

# Prof. Rex Li's Writings

**Category:** Psychology

**Sub-category:** Thinking and Learning

**Code:** Psy 02-019

**Title:** Reading Notes on Alison Gopnik (2010): *The Philosophical Babies* - Chapter 8: Love and Law (p.202 - 233)

**Year Written:** 2022

**Summary/ Abstract:** These are reading notes on Gopnik's *The Philosophical Babies*: Chapter 8: Love and Law (p.202 - 233)

© Rex Li 2021

All rights reserved. To quote or cite, please acknowledge the author (Prof. Rex Li) and source of retrieval from this website ([www.profexli.com](http://www.profexli.com)).

For quotes or citation of over 100 words, please write to the author for written permission.

**Reading Notes on Alison Gopnik (2010): *The Philosophical Babies*  
Chapter 8: Love and Law (p.202 - 233)**

---

p. 202 Starting summary of Piaget / Kohlberg

p. 203 New concept of moral intuition in Pleistocene

Back in the Pleistocene, universal moral intuitions evolved, and those intuitions constrain our moral thinking throughout our lives. There is a sort of universal moral grammar, despite superficial cultural differences, just as there is supposed to be a universal grammar that underlies superficially different languages. We might see signs of these moral intuitions even in young children.

Morality as innate, prewired emotional responses

Still others argue for a different version of this innatist picture. They say that morality comes from what we feel rather than what we know. Morality is rooted in innate, hardwired emotional responses that are only slightly modified by self-conscious adult reasoning. Like Chomsky's view of language, these views don't have much room for changes in moral thinking or for the moral discovery and growth that is so characteristically human.

R: (1) No need to put them in contrasting positions. They can support each other.

(2) As long as there is sociality, there will be empathy, otherness, intentionality.

It works with language, thought concept to form altruism, fairness and moral rules.

p. 205 Facial expressions link to emotion

In particular, facial expressions also reflect emotions. From Boston to Borneo, happiness leads to a particular constellation of upturned lip corners and crinkled eyes while anger causes bared teeth and furrowed brows. Babies imitate emotional expressions as well as simple gestures like sticking out your tongue. If babies automatically link facial expressions to the internal feelings that accompany them, they should link expressions to emotions.

p. 206 From Imitation to understanding:

"Gopnik repeating the message of children understanding, desires and emotions:

- Bang head to light up – imitate
- Pull things apart → follow – understand intention and goals
- Assume they have mind = other's mind

When children see another person express sadness, or make the box light up, or try to pull apart the tube, they themselves will act and feel sad, make the box light up, or try to pull the tube apart.

p. 207 Mirror neurons

p. 208 Sense of self still growing

Children don't see difference between her and others' pain!

Gopnik's personal verdict

I literally feel my baby's pain with as much intensity as I feel my own pain. The impulse to soothe my baby is just as automatic and immediate as my impulse to soothe myself. The immediate, intimate, loving interactions between babies and adults dissolve the boundaries between the self and others. It may feel that way for the babies, too.

p. 209 Reactive aggression – aggression in response to threat from someone.

p. 211 ● Felix Warneken experiment on 14-month old climb over 2 cushions to get you a pen.

● Gopnik anecdote

Tears → band-aids from 2-year-old son

p. 211 – 212 ● Judith Smetana study on rules and harm on 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>-year-old

Even the youngest children differentiated between rules and harm. Children thought that breaking rules and causing harm were both bad, but that causing harm was a lot worse. They also said that the rules could be changed or might not apply at a different school, but they insisted that causing harm would always be wrong, no matter what the rules said or where you were.

Abused children “know” it is wrong to hurt others

abused children thought that hurting someone was intrinsically wrong. These children had seen their own parents cause harm, but they knew how much it hurt, and thought it was wrong.

p. 213 – 214 Psychopaths

p. 215 Trolley problem

p. 217 Cali Tech robots – children treat them as human with intentionality (R: the limit of human differentiation)

p. 218 Babies can differentiate “human” from objects – create a category for empathy

p. 219 R: Innate human grouping tendency.

A couple of recent experiments suggest that this may even be true for completely arbitrary groups—the three-year-old equivalent of the red feathers and blue feathers. Three-year-olds said they would prefer to play with a child who had the same color of hair and the same color of T-shirt that they did, rather than one with a different color of shirt. In another experiment, with four- and five-year-olds, the experimenter would arbitrarily put a red T-shirt or a blue T-shirt on a particular child. Then the child saw pictures of other children in red or blue T-shirts. The children characteristically said that the kids with their own color of T-shirt were nicer, and that they'd prefer to play with them.

p. 220 Morality: universal or particular.

From history: advance to love (family, neighbor, enemy, pet, all life).

p. 221 Morality: Judgment or emotion / sentiment

Normative understanding → act → change →

3 oughts: (1) moral (save my child, whatever)

(2) practical rationality (interest rate)

(3) etiquette (follow rules)

2 rules  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Social / customs / for consistency / efficacy (drive on left, boys toilet, etc)} \\ \text{Moral right / wrong (killing, crime, theft, etc)} \end{array} \right.$

p. 222 – 223 “But our impulse to follow rules run much more deeply. It seems to be an innate part of our human nature.”

p. 224 Smetana study: (3-year-old)

- a) Children distinguishes breaking rules vs harming others – different kind of wrong.
- b) Rules can be changed
- c) Follow the current rules
- d) Understand obligation, prohibition and permission (freedom)

R: The “Jane wearing hat” problem: where source?

Logical reasoning involves “if P then Q” deductions. Suppose Jane says, “When I go outside (P) I wear my hat (Q).” Then you show children four pictures: (1) Jane outside and wearing a hat (P, Q); (2) Jane outside and not wearing a hat (P, not Q); (3) Jane inside and wearing a hat (not P, Q); and (4) Jane inside and not wearing a hat (not P, not Q). You ask them to choose the picture where “Jane is not doing what she said.” Logically, the correct answer is 2. But children are quite bad at this kind of reasoning—they tend to pick by chance.

However, children do much better if you ask them to reason about rules. Suppose Jane’s mom says, “If you go outside you must wear your hat.” Then the child sees the same four pictures as before. But this time she has to choose the picture where “Jane was being naughty and not doing what she is supposed to do.” Once again the right answer is (2), Jane standing out there in the cold risking her death without a hat. Even three-year-olds are very good at picking out the rule violation. Moreover, young children in Nepal and in Colombia are as good at rule logic as children in the United States and Britain.

R: It simply shows context / experience over-rides logical reasoning, which is abstract and develops much later. (Age 7 – 9) See children using context such as “naughty”, “get cold”, “moms said” to package their understanding of normative reasoning so they understand the practical “if”.

Research on children:

Intentionality in rule breaking and harm vs wind blowing off.

By the time they’re three, children consider intentions when they make basic moral judgments about good and harm. They say that intentionally pushing another child is bad, but it’s OK if you just accidentally bump into them. They also differentiate between intentional and accidental rulebreaking. Remember the study that looked at children’s early normative logic, where Mom said Jane had to wear a hat outside. The experimenters also asked whether the child was naughty if “she’s outside and the wind’s blown her hat off” and if “she’s outside and she’s taken her hat off.” The youngest children they tested, who were only three, distinguished the two cases. They said the child who broke the rule on purpose was much naughtier than the child who broke the rule accidentally.

Rules control

p. 228 Rule making for children

For very young children, parents and teachers are natural rule givers. There is no categorical imperative more fearsome than Mommy's "Because I said so." But older children already start to learn to negotiate rules among themselves. Five-year-olds spontaneously invent games with rules.

p. 229 Rules for power

Since rules are such a good way to make people do things, they can also be a source of power. People may enforce rules that serve their own individual ends or the ends of their own group rather than serving the general good. The human impulse to accept and follow rules means that rule-based injustices can easily be perpetuated.

R: This is exactly the key issue of morality. A good joke in economics, "He who has the gold makes the rules" (p. 230)

p. 230 Is morality relative? Gopnik's view:

Making rules gives us a powerful mechanism for changing what we do and adjusting to new circumstances, but our basic empathic assumptions about good and harm govern those changes and protect us from moral relativism.

Basic principles of morality:

What we learn from 2-year-old?

Even two-year-olds have an immediate, intuitive, emotional, empathic understanding of help and harm, rooted in intimate interactions. They also understand that they should follow rules, but that rules can be changed. These two abilities, in concert, give us a very human capacity for moral innovation. Morality, like everything else that is human, is deeply rooted in our evolutionary history, but the most important feature of that evolutionary history is that it allows us to reflect on our own actions and to change them.

p. 231 The possibility of change

Rules allow us to perform complex, coordinated behaviors—they let us help other people in new and powerful ways. But intimate, emotional empathy is a force that can change even the most entrenched rules. If we discover that a rule leads to harm rather than good we can reject that rule. This is especially true if we experience that harm in the rich, intimate way that comes from interacting face-to-face with a real person in real life.

we dehumanize people in the “out-group”—people who are not like us. This impulse is deep-seated and very difficult to overturn completely. One of the best ways to change it is to actually become intimate with the out-group—to recognize that those people are actually like me.

R: Quote a good summary in which Gopnik noted, “there’s lots of room for argument” in what is good and bad, and that “harm and help aren’t straight forward” (p. 230). She’s optimistic by bringing morality back to love and empathy.