

INTRODUCTION

THE ART OF THINKING

I need a philosopher.” Hank was standing in the bathroom, half-naked.

“What?” Julie asked.

“I need a philosopher.”

“Did you rinse?”

“I need a philosopher,” Hank said, getting more agitated.

“You need to rinse. Go back to the sink.”

“I need a philosopher!” Hank demanded.

“Scott!” Julie shouted. “Hank needs a philosopher.”

I am a philosopher. And no one has ever needed me. I rushed to the bathroom. “Hank, Hank! I’m a philosopher. What do you need?”

He looked puzzled. “You are *not* a philosopher,” he said sharply.

“Hank, I *am* a philosopher. That’s my job. What’s bothering you?”

He opened his mouth but didn’t say anything.

“Hank, what’s bothering you?”

“DER’S FOMETHING FUCK IN MY FEETH.”

A flosser. Hank needed a flosser—one of those forked pieces of plastic with dental floss strung across it. In retrospect, that makes sense. A flosser is something you could need, especially if you are two and your purpose in life is to pack landfills with cheap pieces of plastic that provided a temporary diversion. A philosopher is not something that people need. People like to point that out to philosophers.



“WHAT DO PHILOSOPHERS DO, EXACTLY?”

“Um, uh . . . we think, mostly.”

“What do you think about?”

“Anything, really. Justice, fairness, equality, religion, law, language . . .”

“I think about those things. Am I a philosopher?”

“You might be. Do you think about them carefully?”

I cannot count the number of times that I’ve had that conversation. But that’s because I’ve never had it. It’s just how I imagine things would go if I were to tell a stranger that I’m a philosopher. I almost always say that I am a lawyer. Unless I am talking to a lawyer; then I say that I’m a law professor, so that I can pull rank. If I am talking to another law professor, though, then I’m definitely a philosopher. But if I am talking to a philosopher, I’m back to being a lawyer. It’s an elaborate shell game, carefully constructed to give me an edge in any conversation.

But I am a philosopher. And I still find that improbable. I didn’t set out to be one. As a first-semester freshman at the University of Georgia, I wanted to take Intro Psychology. But the class was full, and Intro Philosophy fulfilled a requirement. If a spot had come open in that psychology class, then I might be a psychologist and this book might be full of practical parenting advice. There is a bit of parenting advice in this book, but most of it is not so practical. Indeed, my main advice is just this: talk to your kids (or somebody else’s). They’re funny as hell—and good philosophers too.

I missed the first day of that philosophy class, because my people—Jews, not philosophers—celebrate the New Year at a more or less random time each fall. But I went to the second class, and by the second hour I was hooked. The professor, Clark Wolf, asked each of us what mattered, and as he went around the room, he scratched our answers on the board alongside our names and the names of famous philosophers who had said something similar.

Happiness: Robyn, Lila, Aristotle

Pleasure: Anne, Aristippus, Epicurus

Doing the Right Thing: Scott, Neeraj, Kant

Nothing: Vijay, Adrian, Nietzsche

Seeing my name on the board made me think that my thoughts about what mattered might matter—that I could be a part of a conversation that included people like Aristotle, Kant, and Nietzsche.

It was a crazy thing to think, and my parents were not happy to find me thinking it. I remember sitting across from my father in a rotisserie chicken restaurant, reporting that I planned to major in philosophy. “What’s philosophy?” he asked. That is a good question. He didn’t know the answer because when he registered for classes, there was a spot left in psychology, and that became his major. But I realized that I had a problem: I didn’t know the answer either, and I had been in a philosophy class for several weeks. What *is* philosophy, I wondered, and why do I want to study it?

I decided to show my dad rather than tell him. “We think we’re sitting at a table, eating rotisserie chicken and having a conversation about how college is going,” I started. “But what if we aren’t? What if someone stole our brains, put them in a vat, hooked them up to electrodes, and stimulated them so as to make us think that we’re eating chicken and talking about college?”

“Can they do that?” he asked.

“I don’t think so, but that’s not the question. The question is how do we know that they didn’t? How do we know that we aren’t brains in vats, hallucinating a chicken dinner?”

“That’s what you want to study?” The look on his face was something other than encouraging.

“Yeah, I mean, don’t you see the worry? Everything we think we know could be wrong.”

He did not see the worry. And this was before *The Matrix* came out, so I couldn’t appeal to the authority of Keanu Reeves to establish the urgency of the issue. After a few more minutes of muttering about brains and vats, I added, “The department has lots of logic classes too.”

“Well,” he said, “I hope you take those.”



I SAID THAT IT’S improbable that I’m a philosopher. But that’s not right. What’s improbable is that I’m *still* a philosopher—that my dad didn’t put a stop to it, at that dinner or long before. Because I was a philosopher almost from the time that I could talk, and I am not alone in that. Every kid—every single one—is a philosopher. They stop when they grow up. Indeed, it may be that part of what it is to grow up is to stop doing philosophy and to start doing something more practical. If that’s true, then I’m not fully grown up, which will come as a surprise to exactly no one who knows me.

It’s not for lack of trying on my parents’ part. I remember the first time I pondered a philosophical puzzle. I was five, and it hit me during circle time at the JCC kindergarten. I thought about it all day, and at pickup time I rushed to tell my mother, who taught a preschool class down the hall.

“Mommy,” I said, “I don’t know what red looks like to you.”

“Yes, you do. It looks red,” she said.

“Right . . . well, no,” I stammered. “I know what red looks like to me, but I don’t know what it looks like to you.”

She looked confused, and to be fair, I may not have been clear. I was five. But I struggled mightily to get her to see what I was saying.

“Red looks like that,” she said, pointing to something red.

“I know that’s red,” I said.

“So what’s the trouble?”

“I don’t know what red looks like to you.”

“It looks like *that*,” she said, increasingly exasperated.

“Right,” I said, “but I don’t know what that looks like to you. I know what it looks like to me.”

“It looks the same, sweetheart.”

“You don’t know that,” I insisted.

“Yes, I do,” she said, pointing again. “That’s red, right?”

She didn’t get it, but I was not deterred. “We call the same things red,” I attempted to explain, “because you pointed to red things and told me they were red. But what if I see red the way you see blue?”

“You don’t. That’s red, not blue, right?”

“I know we both call that red,” I said, “but red could look to you the way blue looks to me.”

I don’t know how long we went round on that, but my mother never did see the point I was making. (Mom, if you’re reading this, I’m happy to try again.) And I distinctly remember her concluding the conversation: “Stop worrying about this. It doesn’t matter. You see just fine.”

That was the first time someone told me to stop doing philosophy. It was not the last.



PHILOSOPHERS CALL THE PUZZLE I pressed on my mother the *shifted color spectrum*. The idea is typically credited to John Locke, the seventeenth-century English philosopher whose ideas influenced the

Framers of the United States Constitution. But I'd bet that thousands of kindergarten-aged kids got there first. (Indeed, Daniel Dennett, a prominent philosopher of mind, reports that many of his students recall pondering the puzzle when they were little.) Their parents probably didn't understand what they were saying, or see the significance in it. But the puzzle *is* significant; indeed, it's a window into some of the deepest mysteries about the world and our place within it.

Here's how Locke explained the puzzle (it's easier to follow if you read it out loud in an English accent):

Neither would it carry any Imputation of Falshood . . . if . . . the same Object should produce in several Men's Minds different Ideas at the same time; v.g. if the Idea, that a Violet produced in one Man's Mind by his Eyes, were the same that a Marigold produces in another Man's, and vice versâ.

I know what you're thinking: at five, I had a better grasp of the English language than Locke. At the least, I didn't capitalize letters like a crazy person. But don't worry: I won't make you slog through lots of passages from long-dead philosophers. The point of this book is that anyone can do philosophy and every kid does. If a kindergartner can do philosophy without reading Locke, we can too.

But we did read Locke, so let's see if we can make sense of it. What was he on about? There are lots of mysteries lurking in that short passage: about the nature of colors, about the nature of consciousness, and about the difficulty—or perhaps impossibility—of capturing some of our experiences in words. We'll think about some of those mysteries later on. But the last one points toward an even bigger worry: that other people's minds are, in a fundamental sense, closed to us.

Other people might see the world differently than we do, and not just in the metaphorical sense that they might have different opinions about

controversial topics. They might actually *see* the world differently. If I could pop into your head—see through your eyes, with your brain—I might discover that everything is, from my perspective, topsy-turvy. Stop signs might look blue; the sky might look red. Or perhaps the differences would be more subtle—off by a shade, or a bit more vibrant. But since I can't pop in, I can't know what the world looks like to you. I can't even know what it looks like to the people I know best: my wife and kids.

And that is a lonely thought. If Locke is right, then we are, in an important sense, trapped in our own heads, cut off from other people's experiences. We can guess what they're like. But we can't know.

I don't think it's an accident that this thought occurs to many kindergarten-aged kids. Kids that age are working hard to understand other people—to learn to read their minds. You won't make it very far in the world if you can't figure out what other people think. We have to be able to anticipate other people's actions, and their reactions to our actions. To do that, kids are constantly generating and testing theories about the beliefs, intentions, and motivations of those around them. They wouldn't put it that way, of course. It's not something they do reflectively. But neither was dropping their sippy cup from their high chair, even though that too was an experiment—in physics and psychology. (It fell every time, and someone always picked it up.)

I don't know why I was thinking about colors that day in kindergarten. But what I discovered—simply by thinking it through—was a limit on my capacity to read other people's minds. I could learn a lot about my mother's beliefs, motivations, and intentions just by watching the way she behaved. But no matter what I did, I couldn't learn whether red looked to her the way it looked to me.

We'll return to this problem. As I said, it's a window into some of the deepest mysteries about the world. Kids peer through that window all the time. Most adults have forgotten that it's even there.



PEOPLE ARE SKEPTICAL when I say that kids peer through that window. Sure, *you* came up with the shifted color spectrum, they say. But *you* turned out to be a philosopher. That's not a normal thing for a kid to do. I might have believed them if I didn't have kids myself. I've got two boys: Hank, whom you've already met, and Rex, who's a few years older. By the time Rex was three, he was saying things that implicated philosophical issues, even if he didn't yet see them himself.

As the kids got older, philosophy was right on the surface of what they said. One day, Julie asked Hank (then eight) what he wanted for lunch, and she gave him two options: a quesadilla or a hamburger left over from the night before. Hank was tortured by the choice—you'd think we'd asked him which parent to save from certain death.* It took him a while to decide.

"I'll have the burger," he said, decades later.

"It's already on the table," Julie replied. Hank *always* chooses a burger if one's available.

Hank was *not* happy with this development. He started to cry.

"What's wrong, Hank?" I asked. "That was what you wanted."

"Mommy didn't let me decide," he said.

"Sure she did. You said you wanted a burger and you have a burger."

"No," Hank said. "She predicted me."

"Yeah, but she got it right."

"*It's still insulting,*" Hank insisted. And his burger got cold while he wailed.

The following week, my philosophy of law class talked about *prepunishment*—the idea that we might punish someone before they commit a crime if we know, beyond a reasonable doubt, that they'll do

*Actually, he could answer that instantly—and it wouldn't go well for me.

it. Some people doubt that it's possible to predict well enough to know. I don't, actually. But there's another objection that's a lot like Hank's.

It's disrespectful, some say, to treat a person as if he's already made a decision when he hasn't—even if you know what he'll decide when he does. It's his decision that ought to make the difference, and he's free to go in a different direction until he's decided, even if you know he won't. (Or is he? Does the fact that you can predict what he'll do imply that he doesn't have free will?) I told my class about Hank, and we talked about whether he was right to feel disrespected. Many thought that he was.

I do that a lot when I teach. I share a story about my kids that illustrates the issues we're talking about. Then we debate whether the kids are right in what they say. I do that when I talk with my colleagues too, since the kids give me such great examples. By now, Rex and Hank are famous among philosophers of law.

For years, people would tell me that my kids weren't normal—that they were doing philosophy *because* they have a philosopher for a dad. I didn't think so. Often their ideas came out of nowhere; they didn't track any conversations we'd had. One night at dinner, four-year-old Rex wondered whether he'd been dreaming his entire life. Philosophers have asked that question for ages. But none of them had ever put it to Rex—or even discussed it around him. (We'll take up the question in chapter 8, when we inquire into the nature of knowledge.) If there was a difference between my kids and others, I thought, it was down to the fact that I noticed when they were doing philosophy—and encouraged it.

My view was confirmed when I discovered the work of Gareth Matthews, a philosopher who dedicated most of his career to kids. He passed away in 2011, when Rex was just one. I never met him, but I wish I'd gotten the chance, because Matthews knew more about kids' philosophical abilities than anyone else.

Matthews's interest started the way mine did. His kid said something philosophical. Their cat, Fluffy, had fleas, and Sarah (age four) asked how she got them.

Fleas must have jumped from another cat onto Fluffy, Matthews told her.

“How did *that* cat get fleas?” Sarah asked.

They must have come from a different cat, Matthews said.

“But Daddy,” Sarah insisted, “it can’t go on and on like that forever; the only thing that goes on and on like that forever is numbers!”

At the time, Matthews was teaching a class that covered the Cosmological Argument, which aims to show that God exists. There are many versions of the argument, some quite complicated. But the basic idea is simple: Every event has a cause. But that can’t continue back forever. So there must be a First Cause, which was itself uncaused. Some say that’s God—most famously, Thomas Aquinas.

The argument has problems. Why does the chain of causes have to come to an end? Perhaps the universe is eternal—endless in both directions. And even if there was a First Cause, why think it was God? But it doesn’t matter whether the argument works. (We’ll ask whether God exists in chapter 12.) The point is simply to see that Sarah reproduced its logic. “Here I am teaching my university students the argument for a First Cause,” Matthews wrote, “and my four-year-old daughter comes up, on her own, with an argument for the First Flea!”

That caught Matthews off guard, since he knew a little developmental psychology. According to Jean Piaget, the Swiss psychologist famous for his theory of cognitive development, Sarah should have been in the *pre-operational stage*, so called because kids in it can’t yet use logic.* But Sarah’s logic was exquisite—far more compelling than the Cosmological Argument. Whatever you make of an infinite regress of causes, it’s hard to imagine an infinite regress of cats.

Okay, I can hear you say: Matthews is yet another philosopher with a

*Matthews documents several instances in which Piaget simply fails to understand what kids are saying—and so misses the subtlety of their thought. Often the problem is that Piaget isn’t as creative as the kids.

philosophical kid. That doesn't tell us much about kids in general. But Matthews didn't stop with his kids. He talked to people who weren't philosophers—and heard many similar stories about their kids. Then he started to visit schools to talk to more kids himself. He'd read stories that raised philosophical questions to the kids—then he'd listen to the debate that ensued.

My favorite of Matthews's stories came from the mother of a little boy named Ian. While Ian and his mother were at home, another family came to visit, and the family's three kids monopolized the television, keeping Ian from seeing his favorite show. After they left, he asked his mother, "Why is it better for three people to be selfish than for one?"

I love that question. It's so simple—and subversive. Many economists think that public policy ought to maximize the satisfaction of people's preferences. Some philosophers think so too. But Ian invites us to ask: Should we care about preferences if they're simply selfish? There's a challenge to democracy lurking here too. Suppose Ian's mother put the question what to watch to a vote? Is counting selfish kids a good way to settle the question?

I don't think so. Had Ian been my child, I would have explained that we let guests choose what to watch because they're guests—not because there are more of them. It's a way of showing hospitality, so we'd do just the same even if the numbers were switched.

What about democracy? We'll think about it later on, since Rex thinks our family ought to be one. For now, I'll just say: Democracy shouldn't be a way of summing people's selfish preferences. Voters ought to be public-spirited. They should seek to promote the common good—and important values, like justice and fairness—not their own individual interests. Don't get me wrong. I believe in democracy, even when it doesn't live up to that ideal. But I stand with Ian in thinking that more people acting selfishly is just more selfishness—and not a good way to make decisions.

Ian's mother was confused by his question. She had no idea how to answer. And I suspect most adults would find themselves just as flum-

moxed. Little kids often question things grown-ups take for granted. Indeed, that's one of the reasons they make good philosophers. "The adult must cultivate the naiveté that is required for doing philosophy," Matthews said, but "to the child such naiveté is entirely natural."

At least, it is for the littlest kids. Matthews found that "spontaneous excursions into philosophy" were common between the ages of three and seven. By eight or nine, kids seem to slow down, publicly if not privately. It's hard to say why. It may be that their interests shift, or that they feel pressure from peers or parents to stop asking childish questions. Still, Matthews found it easy to prompt philosophical conversations among kids that age and older—and he was struck by the clever ways in which they reasoned. Indeed, Matthews claimed that, in some ways, kids are better philosophers than adults.



I SUSPECT THAT SOUNDS ODD. The very idea of child development seems to presuppose that kids' minds mature—get more sophisticated as they grow older. In Matthews's view, just the opposite is true, at least in relation to some skills.* Kids do philosophy with "a freshness and inventiveness that is hard for even the most imaginative adult to match." The freshness stems from the fact that kids find the world a puzzling place. Several years back, a psychologist named Michelle Chouinard listened to recordings of young children spending time with their parents. In just over two hundred hours, she heard nearly twenty-five thousand questions. That works out to more than two a minute. About a quarter of those questions sought explanations; the kids wanted to know *how* or *why*.

Kids also like to puzzle things out. In another study, researchers found that kids who don't get answers to *how* or *why* questions cook up their

*As we'll learn in chapter 10, many developmental psychologists now agree with Matthews. Kids' minds are different—not better or worse.

own explanations. And even when they do get answers, they often aren't satisfied. They follow up with another *why* or challenge the explanation offered.

But we haven't yet hit the most important reason kids make good philosophers: they aren't worried about seeming silly. They haven't learned that serious people don't spend time on some questions. As Matthews explains:

The philosopher asks, "What is time, anyway?" when other adults assume, no doubt unthinkingly, that they are well beyond the point of needing to ask this question. They may want to know whether they have enough time to do the week's shopping, or to pick up a newspaper. They may want to know what time it is, but it doesn't occur to them to ask, "What is time?" St. Augustine put the point well: "What, then, is time? Provided that no one asks me, I know. But if I want to explain it to a questioner, I am baffled."

I've spent years attempting to answer a question that sounds equally silly: What is law? I'm a law professor, so you'd think I'd know. (I teach at the University of Michigan, where I hold appointments in the law school and philosophy department.) But if we're honest, most lawyers are like Augustine: we know what law is, right up until you ask, then we're baffled.

Most of my colleagues happily ignore their ignorance. They have important business to get on with. And I think they think I'm silly for getting stuck on the question. But I think we should all be silly like that sometimes. We should take a step back from our practical concerns and think like little kids. It's a way of recapturing some of the wonder they have at the world—and a way of reminding ourselves how little we understand of it.



ON THE FIRST DAY of second grade, Rex was asked to write down what he wanted to be when he grew up. The teacher sent home a list of the kids' career ambitions, but she didn't say which kid was aiming at which career. Still, it wasn't hard to pick Rex's entry from the list. There were a few future firemen, several doctors, some teachers, a surprising number of engineers. But there was only one "math philosopher."

At dinner that night, I asked Rex the question I still couldn't answer: "Ms. Kind says that you want to be a philosopher of math. What is philosophy?"

Rex pondered for a half second. Then he said, "Philosophy is the art of thinking."

I called my dad. "Remember when we had dinner at that rotisserie chicken place, when I first came home from college? I told you I wanted to study philosophy, and you asked what it was. Well, now I know!"

He didn't remember, and he didn't much care. But Rex was right. Philosophy is the art of thinking. A philosophical puzzle is one that requires us to think about ourselves and the world in an effort to understand both better.

Grown-ups and kids do philosophy in different styles. Adults are more disciplined thinkers. Kids are more creative. Adults know a lot about the world. But kids can help them see how little they actually know. Kids are curious and courageous, where adults tend to be cautious and closed down.

David Hills (who teaches at Stanford) describes philosophy as "the ungainly attempt to tackle questions that come naturally to children, using methods that come naturally to lawyers." That's an apt description of professional philosophy. But it presupposes a division of labor we don't need. Grown-ups and kids can do philosophy together.

Indeed, they should. Conversations between kids and adults can be collaborative, since each brings something different to the table. And

they can be fun too. Philosophy is partly play—with ideas. For sure, we should think like little kids. But we should also think *with* them.



THIS BOOK IS INSPIRED BY KIDS, but it's not for them. In fact, kids are my Trojan horse. I'm not after young minds. I'm after yours.

Kids will do philosophy with or without you. I'm hoping to get you to try it again. And I'm hoping to give you the confidence to talk to kids about it, by helping you to see the philosophical issues latent in everyday life—and teaching you a bit about them.

I'm going to tell you stories, mostly about Rex and Hank. In some of the stories, Rex and Hank do philosophy. They notice a puzzle and try to puzzle it out. In others, they say or do something that presents a philosophical puzzle, but it's not one they notice themselves. Still other stories are just about our hapless parenting; philosophy provides some perspective on what went wrong.

Sometimes we'll think with the boys. Sometimes we'll think about them. And sometimes we'll go off on our own and do some grown-up thinking about the questions they raise. But the boys will never be too far away, since they have a lot to say.

Together Rex and Hank will take us on a tour through contemporary philosophy. But like many of the best tours, this one's a bit quirky. Some of the questions we'll encounter are universal. They'd pop up in parenting any kid. In that category, we could put questions about authority, punishment, and God. Others reflect interests Rex and Hank happen to have, like the size of the universe. Different kids get interested in different things.

When parents hear about this project, they often share questions their kids ask. Some are *amazing*. Every night at bedtime, for weeks on end, one little girl would ask her mother: *Why do the days keep coming?* Her mom explained the rotation of the earth, but it was clear the mechanics

weren't what interested her. I might have told the girl about *continuous creation*—the idea (common to some Christian thinkers) that God creates the world at every moment, not just at the start. I don't know whether that would have satisfied her, though. It's possible that the girl's question came from someplace dark—from angst about the world and what it was throwing at her.

My boys aren't dark—at least not yet. But they're constantly curious, so we're going to cover a lot of ground. This book comes in three parts. The first is called Making Sense of Morality. In it, we'll ask what rights are—and what it takes to override them. We'll ask how we ought to respond to wrongdoing. In particular, we'll wonder whether revenge is ever warranted. And we'll ponder punishment too—what it is and why we do it. Then we'll think about authority. We'll ask whether *because I said so* could really be a reason for a kid to follow orders. Finally, we'll think about the words we're not supposed to say—the bad bits of language. (I should warn you: I swear a bit, maybe more. Don't judge me too harshly. I defend myself in chapter 5.)

In the second part, Making Sense of Ourselves, we'll turn to questions about identity. We'll ask what sex, gender, and race are. But we won't be leaving morality behind. When we think about sex and gender, we'll ask what role they should play in sports. And when we consider race, we'll ask whether it's a ground of responsibility—and whether reparations are owed for slavery and segregation.

The third part is called Making Sense of the World. It starts with questions about knowledge. With Rex, we'll wonder whether we might be dreaming our entire lives. And we'll consider skepticism—the worry that we can't know anything about anything at all. After that, we'll take up questions about truth—and we'll think about the tooth fairy too. Then we'll train our minds on our minds, as we wonder what consciousness is. We'll also ponder the infinite. And at the end of our journey, we'll ask whether God exists.



WE'RE GOING TO MOVE FAST, at least for philosophers. You could spend a lifetime studying any of the topics we'll take up. The best we can do is hit the highlights. But if all goes well, by the end of the book, you'll be well equipped to think through the puzzles we'll see—with a kid or on your own. That's one of the things I love about philosophy: you can do it anytime, anywhere, in conversation with others or all by yourself. You just have to think things through.

To that end, I want you to read this book a bit differently than you would many others. Most nonfiction writers want you to believe the things they say in their books. They're hoping that you'll accept their authority and adopt their way of thinking about the world.

That's not my aim at all. Sure, I'd like to persuade you to see things my way. But the truth is: I'm happy for you to think differently—as long as you've thought it through. In fact, I suggest that you approach the arguments I offer skeptically. Don't assume that I'm right. In fact, assume that I've gone wrong somewhere, and see if you can spot the spot.

But do me a favor. Don't just disagree. If you think I'm wrong, work out the reasons why. And once you've done that, think through what I might say in response. And how you'd reply, and what I'd retort. And so on, until you feel like you aren't learning anything anymore. But don't give up too quick; the further you go, the more you understand.

That's how philosophers work (at least the grown-up ones). I tell my students: when you have an objection to another philosopher's work, you should assume that she already thought of it—and that she thought it so misguided it wasn't even worth mentioning. Then you should try to work out why. If you give it a good try and you can't figure out where you've gone wrong, it's time to tell other people about it. The goal is to get in the habit of treating your own ideas as critically as you treat other people's.

That advice shows up in the way I talk to the boys. In our house,

you're not "entitled to your opinion," as Americans like to say. You have to defend it. I ask the boys lots of questions. Then I question their answers, so they have to think critically about their own ideas. That annoys them sometimes, but I see it as an important part of parenting.

We're all accustomed to supporting kids' interests—and helping them discover new ones. We expose them to art, literature, and music. We encourage them to try sports. We cook with them. We dance with them. We teach them about science and take them to nature. But there's one task lots of parents neglect, because they don't see it as a separate task: supporting their kids as thinkers.

Over the course of this book, you'll learn lots of ways to do that. The simplest is to ask questions—and question answers. But you don't have to play teacher. Indeed, it's better if you don't.

Jana Mohr Lone directs the Center for Philosophy for Children at the University of Washington. Like Matthews had, she visits schools to talk philosophy with kids. But she doesn't teach them philosophy. Instead, she does philosophy with them. The difference is subtle but important. Kids can already do philosophy—in some ways, better than you. So treat them like collaborators. Take their ideas seriously. Try to solve problems with them, not for them. When you're talking philosophy, that shouldn't be so hard, since chances are, you don't know the answers yet either.

That leads me to my last ask: set your grown-up sensibilities aside. Most adults are like my dad. They have little patience for the sorts of puzzles that philosophers ponder; those are the opposite of practical. Worrying that the world is not what it seems will not get the laundry done. But I hope the boys and I can flip that script, at least for a little while. Why do the laundry when the world may not be what it seems?



LATELY REX AND HANK have been wondering why this book is called *Nasty, Brutish, and Short*. You might have heard the phrase before. It comes from Thomas Hobbes, who lived at roughly the same time as

Locke. Hobbes was curious what life would be like without any government at all—a condition philosophers call the *state of nature*. He thought it would be awful. Indeed, he thought it would involve a “war of every man against every man.” In the state of nature, Hobbes said, life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

I don’t know about the state of nature. But a “war of every man against every man” is an apt description of what a house with little kids is like.

We are lucky. Our lives aren’t solitary or poor. But our kids are nasty, brutish, and short.

They are also cute and kind. And actually, we are lucky on that front too. Rex and Hank are uncommonly cute and kind. But all kids are, at times, nasty and brutish. That’s why we’re going to think about revenge and ask whether punishment can be used to build better creatures.

The kids are willing to accept the characterization, at least in part.

“Are you nasty and brutish?” I asked Hank.

“I can be nasty,” he said, “but I’m not British.”

Rex lobbied for another title. He wanted to name the book *Not Nasty or Brutish, Just Short*. Having lost that battle, he’s begging to blog under that title. So watch out. He might be coming to an Internet near you.

For now, though, he’s the star of this show, alongside his little brother, Hank. They are two of the finest philosophers I know. They’re among the funniest. And the most fun too.



**MAKING SENSE
OF MORALITY**

RIGHTS

I love drawing a bath. Not for me, of course. I'm a straight man socialized in the last century, so I don't take baths. Or express the full range of human emotions. But my children take baths, and someone has to draw them. Most nights, I make sure that someone is me.

Why? Because the bath is *upstairs*. And *downstairs* is a fucking madhouse. As kids get tired, their kinetic energy increases and their self-control self-destructs. The noise rivals a rock concert. Someone is screaming because it's time to practice piano, or because there's no time to practice piano. Or because we didn't have dessert, or because we did have dessert but he got it on his shirt. Or simply because there must be screaming. Screaming is the cosmological constant.

So I escape. "I'll start Hank's bath," I say, bounding up the stairs, on the way to the best part of my day. I close the door, start the water, and tinker with the temperature. Not too hot, not too cold. Back and forth, as if I might get it right. But make no mistake: The water will be too hot.

Or too cold. Or both, because kids reject the law of noncontradiction. I will fail. But I am at peace. Because the bath muffles the screams. There, alone on the tile floor, I sit with my thoughts (and by *thoughts*, I mean *phone*), soaking up the solitude.

My wife has figured me out, so sometimes she strikes first. “I’ll start Hank’s bath,” she says, crushing my soul. But she’s a straight woman socialized in the last century, so she wastes the opportunity. She turns on the bath, but instead of fiddling with her phone while the water fills, she does something sensible, like laundry. Or something inexplicable, like return to the room the children are in to . . . parent?! I know that I should feel bad about this. And I do. But not for the reason I should. Solitude is the greatest luxury we can afford. Someone should soak it up. Better Julie than me. But if not her, definitely me.

So there I am, sitting on the bathroom floor, dimly aware that the downstairs crazy is crazier than normal. Hank (age five) is full-on wailing, so it must be something serious (and by *serious*, I mean *trivial*). When I cannot let the water rise any longer, I shut it off and shatter my serenity.

“Hank, the bath is ready,” I shout down the stairs.

No response.

“HANK, THE BATH IS READY!” I scream over his screams.

“HANK, THE BATH IS READY!” Rex relays, with great satisfaction.

“HANK, THE BATH IS READY!” Julie says, with great irritation.

And then the sobs are ascending upon me. Slowly. One. Step. At. A. Time. Until Hank arrives, out of breath and out of his mind.

I try to calm him down. “Hank,” I say softly, “what’s wrong?” No response. “Hank,” I whisper, even more softly, “what’s bothering you?” He still can’t collect himself. I start taking off his clothes as he tries to catch his breath. Finally he’s in the bath, and I try again. “Hank, what’s bothering you?”

“I don’t . . . I don’t have. . . .”

“What don’t you have, Hank?”

“I DON’T HAVE ANY RIGHTS!” Hank wails, bursting back into tears.

“Hank,” I say softly, still hoping to soothe him but also now curious: “What are rights?”

“I don’t know,” he whimpers, “but I don’t have any.”



THIS TIME, Hank did need a philosopher. And lucky for him, he had one.

“Hank, you do have rights.”

That got his attention. The tears slowed a tiny bit.

“Hank, you do have rights. Lots of them.”

“I do?” Hank asked, starting to catch his breath.

“Yeah, you do. Would you like to learn about them?”

He nodded.

“Well, let’s talk about Tigey,” I said. Tigey is the Hobbes to Hank’s Calvin—the white tiger that has been his constant companion since birth. “Can people take Tigey away from you?”

“No,” he said.

“Can people play with Tigey without asking first?”

“No,” Hank said, “Tigey’s mine.” The tears were almost gone.

“That’s right,” I said. “Tigey’s yours. And that means you have a right to him. No one can take Tigey or play with him unless you say it’s okay.”

“But someone *could* take Tigey,” Hank objected, teetering back to the edge of tears.

“That’s right,” I said. “Someone *could* take Tigey. But would that be okay? Or would it be wrong?”

“It would be wrong,” he said.

“That’s right. That’s what it means to have a right. If it would be wrong for someone to take Tigey, then you have a right that they not take him.”

Hank's face brightened. "I have a right to all my aministrals!" he said, swapping the *n* and *m* to make my favorite of his mispronunciations.

"That's right! You do! That's what it means for them to be yours."

"I have a right to all my toys!" Hank said.

"Yes—you do!"

And then his cute face collapsed. Sobbing again, soaking wet.

"Hank, why are you sad?"

"I don't have a right to Rex."

That was the source of the downstairs crazy. Hank wanted to play with Rex. Rex wanted to read. And Hank did not, in fact, have a right to Rex.

I explained: "No, you don't have a right to Rex. He gets to decide whether he wants to play or not. We don't have a right to other people unless they make a promise."

That's a bit too simple. Sometimes we have claims on others even when they haven't promised us anything. But I decided to save a more detailed conversation until the student was less distraught. Instead, we talked about what Hank could do on his own when Rex wanted to read.



WHILE TEETERING AT THE EDGE of tears, Hank made a sharp observation about rights. I started by asking whether someone could take Tigey without his permission. He said no. But a split second later, he thought better of it. Someone could take Tigey without his permission. In fact, Hank had done just that to Rex. Rex's Tigey is named Giraffey. (Before you criticize my boys' naming conventions, you should know that I was even less creative; my companions were Monkey and Giraffe.) When Hank first learned to crawl, he'd zoom into Rex's room at every opportunity, put Giraffey under his chin, and scoot out as quickly as he could. Rex had a right to Giraffey, every bit as much as Hank has a right to Tigey. But Hank could and did take Giraffey.

What does that tell us about rights? Well, Hank's right to Tige y protects his possession of him. But the protection the right provides is not physical. There's no force field around Tige y that prevents others from taking him. Rather, the protection a right provides is, in philosopher-speak, *normative*. That is, it is generated by the norms, or standards, that govern good behavior. Someone who is aiming to act well would not take Tige y without Hank's permission (at least not without a really good reason—more on that in a moment). But not everyone aims to act well. The protection that a right provides depends on the willingness of others to recognize and respect it.



BEFORE WE MOVE ON, a brief note about language and the people who are pedantic about it. I asked Hank whether someone could take Tige y without his permission, and he said no. Then he thought better of it and said yes. He was right the first time. And the second.

Wait, what? How could that be? Words like *can* and *could* are super flexible. Here's a quick story to show you what I mean.

When I was a student at Oxford, a friend took me to his college bar. He asked for two pints.

"Sorry, mate, can't do it. We're closed," said the guy tending bar.

My friend looked at his watch. It was 11:01; the bar closed at 11:00. "Aww, come on, just two pints."

"Sorry, can't. Rules."

"Well, you *cooould*," my friend said.

Now pause the story. Was my friend pointing out that the guy tending bar was confused about the meaning of the word *could*? No. There's a sense in which he couldn't sell us the drinks. And a sense in which he could. And my friend's long, drawn-out *could* was an attempt to shift his attention to the second sense. The bartender was telling us that it wasn't *permissible* for him to sell us two pints; my friend was pointing out that it