

**Commentary:**

**COMMENTARY ON HOW TO ORDER A BABY:  
CONFUSIONS AND CONSTRUCTIONS OF A LITTLE  
SCIENTIST IN THE FREUDIAN WORLD**

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**Abstract**

The following commentary addresses Kenneth R. Cabell's use of Freud's concepts of theory formation as found in Freud's essay *On the Sexual Theories of Children* (1908) to address the question of the origin of babies from a child's perspective. In Cabell's article (2009) *How to Order a Baby: Confusions and Constructions by a Little Scientist in the Freudian World*, the author examines the use of microgenetic processes which are associated with abductive reasoning to describe the development of a child's reasoning abilities in terms of the origins of babies. Cabell presents a model of abductive reasoning that relies heavily on the information-processing tasks of induction, deduction and hypothesis testing. A careful examination of the affective catalysts and motivations including emotional reactions, dysregulation of affect, defense mechanisms and fantasy involved in a child's construction of a belief would provide a more integrated and comprehensive model.

**Keywords:** Commentary, Abductive Reasoning, Microgenetic Processes, Freud.

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## COMMENTARY

In his article (2009) *How to Order Babies: Confusions and Constructions by a Little Scientist in the Freudian World*, Kenneth R. Cabell examines the use of abductive reasoning in a child's attempt to develop an acceptable explanation to the puzzling and difficult question regarding the origin of babies. In his examination, Cabell utilizes Freud's model in addressing the problems of pregnancy and childbirth from Freud's 1908 essay *On the Sexual Theories of Children*. The use of Freud's model in explaining the microgenetic processes involved in the development of cognitive reasoning in children regarding explanations of pregnancy and childbirth is interesting as well as creative. It seems important, however, when referring to Freud and his explanation of how children develop their concepts of pregnancy and childhood, to include a brief discussion of the influences of conflict, anxiety, defense mechanisms and fantasy in the discussion while acknowledging the epistemological nature of abductive reasoning.

Cabell distinguishes abductive reasoning from inductive and deductive reasoning by explaining that induction and deduction are non-developmental processes while abduction is a developmental process. Abduction uses inductive and deductive reasoning along with hypothesis testing and it is the constant dialogue between these interrelated processes that accounts for the development of beliefs. In addition, Cabell makes the point that most developmental theorists are stage theorists who present discrete stages or levels of development. Piaget and Freud are offered as examples. One of Cabell's most compelling arguments includes a discussion of the microgenetic analysis of phenomena which carefully examines the "interrelated sequence of forms" as opposed to considering a "developmental sequence of independent states" (p. 69). According to Cabell, it is the relationship between forms rather than discrete stages of development that account for the process of belief development in children.

Cabell presents a model of abductive reasoning which begins with an affected domain or an experience that causes a child to feel doubt. In order to deal with the discomfort created by doubt, the child develops a question that, when answered, will eliminate the doubt. The model presented relies on information-processing tasks of induction, deduction and hypothesis testing in response to subsequent life experiences which adjust the child's developing beliefs. By comparison, Freud posited that children constantly construct, deconstruct and reconstruct theories in response to their experiences. What remains unclear in both models are the catalysts for change and the mechanisms of change. Proponents of abductive reasoning rely heavily on an epistemological information-processing model while acknowledging the contribution of affect only through the development of doubt which develops when a child has an experience that is not readily understood. Freud's model is also constructed of theory

development but there is no explanation of when or why theories are modified nor the processes involved in the modification.

While abductive reasoning provides an epistemological explanation for the information-processing mechanisms involved in the development of a child's beliefs, it does not account for the influences of emotion, problems with affect regulation, defense mechanisms and a child's use of fantasy. In presenting Freud's model to illustrate abductive reasoning in a child's attempt to understand the origins of babies, Cabell should consider influences on theory construction from a Freudian perspective as well. Several research studies agree that the developmental tasks involved in understanding pregnancy and childbirth are among the most complex and difficult for children (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1966; Bernstein & Cowen, 1975). It is also generally accepted that most of Freud's model was developed from the accounts of his patients and their processes in understanding their reactions and beliefs about their siblings. While Freud observed that his patients seemed to develop and revise several theoretical explanations for the arrival of siblings, many of the revisions to their belief systems were prompted by feelings of jealousy, rage and guilt (Houzel, 2001). Patients with less ability to regulate affective reactions were more likely to engage in the use of defense mechanisms, particularly fantasy. It is not only the need to eliminate doubt from the experience of a child but the need to reduce anxiety resulting from feelings of jealousy toward a new sibling, rage toward a mother for taking away love and attention and guilt for wanting to destroy the new object of a mother's love that is often a catalyst for adjusting or modifying a belief. In addition, children who are raised in environments that are threatening or dangerous are likely to develop primitive defense mechanisms such as splitting, projection or dissociation in response to their life experiences and thereby distort their understandings of experience in an effort to protect themselves from their own rageful and destructive impulses as well as protect those they love and need for survival.

The process of abductive reasoning does acknowledge the unique quality of any individual's life experiences and the influences on those life experiences on the formation of beliefs. Abductive reasoning also accounts for the process of belief development as being fluid rather than discrete or static. Cabell makes a strong case for the study of microgenetic processes by making the argument that it is neither the beginning belief nor the end belief that is most important in understanding a child's thinking but an examination of the development of beliefs that leads to the best understanding and insight. A careful and systematic examination of the influences of emotional experiences, affect dysregulation, defense mechanisms and the use of fantasy on the processes involved in abductive reasoning, namely induction, deduction and hypothesis testing, would produce a more integrated and complete theory.

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