

## CHAPTER 2

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# Considering Children as Concepts

## A LITERAL VIEW OF JESUS' SAYING

**T**he Gospels refer to entering (Matthew 18:3), receiving (Mark 10:14; Luke 18:17), and being born into (John 3:3, 7) the kingdom like children, so we need to clarify what we mean by “children” to know *what we need to be like* to be part of the kingdom. To do this we will dismantle the child/adult paradox and take only a “literal view” of “the child” that fits with the plain meaning of everyday speech. In the next chapter we will do the opposite. We will consider children in a figurative way as parables to stimulate our imagination to go beyond the ordinary meaning.

A literal *concept* about children is no more real than a menu is a meal, but we need to carefully and slowly form a general idea about them, because we were all children once.

Our intuition has been shaped by our personal experiences, which vivify but limit our view.

We need to avoid the “overconfidence” of what Daniel Kahneman called a “focusing illusion.” This can be illustrated by Kahneman’s study of Midwestern and Californian college students. The Midwesterners leapt to the conclusion that Californians were happier than they were, although both groups independently reported the same life satisfaction.<sup>1</sup> To prevent a confident leaping from illusion to conclusion, we will slow down and formalize our thinking by looking at children from four points of view: theology, history, psychology, and our own unique memories of childhood.

## THEOLOGIAN AND THE GRATEFUL CHILD

Most theologians across the centuries have been ambivalent, ambiguous, and/or indifferent to children. Only a few have considered them a means of grace, which would be more in line with Jesus’ saying.

I surveyed this history in *Children and the Theologians* (2009) with the hope of making this negative, unspoken, *de facto* theology of childhood more conscious.<sup>2</sup> Making it conscious, I thought, might clear the way to build a more constructive and graceful theology of childhood to guide the church in the future.

In this book I will concentrate on the work of a single theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988), who considered children a means of grace, and placed the child’s wonder at

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1. Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 402–403.

2. Jerome W. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way for Grace* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2009), 8–24.

being born in the center of his enormous, theological project, which blended theology, spirituality, and beauty. He explicitly addressed the complexity of becoming-like-a-child just before he died, in a little book that we will come to in a moment.

Von Balthasar proposed that children begin to wonder when they open their eyes and see their mother's smile. The smile signifies that they are in a new home after the difficult struggle through the birth canal and that they are welcome in this new reality. Many human beings around our earth have felt this welcome by their mothers' smiles, but they have not given much thought to it in theological terms.

Von Balthasar thought that the wonder babies experience comes from "being permitted to be." He placed this experience at the center of his theology, because, as he wrote, "This condition of being permitted cannot be surpassed by any additional insight into the laws and necessities of the world."<sup>3</sup> Our original wonder at being alive opens us to God's undifferentiated yet creative presence focused by the mother's smile. Being alive and being welcomed are global feelings in the infant, so the resulting gratitude is a pervasive gratitude for life itself. As such, it shapes our identity, which in turn shapes how we live and do our dying.

Others have noticed the importance of gratitude for being alive as a life-shaping event. Virginia Woolf commented on this in *Moments of Being*. She wrote that "moments of being" are the times when one experiences reality itself, instead of the more ordinary protective covering, which she called "non-being."

One of Woolf's earliest "moments of being" took place when she was lying in her crib in the nursery—"half asleep, half awake"—listening to sounds beyond the window that she

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3. Quoted in David L. Schindler, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work* (San Francisco: Communion, 1991), 633.

later realized were the sounds of the waves breaking—“one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach.” As she listened she also watched the light come into the room as the breeze lifted the blind. She wrote, “. . . of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive.”<sup>4</sup> The gratitude she felt for being alive provided the primal foundation for her life. As she said, “these moments of being of mine were scaffolding in the background; were the invisible and silent part of my life as a child.”<sup>5</sup>

Von Balthasar discovered the starting point for his theology by watching children around him, remembering his own childhood, by his theological intuition and his enormous learning. He was also greatly aided by Adrienne von Speyr (1902–1967), a respected medical doctor in Basel, who was baptized a Roman Catholic in 1940 under his spiritual guidance when she was thirty-eight. She kept the reality of children always in front of von Balthasar and he warmly appreciated her joy, childlike qualities, and wonder—as well as her strength and courage, which were often tested by poor health and in other ways. Together they established a religious society in 1945, the secular Community of Saint John (*Johannesgemeinschaft* [*Säkularinstitut*]) for women and men. Von Balthasar wrote about the spirituality practiced there in *Our Task* (1984 German, 1994 English).<sup>6</sup>

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4. Quoted in John Pridmore, *Playing with Icons: The Spirituality of Recalled Childhood*, private mss., 94. To read more fully about Virginia Woolf's foundational experience, see *Moments of Being: A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (San Diego: Harcourt, A Harvest Book, second edition, 1985), 64–72. This book was edited after Woolf's death.

5. Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 73.

6. The common “task” referred to in the title is that of von Balthasar and von Speyr. Von Balthasar hoped to insure that no one would desire to separate his work from hers. The book also includes a description of the way the community was formed and its spirituality, which gives another meaning to the commonality of the task.

The Society of Jesus decided that founding a secular community of men and women was at odds with his vocation as a Jesuit, so von Balthasar left the order with great, personal difficulty in 1950. He felt that God had called him to a new task, which was to sanctify the world from within the secular ethos. This move also, at least in my view, forced him to see more clearly the importance of children for his theology.

What von Balthasar saw in children has not been the majority view in theology. St. Augustine represents the majority view, so let's take a moment to discuss his experience with children, which influenced his theology. The Bishop of Hippo Regius in North Africa thought that children arrived in the world already infected with original sin. He knew firsthand from his own adolescence that sinfulness was a fundamental part of human nature. He and a group of boys stole pears, merely "for the excitement of stealing."

Augustine could not remember his own infancy to determine its sinfulness by introspection, so he watched babies to see if they showed signs of original sin. He thought they did and wrote, perhaps with irony, "The feebleness of infant limbs is innocent, not the infant's mind."<sup>7</sup> In other words, he thought babies and children may look innocent, but in reality the evidence of their self-love and diseased wills, as when they are hungrily feeding at the breast without concern for others, show that they are born sinful. Today we might call such infant behavior an instinct, which is necessary for survival, but some 1,500 years ago Augustine saw something else.

Augustine also learned about children as a father and participant in a marriage of some thirteen years. This was a legal

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7. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press: World's Classics edition, 1992), 9. His description of watching infants at the breast is also on page 9. The description of stealing pears "for the excitement of stealing" is at page 29.

marriage, but it was not fully and strictly connected to the laws of Roman citizenship and inheritance. Like many in the Roman Empire, he opted for a second-class marriage, which had the official sanction of the church, until he was ready to commit to the stringency of the more formal one.<sup>8</sup> Augustine never mentioned his wife's name in all his voluminous writing, but the child they had together was called Adeodatus (A Gift from God). He did not have much if anything to say about the details of his own son's sinfulness except that he was born out of Augustine's sin.

Bishop Ambrose baptized Adeodatus and his father at the cathedral in Milan during the Easter Vigil in 387. Augustine later praised his sixteen-year-old son for his part in the dialogue *The Teacher*, which Augustine said they wrote together about 389, not long after the two of them returned to North Africa. Adeodatus' mother had been sent back to Africa earlier when Augustine decided to marry a young, Roman heiress, but the marriage never took place. Sadly, Adeodatus died in Africa at an age only a little older than his father had been when he and his friends had stolen pears a generation before.

We will return to Augustine many times as this book unfolds, but for now we will just note one more thing. It was the voice of *a child*, chanting over and over again "Pick up and read,"<sup>9</sup> that was the means of grace for his conversion. Upon hearing the child's chanting, he opened "the book of the apostle" and read from Romans 13:13–14, which was the catalyst for his conversion to Christianity.

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8. "Concubinage" was a traditional feature of Roman life, and the Catholic Church recognized it, provided the couple remained faithful to one another." This second-class marriage with a concubine (not a prostitute) was for convenience until one was established in life and ready to take on the responsibilities of a Roman citizen. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), 62.

9. Augustine, *Confessions*, 152.

This short digression highlights the difference between von Balthasar's view of children and Augustine's. This contrast shows how radical it was for von Balthasar to write that the mother's smile shows the infant "that it is contained, affirmed, and loved in a relationship which is incomprehensively encompassing, already actual, sheltering, and nourishing." As an "object of love," the child feels allowed to be and begins to play.

The experience of "being permitted" precedes questions about rights and duties, so children's gratitude for being is the deep root for adult ethical consciousness. "Everything, without exception, which is to follow later and will inevitably be added to this experience must remain an unfolding of it."<sup>10</sup> We will return to this idea in chapter 5 when we discuss Thomas Traherne, who placed the gratitude of the child at the center of his theory of ethics for adults.

When von Balthasar died at the age of eighty-three, the manuscript for a little book was found on his desk. He had planned to give it to friends as a Christmas present. In English it is called *Unless You Become Like This Child*, and with it von Balthasar added another dimension to Jesus' call for us to become like a child. We also need to become like *this child*, the Christ child, to dwell in God's kingdom.

We know almost nothing about Jesus' early years, despite many attempts over the centuries by historians, artists, novelists, and poets to reconstruct them. A bridge between the centuries, however, exists. It is play. Von Balthasar wrote that Jesus and all children play naturally like Sophia did. She (Holy Wisdom) has played in God's presence since the beginning of time and was personified in Proverbs (8:22–31).

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10. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, V: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 616.

Von Balthasar thought that the playful blend of Sofia, the Christ Child, and all children, regardless of time or place, pleases God and “exactly fulfills his command.”<sup>11</sup> God’s Child embodied God’s *command* to play *freely*, which defines our nature and avoids the either-or thinking (predestination versus free will) about grace that has sometimes dominated theology.

Von Balthasar’s view of grace, much like that of St. Thomas in his *Summa Theologiae*,<sup>12</sup> was that we are *determined* by God to choose freely, as creators in God’s image, so the grace of God’s love can be accepted (instead of overwhelming us) and nourish us creatively all through our lives and in our deaths. We will return to the theme of play when we discuss the psychological view of children later in this chapter, and in chapter 4 when we talk about how the creative process plays pervasively in God’s creation.

In summary, then, von Balthasar is a strong representative of the minority view in Christian theology concerning the nature of children. He stressed that their nature is one of gratitude for being permitted to be. It is from this source that our ethics emerges and our life and death is framed. The mother’s smile and our tendency to play are the accent notes in his theology of childhood. These themes will continue to appear in this book, but it is now time to turn to the historians of childhood, whose method is much different from that of theology.

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11. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child* (San Francisco: Comunio, 1991), 35–36.

12. Denys Turner, *Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 154.