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## Frog and Toad at the Academy: Gareth B. Matthews on How Children's Literature Goes Philosophical

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# Frog and Toad at the Academy: Gareth B. Matthews on how children's literature goes philosophical

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## Abstract

Gareth B. Matthews (1929–2011) inaugurated the study of philosophy in children's literature by simultaneously arguing (1) that philosophy is essentially an encounter with certain kinds of perplexities, (2) that genuine philosophical perplexities are readily found in many children's stories, and (3) that many children are capable of appreciating and enjoying them. He wrote 58 reviews of philosophical children's stories and co-authored a series of teacher guides for using such stories. Following Matthews' example, others have produced resources recommending children's stories as stimuli for intergenerational philosophical dialog. In our research, we study and systematize the different ways that Matthews understood children's stories to go philosophical. Here, we introduce five of those ways: philosophical story irony, philosophical story fancy, thought experiment, philosophical fable, and philosophical story realism. For each of these ways, we define a set of literary elements and describe the kind of philosophical perplexity they invite, illustrating with examples from children's literature reviewed and discussed by Matthews. We intend our article to shed new light on Matthews' scholarship, to guide (ourselves and others) in locating some of the elements in children's stories that occasion different types of philosophical perplexity, and to spark new conversations among philosophers and educators about this promising field.

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## Keywords

Gareth B. Matthews, children's literature, philosophy, philosophy for children, thought experiments, fables

## Introduction

[O]ne night as I was reading *Many Moons* by James Thurber to my son [...], it occurred to me that this was about perceptual illusion. And I was about to give a lecture on perceptual illusion the next day at the university. So I conceived the idea of bringing along the book and at the start of the lecture I read *Many Moons*—I surprised them! (Matthews, 1999a)

Gareth B. Matthews' (1929–2011) interest in philosophy in children's literature began in the 1970s, at a time when many of his students had become "suspicious of philosophy" as part of an "establishment plot to distract their attention from the Vietnam War and the ills of the world" (Matthews, 1995b). Matthews (who also opposed the war) reasoned that if his students could recognize the philosophy in a children's story, they might see it as "a natural human activity" (1995b).

In his first essay on philosophy and children's literature (1976), Matthews identified philosophical concepts and puzzles in a number of books written for children, which he traced to sources in the Western canon. What he discovered was, in fact, a precursor to the contemporary philosophy for children movement<sup>1</sup>: the appeal to children's philosophical thinking on the part of certain authors, including A.A. Milne (*Winnie the Pooh*), Frank L. Baum (the *Oz* books) and Arnold Lobel (the *Frog and Toad* books). He writes:

some very good children's poems and stories [...] excite in young minds (and a few old ones too) perplexities that can't be assuaged merely by passing on information, even information of a very sophisticated sort.<sup>2</sup> [...] Perhaps identifying philosophical whimsy as a bona fide style of writing in children's literature will help us find new respect for children's poems and stories, and for children. (1976: 16)

Significantly, Matthews inaugurated the study of philosophy in children's literature by simultaneously arguing (1) that philosophy is essentially an encounter with certain kinds of perplexities, (2) that genuine philosophical perplexities are readily found in many children's stories, and (3) that many children are capable of appreciating and enjoying them.

Matthews faults stories like Jean Van Leeuwen's "Questions" (1981) which portray a "phony contrast between naive ignorance in children and patient wisdom in adults," who are "not really interested in [children's] questions," and who put children down "with a kind and gentle condescension" (1988a: 188).<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the stories Matthews valued, present philosophical perplexities that "demand to be worried over and worked through, and discussed, and reasoned out, and linked up with each other and with life" (Matthews, 1976: 16). Adults who entertain philosophical questions with children often come to doubt ideas and commitments they have taken for granted, to see at least parts of their experience with fresh eyes, and to develop respect for children's daring curiosity and imagination. In this way, "Addressing the ageless questions of philosophy is itself a renunciation of condescension; it is also a celebration of the humanity we share with our children" (Matthews, 1988a: 196–197).

In 1979, Matthew Lipman invited Matthews to be the sole contributing editor for *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children*. In that role, Matthews created the "Thinking in Stories" column, where, from 1979 to 2006, he wrote 58 reviews of philosophical children's stories, ranging

from Plato's Ring of Gyges to William Steig's *Shrek!* (1990).<sup>4</sup> Building on that column, in the mid-1980s he co-authored a series of teacher guides for the use of such stories: *Wise Owl: Talking and Thinking about Children's Literature*.<sup>5</sup> Following Matthews' example, many others have produced resources recommending children's stories as stimuli for intergenerational philosophical dialog (see [Prindle Institute, 2020](#); [Sprod, 1993](#); [Turgeon, 2020](#); [Wartenberg, 2003, 2013, 2014](#); [Worley, 2012](#)). Other scholars have followed Matthews' example in using children's stories to introduce university students to philosophy (see [Baggett and Klein, 2004](#); [Held, 2011](#)) and in producing academic studies of philosophy in children's literature (see [Chetty, 2014](#); [Costello, 2012](#); [Johansson, 2011](#); [Kidd, 2020](#); [Sainsbury, 2017](#)). Still others demonstrate the philosophical significance of aspects of picture books Matthews rarely considered, such as the artwork and its complex relationship to the text (see [Haynes and Murris, 2012, 2017](#); [Maagerø and Lorentzen Østbye, 2012](#); [Murris, 2015](#)).

In her recent essay on Matthews, Karin Murris (2022) argues that Matthews' reliance on the Anglo-American analytic tradition in identifying philosophical children's literature limits his understanding of philosophy and of children-as-philosophers. Similarly, Kohan and Cassidy argue that Matthews' practice of philosophy in the analytic tradition and his view of children as "little investigators" (2022: 240) and "natural philosophers" (Matthews 1994: 45) were culturally bounded (see also [Haynes and Murris, 2012](#); [Murris, 2015](#)). As David Kennedy argues, "in criticizing the cognitive scientists' caricature of the child as pre-rational, Matthews may be naively accepting the definition of rationality which led to this distortion [...]. So instead of identifying the fault in a rationalistic ideal of reason [or philosophy], Matthews claims the child for this ideal as well" (1995: 42). Murris (2022) also points out that since Matthews' time, important developments have occurred in the fields of children's literature, childhood studies, and posthumanism, that problematize a number of his assumptions about how children's literature goes philosophical, and about children themselves (see also [Kidd, 2020](#)).

We do not entirely disagree with these criticisms. However, we believe that Matthews' investigation of philosophy in children's literature contains untapped resources. To begin with, Matthews did not conceive analytic philosophy to be narrowly focused on definition and reason:

[T]he styles of analytic philosophy that have dominated the English-speaking world have been characteristically unpretentious. They have often included a remarkable playfulness and whimsy. (Lewis Carroll was, after all, a professional philosopher.) Such styles are [...] closely akin to the kind of reflection young children are so readily capable of, and indeed, so very good at. (1984: 117–118)

Moreover, children's literature scholar Kenneth B. Kidd recognizes that while Matthews was trained in the analytic tradition, he nonetheless "pioneered a child-centered philosophical practice that was both more classically humanist and more theory-friendly" (2020: 19). Kidd finds that in using children's stories to philosophize with children, Matthews drew out their intuition and feeling, as much as their critical thinking. In historicizing the "philosophical turn" in children's literature (2020: 7), Kidd credits Matthews with drawing on the analytic tradition to establish that children's literature can be philosophical, noting that once children's literature is taken up by one philosophical tradition, it is open to being taken up by others. For Kidd then, Matthews "builds on the philosophical foundations of children's literature while also revising that tradition by reimagining children's literature as philosophy in creative form" (2020: 6).

In her (2022) essay, Murris helpfully identifies several ways Matthews finds that stories can arouse children's philosophical thinking, including philosophical whimsy, thought experiments, conceptual exploration, and imaginative engagement. Taking our lead from her analysis, we sought to expand on it, first, by attempting to create a comprehensive taxonomy of the ways that Matthews

identified children's stories going philosophical, and, second, by learning more about the characteristics of the stories he worked with, that allowed them to go philosophical in those ways. To accomplish the former, we each read Matthews' *Thinking in Stories* column, the *Wise Owl* curriculum series, the academic publications in which he discussed particular children's stories, and each of the stories he discussed in those places. We made notes independently about Matthews' treatment of each story, then compared our notes and constructed a table to organize categories of the different ways the stories work philosophically. Constructing the table involved a continual process of revisiting stories and articles, negotiating divergent interpretations, and revising the number and the descriptions of the categories in it. We found that, though the meaning Matthews gave to terms like "philosophical whimsy" evolved over nearly 40 years, his writing provides a coherent set of distinct ways that children's stories go philosophical. In this essay, we describe five of them: philosophical story irony, philosophical story fancy, thought-experiment, philosophical fable, and philosophical story realism.

In order to study the characteristics of the children's stories Matthews worked with that allowed them to go philosophical in these ways, we focused on philosophical story irony, for which he composed a formula identifying how particular elements of the story induce that kind of philosophical perplexity (Matthews, 2005). We did so because this essay was written toward the end of Matthews' life and demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of how children's stories can go philosophical. In addition, we noted that having composed a formula for philosophical story irony (the only such formula he composed), Matthews was able to apply it to a number of different stories, and in doing so, made it easy for others to locate the same device in still other stories. We therefore attempted to create similar formulas for the other ways Matthews identified children's stories going philosophical, both as a way of better understanding them, and of making it easier to identify them in contemporary children's literature.

Clearly, Matthews did not discover all of the ways that adults or children may find children's stories philosophically perplexing. Those who followed his lead in using children's literature to do philosophy with children and college students—working in a number of countries and cultural traditions—have found many different ways that children's stories evoke philosophical perplexity. Indeed, the variety of contemporary approaches in this field involves not only dramatic differences of method but also important contestations regarding childhood, philosophy, and education. We do not attempt here to offer a comprehensive account of this field, but to demonstrate the continuing relevance of Matthews' analysis, in part because of how infrequently he is credited by contemporary authors. Our aim in this article is to provide guidance (to ourselves and others) in locating some of the philosophical devices he found in children's stories, by using formulas to make them more explicit. We think of these devices as hidden doorways that must be spied out, opened, and walked through.

Finally, we take seriously Murriss' contention that there is an "inevitable political dimension of how the child is positioned when stories are used as educational texts" (2022: 51). Our elucidation of Matthews' analysis of philosophy in children's literature is grounded in our pragmatist understanding that language, culture, and education (and stories) always foster, as well as confine meaning and value. This understanding is enriched by Gallagher's (1992) exposition of "moderate hermeneutics," for which education is an interpretive dialectic among students, teachers (and parents/carers), and the curriculum. As students confront and attempt to accommodate a curriculum that represents inherited traditions of arts and sciences (those that we adults still find meaningful), their prior horizons of knowledge, ability, and value inevitably transform and expand—but so do those traditions, by novel uses and adaptations worked out by new generations of children (see Gregory, 2021). As we have written elsewhere,

Matthews sought both to perpetuate and to adapt the Western philosophical tradition by initiating children into it. To that end, it is not coincidental that the tradition functions by means of communities of meaning-making that allow individuals to challenge established meanings and forge new ones. The value of philosophical children's literature, in this regard, is that it invites children to take critical perspectives on the culture in which they find themselves. (Laverty and Gregory, 2022: 13)

## Philosophical story irony

In 2005, Matthews took issue with the claim made by Ellen Winner (1988) “that pre-school children [...] fail to understand irony and are themselves unable to use language ironically” (Matthews, 2005: 81). From decades of philosophizing with young children, he knew that “many stories that are enjoyed and appreciated by pre-school children depend for their primary interest on irony” (Matthews, 2005: 82). He gave the example of “The Garden,” from Arnold Lobel’s *Frog and Toad Together* (1972), in which Toad tries shouting, singing, reading stories, lighting candles at night, and playing music to encourage seeds in his garden to grow. When, at last, the seeds begin to sprout, Toad remarks that, “It was very hard work.” In Matthews’ analysis, this remark creates an instance of dramatic irony, a literary device that originated in Greek tragedy, by which the full meaning of a character’s words or actions is understood by the audience but not by the character. As Matthews explains, “The audience knows that [Toad’s] efforts were entirely misplaced. Young kids, even pre-schoolers, realize this. But Toad fails to understand it” (2005: 86). Matthews concludes that children’s appreciation of such stories “gives us reason to reject [Winner’s] comprehensive thesis” that pre-school children cannot understand irony (2005: 93).

But dramatic irony, by itself, does not make a story philosophical. Matthews was interested in stories in which the character’s lack of understanding concerns a point of philosophy. In “The Garden,” Toad’s lack of understanding concerns the “philosophically problematic concept [...] of causality [...]. We seem to be pretty good at saying what is the cause of what. Yet it remains very difficult for us to understand, and even more difficult for us to give a satisfactory analysis of, what it is for one thing to cause another” (Matthews, 2005: 86). After discussing the fallacy of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, and noting that many people talk to, and play music to their plants, Matthews concludes that “‘The Garden’ is an excellent vehicle for initiating a philosophical discussion of causality with kids” (2005: 87). This leads him to identify a particular way that some children’s stories go philosophical, which he calls “Philosophical Story Irony”:

We have a case of Philosophical Story Irony whenever there is some statement or proposition, p, such that

1. According to a story, or according to one or more characters in the story, it is true that p, even though,
2. We, the audience, understand that not p, and,
3. We won’t be able to offer a helpful explanation of why anyone should think, mistakenly, that p, without clarifying some philosophically problematic concept basic to the supposition that p. (Matthews, 2005: 91)

Matthews also applies this formula to Lobel’s story “Dragons and Giants” (1972) in which, after being threatened by a snake, an avalanche, and a hawk, Frog and Toad hide away in their homes and stay there “for a long time, just feeling very brave together.” Matthews notes, “We won’t be able to offer a helpful explanation of why anyone should think, mistakenly, that they had shown themselves

to be brave without clarifying the philosophically problematic concept of bravery, which is basic to their supposition” (2005: 92; see also Matthews, 1994: 104–106).

However, Matthews’ formulation of philosophical story irony is complicated by observations he makes elsewhere about the naivete of young children—to which he attributes their susceptibility to philosophical perplexity—and the lack of such naivete in older children and adults. In the first place, children who do not understand (2) “that not p” will not see the irony in the story. For example, Matthews (1980) relates that a school teacher who read *Hildilid’s Night* (Ryan, 1971) to groups of children ages five to nine drew out very different discussions from the younger and the older children. Hildilid is an old woman who hates the night and tries various ways to be rid of it, including sweeping it out of her home, catching it in a sack, tying it up with vines, sheering it from the sky like wool from a sheep, and spanking it. In the end, as the sun begins to rise, “Hildilid was too tired from fighting the night to enjoy the day,” (1971: 25) through which she sleeps in order to be fresh to resume her fight with the following night. Both younger and older children appreciated the story’s dramatic irony: Hildilid’s efforts will cause her to spend her waking hours in the night, which she hates, and sleep through the daylight hours she loves. However, for different reasons, some younger and some older children could not appreciate the story’s *philosophical* irony. Some younger children did not find Hildilid’s efforts to be absurd; they enjoyed speculating about the possibility of using light to remove the night. From this, we conclude that in cases where children do not understand “that not p” (in this case, “that the night cannot be chased away”), it might take disagreement among the children or prodding from an adult to get them to question p and thereby appreciate the story’s philosophical irony.

Matthews also reports that some older children were unable to appreciate the story’s philosophical irony because they understood that night is caused by the turning of the earth. The scientific understanding of night and day makes Hildilid’s efforts ridiculous, in a way that does not depend on “(3) [...] clarifying some philosophically problematic concept basic to the supposition that p.” Matthews’ formulation of philosophical story irony works when a character’s mistaken belief involves an essentially contested concept like bravery or causality. It is striking, however, that Matthews reviewed a number of children’s stories in which characters express beliefs that are mistaken according to science, which he nevertheless took to be philosophically perplexing. In these cases, Matthews suggests that adults should attempt to cultivate childlike naivete by stepping back from their scientific literacy, first, to be able to appreciate children’s philosophical perplexity and discuss it with them without condescension, and, second, in order to arrive at their own genuine perplexity, for instance, by coming to see scientific explanations as problematic or even to consider that science does not always provide the best explanation for what strikes us as mysterious. Regarding “The Garden,” he writes:

vis-à-vis our children we adults have only the pseudo-advantage of knowing what most people conventionally count as real causes rather than false ones. Unless we are rather sophisticated philosophers, we will not be prepared to specify what we consider necessary and sufficient conditions for one event’s being the cause of another. (1994: 106; see also Matthews’ 1979 review of Bernard Wiseman’s *Morris the Moose* (1959/1989) and his (2000) review of James Thurber’s *Many Moons* (1990).)

Philosophical story irony depends on the tension between two different kinds of understanding: (1) that a story character is doing something we believe to be misguided and (2) that it is not clear why it is misguided. Some younger children could not understand Hildilid’s efforts as misguided, while some older children could not bring themselves to doubt that her efforts were misguided.



Given these considerations, we offer the following revision to Matthews' formulation of philosophical story irony, which includes an addendum that incorporates his advice to adults:

We have a case of Philosophical Story Irony whenever there is some statement or proposition, *p*, such that:

1. According to the story, or according to one or more characters in the story, it is true that *p*, even though,
2. We, the audience, understand that not *p*—though that understanding may require problematization of *p* (by disagreement or questioning from others)—and,
3. We won't be able to offer a helpful explanation of why *p* is not true, without clarifying some philosophically problematic concept basic to the supposition that *p*; however,
4. If *p* contradicts a scientific principle and children believe that *p*, adults should consider not attempting to persuade them to question *p*, in order to:
  - a. Appreciate children's philosophical perplexity and discuss the issue with them without condescension,
  - b. Arrive at their own genuine perplexity, for instance, by coming to see scientific explanations as problematic, or
  - c. Consider that science does not always provide the best explanation for what strikes us as mysterious.

The case of philosophical story irony illustrates that while philosophical children's stories bring adults and children to share in philosophical perplexity, that sharing sometimes requires adults to doubt what they presume to know. In this way, children's literature becomes educational for older as well as younger people.

### **Philosophical story fancy**

Many children's stories introduce readers to other worlds in which fanciful things happen, and, as Matthews noted, such stories often raise philosophical questions. As discussed below, fanciful stories sometimes present thought experiments—opportunities for us to consider the possible implications of an imaginary situation. Others can be read as allegories of the moral or political meaning of the human world. But as Matthews observed, fanciful stories can also prompt philosophical skepticism and reconsideration of the world we thought we knew:

[T]he Oz stories take us to another place with a different reality in such a way that we are prodded into thinking freshly about our own familiar world. The world of Oz is enough like, but also enough different from, our own world, to raise intriguing questions about our familiar world, and about whether we really understand it. (2004: 178)<sup>6</sup>

Our review of Matthews' treatment of fancy as an element of philosophy in children's literature yields the following definition:

We have a case of Philosophical Story Fancy whenever there is

1. A character, power, or device that the reader takes to be unreal, such as
  - a. Mythical or fantastical creatures,
  - b. Beings (including humans) with supernatural (magical or spiritual) powers,



- c. Creatures from other parts of the universe, and/or
- d. Imaginatively-advanced technologies (science fiction)

That:

2. Invites philosophical perplexity or skepticism about:
  - a. How well we know others,
  - b. The veracity of our perception,
  - c. The meaning of particular experiences, or
  - d. The nature of reality.

The first kind of perplexity is simply to recognize that people we know likely have beliefs, desires, talents, pasts and pursuits we know nothing about and may be shocked to discover. Stories with philosophical story fancy sometimes present worlds distinct from ours, while others present fanciful worlds interactive with ours. Thus, Matthews suggests that the “coordination of the wizard world with the Muggle [non-magical] world” in the Harry Potter stories “should invite us to think about the fact that people around us, perhaps even our own relatives or best friends, may have, for all we know, very different belief systems from our own” (2004: 183).

The second kind of perplexity prompted by philosophical story fancy is skepticism about the veracity of our perception. Thus, Matthews explains that Muggles in the Harry Potter stories rarely notice the magical happenings going on around them because, “What they see and hear is pretty much restricted to what they have become accustomed to think they will see and hear. Whatever falls outside this sphere of expectation is easily dismissed as illusion or even hallucination” (2004: 184). A question Matthews thinks these stories ought to raise for readers is, “Should we pay more attention to the odd experiences we have [...]?” (2004: 184). Suggesting a positive answer to that question, he draws the moral from the Harry Potter stories that “We should know that what we see and what we hear is shaped by what we expect to see and hear” (2004: 184).

The third kind of perplexity prompted by philosophical story fancy concerns the meaning of experience. In Posy Simmonds’ storybook *Lulu and the Flying Babies* (1988), young Lulu is impatient to get to the park to play in the snow and loudly complains when her parents divert their outing to a nearby art museum. Left on a bench to pout by herself, Lulu is soon addressed by cherubs climbing down from a painting hanging above her, who scold her bad manners and then lift her into the air and fly with her inside a fifteenth-century Flemish painting of a winter scene where she can roll in the snow. From there, the “flying babies” take her into other paintings where she and they splash in the sea, growl at a tiger, and have other adventures. In reviewing the story (1998a), Matthews suggests that Lulu’s literal entering of paintings provides an opportunity for the reader to wonder about the meaning of our own experiences of inhabiting novels, movies, and works of art.

The fourth and most dramatic kind of perplexity prompted by philosophical story fancy is to unsettle our metaphysical or religious assumptions about what is real. Noting that “Some of the most exciting stories we can read introduce us to a reality very different from the humdrum world with which we are so familiar,” Matthews insists that these stories “raise, sometimes in gripping and unforgettable ways, intriguing questions about whether there might be realities very different from anything we have ever experienced” (2004: 175). This kind of perplexity is highlighted in his detailed analysis of Baum’s *Ozma of Oz* (1907), in which Dorothy encounters a tree that bears lunch boxes instead of fruit, inside of which are ham sandwiches (wrapped), pickles, apples, and slices of

cheese and sponge cake (and the tree's leaves are table napkins). Matthews takes Baum to be challenging readers,

to think about the easy distinction we think we can draw between what is natural and what is artificial, or human-made. We can agree that it is unlikely there are really any lunchbox trees anywhere in the universe. But is it only unlikely? Is it possible, even if only faintly possible, that somewhere there are such things? Can we know, with full certainty, that there is no such thing anywhere? (2009: 40)

In Mordecai Gerstein's *The Mountains of Tibet* (1989), the soul of a Tibetan man is allowed to choose the galaxy, planet, country, village, species, parents, and gender of his reincarnation. Matthews laments that "Some adults avoid discussing stories like *The Mountains of Tibet* with children because they don't want to face the question, 'But is [reincarnation] really true?'" (1991: 1). He observes that "Children, however, are often more ready than their elders to 'dwell in possibility' for a while," and that "both children and grownups need to make some room in their lives for 'What-if?' questions" (1991: 1).

## Philosophical thought experiments

Matthews delighted in thought experiments as stimuli for philosophizing with children. He writes: "One way in which children's stories can be philosophical is by presenting us readers with a thought-experiment that goads us into reflection. The thought-experiment may invite us (1) to explore a concept or (2) to test a principle or (3) to consider whether or not some attitude is well placed" (1986: 29). This was as close as Matthews came to explaining what he understood the nature of a thought experiment to be, which is unsurprising, given that thought experiments have been so variously characterized in the history of philosophy and science. We offer the following account of how Matthews found children's stories engaging readers in philosophical thought experiments:

A children's story introduces a Philosophical Thought Experiment when it:

1. Creates a moral problem or dilemma that poses the question, "What would be the right thing to do in this case?" or "What would you do in this case?"; or
2. Creates a conceptual problem or dilemma with limited options, that poses the question, "Which is the best way to understand this concept?"; or
3. Creates a fanciful or counterfactual situation that poses the question, "What would be the likely or possible consequences of this situation?"

In any of these cases, the thought experiment has to:

- A. Invite creative or imaginative thinking about possibilities and/or consequences and
- B. Be open ended enough to allow for more than one outcome, but
- C. Also be appropriately constrained by relevant aspects of reality and/or the situation described in the story.

An example of a story that creates a moral dilemma, and one that Matthews often used with children and university students, is the Ring of Gyges from Plato's *Republic*, in which the shepherd Gyges uses a magical ring that makes him invisible to seduce the Queen, kill the King, and take over

the kingdom. On one occasion, when Matthews asked a group of fifth- and sixth-graders what they would do if they had the Ring of Gyges,

Their responses were remarkably fresh and candid. Most of them said they would probably do some bad things that they would not do now for fear of being caught. But one student insisted that she would also use the opportunity to do some good things [...]. It would be fun, she thought, to give surprise gifts to people, if the recipients could not find out where the gifts came from. (1996: 1)

Matthews notes that, in comparison to his university students, these young people were “much more imaginative [...] in taking the thought-experiment seriously” (1996: 1). One of the ways in which they took it more seriously was to notice that, as a thought experiment, Plato’s story leaves out important details:

Thus, one student wanted to know whether, if I were made invisible by the ring, what I was carrying would also be made invisible. If, for example, I had undertaken to remove a TV set from an appliance store and what people could see was a TV set mysteriously rising off its table and floating out the door, the theft would be less likely to be successful than if the TV, too, were made invisible by the ring. No one had ever raised that question with me before. But, once we had thought of it, we began to think of ways in which even the cleverest and best-equipped thief might be somehow detected. (1996: 1)

This episode illustrates how the outcome of a thought experiment depends on relevant aspects of the situation described in the story, and how various aspects of the situation *become* relevant in the course of the experiment.

An example of the second kind of thought experiment, in which we consider a limited number of alternative ways of understanding a concept, is presented in the story of the Tin Woodman.<sup>7</sup> The story (not conveyed in the 1939 Hollywood film) closely mirrors the puzzle of the Ship of Theseus, in that the hapless Woodman was the victim of a witch’s curse that caused his axe to chop off one body part after another, each of which was replaced by a tinsmith. The first thought experiment Matthews offers from this episode is: “what is the limit to the number or kind of replacements for limbs and body parts that someone could get and stay alive?” (2004: 176). Matthews’ question suggests that the Woodman’s tin parts are not part of his living body, so that a human whose parts were eventually, entirely replaced by mechanical parts would no longer be alive. Matthews relates the story of the Ship of Theseus to contemporary philosophical quandaries such as, “What do I have to know about the bike I got back from the repair shop to know that it is really and truly my old bike, and not just a patchwork bike, with parts from the old bike, perhaps most of its parts, or perhaps only the handlebar, or the seat? And what allows my own body to continue to be my own body from day to day, even though the cells that make up my body are constantly being replaced?” (2004: 177).

In the two essays in which Matthews discusses the story of the Tin Woodman, he calls attention to details of the story relevant to negotiating the concepts of “alive,” “existence,” and “identity,” by noting three differences between the Ship of Theseus and the Tin Woodman. First, “the woodman, unlike the Ship of Theseus, gets replacement pieces that are of a different material from the original,” which is important because it “modernize[s] the story of the Tin Woodman to allow for, say, plastic replacements for hearts, lungs, and skin, [and] titanium replacements for bones” (2004: 177). Second, “the Tin Woodman [...] continued to function as a living being throughout the process of having his body parts replaced.[...] So, if we want to say that [the Ship of Theseus] survived the replacement of all her boards, we can’t exactly say she did so by continuing to live one life” (2009: 39). Third, “the Woodman, unlike the ship, is able to tell the story of his life.[...] H]e can remember

being a creature made up of flesh and bones. That makes the case for persistence through time especially strong. Still, it doesn't remove all possible doubt that the Woodman actually survived this process of piece-by-piece replacement" (2009: 39–40).

An example of the third kind of thought experiment, in which we imagine consequences of a fanciful or counterfactual situation, is presented in Charlotte Zolotow's *I Know a Lady* (1986), in which the character Sally, who has become friends with an elderly woman in her neighborhood, wonders what the woman was like as a young girl. "I wonder if some old lady / she knew / had a garden / and cooked and smiled / and patted dogs / and fed the cats / and knew her name." Matthews remarks that "One reason Sally's thought is remarkable is that it includes the realization—hard for a child to manage, but then hard, too, for an adult—that old people are not essentially old, but were once, in their very own persons, children" (1987: 1). Sally's realization that her elderly friend was once a young girl is not counterfactual, but her speculation about the Lady having had a previous intergenerational friendship is a thought experiment. So too is Sally's concluding speculation: "If I was an old lady / and she was a little girl / I would love her a lot / the way I do now." About this, Matthews reflects:

For anyone at all to be able to imagine an old woman as a young girl is hard enough. For a child to do that and, at the same time, imagine herself as an old woman, seems outrageously difficult. And who could know what anyone would be like after such great age transformations? Still, one function of literature is to get us to try such thought-experiments [...]. (1987: 1)

In order to prompt this kind of thought experiment, Matthews' teacher guide includes the discussion questions: "Can you imagine your parents as children? What might they have been like?" and "Can you imagine being the mother or father of your teacher? What might you be like?" (1991: 10).

Of all the ways that children's literature can go philosophical, thought experiments uniquely rely on (moral) imagination and hypothetical thinking. For that reason, they often create an equal playing field for adults and children to engage in philosophical inquiry. If adults have the advantage of bringing more experience and knowledge to the experiments, children typically bring more curiosity and imagination.

## Philosophical fable

Traditionally, a fable is a story, generally short in length, often featuring animal characters, that metaphorically conveys a truth that may or may not involve a moral imperative.<sup>8</sup> Fables originated in the proverbs of ancient wisdom literature, but as J.H. Blackham explains, didactic stories "invented to bring home a moral [...] will not be fables. They are too simplistic to require a fable to arrest and engage the mind" (2013: xi). A fable makes the truth it represents "graphic and memorable, ready for application: sour grapes, [...] a wolf in sheep's clothing," and an ambitious fable will, in addition, "generate and store new meaning in the conception it represents" (2013: xii). A metaphor is a literary device that compares two things in order to increase the understanding of one or both of them. Fables use metaphors to compare something in the story (imagining grapes to be sour) to something in the life of the reader (disparaging something unattainable), in order to increase the understanding of the latter. It is both the distance from reality and the added meaning created by the story's metaphorical aspect that makes it ripe for philosophical inquiry.

Matthews labels many of the children's stories he reviews as fables because they employ metaphors in this way. He also makes a distinction similar to Blackham's, between a fable that is moralistic and one that is, or can be taken as, philosophical. Indeed, in his writing on children's

literature, Matthews rarely mentions morality. Concerned about the inclination of adults to moralize with children, he is reticent about recommending stories with explicitly moral content. Thus, he writes of Theodor Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss, that,

he was first, and most of all, a moralist. He clearly wanted to have a significant influence on the moral life of children, as well as, one suspects, the moral life of their elders. That motivation places him squarely in a venerable tradition that runs back through Hans Christian Andersen and Heinrich Hoffmann (inventor of *Struwwelpeter*) to Aesop and his ancient fables. What makes Dr. Seuss stand out from the tradition of moralism in children's literature is the way he avoided being moralistic. How can a moralist avoid being moralistic? Humorous verse certainly helps. So do zany drawings and ridiculous plots. But the plots need to be wisely ridiculous. And Dr. Seuss was a genius at thinking up wisely ridiculous plots. (1992: 1)

However, Matthews notes that humor or fancy can ambiguate the moral of a story to the extent that the reader must do some intellectual work to understand it as a fable (see *Two Islands*, below).

From these sources, we offer the following formulation of the philosophical fable:

A children's story acts as a Philosophical Fable when it:

1. Is short in length or focuses primarily on one idea,
2. Employs a metaphor to convey a truth about the human condition that may or may not involve a moral imperative, and when
3. Genuinely perplexing questions can be raised about that truth or moral imperative, including:
  - a. What, precisely, is the truth or moral imperative being conveyed?
  - b. How far do I agree with it? and,
  - c. To the extent I agree, how can I apply it in my life?

We note that while answering (c) depends on having answered (b), which depends on having answered (a), it often happens that answering (c) may require revising our answers to (a) and/or (b).

An example of a children's story that requires some intellectual work to clarify the truth or moral it contains is the environmentalist fable *Two Islands* by Ivan Gantshev (1985), in which settlers on one island, "Greenel," preserve its beauty and natural resources, while settlers on the neighboring island, "Graynel," cover it with factories and skyscrapers. When no green spaces are left on Graynel, its "Boss" asks permission to build a bridge connecting it to Greenel. Though he is denied, he prepares to build it anyway by stockpiling materials and weapons on one side of Graynel. On the day Graynel's citizens assemble to witness the bridge's construction, the entire island tips on its side and the inhabitants, materials, weapons, and factories are plunged into the sea. The tipping of Graynel is what tips this otherwise quasi-realist story into the realm of fable. Remarking that "The moral of this story is obvious enough," Matthews notes that "Unlike children's literature that is meant to socialize children and train them to take their preordained places in society, this book is aimed at encouraging children to be social critics" (Matthews, 1988b: 1). However, the questions Matthews raises for philosophical reflection suggest that the moral of this fable is not easy to clarify:

Couldn't [the Boss] have developed a reasonable alternative to pastoral Greenel? Or does the road to modernization lead only to self-destruction? [... S]ome people prefer to live in New York City, even with all [its] problems.[...] So what could they do to make Graynel more livable [...]? [...]And what about Greenel's obligations to the rest of the world, and to Graynel in particular? (Matthews, 1988b: 1)

Some of these questions challenge the suitability of the story's metaphor to increase understanding of our lives, while others problematize the story's implied, all-or-nothing environmentalist moral.

An example of a children's story that delivers a moral that Matthews suggests ought to be questioned is Brock Cole's *The King at the Door* Cole (1979), in which a ragged old man claiming to be the King begs for food and clothing at an inn. The innkeeper mocks the old man by offering him dishwater to drink, the dog's dinner to eat, and rags to wear, but a servant boy named Little Baggit offers him his own bread and ale, hat and coat. The old man rides away on the boy's donkey and the next day the King's royal coach arrives at the inn to take the boy to live at the palace. On its face the story is moralistic, but Matthews works against this by pointing out that in real life we would not necessarily heed the story's moral: "Most of us would be unlikely to believe an old man who turned up at our doorstep and claimed to be Napoleon or Jesus Christ" (1998b: 1). Matthews' resistance to the fable's moral led to his own thoughtful reconstruction of it: "I'm inclined to think we should allow for several different and mutually incompatible clusters of human virtues, each of which might embody in its own way a genuine moral ideal. The sweet innocence of Little Baggit should not be abandoned for the shrewdness of the innkeeper" (1998b: 1).

A fable that offers a moral that seems indisputable in general but that requires careful thinking about how to apply in real life is Dr. Seuss's "The Sneetches" (1961), which uses humor, imaginative creatures and fantastical, full-color images to convey a moral imperative with a political overtone. The bizarre, beach-dwelling Sneetches are engaged in a class war in which those who have green stars on their bellies treat those who do not with disdain. After the underhanded entrepreneur Sylvester McMonkey McBean charges the plain-bellied Sneetches three dollars to be put through a machine that puts stars on their bellies, he convinces the original star-bellied Sneetches that stars are now out of fashion and charges them ten dollars to be put through his "Star-Off Machine." This sets off a chain reaction in which each group races back and forth through both machines. By the time all their money is spent the groups are entirely mixed up, at which point the crafty McBean departs, and the Sneetches' confusion leads to their collective epiphany, "that Sneetches are Sneetches / And no kind of Sneetch is the best on the beaches" (1961: 24). Though clearly moral, Matthews writes that "Shrewdly, Dr. Seuss leaves the applications of his fable up to his readers.[...] We have to think about the ways that *we* make invidious distinctions based on wearing the 'right' kind of sneakers, getting the 'in' haircut, having the preferred color of skin [...] or boasting a 'real' American name" (1992: 1).

Matthews favored philosophical fables because, unlike traditional fables used to teach morals to children (think Aesop), philosophical fables often challenge social norms of belief, value, and behavior. And because such norms are more ingrained in adults than in children, it can be more difficult for adults to seriously reevaluate them. In any case, we expect that children and adults will likely interpret philosophical fables differently: understanding their truisms, agreeing or disagreeing with them, and, especially, deciding what they mean for how we live.

## Philosophical story realism

Realism in children's and young adult literature, as in adult literature, portrays ordinary and extraordinary characters and events as they are, were, or as they might actually be. Because we follow John Dewey in understanding aesthetics, epistemology, ethics, and other subdisciplines of philosophy to be dimensions of the meaning of ordinary experience, we are not surprised to find that realist literature for every age is replete with philosophical themes, questions, and controversies. It is not surprising, therefore, that Matthews recommended a number of realist children's books as ripe for philosophical reflection. We note that while a good philosopher can likely find something



philosophical in most any story, we reserve this category for “when philosophy is built into the narrative structure of children’s books rather than spotlighted as a topic or concern” (Kidd, 2020: 3–4)—that is, when philosophy is integral, rather than incidental, to the plot, the characters, or to some other essential feature of the story, such that to understand the story requires grappling with a philosophical concept or issue. We also note that while other philosophical devices we have discussed—such as philosophical story irony—may be found in realist children’s literature, this category is reserved for literature that goes philosophical without employing those other devices.

Of the realist stories Matthews finds philosophical, we note a prevalence of two varieties: offbeat stories and high-stakes dramas. Matthews uses “offbeat” to describe stories that, while not overly dramatic, invite a quizzical attitude toward ordinary experience. Other realist children’s stories go philosophical by demonstrating how philosophical conundrums can be the stuff of high-stakes drama. We suggest considering these types as ends of a continuum. We also note the prevalence of existential themes—including aging, authenticity, death, loneliness, personal transformation—and moral themes—including animal rights, compassion, hypocrisy, and justice—in the realist children’s stories Matthews analyzed. Such stories invite readers to identify with characters, confront existential and moral issues, develop relevant concepts, and prepare to make informed decisions about these issues in their own lives.

From our study of Matthews, we offer the following formulation of philosophy in realist children’s stories:

We have a case of Philosophical Story Realism whenever there is a story that:

1. Portrays characters and events as they are, were, or as they might actually be, but that
2. Requires grappling with a philosophical concept or issue in order to understand it, with the understanding that the story may be situated on a continuum between:
  - a. Stories that highlight a philosophical dimension of ordinary experience with which the reader is likely familiar, and
  - b. Stories in which the philosophical issue arises from the characters’ involvement in extraordinary experiences in which there is much at stake for them.

A good example of philosophical story realism of the offbeat variety is *Fiona’s Bee* by Beverly Keller (1975), in which the eponymous, shy Fiona saves her money to buy a dog dish, fills it with water, and waits for a thirsty dog and its owner to happen by, hoping to make new friends. When a bee lands in the dish and begins to drown, Fiona rescues it with a stick and holds very still while the bee recuperates sufficiently to crawl up her arm to rest on her shoulder. She then walks carefully to a nearby park where the bee may be lured from her shoulder to a flower, and on the way impresses a number of other children who befriend her. Matthews recommends this “delightfully offbeat” story for discussing the questions, “What animals could be pets? [...] What about people who keep horses? Are their horses their pets? [...] What about the morality of keeping an animal as a pet? [...] Is it moral to keep as a pet an animal that is indifferent, or even hostile, to human companionship?” (1995a: 1).

An example of philosophical story realism of the high-stakes variety is *Standing Up to Mr. O*, (Mills, 1998) which tracks the growing ethical consciousness of twelve-year-old Maggie, and the courage she must summon to act on her newly-formed convictions to become a vegetarian and to not participate in animal dissections at school. Standing up for herself leads Maggie to argue with her mother, to denounce her best friend as a hypocrite, and to lose respect for her favorite teacher, Mr. O—who, besides failing her in science, makes sure that her essay defending animal rights will not



win a school contest. The only classmate who joins Maggie's protest is Jake, who is motivated by a sense of rebellion more radical and confident but less precise and scrupulous (see Matthews, 2002).

Realist philosophical stories provide opportunities for children and adults to exchange perspectives about the kinds of philosophical meaning that pervade ordinary (and extraordinary) human experiences. Doing so is an important means to better understand and empathize with each other across generational differences, and to thereby expand and deepen the meaning of those experiences.

## Conclusion

Matthews identifies several kinds of philosophical perplexity and a number of literary devices in children's stories that can provoke such perplexities. He sometimes focuses on one or the other, so part of our task was to discover the extent to which his analysis could be systematized, aligning particular devices with particular kinds of perplexity. In doing so, it became clear to us that the philosophy in children's literature is neither exclusively in the stories themselves nor in the minds of the philosophical readers, but in the interaction of a philosophically sensitive mind with elements of a story. It follows that the philosophy in children's literature does not necessarily depend on the intentions of the authors or illustrators.<sup>9</sup> Nor does it correspond to particular reading levels, to particular formats such as picture books, chapter books, or novels, or to particular genres such as adventure story, fantasy, fairy tale, science fiction, or mystery. Of course, it also follows that having formulas in mind of the kind we have presented here cannot guarantee that children (or adults) will experience those kinds of philosophical perplexity, or that they will not discover very different kinds. Again, we do not believe that having some idea of what counts as philosophy—in terms of things we might look for in a children's story, even derived from a particular philosophical tradition—precludes children or adults from asking different kinds of questions or finding different kinds of meaning that challenge that tradition. On the contrary, you can only be surprised, philosophically, if you start from somewhere, speaking a certain language, asking a certain kind of question, within a certain cultural context.

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## Notes

1. This movement encompasses all approaches to the philosophical practice of children and adolescents, including approaches more akin to that of Socrates than to preparation in an academic discipline.
2. Philosophical perplexity is a term of art Matthews developed in his book *Socratic Perplexity and the Nature of Philosophy* (1999b). He wrote, "There is great worth in having come to appreciate what is problematic about the idea of knowing something, or the idea of being pious, even if one never comes up with a satisfactory account of what knowledge or piety is" (1999b: 128). Like philosophy, children's literature

- helps us appreciate the problematic character of our most common and central concepts, such as love, person, and causality.
3. Lynn Gluek and Harry Brighouse note that children's stories also condescend to children when they "'dumb down' language, content and even image in order to appeal to what the author, publisher, book club, or parent believes will be appropriate for children" (2008: 130).
  4. The complete column, which continues as an active weblog, is available online at [www.montclair.edu/iapc/thinking-in-stories](http://www.montclair.edu/iapc/thinking-in-stories).
  5. See [www.montclair.edu/iapc/wise-owl](http://www.montclair.edu/iapc/wise-owl), co-authored with Lenore Carlisle and Shari Tishman.
  6. Many children's stories depict worlds inhabited by anthropomorphized animals or imaginary creatures like Sneetches, but in which nothing otherwise fanciful—magical, supernatural, or science-fictional—occurs. These stories generally do not go philosophical in the ways described here, though they frequently do so in other ways.
  7. Interestingly, Matthews did not expressly refer to the story as a thought experiment.
  8. Dixon (2015) distinguishes three kinds of moral imperatives conveyed by fables: general moral imperatives, guides to action, and moral virtues worth cultivating.
  9. Gluek and Brighouse (2008), for instance, raise doubts about the intention of Baum to include philosophical elements in his Oz books.

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