

of a riven and disunified mind haunted by its past; it may be the symptom of an oppressive, alienating culture and society; it may be the very nature of human consciousness.

(p2)

Yes, it could indeed be all or some of these things to all or anyone. It could also be none of these things. Offered at the outset of the book, this attempt at some kind of compressed abstract view across the topic seems obscure, to the point of saying little. If nothing else, it is unclear how to parse a sentence that starts with anxiety as a dysfunction and ends with it as the very nature of our minds.

Later, he acknowledges that anxiety reminds us that we are complex beings “not easily resolved into the atoms of our favourite theories” (p3). Indeed, nothing is resolved in this book, though Chopra seems to favour the existential position (that to be anxious is to be human) relative to the other three approaches which he offers less room.

The book is a helpful introduction to many readers, written as it is in a fluent and non-academic style, albeit perhaps a little repetitive at times. He is right to deny the reader, from the outset, any hope of self-help by reading it. However, for a newcomer to these philosophies, he will take their understanding of anxiety beyond the possibilities of pathology and medication into other realms they can choose to explore further.

Andrew Miller

The Child as Natural Phenomenologist: Primal and primary experience in Merleau-Ponty's psychology

2013. Talia Welsh. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

I am going to cheat a little with words in this review. I am calm and confident with why and how I am going to cheat. In summer 2023, I was discussing word counts with the reviews editor and suggested that this new-fangled artificial intelligence could help her, so why not do a review with it. Then I quickly swallowed my words, as why would I let somebody else take the glory for an idea? I wanted to use ChatGTP with this book as I had read it in May, not written the review and wanted to get it over with. So, I write this in the shadow of the 2023 conference keynote which promoted the idea that ChatGTP could be helpful for my work, and in this area, there is potentially a benefit to my professional productivity.

Let me give you some background. In setting up ChatGTP I logged in with my professional Google account, on the basis that it may know more about me than if I created a new profile linked to nothing. I also gave it this overview of me:

I am an existential phenomenological psychotherapist and supervisor based in London. I am a father of twin girls who were born two weeks before the lockdown in the UK began. I am married to Sara who works in financial services as a business analyst. Before becoming a therapist, I worked in project management and coached rugby union for over ten years. My main hobbies currently are running long distances and groundhopping.

Nothing particularly moving, but some nuggets in there that could be run with if one wanted to. I started easy and I asked the following question:

Ben S.: Write a five-hundred-word review of the book *The Child as Natural Phenomenologist* by Talia Welsh.

ChatGTP: *The Child as a Natural Phenomenologist by Talia Welsh is a thought-provoking exploration into the world of childhood and the inherent ability of children to engage in phenomenological experiences. As an existential phenomenological psychotherapist based in London, this book resonated with me on a profound level, intertwining theoretical perspectives with practical insights into the lived experiences of children.*

Welsh delves into the rich tapestry of a child's consciousness, emphasising the importance of acknowledging and understanding the child's perspective in its raw and unfiltered form. The book unfolds as a journey through the lens of phenomenology, inviting readers to reconsider conventional views of childhood development. As a father of twin girls born just before the UK lockdown, I found the exploration of childhood experiences particularly relevant and illuminating.

One of the book's strengths lies in its ability to bridge theoretical concepts with real-world examples. Welsh seamlessly weaves together philosophical ideas with narratives of children navigating their way through the complexities of the world. This approach not only makes the content accessible but also adds a layer of authenticity to the exploration of phenomenology in the context of childhood.

The author emphasises the role of adults, including parents and educators, in fostering an environment that nurtures a child's natural inclination towards phenomenological exploration. As a father, this resonated deeply with me, prompting reflection on how I can create spaces that allow my own daughters to engage authentically with their surroundings and experiences.

The book also addresses the impact of societal influences on a child's phenomenological development. In a world often dominated by technology and structured routines, Welsh advocates for preserving the unstructured, open-ended nature of a child's exploration. This perspective aligns with

my own commitment to balance in my daughters' lives, ensuring they have the freedom to discover the world on their own terms.

Furthermore, Welsh explores the significance of cultural and societal narratives in shaping a child's phenomenological experiences. As someone who has transitioned from project management to psychotherapy, I appreciate the nuanced understanding of how various life contexts contribute to the formation of a child's worldview.

In the context of my background in rugby coaching, I was intrigued by the parallels drawn between the child's phenomenological exploration and the dynamics of team sports. Welsh's exploration of interpersonal relationships, communication, and collaboration within the framework of phenomenology adds a layer of complexity that resonates with my diverse experiences.

*In conclusion, *The Child as Natural Phenomenologist* is a captivating journey into the heart of childhood experiences, inviting readers to reconsider their feelings and engage in a more profound understanding of a child's world. As a therapist, parent, and former rugby coach, the book offered valuable insights that will undoubtedly shape my approach to working with children and supporting my own daughters on their unique phenomenological journeys.*

So that makes four hundred and sixty-three words, close enough, although I was expecting five-hundred words precisely, in part owing to growing up with programmes like the *West Wing* where speech writers wrote to precise targets and having bought into the idea that AI is going to destroy us – it should have been easy feat for machine to count words exactly. I am also disappointed on how ChatGPT linked my own experience to the review, it feels misguided and quite reductive. So, I wondered if the description of the review itself just needed to be put differently. I therefore added in a style request based on an assumption about the fame of colleagues.

Ben S.: Write a five-hundred-word review of the book *The Child as Natural Phenomenologist* by Talia Welsh in the style of Irving Yalom for a journal about existential psychotherapy

ChatGPT: *In the vast landscape of existential psychotherapy literature, Talia Welsh's *The Child as Natural Phenomenologist* stands out as a poignant exploration of the intersection between childhood development and existential phenomenology. As an existential phenomenological psychotherapist myself, I found Welsh's work to be a compelling addition to the field, offering profound insights that resonate with the core tenets of our therapeutic approach.*

Welsh artfully weaves together the threads of existential philosophy and child psychology, inviting readers to contemplate the unfolding of a child's

subjective experience as they navigate the complexities of existence. Drawing on her ability in both fields, she skilfully elucidates how children, in their natural state, engage with the world as budding phenomenologists, actively constructing meaning from their encounters.

One of the book's strengths lies in Welsh's ability to balance theoretical depth with practical implications for psychotherapeutic practice. She deftly applies existential concepts, such as the lived body and lived time, to the developmental stages of childhood. This nuanced exploration allows therapists to gain a richer understanding of how existential themes manifest in the early formation of a person's worldview.

As a father of twin girls myself, born just weeks before the onset of the UK lockdown, I found Talia Welsh's insights particularly resonant. She delves into the existential implications of growing up amidst societal challenges, acknowledging the impact of external factors on a child's phenomenological engagement. This perspective adds layers of complexity to our understanding of existential development, emphasising the dynamic interplay between the individual and their socio-cultural context.

Moreover, Welsh adeptly addresses the role of caregivers in shaping a child's existential journey. Her exploration of the parent-child relationship from an existential phenomenological lens offers valuable guidance for therapists working with families. By emphasising the importance of attunement and authentic presence, she underscores the therapist's role in creating a conducive environment for the child's natural phenomenological exploration.

In the spirit of Irving Yalom, Welsh transcends the confines of academic discourse, infusing her writing with a sense of humanity and compassion. The case studies presented in the book vividly illustrate the nuances of existential encounters in childhood, providing a window into the lived experiences of young individuals grappling with the fundamental questions of existence. These narratives serve not only as educational tools but also as a source of inspiration for therapists looking to deepen their empathic connection with clients.

The Child as Natural Phenomenologist is a welcome addition to the existential psychotherapy canon, enriching our understanding of the human experience from its earliest stages. Welsh's ability to bridge philosophy and practice, coupled with her compassionate approach, makes this book an invaluable resource for therapists, educators, and anyone interested in the intricate dance between childhood development and existential exploration.

Now we are down to four hundred and forty-nine words. I wanted to keep the Yalom theme, as if I could write like him and have one percent of his writing success, I could dream of being without a mortgage and affording a retirement.

Ben S.: Can you write a five-hundred-word review of the book *The Child as Natural Phenomenologist* by Talia Welsh as if you are Irvin Yalom reviewing the book

ChatGTP: Certainly! Here is a review of *The Child as Natural Phenomenologist* by Talia Welsh, framed as if written by Irvin Yalom:

In Talia Welsh's thought-provoking work The Child as Natural Phenomenologist, she delves into the intricate realms of existential phenomenology, offering a unique perspective on the developmental experiences of children. As I perused the pages of this insightful book, I could not help but draw parallels to my own existential approach to psychotherapy.

Welsh skilfully navigates the intersection of existentialism and child psychology, unravelling the complex tapestry of a child's subjective experience. Much like the existential concerns that permeate my own therapeutic framework, Welsh highlights the child's innate ability to engage with the world in a phenomenological manner. It is a perspective that resonates with the core of existential therapy, emphasising the importance of subjective lived experiences.

One of the book's strengths lies in Welsh's ability to bridge theoretical concepts with practical applications. She artfully weaves case studies and anecdotes, allowing the reader to grasp the real-world implications of her ideas. This approach mirrors my own belief in the power of storytelling within the therapeutic context, enabling clinicians to connect theory to the lived experiences of their clients.

Welsh's exploration of the child's encounter with the world as a natural phenomenologist invites reflection on the existential themes that underpin our human existence. She adeptly explores concepts such as freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning, even in the early stages of development. As a seasoned existential psychotherapist, I appreciate the nuanced way she integrates these existential themes into the narrative of childhood.

The book also shines a light on the role of caregivers in nurturing a child's existential awareness. Welsh underscores the significance of attuned parenting and the impact it has on a child's developing sense of self. This resonates deeply with my own emphasis on the therapeutic relationship and its transformative potential in helping existential exploration.

Furthermore, Welsh's work prompts reflection on the intersectionality of existential phenomenology and developmental psychology. She skilfully navigates the delicate balance between theoretical depth and accessibility, making this book valuable for both seasoned practitioners and those new to the field.

In conclusion, The Child as Natural Phenomenologist is a commendable contribution to the literature at the crossroads of existentialism and child psychology. Talia Welsh's eloquent exploration of the child's phenomenological journey aligns with the principles of existential psychotherapy, offering a fresh perspective on the profound nature of childhood development. This book is not only a valuable resource for therapists but also an enriching read for anyone interested in the intricate interplay between existential philosophy and the first stages of human experience.

I notice that this time the review is just four hundred and sixteen words. Why am I so fixated on the word count? Two reasons. Firstly, it is the easiest measurement of accuracy of compliance with a request, and I have assumed that the processing power and knowledge of synonyms and potential match-ups mean that achieving a precise word count would be straightforward. Secondly, I remember how important word counts were in my studies (a number with the plus or minus 10 percent). Only one of these reviews would 'pass,' the first one. Admittedly, I have not told ChatGPT about the stringency of the condition, but I would counter, if I need to be so precise to get accurate outputs, I wonder how accurate one can assume the review itself to be.

I do not think that any version of these reviews it is a particularly helpful. There is too much of the 'I' referenced and too much repetition of quite generic statements. Some of the language is Yalomian in nature, but I do not think he would necessarily write about 'existential philosophy' without clearly defining what that is. Certainly, his more clinically academic books are precise. Also, I think he would offer examples that illustrate that he has read and understood the text. Perhaps here are my own guidelines shining through. However, it is helpful to ground a review in at least a couple of passages to support what I am saying and this, as in the other reviews, is absent. As such, there seems to be something within the reviewer that is misinterpreting what I mean by 'review'; I am unsure if this is because it is leaning on plot reviews from across the virtual world which miss detail to offer themes, or if it is simply because ChatGPT can only understand what is fed into it but cannot read it.

So let me tell you what I think of the book. It is divided into six chapters, the first of which concerns the author's thinking prior to her role at the Sorbonne in 'Early work in child psychology' and introduces ideas that the world of the child is meaningful and organised, even if that organisation does not bear resemblance to the world of the adult. The second chapter, 'Phenomenology, Gestalt theory and psychoanalysis' begins to address an analysis of child psychology and pedagogy before moving on in 'Syncretic sociability and the birth of the self' to address the thesis that while early life has a shared sociability, there is no subjectivity. The fourth chapter

introduces modern thinking in terms of phenomenology before Chapter 5, ‘Exploration and learning’ uses two examples, magic trick explanations and drawing to explore the perception of the child. Finally, ‘Culture, development and gender’ locates the works and thinking more generally within socio-cultural norms, especially around gender.

The contemporaneous additions brought in in Chapter 4 were interesting given that I am in the world of having two four-year-olds and can acutely remember the experience of parenting two newborns through to their current age. That there is now research that offers a scientific and rigorous testing of the importance “of face-to-face relations between adults and infants demonstrates the unique human predisposition toward faces as well as the importance of such interactions to development” (p101). This, to my mind, stands the gut test that there is some subjectivity with a newborn, primarily with mother. While preparing for the birth of my twins, it was clear that twins develop slower than single children, the colloquial literature suggesting it is because of a lack of one-to-one face time compared with single children around bottles, breasts and nappy changes. The pandemic’s requirement that I work from home, coupled with a determination to be something approaching a good-enough parent and wanting to help my kids meant that there was lots (and lots!) of face time (not FaceTime). Both girls have developed as single children would be expected to. Potentially they are both being held back, the small sample size should be acknowledged, but this modern development of thinking rings true by experience.

So, this review is about two, maybe three things. Firstly, I am disappointed in ChatGPT as a reviewer and would not feel comfortable using/recommending it for a review. There are caveats to that assertion, however. Firstly, it is time-bound, it is a right now and I worked with the free version of the programme. I am also certain I am not using it to its potential. Based on the keynote presentation at the 2023 conference, I am almost certain that with some work I could use it more precisely and churn out more/better reviews if I were so inclined. Secondly, I am not sure of the ethics of using it, even as a base to churn out a review to be edited before submission. There is too much of a disjoint to really become ‘my work’ as opposed to ‘the work’. I am reminded of a skill I had in Year 9 Spanish where I would copy my friend Chris’ homework of translations but correct his mistakes. It was clever but the ethics were the more interesting. A review is not translation. So, this review, a basic but practical review, of ChatGTP says ignore it right now. I am open to challenge on that but given that only little of my work could be helped, I am unsure I want to make the effort to get the help to improve my work as it would bring few advantages to my life.

Finally, on the the book. The work is well researched and offers multiple opinions that dive into Merleau-Ponty and will be of huge interest to

colleagues who have either a clinical or an academic interest in childhood. But I will be honest; I struggled with it. I have an interest in childhood development born from my own parenting experiences, but I am not academically inclined towards childhood, nor clinically as I do not work with children. I may simply be in the parenting role too much to distinguish that from other aspects of the experience.

Ben Scanlan & ChatGPT

The Substance

2024. Film. Dir: Coralie Fargeat.

And this self that I am – this I am in a world which the Other has made alien to me, for the Other's look embraces my being and correlatively the walls, the door, the keyhole.

(Sartre, 2003: 285)

Anyone with a phobia of needles look away now. *The Substance* is a visual and aural assault-course that has divided festivalgoers, critics and audiences, with media attention focusing on people walking out mid-screening. There can be no doubt this is a tough film to endure, even for a seasoned horror buff such as myself.

It is a cornucopia of filmic references, particularly paying homage to early David Cronenberg. *The Shining*, *Carrie*, *Alien*, *The Elephant Man*, and the lurid 1988 cult satire *Society* all get a look in. It even manages to wedge in 'Also sprach Zarathustra', made famous by its use in the opening of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. *The Substance* has been touted as a critique of female ageing in the entertainment industry in particular – and society in general – and it certainly wears its feminism, of a fashion, on its sleeve. But there is also plenty in it to offer anyone looking for something a little more existential.

Demi Moore plays Elizabeth Sparkle, a one-time Oscar winner who at fifty has been reduced to presenting an old-fashioned fitness TV programme, *à la* Jane Fonda (even the leotards seem to have survived the Eighties). But this is L.A. and this is the United States; she already pretty much has one foot in her entertainment industry grave, and so it happens that her show is cancelled as the network looks for younger, fresher flesh. "I have to give the people what they want," reasons Harvey, the ultra-sleazy network exec (himself a well-creased individual past his prime – but, hey, he is a man, that is allowed), played brilliantly and hilariously by Dennis Quaid.

Following a car accident (Elizabeth is distracted passing a roadside billboard as her image is being taken down), a flawless, though rather