with the view that redistribution is unjust, this brand of libertarianism suggests the best we can do is discourage less intelligent people from having children and get used to inequality. Everything else will just make things worse.

After looking at the research, Brooks draws a very different conclusion: that human beings are much less rational and self-interested than most modern political thinkers have assumed. He argues that IQ matters much less than the emotional and social skills that people develop in early childhood. These skills constitute a person's character. Character can be developed by adequate parenting, healthy social environments, and good schools.

Harold eventually finds himself working for a Washington think tank where he discovers a *New York Times* columnist whose views are 'remarkably similar to his own' (Brooks is a *New York Times* columnist). Harold supports programs that develop character in children from disadvantaged families—parenting classes for teenage mothers, nurse visits for disorganised families, and integrated neighbourhood approaches like the Harlem Children's Zone.

Harold is unsure whether to call himself a liberal or a conservative. He finds himself agreeing with Daniel Patrick Moynihan's comment that 'The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself.'

Harold realises that while government cannot and should not run people's lives, it can influence how they live by shaping their institutional environment. Government should not only maintain a basic framework of order and security but also play a positive role by funding national service programs, social-entrepreneurship, and charter schools. By bringing government closer to communities and allowing decision-making at the local level, governments can encourage habits of active and responsible citizenship.

Values are a key element of culture and Brooks sees these as flowing from communities. He writes: 'If you felt, as Harold did, that in some low-income communities achievement values were not being transmitted from one generation to another, then you had no choice but to try to instill them. That meant you had to be somewhat paternalistic.' Brooks illustrates this point through the story of Harold's wife, Erica, who overcomes the disadvantages of her family background and childhood neighbourhood thanks to the tough discipline of a charter school.

Applied in an Australian context, Brooks' approach might resemble Noel Pearson's response to Indigenous disadvantage. Rather than dealing with disadvantage through redistribution, Brooks argues for initiatives that foster local decision-making and reinforce positive social norms. The stress on local control is a key difference between Pearson's approach in Cape York and Mal Brough's and Jenny Macklin's intervention in the Northern Territory. As in Pearson's approach, there is a strong focus on parenting and children. Where families are weak, local institutions like schools step in to fill the gap.

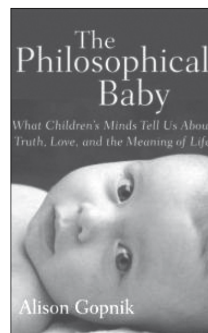
Reviewers like Will Wilkinson in *Forbes* and Christopher Chabris in the *Wall Street Journal* have pointed out shortcomings in Brooks' handling of research in neuroscience and psychology. And it is true that he often cherry-picks findings to illustrate his favourite claims. But for readers willing to engage with the research themselves, Brooks' book is a useful place to begin. With a growing body of research on the brain and mind, it no longer makes sense to rely on assumptions about human nature.

Reviewed by Don Arthur

The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us About Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life
By Alison Gopnik
Picador, New York, 2010
$US16, 288 pages
ISBN 9780374231965

Today's parent is regularly confronted with what can be described as the 'scientification' of parenthood—everywhere there is a new study on some aspect of early childhood behaviour. This is reassuring in some ways—parents have a better knowledge and understanding of today's offspring. But it can also cause parents to feel overwhelmed and incompetent. If you are not an expert, you may very well be 'doing it wrong' and with dire consequences.

Alison Gopnik's *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us About Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life* is one of the more 'scientific' books about young children. However, Gopnik, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley avoids sounding like the advice-dispensing expert and provides an informed and insightful picture of the world of very young children. Gopnik's focus on what really matters—love, understanding and meaning—is a welcome respite from advice on relatively short-lived concerns about controlling crying or getting toddlers to eat all their vegetables.



Gopnik's thesis is that the immense human capacity for change, of ourselves, and our environments can be better understood by deepening our knowledge of children and why they are the way they are. In Gopnik's words, the book is about 'how children develop minds that change the world.' It is children's capacity for imaginary play—developing the ability to understand cause and effect at the imaginary level—that later enables adults to imagine the world other than as it is and then act to change their environment.

The capacity to develop imaginary companions helps children to learn about the people and the world around them, says Gopnik. Imaginary playmates enable children to test responses, to play out interactions they have witnessed, and figure out the social world around them. She also argues that this capacity in children is what enables them as adults to create great works of literature, plays and art.

Recent research shows that children are empathetic and have some of the foundations of morality from when they are very young. This is tempered, however, by the explanation that moral thinking is just as open to change as are other aspects of children's thinking.

Children are, as Gopnik says, 'both profound and puzzling, and this combination is the classic territory of philosophy. Yet you could read 2,500 years of philosophy and find almost nothing about children.' Despite the title *The Philosophical Baby*, it is well into the book before Gopnik discusses philosophy in detail. Quoting Plato's *Republic* and the discussion between Socrates and Glaucon in the cave, she credits children's exploratory play with enabling them/us to learn about the world.

The more interesting and perhaps sobering discussion is about how much children learn from watching those around them, their direct interactions with others, and watching interactions between others.

Gopnik argues that babies are, to some extent, more conscious than adults. While adults are accustomed to their environment and take much of it for granted, babies are alert to almost everything around them and are constantly looking for new experiences and opportunities to learn. She describes babies' capacity for attention as much like a lantern—alert to all around, while adults focus attention like a spotlight—focused on the needs and demands of the moment. Gopnik uses the experience of travel for adults to make her point: everything in a new or unfamiliar setting catches our attention and our senses are heightened in a way that doesn't happen every day. It may also explain why children and babies sleep so much—we all know how exhausting it can be to travel and absorb all that is new to us.

But consciousness is not just about our awareness of the outside world but also a 'distinctly internal experience.' Who am I? As we grow older, we construct a linear experience of ourselves—our memories, experiences, travels—but children don't experience this sense of self until about the age of four. Until then, children have episodic memory but little or no autobiographical memory.

Children's lack of a conscious self allows them to constantly change their beliefs about the world as they learn more about it. Importantly, Gopnik argues that it is our ability to create a self and therefore execute long-term plans that save us from destructive behaviours.

For those of us lucky to have had happy childhoods, the chapter 'Learning to Love' contains an insightful and comforting reminder about how fortunate we have been and how important it is for us to do what we can to ensure the same for our children:

> There is a kind of immunity about a happy childhood, not an immunity from the disasters and catastrophes that may, that almost

> certainly do, lie ahead, but an intrinsic immunity. Change and transience are at the heart of the human condition. But as parents we can at least give our children a happy childhood, a gift that is as certain, as unchanging, as rock solid, as any human good.

It is hard not to agree with Gopnik when she claims that 'children really do put us in touch with important, real, and universal aspects of the human condition.' They certainly do that, but having children of our own is perhaps not the only way to experience this.

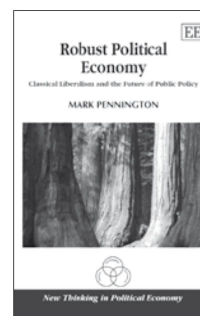
This book is also good for parents who struggle daily to understand why a three-year-old can be diverted by eight different things on the way to the front door. Gopnik's explanation of children being open to all the experiences in front of them is a gentle and often necessary reminder for patience and understanding in the busy lives of adults.

The book alternates between an articulation of how children can improve our understanding of philosophy and an exposition of emerging trends in scientific understandings of the very young. While Gopnik may not have greatly advanced the discipline of philosophy through her study of babies, her book is nonetheless informative, readable and thought-provoking.

Reviewed by Cecilia Hilder

Robust Political Economy: Classical Liberalism and the Future of Public Policy
By Mark Pennington
Edward Elgar Publishing 2011
£25, 302 pages
ISBN 978184907654

The UNSW academic Martin Krygier draws a useful distinction between the 'methodological' and the 'normative' aspects of political ideologies. Theories about how the world does or could work are 'methodological.' Theories about values are 'normative.' Though each ideology has both aspects, it is possible to accept one without the other. The normative ideal of socialism—equality between people—continues to resonate. Methodologically, socialism's economic prescriptions are discredited, overwhelmingly thought 'not to work.' Conservative methodological ideas (Krygier's example) about the unanticipated and often unwelcome consequences of radical change offer useful insights. But 'normative' conservatism, such as 'traditional' religious values, is often unappealing.



Mark Pennington's book *Robust Political Economy* puts him in the school of classical liberal thought that emphasises methodological claims. Mainly following Friedrich A. Hayek, Pennington focuses on the institutional implications of limited human cognitive capacities, and to a lesser extent, limited moral motivations. The strands of classical liberalism or libertarianism that make normative rights-based arguments are largely absent from this book, while the normative arguments of left-liberalism, as found in the work of John Rawls or Ronald Dworkin, are present but criticised on methodological grounds.

Pennington's cryptic title, 'robust political economy,' refers to his key test for comparing economic, political and social institutions: how 'robust' they are to our cognitive and moral weaknesses. The book's key contention is that liberal institutions—private property, a market economy and limited government—are robust to these weaknesses and work fairly well even when our individual knowledge is limited and we are prone to neglect the interests of others. Moreover, they work better than the institutions proposed by rival economic and political theories.

The comparative element of Pennington's argument is important. He is not saying that liberal institutions completely solve the 'knowledge problem' or prevent unethical behaviour. Compared to an ideal situation, liberal institutions will be found wanting. Compared to the realistic alternatives, liberal institutions look more attractive. In dealing with basic human limitations, we have better or worse options, not complete solutions.

The first rival theory Pennington examines in detail will surprise some readers: neo-classical economics. For many critics of liberalism, neo-classical economics and classical liberalism are conflated into 'neoliberalism.' In policy terms, the confusion