is not to expand philosophy's audience but to transform its understanding of knowledge itself. The philosopher as adult is not the measure of rationality but one historical arrangement of it. The work of philosophizing as children begins where that arrangement unravels at the point where wonder, dependence, and relation are recognized as sources of understanding rather than obstacles to it.

The limits of philosophy for and with children

Accounts of Philosophy for Children typically begin by narrating the movement's origin in Matthew Lipman's classroom experiments at Montclair in the early 1970s and by identifying the community of inquiry as its central pedagogical device. Historical surveys and systematic reviews corroborate this lineage and document the institutional spread of P4C from the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children to dozens of national programs that adopted Lipman's novels and teacher manuals as curricular anchors (Ab Wahab et al., 2022, pp. 1–2). The history matters for the present argument because it shows that P4C was constituted as a pedagogical reform with a clear direction of guidance. Adults select materials, set the rules of dialogue,

moderate the flow of reasons, and certify the products of discussion as philosophical. Later expansions of the movement kept this structure in place while relocating its center of gravity. Robert Fisher's work, for example, elaborated a United Kingdom strand where philosophizing became a vehicle for teaching thinking and for training teachers to foster communities of inquiry across primary and secondary schools (Fisher, 1996, pp. 36–41). The historical arc from Lipman to Fisher gives us a robust pedagogical tradition with demonstrable outcomes in higher order thinking and classroom culture. It also explains why the verbs that name the field are “for” and “with,” since both embed the adult educator as organizer of the conditions for children's inquiry.

The distinction between “for” and “with” frames the strongest internal critique of P4C. “For” typically names Lipman's original curricular strategy anchored in children's philosophical novels and structured facilitation. “With” often names the shift toward co-inquiry that emphasizes dialogical reciprocity and the cultivation of a classroom commons. Kohan's recent work pushes this second strand by treating philosophizing as a way of life rather than a discrete method. His claim is not that adults should transfer philosophical content to children, but that a philosophical life can be lived with children through shared practices of questioning, listening, and attention that exceed instruction and assessment (Kohan, 2020, pp. 1–6). Murris deepens the “with” through a posthuman orientation that decenters the adult subject and reframes childhood as an epistemic condition of openness to alterity rather than a stage on the way to adult rationality. She uses picturebooks and classroom dialogues to show that children's sense-making is relational and more-than-human, which requires the adult to relinquish control over the trajectories of dialogue and to accept forms of response that do not mirror adult discursive habits (Murris, 2018, pp. 1–9). These developments have real force. They turn P4C away from content delivery and toward collective inquiry. They also keep the adult in the role of designer, curator, and guarantor of philosophical legitimacy. “With” softens the hierarchy but does not remove it.

Recent work brings the critique of hierarchy into explicit conversation with decolonization. Amy Reed-Sandoval argues that P4C can contribute to decolonizing projects when it is reformed by those very critiques. Her account begins by specifying coloniality and decolonization in concrete borderlands contexts, then shows how standard P4C practices risk reproducing Eurocentric norms of voice, topic selection, and classroom authority even when the classroom is diverse and dialogical (Reed-Sandoval, 2019, pp. 27–31). She does not abandon P4C. She identifies reforms that make room for community-partner priorities, for Indigenous and local knowledges, and for facilitation practices that do not treat Western argumentative style as the measure of philosophical seriousness (Reed-Sandoval, 2019, pp. 34–39). Erick Padilla Rosas extends this line by drawing on the philosophy of liberation to move P4C from a stance of facilitator neutrality to intentional commitments that answer the needs of oppressed communities. The proposal for a philosophy of liberation for or with children reframes the teacher's task as a political and ethical one that stands with children in struggles for freedom, which means naming structures of domination rather than bracketing them

for the sake of supposedly neutral inquiry (Padilla Rosas, 2023, pp. 15–18; Padilla Rosas, 2024, pp. 1–4). These interventions work against Eurocentrism and against an ideal of the disembodied facilitator. They still describe a pedagogy in which adults retain the power to decide when inquiry remains faithful to philosophical norms and when it slips into something else.

Childist philosophy sharpens the point by naming adultism not merely as a pedagogical problem but as an epistemic one. Tanu Biswas’s childist project begins earlier than the collaborative formulation cited above, through sustained critiques of the colonial and adultist assumptions embedded in the historic formation of Philosophy for Children. Across this work, childism is articulated through concepts such as learning from children and letting teach, which resist the assumption that adults are the primary epistemic authors of philosophical space (Biswas et al., 2024). In these accounts, philosophy is not treated as a neutral activity delivered to children, but as a practice fundamentally reshaped by children’s modes of sense-making. Biswas further proposes philosophy as play, not as a classroom technique but as an ontological orientation, an insight developed in dialogue with John Wall’s claim that play names a condition of being rather than an optional activity (Wall, 2010). Philosophy as children builds on these interventions while departing from them in emphasis. Rather than redescribing pedagogical relations between adults and children, it names an epistemic posture that adults themselves must inhabit, even when children are not physically present, and even when the materials of inquiry are adult-produced. The risk of aboutness remains, but the proposed posture attempts to displace it by treating childishness as a constraint on adult authority rather than as an object of adult interpretation.

The limit these genealogies disclose is structural rather than accidental. P4C emerged as pedagogy. It succeeded as pedagogy. Its own best critics have transformed it by replacing instruction with co-inquiry, by resisting neutrality in favor of liberation, and by challenging Eurocentrism in method and content. The adult remains the designer and arbiter in each case. At this point, the charge of infantilization cannot be sidestepped, and it should not be. To philosophize as children requires accepting infantilization as an epistemic consequence rather than treating it as a reputational failure. Adult philosophical culture treats infantilization as a sign of unseriousness precisely because it threatens the norms through which maturity secures its authority as the measure of rigor. Reclaiming infantilization names a willingness to let philosophy appear awkward, unfinished, and exposed to correction, rather than insulated by procedural legitimacy or methodological control. If this posture risks dismissal as naïve, that risk is not accidental but diagnostic of the adultist criteria of seriousness that philosophy as children aims to undo (Burman, 2008; Rollo, 2018). The confrontation requires more than generous facilitation, more than excellent curricula, and more than new interlocutors. It requires a shift in epistemic posture that treats childishness neither as a deficit nor as an ideal to be imitated, but as a set of practices through which inquiry proceeds without adult sovereignty over the measure of rigor and the form of answerability. I write this as an adult, from

within the very structures of authority I seek to critique. The paradox is inescapable: a sovereign adult proposes that sovereignty be relinquished. However, this is not a contradiction but the condition of the work. Philosophy as children does not require that adults cease to be adults in chronological terms, but that we refuse the epistemic privileges chronological adulthood has claimed. The distinction between child and adult becomes non-chronological: it names modes of relation to knowledge rather than stages of biological development. The next section stays with this posture long enough to show what it demands of philosophical practice once methodological authority no longer does the organizing work.

Philosophy as children: defining the epistemic posture

To philosophize as children means adopting a stance that treats not-knowing, curiosity, and porous subjectivity as conditions for inquiry rather than as defects to be overcome and refuses both the idealization and the pathologization of childhood by treating the qualities historically associated with childishness as epistemic resources rather than developmental deficiencies and reframes inquiry so that wonder and dependency become sources of epistemic traction. Curiosity functions as a method for disclosing what otherwise remains obscured by habits of mastery instead of merely a preliminary stage on the way to stable knowledge. Porous subjectivity names the readiness to be affected by what one encounters and to revise one's grasp in the face of that encounter. The claim is not that adults should imitate an imagined spontaneity, but instead that philosophical work proceeds best when the knower allows relation, attention, and receptivity to set the terms of understanding. This posture reorients the measures of rigor. Argument does not lose force because it begins from uncertainty. Argument gains force because it answers to phenomena without foreclosing them in advance.

Any account of philosophizing as children has to be clear about what counts as childhood and what counts as philosophy, especially given how easily both terms collapse into vague affirmations of openness or wonder. In this article, childhood does not name an empirical group or a psychological profile. It names a cluster of qualities that adult philosophical discourse has repeatedly attributed to children in order to secure its own image of maturity. Curiosity, receptivity, dependence, vulnerability, not-knowing, and porous subjectivity appear here not because they transparently describe how children actually think, but because they have functioned historically as the negative foil through which adult rationality has defined itself. Adult philosophy has learned to recognize itself by treating these qualities as marks of immaturity, provisionality, or lack. Rather than rejecting those associations, I take them up deliberately and ask what happens when their developmental framing is suspended. Without the promise

that these traits must eventually be outgrown, they begin to look less like deficiencies and more like conditions of possibility for inquiry itself.

Understood in this way, childhood names an epistemic orientation rather than a stage of life. It describes a way of relating to knowledge that remains exposed to what is not yet understood, that tolerates dependence on others, and that resists the urge to secure meaning through closure. Nothing about this orientation belongs exclusively to chronological children. Adults can inhabit it as well, although doing so requires effort rather than innocence. Sustaining openness demands discipline, not in the sense of following a method, but in the sense of learning how to stay with uncertainty without converting it into authority. The point is not to imitate children, nor to romanticize childhood, but to interrupt the adult habit of equating seriousness with control.

Philosophy, as it appears in this framework, cannot be reduced to a list of traits either. Dependence, curiosity, receptivity, care, responsiveness, and incompleteness recur throughout this paper not as interchangeable virtues but as pressures placed on thinking when it refuses to finalize itself. Philosophy here does not culminate in doctrine or resolution. It persists as an activity that remains answerable to what exceeds it, including other people, other worlds, and the limits of its own concepts. To philosophize is to attend, to question, and to remain corrigible, even when doing so unsettles the boundaries of the discipline itself. Philosophy as children names the point at which these orientations meet. Once adulthood no longer organizes what counts as rigor, philosophy no longer appears as a guarded domain of expertise but becomes a shared practice of collective wondering, open to entry and resistant to mastery.

Phenomenology offers one vocabulary that can be rendered deliberately imprecise in the right ways, capable of sustaining exposure, reversibility, and incompleteness rather than enforcing methodological closure. Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes perception as an unfinished openness that situates the subject within a world that exceeds any thematic grasp. Perception does not deliver a completed picture that the mind then judges at a distance. Perception gathers sense through the body's active exposure to a field of meaning. The subject discovers itself as already entangled with what it seeks to know, which means that knowledge grows through reversible relations rather than through unilateral capture (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, pp. xii-xiv, 247–249). This unfinishedness gives inquiry its discipline, shaping how attention is sustained without hardening into a procedure that guarantees authority. Discipline in this context refers to the work of staying with what appears, including its instability and resistance, rather than the enforcement of rules that secure philosophical legitimacy in advance. The inquiry begins from the world's capacity for surprise by resisting our conceptual habits. Sara Ahmed's account of attention clarifies the practical shape of this commitment. Orientation directs what comes into view and what remains in the periphery. Attention is not a neutral spotlight that a sovereign subject points wherever it chooses. Attention is a disciplinary vector that follows established lines and that must be reworked if neglected objects and relations are to appear (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 1–24, 115–122). The childlike stance interrupts habitual orientation by allowing questions to pull the inquirer off

well-worn paths and toward what feels oblique or marginal. This is not a license for careless wandering. It is a disciplined readiness to have one's concepts moved by what they encounter.

This account's reliance on phenomenology requires acknowledgment of a potential tension. Phenomenology, as it developed through Husserl (1913/1982), Martin Heidegger (1927/1962), Merleau-Ponty, and others, is a product of the philosophical tradition described above and may carry its own adultist assumptions. The phenomenological reduction, for instance, presumes a reflecting subject capable of bracketing habitual beliefs, a capacity that some might argue children have not yet developed. However, Merleau-Ponty's later work, particularly his attention to the body's pre-reflective engagement with the world, opens phenomenology beyond such presumptions. His claim that "we never cease to be children" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 355) suggests that the reflecting adult is not a culmination but a forgetting of embodied openness. I use phenomenology not as a master vocabulary but as one resource among others (including childism, care ethics, and decolonial thought) for articulating a stance toward knowledge that refuses mastery. If phenomenology remains useful here, it is because Merleau-Ponty and Ahmed provide language for describing how attention operates and how perception entangles the knower with what is known. The point is not to elevate phenomenology above other frameworks but to show that even within the dominant tradition, resources exist for unsettling the autonomous subject that tradition otherwise valorizes.

Relational responsibility supplies the ethical correlate of this epistemic discipline. Michael Monahan argues that maturity is not a static possession but a practice of manifesting responsibility to others across shifting contexts. He refuses the image of the autonomous agent who carries moral authority as a private asset. Responsibility emerges through relations that both enable and constrain action, which means that responsiveness to others is the mark of grown judgment rather than its opposite (Monahan, 2022, pp. 160–167, 204–209). Read as an epistemic claim, the point is that knowing also answers to others. Inquiry becomes accountable to those who are implicated in what one studies and to those who can be harmed or helped by the way a problem gets framed. The posture of philosophizing as children aligns with this view because porous subjectivity treats dependence not as a lack but as a condition for more exacting understanding. One does not seek a moral telos of purity or innocence. One seeks forms of knowledge that are responsive to the claims of others and that remain corrigible because those claims continue to arrive.

Language and temporality provide the ground where this posture takes shape. Adilson Cristiano Habowski and Cleber Gibbon Ratto (2022) describe "childhood times" as a mode of being in which linguistic emergence precedes and exceeds any final stabilization of meaning. Experience does not sit before language waiting to be named. Experience is already within language, and language opens paths for living that cannot be charted in advance. They write that "Childhood is not a phase to be overcome but a condition of being-in-language" (Habowski & Ratto, 2022, p. 6). Philosophizing

as children takes up this insight as a shift in how inquiry is oriented, rather than as a rule for how it ought to proceed. Treating this orientation as a method would already mislocate its force since the authority method claims in advance is precisely what philosophy as children loosens its grip on. If childhood is a condition of being-in-language then it is not bound to chronological age. Chronological adults can and do inhabit this condition when they allow language to unsettle certainty rather than securing it. Conversely, chronological children can be trained out of this condition through pedagogies that demand premature closure. The stance I propose is available to anyone willing to resist the epistemic gestures (mastery, finality, autonomy) that philosophy has coded as adult maturity. If childhood names a condition of being in language rather than a rung on a ladder, then philosophical inquiry should not treat linguistic hesitation, invention, or play as signs of immaturity. Those features track the way language makes experience available at all. The knower learns to listen for what language is doing and not only for what propositions claim. Attention falls on the inflections, interruptions, and refigurings through which new sense takes hold. The result is a de-hierarchized relational epistemology. Inquiry proceeds from wonder and dependence toward more adequate articulations, and it resists the policing of mastery that insists on closure in advance of understanding. Rigor is preserved through disciplined attention and through answerability to phenomena and to others, not through the fantasy of a subject that stands outside the conditions of its knowing.

It is crucial to clarify that “philosophy as children” describes an epistemic posture enacted by adults, not a claim about children’s actual ways of knowing. This distinction aligns with Hanne Warming’s concept of the “child prism,” an analytical lens through which adults study society from the standpoint of childhood, and with Burman’s “child as method,” which treats childhood as a critical tool for interrogating adult epistemologies (Burman, 2018; Warming, 2011a). This approach also draws on the tradition of ‘childist criticism,’ which seeks to challenge adult interpretative authority while acknowledging that the ‘child’ in literature and philosophy often remains an adult construction, as well as more recent warnings against conflating an adult’s critical posture with the actual cultural productions and distinct epistemologies of children themselves (Deszcz-Tryhubczak & García-González, 2022; Hunt, 1991). The posture I propose draws on adult-constructed representations and phenomenological reflections rather than direct engagement with children’s perspectives. This is not children’s own meaning-making, which Gunilla Halldén distinguishes as “children’s perspectives,” but rather an adult appropriation of what we identify as childlike qualities for the purpose of epistemic transformation (Halldén, 2007). The risk is that it can romanticize or essentialize childhood; the opportunity is that it can disrupt adult certainties without requiring children to perform the labor of that disruption. Philosophy as children asks adults to cultivate a stance toward knowledge that we associate with childhood (curiosity, receptivity, dependence), not because children possess these qualities naturally or universally, but because adults have historically defined themselves against them.

Methodological and ethical dimensions

Philosophizing as children entails an ethical as well as epistemic transformation. It contests the hierarchies that decide whose ways of knowing count as credible and whose are dismissed as naïve or undeveloped. Miranda Fricker's (2007) account of testimonial injustice provides the theoretical foundation for understanding why this contestation is necessary. Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker's credibility is deflated because of identity prejudice rather than the substance of their claims. Fricker demonstrates how epistemic authority has historically been distributed through social hierarchies that equate rationality with maturity, autonomy, and composure. The child, as a figure of emotional excess and cognitive incompleteness, exemplifies the subject structurally excluded from epistemic recognition. To philosophize as children therefore becomes an act of redress. It does not simply include children's voices in philosophical dialogue but transforms the conditions under which those voices can be heard. This epistemic posture that begins from not-knowing and dependence resists the interpretive habits that conflate epistemic competence with detachment and self-possession. Fricker's framework clarifies that such resistance is not only methodological but also reparative, since it works to restore credibility to forms of sense-making that have been persistently dismissed as pre-rational.

This corrective dimension extends into moral theory, particularly through Tronto's (1993) ethics of care. Tronto identifies dependence and responsiveness as the material and affective conditions of moral life, showing that care is not a secondary or sentimental virtue but the structure that sustains social and epistemic life itself. Dependence, in her account, is not the negation of agency but its precondition. To know and to act both require responsiveness to the needs and vulnerabilities of others. Bringing Tronto into dialogue with the epistemic posture of philosophy as children reveals that responsiveness is as epistemic as it is moral. When the knower begins from relational dependence, knowledge becomes a form of care. It requires attention to the conditions that make understanding possible, including the power relations that determine who can speak and who is heard. Such attention makes epistemic humility a methodological necessity rather than a moral ornament. Inquiry becomes a practice of sustaining relation, not of escaping it.

Childism provides a framework for articulating this relational ethics more explicitly. Childism functions as an ethical and epistemological method aimed at redressing the systemic erasure of children's ways of knowing (Biswas et al., 2024). It invites philosophers to reconstruct theoretical vocabularies from the standpoint of those whose experiences have been rendered unintelligible by adultist norms. The point is not to valorize childhood as a moral ideal but to treat it as a site from which to rethink the exclusions that structure philosophical reasoning. Childism thus becomes a critical and constructive practice: it critiques the hierarchies that silence certain knowers and it reconstructs philosophical inquiry as an inclusive and responsive practice. The Childism and Decoloniality colloquium (2023) brought together scholars working at

the intersection of childist theory and decolonial critique with particular attention to epistemic injustice, colonial temporalities, and the governance of childhood. Contributions by Biswas and Rollo explicitly link childism to decolonial thought by showing how adultism operates as a temporal technology that mirrors colonial hierarchies of maturity and development. Both projects insist that epistemic repair requires structural transformation. Philosophizing as children inherits this demand by seeking to build a mode of reasoning that is answerable to others and open to the plurality of worlds that those others inhabit.

María Lugones's (2003) discussion of playfulness offers a way of approaching plurality without turning relational openness into a method or a moral posture. Playfulness, as Lugones describes it, belongs to the practice of world-traveling grounded in loving perception, a mode of encounter that resists understanding others through mastery or epistemic capture (Lugones, 2003). World-traveling does not proceed by translating unfamiliar practices into familiar terms, nor does it aim at coherence or agreement. Entry into another world unsettles habitual forms of sense-making and exposes the traveler to moments of confusion, vulnerability, and misrecognition that cannot be resolved in advance. Rather than treating such moments as obstacles, playfulness sustains them, loosening the association between seriousness and control that governs much philosophical inquiry. Within this frame, playfulness sharpens the demands of philosophizing as children rather than merely illustrating them. Epistemic humility emerges here as an active orientation toward transformation, not as restraint or self-limitation. Inquiry shaped by this orientation does not seek to collapse the distance between knower and known or to stabilize meaning through closure. Attention remains with the gap itself, allowing incompleteness to orient understanding as it unfolds. Lugones's insistence that playfulness enables mutual recognition instead of epistemic conquest places philosophizing as children within decolonial practices that privilege relation over mastery as the condition of knowing (Lugones, 2003).

Transforming philosophy through childlike posture is most radically articulated in Wall's (2010) proposal that philosophy is play. If play is not something children do in preparation for adult seriousness but an ontological condition of human being, then philosophy does not become rigorous by transcending play but by recognizing itself as play. Belisário d'Araújo Couto and Biswas (2025) develop the Brazilian Portuguese concept of *brincar* as a relational mode of being-with that encompasses play, care, and creative improvisation. *Brincar* names a practice that refuses the instrumentalization of interaction and describes a way of being together that does not seek outcomes beyond the relation itself. They propose *brincar* as the foundation for decolonial childism on the basis that play dismantles the temporal logic of development and positions the child as always becoming rather than already being (Belisário d'Araújo Couto & Biswas, 2025). Philosophy as children enacts this playfulness not as frivolity but as an epistemic commitment to remain open to transformation through encounter. In the volume, Rollo addresses directly the question of what remains of philosophy once adultism is overcome. His answer is that philosophy would no longer be recognizable as

a discrete discipline policing its boundaries but would become a distributed practice of collective sense-making (Rollo, in Biswas et al., 2024, pp. 749–751). This is the horizon toward which philosophy as children gestures: not a reformed version of the discipline, but a reconfiguration of what counts as philosophical work.

Refusal of epistemic conquest is identified by Mignolo (2007) as “delinking,” a methodological withdrawal from the logic of mastery and closure that underwrites colonial epistemology. Delinking does not entail disengagement from thought or critique but a redirection of the locus of enunciation. Knowledge no longer issues from the assumed universality of the Western rational subject but from the plurality of local histories and relations that sustain life. When philosophical inquiry delinks from the presumption of epistemic sovereignty, it creates space for childlike ways of attending, imagining, and wondering to appear as legitimate forms of thought. Philosophizing as children therefore becomes a method of delinking: it steps back from the structures that define rational adulthood as the measure of philosophical validity and opens a space where curiosity, dependence, and playfulness operate as disciplined forms of reasoning. The ethical task of such a method is to sustain the fragility of relation, to remain in conversation without the guarantee of mastery, and to practice knowing as a shared, unfinished responsibility.

Practicing philosophy as children

Practicing philosophy as children calls for an orientation to thinking that remains embedded in relation rather than positioned above it. Attention shifts away from locating philosophy inside childhood as an object of interpretation and toward recognizing that certain aesthetic and experiential forms already enact the stance that philosophical maturity tends to suppress. Scenes of play, storytelling, and shared absorption do not function as raw material awaiting philosophical extraction. They already organize attention, imagination, and responsiveness in ways that unsettle the demand for explanation as the final measure of understanding. Inquiry takes shape here through sustained engagement rather than through interpretive closure, drawing its force from the refusal to settle too quickly on what counts as sense. Curiosity guides this mode of philosophizing not as a trait to be admired but as a way phenomena come into view and remain available to revision. Concepts develop under pressure from encounter rather than being imposed as organizing frameworks, and relations of knowing and being shift along with them. What emerges is a form of inquiry that remains generative precisely because it does not rush to stabilize meaning. Philosophy practiced in this register stays close to how understanding unfolds in real time, shaped by shared attention and exposed to interruption, rather than secured by distance or mastery.

Children’s literature and film offer compelling scenes for observing such inquiry in action.² In *The Little Prince* (Saint-Exupéry, 1943), the narrator is chastised for mistaking a drawing of a boa constrictor for a hat. The error is not one of perception but of imagination. The drawing functions as a philosophical challenge, revealing that meaning emerges through openness rather than recognition. The child’s vision is not superior to the adult’s because it sees more but because it does not mistake comprehension for understanding. The prince’s repeated question, “What is essential is invisible to the eye,” defines philosophy as a relational practice grounded in wonder. Similarly, in *Matilda* (Dahl, 1988), the child protagonist does not overthrow adult authority through rebellion alone but through epistemic improvisation. Her reading, questioning, and telekinetic play all dramatize the act of thinking beyond what has been prescribed. Matilda’s intelligence is not the measure of her superiority but the form through which care and resistance are learned together. Both narratives show that philosophical insight arises not from detachment but from imaginative participation in a world that remains unfinished.

Films such as *Inside Out* (Docter & Del Carmen, 2015) and *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, 2001) illustrate this same posture through movement between emotional and perceptual worlds. In *Inside Out*, Riley’s interior landscape becomes a site of discovery where conflicting emotions are not obstacles to reason but the conditions of self-understanding. The film turns feeling into an epistemic event. Joy learns that sadness is not an error to be corrected but an opening to relation and meaning. This shift parallels the philosophical task of learning to attend rather than to master. In *Spirited Away*, Chihiro’s journey through the spirit world stages the undoing of adult habits of control. She learns to perceive through humility and attentiveness, cultivating the capacity to act without possession of the rules that govern the world she enters. These films do not sentimentalize children as symbols of purity. They show that to think as children is to dwell in transformation, to approach knowledge as a process of becoming responsive to what is not yet understood.

² It is essential to acknowledge at the outset that the examples I discuss (*The Little Prince*, *Matilda*, *Inside Out*, and *Spirited Away*) are adult-produced representations of childhood rather than cultural productions originating from children themselves. This distinction matters for childist analysis. These texts do not transparently express children’s ways of seeing; they express adult imaginings of childlike vision (Deszcz-Tryhubczak & García González, 2023). Peter Hunt’s concept of “childist criticism” offers a relevant framework here: it names an adult practice of reading as a child, which differs from childism as a philosophical and political project (Hunt, 1991). Philosophy as children occupies an analogous position. It is not philosophy produced by children but a practice of adults reading, writing, and thinking in ways that resist adult mastery. The epistemic posture I propose thus falls somewhere between Biswas’s philosophy *hos/bei* children, which maintains direct engagement with children as interlocutors, and Hunt’s childist criticism, which treats texts as occasions for adults to inhabit childlike interpretive stances. These adult-created narratives remain useful not because they authentically represent children but because they model modes of attention, vulnerability, and relational openness that philosophy as children seeks to cultivate.

Practices of description expose how philosophizing as children unsettles philosophy's habitual reliance on interpretive authority. Description that resists immediate explanation keeps thought at the level of appearance, allowing experience to register before it is organized into meaning. Loren S. Barritt's phrase "childlike attention to experience" names this hesitation with unusual precision, especially in the way it delays decisions about what experience is supposed to signify (Barritt, 1986, p. 15). Attentiveness of this kind interrupts a familiar philosophical reflex: the conversion of uncertainty into conceptual mastery. What comes into view instead is a different demand placed on thinking, one that measures rigor by responsiveness rather than by interpretive control. Classroom inquiry renders that demand visible with particular clarity. Questions like "Where do thoughts go when we stop thinking them?" or "Why do people cry when they are happy?" shift attention toward affective and embodied dimensions of experience that cannot be stabilized through explanation alone. Remaining with questions of this kind alters the educator's role, drawing authority away from instruction and toward attunement. Philosophical activity takes shape through the maintenance of a relational space in which thinking remains open to interruption, hesitation, and shared uncertainty. Practicing philosophy as children in this register cultivates responsiveness by refusing the adult impulse to secure inquiry through closure.

Public-facing philosophical work can also embody this mode of attention. When philosophy enters artistic, digital, or dialogical spaces that encourage participatory reflection, it enacts the same openness that characterizes childlike inquiry. Philosophical conversations in community settings, art installations that invite viewers to co-construct meaning, and media projects that translate concepts into shared stories all function as instances of philosophy as children. They do not disseminate ideas from a position of mastery but cultivate shared wonder as the basis of thinking. This shift from explanation to relation transforms philosophical authority into responsiveness. It demonstrates that philosophical work need not guard itself against accessibility; rather, it can treat accessibility as a site of rigor, since it demands precision about what matters and why.

Philosophy as children names a way of engaging knowledge that abandons the aspiration to epistemic self-sufficiency. Intersubjective curiosity organizes inquiry here, grounding understanding in dependence on others rather than in individual certainty. Knowledge develops through care, attentiveness, and exposure to what resists immediate comprehension, which places vulnerability at the center of philosophical work rather than treating it as a liability. Courage enters the practice at precisely this point, since remaining answerable to relation requires giving up the protections offered by closure and mastery. Inquiry unfolds as a repeated encounter with a world that cannot be fully anticipated, one that demands patience with uncertainty and responsiveness to what exceeds prior sense. Ethical and epistemic rigor take shape through that responsiveness, measured by the ability to remain engaged without converting openness into authority. Renewal emerges from this orientation, not as a return to philosophical

origins, but as a continued willingness to let thinking be altered by what it cannot yet claim.

Implications: rethinking philosophy's epistemic boundaries

Philosophy as children invites a reconfiguration of what philosophy takes itself to be. It challenges not only the exclusion of the child as knower but the larger architecture of epistemic authority that has long governed the discipline. The argument has shown that philosophy's adultism is not incidental but constitutive: the philosopher becomes recognizable as such by rising above the dependencies, hesitations, and vulnerabilities associated with childhood. To philosophize as children reverses this trajectory. It makes dependence, curiosity, and receptivity the very grounds of philosophical work. Thinking is no longer a solitary achievement, but rather a responsive practice sustained by relation. The implication is that philosophy's claim to autonomy must be re-examined as an historical construction rather than as a condition of truth.

Taking that claim apart reveals how the discipline's boundaries have been maintained through the exclusion of modes of attention deemed affective, embodied, or provisional. The supposed rigor of adult reason depends upon a disavowal of the relational processes that generate understanding in the first place. Philosophizing as children refuses this division by locating precision within responsiveness. The task is not to make philosophy gentler or more inclusive in tone, but to redefine what counts as philosophical method. Wonder, vulnerability, and dependency are not departures from analysis; they are conditions that make analysis possible. When philosophy learns to inhabit them, it ceases to present detachment as a prerequisite for clarity. The clarity that emerges from relation is of a different kind: it exposes the partiality of every perspective and accepts incompleteness as a feature of thought rather than its failure.

Reframing philosophical practice in this way also unsettles the metaphysical assumptions that underwrite epistemic closure. The discipline's confidence in finality with its desire to secure the last word by fixing concepts and arguments betrays an anxiety about the instability of meaning. Philosophizing as children treats that instability as productive. The openness characteristic of childlike inquiry becomes a methodological virtue. To think without guarantees is not to abandon rigor but to practice it through sustained attention to what resists completion. Barritt's (1986) notion of "childlike attention to experience" anticipates this rigor of openness, in which understanding grows through description and relation rather than through system and control. Such attention requires courage because it refuses to stabilize the world for the sake of certainty. It is a mode of care for thought itself.

This reorientation has consequences that extend beyond epistemology. Feminist and critical philosophies have shown that the figure of the autonomous subject sus-

tains patriarchal and colonial economies of knowledge. By exposing dependence as the ground of agency, philosophy as children joins those critiques without repeating them. It demonstrates that intellectual maturity, as conventionally understood, is not a neutral achievement but a normative fiction that disciplines who may speak and how. The alternative is not regression but re-composition. When philosophy begins from relational curiosity, it opens itself to multiple temporalities and affective registers that have always been present but rarely recognized as philosophical. This is not an expansion of the field's objects; it is a transformation of its self-understanding.

The practice that results is neither a pedagogy nor a new subdiscipline. It is a shift in how philosophers read, write, and listen. Thinking as children means engaging concepts as interlocutors rather than instruments, allowing them to speak back and to resist containment. It means writing that does not conceal uncertainty behind the authority of voice and reading that does not treat comprehension as possession. The philosopher becomes accountable to the ongoingness of thought, to the relations that sustain it, and to the fragility of meaning that gives it urgency. Such accountability reclaims philosophy's ethical dimension without subordinating it to moralism. It repositions philosophical seriousness as the ability to remain responsive.

Philosophy as children therefore redefines the boundaries of the discipline by returning to the question of what thinking can be. It replaces the fantasy of self-sufficient reason with a practice grounded in relational intelligence. Dependency becomes a source of insight; wonder becomes a method; incompleteness becomes a form of rigor. Philosophizing as children reframes philosophy from the mastery of thought to its renewal. In that renewal, the adultist fiction of maturity loses its hold, and the work of philosophy begins again as curious, uncertain, and alive to the world that teaches it how to think.

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Conflicts of interest:

The authors certify that they have no commercial or associative interest that represents a conflict of interest in relation to the manuscript.

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Rachel McNealis
Philosophizing as children
Practicing thought beyond the logic of maturity
31 Jan 2026

Childhood & Philosophy (Rio de Janeiro), volume 22, p. 1–27, 2026.

<<https://doi.org/10.12957/childphilo.2026.95048>>

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