

A Philosophy of Childhood
by
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The Poynter Center
for the Study of Ethics and American Institutions
Indiana University

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**Introduction by
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Over the course of the 2004-05 academic year, six faculty from IU Bloomington met ten times to read and discuss materials on “The Ethics and Politics of Childhood,” the theme for the second annual Poynter Center Interdisciplinary Faculty Fellowship and Seminar.

Drawing on moral philosophy, cultural studies, political theory, legal decisions, and American literature, the seminar set out to explore a series of questions surrounding children and our responsibilities toward them. If there is any one universal experience, it is that we were all young once. Yet our experiences of youth and the moral issues surrounding our relationships with parents, cultural, religious and educational authorities, and the state remain relatively unexplored. Our seminar thus tried to sort out questions regarding the nature and grounding of children’s rights, the duties of love and justice toward children, claims that cultural, political, and religious groups may make on behalf of a child’s welfare, and the moral basis of the family, among other topics. We looked at debates about the role of public education in the civic and moral formation of children; the rise of the home schooling movement; issues regarding the gestation, design, and rearing of children; and the grounds and limits of parental authority. All of these topics spark reflection about, and enlist theoretical help from, more general claims regarding human freedom, the relationship between families and the state, and the claims of identity and cultural background in childhood development.

The essay by Gareth Matthews that follows grows out of the seminar’s year-long interaction. Professor Matthews was one of three speakers invited to campus to share reflections on the year’s theme. My aim here is to provide a preface to Professor Matthews’s paper that summarizes some of

the seminar's reflections and discussions over the course of the 2004-05 year.

First, a word about the topic: My rationale for choosing this topic was that little sustained work has addressed adults' moral responsibilities toward children or children's responsibilities toward themselves and others. That lacuna is striking given the universality of childhood experience and the importance of relating to children in families, schools, and civil society. Children seem strangely "orphaned" by intellectuals. Creating a bibliography that captures features of childhood experience along with their moral and political dimensions was one of our aims.

We organized our initial set of readings in a series of concentric circles. (For a copy of our syllabus, please consult our website at <http://poynter.indiana.edu/fellows04.shtml#Readings>.) We began with an effort to think about childhood experience and to consider differences between a child's and an adult's experience of the world. We thus asked whether childhood is a *stage* or a *state*, whether it should be seen as a condition of *innocence* or *diabolical adventure*, and how we might consider questions of *dependence* and *independence* of children as they grow.

We then asked how we might theorize about children's rights in light of inferences we drew from accounts of childhood experience. If there is something special about childhood either as a stage or a state, then perhaps there is something unusual about the sorts of rights we might attach to children. We discussed at length the idea from Joel Feinberg that children have a right to an "open future"— a right held in trust now for certain protections and entitlements that a child is due later, as an adult. The right to an open future refers to rights that are saved for young persons until they reach adulthood, but which can be violated prematurely, before a young person is able

to claim or use them. We also asked whether the language of rights is the best way to frame adults' responsibilities toward children, especially if we view such responsibilities as involving family ties that are of an unusually intimate sort.

Such questions have moral and legal dimensions. On the moral side, we asked how a right to an open future connects, if at all, to many parents' desires to provide "the best" for their children. How does the quest for "better children" stack up to the affirmation of a right to an open future? Are there limits to demands that many parents pursue in the training and medical treatment of their children? Is the pursuit of better children aiming to help them exercise that right, or does it suggest narrowing the options for a child? We thus asked how "open" an "open future" can be. On the legal side, we examined the extent to which such a right empowers the state to intrude into family matters, and whether such intrusions constitute an unusual sort of infringement. This is an especially sensitive matter given the privacy we attach to families as a condition for respecting the liberty of individuals and the value of family intimacy.

Questions surrounding a child's experience of intimacy in family life lead naturally into questions about the moral basis of the family and whether it constitutes a unique kind of social unit. Here the question was not whether the family contributes something valuable to the state, but whether there are intrinsic goods to the family. What legitimizes the family as a social entity, as opposed to cults, clubs, friendships, political parties, and other social groups? Are there moral goods intrinsic to the family that allows us to assign a specific sphere to it as a social unit? That is to say, is there something about the nature of the family that provides a basis for morally evaluating actual family arrangements and

relationships? In a related vein, we might ask if there are *moral* reasons for having children.

One way to approach these matters is to say, following Ferdinand Shoeman, that adults have the right to enter into certain kinds of *special* relationships. We esteem families, in other words, because they provide the locus for forming unique kinds of connections, connections that are unavailable to us in other social contexts. Yet esteeming families because they enable adults to satisfy a basic set of rights seems strange, or at least limited. It appears to ignore the goods that children experience in families independent of whether their parents are satisfying a set of rights-claims. Given that fact, we were led to ask about other goods or values that are relevant to the intrinsic goodness of the family.

Guidance on this basic question might be provided by the principles of love and justice. On the one hand, the idea of a “right to enter into certain kinds of special relationships” suggests that we look at justice as providing a basis for thinking about the moral basis for the family. Justice provides a critical principle, although perhaps a limited one, for evaluating parental decisions and family life more generally. At a minimum, it protects against families becoming small despotisms.

But many of us also experience family love as unconditionally accepting. Moreover, within families we experience mutual flourishing, intimacy, and meaningful experiences as part of the inherent goods of family life. Those facts seem not to sit comfortably with the idea of “family justice.” It seems odd to say that love should be the subject of a “claim.” Thus the seminar asked if family love presupposes justice as a primary virtue, or

whether family love qualifies or modifies the application of justice. That is to say, should justice constrain love, and if so, does that endanger it? Or is it the case that family justice ought to be qualified, perhaps tempered, by love?

Families, of course, do not exist in a cultural, political, or social vacuum. They are prime “carriers” of customs and traditions. Thus the seminar focused on the relationship between children, families, and cultural traditions. One question is whether there is something special about culture that marks it off as a unique kind of good. Often we connect considerations of culture with the good of identity formation. But basic questions about how to triangulate the values attached to cultures, families, and a respect for children are nettlesome.

For example, we might ask whether children are *entitled* to being enculturated by their parents and, if so, whether any set of cultural traditions will do. Put differently, it is an open question whether parents have the *duty* to bestow their cultural beliefs on their children. If they do have such a duty, then parents commit some kind of wrong by not socializing their children within a particular culture, or by not passing along their cultural traditions (if they have them). Rarely, however, do we in fact censure parents for failing to transmit cultural traditions that they don’t endorse.

A related set of issues turns on whether parents have a *right* to enculturate their children. If they do, then we might ask whether this right is any different from the sort of rights we generally assign to parents by virtue of their authority in the family. We might also ask if there are restrictions on this right. Naturally such a right is likely bump up against the rights that we considered at the outset of the seminar. If

children have rights, then those rights may limit what parents can do in the name of transmitting cultural values. We examined these questions in light of important legal decisions, including *Yoder v. Wisconsin*.

Encircling the child, his or her parents and family, and the family's cultural and religious traditions, is the state. Given the assumption that the state has an interest in forming citizens and that citizenship involves a certain set of virtues and dispositions, we were led to ask how to integrate the role of the state into considerations of cultural transmission and moral formation. Of special relevance is the role of *educational institutions* in such matters. The state's interest in forming citizens must, of course, be situated in relation to parents' interests in the kind of child they want to raise, *and* the interests that children may have independently of family, cultural, or state interests. There is also the delicate issue of the extent to which the state in a liberal democracy can presume to transmit moral values that seem to extend beyond those of a civic sort.

Attention to educational matters also leads naturally to considerations of the sort of "reason" that should be cultivated in schools. Sometimes such reason chafes against the traditions, cultural norms, or belief systems of families. The seminar thus considered questions of "public reasonableness" civic virtue, and the skills of democratic participation as necessary ingredients in the civic formation of children.

The seminar participants used our discussions as a platform for launching a series of independent research projects. These projects took up questions regarding the practical and moral challenges of working with divorced parents in legal

contexts, rights to health care, research on children in educational settings, and the home schooling movement.

A Philosophy of Childhood

The expression, “Philosophy of Childhood,” is hardly a household word. It is not even a philosopher’s household word. In my book, *The Philosophy of Childhood*,¹ I took myself to be offering a philosophical consideration of theories of childhood and child development, and, more generally, of things people say about children, of attitudes people have toward children, and of the place children occupy in our society. Understood in this way, a “Philosophy of Childhood” would be an application of philosophy to childhood analogous to the application of philosophy to science in the philosophy of science, to art in the philosophy of art, to language in the philosophy of language, and so on.

“Philosophy of Childhood” can also be understood in another way. Understood in this way there are different, indeed, competing, philosophies of the child. A philosophy of childhood in this sense is a reasonably coherent conception of childhood that helps us understand what attitudes we should take to our children, what goals we should have for them, what place they should occupy in the family, the community, and the society, as well as what rights and responsibilities they should have and we should be recognized to have toward them.

I would like to be able to present my own philosophy of childhood, in this second sense of the phrase. But I have a much more modest goal here. What I offer is what a Kantian might call a “Prolegomena to any Future Philosophy of the Child.” I propose to present my prolegomena in the form of a set of desiderata for an adequate philosophy of childhood. I shall do this against the backdrop of Aristotle’s philosophy of childhood, which I shall be criticizing.

The elements of any adequate and defensible philosophy of childhood would have to include, I think, at least these five items:

1. A conception of **what a child is**;
2. A conception of what the **goods of childhood** are;
3. A conception of what **cognitive interests and goals** are appropriate to childhood;
4. An assessment of what the **moral capacities** of children are; and
5. A framework for understanding **children's rights and responsibilities**, as well as **parents' rights and responsibilities** with respect to their children.

There can be no doubt, I think, that each of these five elements is to be found in the writings of Aristotle. Arguably no other philosopher has developed such a well-worked-out and influential treatment of these elements. But to say that much is not to say that Aristotle's philosophy of the child is a satisfactory one. Just as Aristotle's views on natural slaves and women are, I think, quite wrong, so are his views on children.

There can be no doubt either that Aristotle was prejudiced against handicapped people in his society (if I may use a non-PC term in this context); he regarded them as "natural slaves." Aristotle was also clearly a sexist. And he seems to have had little time or respect for children. Yet his views on the handicapped, on women, and on children are worth discussing today, and not only because they show prejudice in one of the greatest minds in all Western civilization—though they do show that. His views are worth discussing because they bring out, forcefully, important issues that even those of us who disagree

with him, or perhaps I should say *especially* those of us who disagree with him, need to address.

Still, even after saying all that, I confess to feeling a bit uneasy about making Aristotle my stalking horse for this paper. Aristotle is, in fact, one of my favorite philosophers. I have studied him for most of my adult life. I have written many articles on his metaphysics and even published, together with a colleague, a first English translation of an ancient Greek commentary on Aristotle's earliest work, the *Categories*. In criticizing Aristotle so directly I try to comfort myself by insisting that criticism is also a form of tribute.

Aristotle's metaphysics is influenced in many important ways by his biology. No doubt it was important to Aristotle that his father was the court physician to King Amyntus of Macedonia, grandfather of Alexander the Great. No doubt Aristotle's father influenced his intellectual development even before he ever reached Plato's Academy as a seventeen-year-old. In any case, ideas about biology suffused Aristotle's philosophical thought.

Central to Aristotle's philosophy is his doctrine of the "Four Causes"—material cause, efficient cause, formal cause, and final cause. As a footnote I might mention that there is, as one might expect, much scholarly and philosophical debate about whether we should translate Aristotle's Greek word *aitia* as "cause" and even whether we should think of Aristotle's doctrine as a doctrine about *kinds* of cause, rather than one about *senses* of the Greek word we translate as "cause." It may be enough for our purposes to think of "cause" in Aristotle as something like "explanatory principle."

Central to Aristotle's philosophy of childhood is his idea that the mature adult human being (in fact, the mature **male** adult, though I shall not develop that point here) is the final cause—the end or purpose—of everything that comes earlier in human development, including the human embryo, the human infant, and the human child. And here Aristotle's idea of a *formal cause*, or nature, joins with his idea of *final cause*, or purpose. The nature of a child is to be a **potential** adult. A child is not only an unfinished being; what a child is can be understood properly only by reference to what children should naturally become.

If we add in a few other assumptions, it will follow that the *goods* of childhood, according to Aristotle, are entirely derivative from the goods of adulthood. Since childhood is an essentially *prospective* state, what is a good for a child can only be something that will contribute to its good in adulthood.

In the chapter on child art in my book, *The Philosophy of Childhood*, I quote several passages from Michael Slote's *Goods and Virtues*² to express this Aristotelian idea. Here is one such passage:

Consider how ordinary people and biologists tend to think of plants and animals over time. Within the life cycle of a given organism a distinction is typically drawn between periods of development and periods of decay, and this distinction is partly marked by treating a certain period of maturity as representing the fullest development of the organism and other periods as leading "up to," or "down from," it. In keeping with these distinctions, there is also a tendency to think of organisms as being most fully what they are (what they have it in them to be) during maturity, a tendency perhaps most clearly exemplified in

the tradition of making general reference to organisms by their adult names rather than by names appropriate to other stages of their life cycle. (We speak of the parts of a tree's life, not of a seed's or a sapling's life, of the development and decline, or old age, of a horse, but not of a colt.) (36)

What Slote claims in this passage may seem obviously true, even truistic. But we need to be wary. Slote uses this Aristotelian, biological picture as the basis for ordering the goods of life. According to him the goods of life are relative to the period of one's life. The idea is not just that what can be reasonably pursued as a good for childhood is different from what can be reasonably pursued as a good for young adulthood, or for middle-age, though he also assumes that to be the case. His claim is the more interesting one that the goods of childhood and the goods of old age are *less valuable*, indeed much less valuable, than the goods available at the prime of life. To dramatize his point he asks us to weight the value of good dreams. "In a way, our treatment of childhood," he writes,

. . . is interestingly similar to the way we regard what happens in dreams. Proust tells us (roughly) that we do not reckon the sufferings and pleasures of our dreams among the actual goods and evils of our lives . . . And just as dreams are discounted except as they affect (the waking portions of) our lives, what happens in childhood principally affects our view of total lives through the effects that childhood success or failure are supposed to have on mature individuals. Thus in cases where an unhappy schoolboy career is followed by (or, as we sometimes like to think, helps to bring about) happy mature years, we think of the later years as

compensating for childhood misery, even as wiping the slate clean. (14-15)

This Aristotelian, biological view of the stages of life thus gives us the idea that the goods of childhood are not goods in their own right, but only, if at all, because they contribute to, or make possible, the goods of prime-time adulthood.

As I try to point out in *The Philosophy of Childhood*, there are some things that many children do better, while they are still children, than they will ever do as adults. Drawing, or painting, is one of those things. No doubt Aldous Huxley overstates the matter when he claims that 50 percent of children are “little geniuses in the field of pictorial art.” But the fact remains that many, many children produce drawings and paintings of much greater aesthetic value and interest than anything they will be able to produce as adults.

In the chapter of my book on child art, I focus on the question of whether we can know, simply from the fact that a painting or drawing is by a young child, that it is not appropriate for exhibition in a major art gallery. I suggest, rather tentatively, that the answer to that question should be “No.” But I should make clear that I am not discussing that question here. My question here is whether producing art works is a candidate for an unqualified good of childhood, or whether producing art can be for a child only a derivative or prospective good, by, for example, helping the child to develop into a confident and sensitive adult, even if not into a successful adult artist, which, of course, very few children will do.

My answer is that child art can be an unqualified good, both for the child and for the rest of us. Not only is the art many

children produce vastly superior to anything they will, or even can, produce as adults, some child art is really good art—inventive, imaginative, colorful, free. To become convinced of that fact you need only visit the Museum of Children’s Art in Oslo, Norway.

So far I have said a little about Aristotle’s conception of childhood and of the goods of childhood. I have filled out these points by quoting a couple of passages from a philosopher of our own time, Michael Slote, passages which express this Aristotelian conception of the goods of childhood and connect it to Aristotle’s idea of how final and formal cause are joined in biological development, and, in particular, in the development of a human being. Then I have criticized the conception of the goods of childhood that Slote and Aristotle seem to share by reference to the example of child art.

I turn now to the third element in a philosophy of childhood I mentioned above, the matter of cognitive interests and achievements. Here I am going to look to Piaget as my modern Aristotelian. I don’t mean to suggest that Piaget was an Aristotelian through and through. He was not that. But there is, I think, an important respect in which Piaget used the Aristotelian idea of how to think about biological development in working out his own highly influential psychology of cognitive development.

Piaget began his academic life as a biologist. When he turned his attention to human psychology, he applied the notion of biological maturation to cognitive development. Here it may be useful to note a parallel with Freud. Freud’s conception of unconscious motivation was tripped off by his noticing that people sometimes do things

that puzzle themselves, the motivation for which, he reasoned, must be some suppressed desire, some desire that the conscious self does not wish to acknowledge. Similarly, Piaget's attention to stages of cognitive development was tripped off by the recognition that people taking IQ tests sometimes make puzzling mistakes, mistakes that are not simply the result of a lack of information. The source of these mistakes, Piaget reasoned, must be structural, that is, it may be the result of the subject's limitation to a cognitive structure that needs to be replaced by a more sophisticated structure, that is, by a more mature one.

Piaget's insight was brilliant. It led him and his many students and followers to develop countless experiments to show that there are distinct and distinctly identifiable stages of cognitive development with respect to this or that cognitive competence. Drawing on his biological background, Piaget theorized that cognitive development, like biological development, proceeds as relatively primitive cognitive structures are replaced by more sophisticated ones.

It is important, however, to be entirely clear about the normative implications of Piaget's rather Aristotelian theory of cognitive development. Treating cognitive structures as quasi-biological structures leads us to accept the structures in place in the normal adult as the standard against which we measure the child's development. Thus the child's knowledge is guaranteed to be naïve and primitive in identifiable ways, whereas the knowledge of the standard adult is assumed to be normative. That assumption, however, should be quite worrying. You don't have to be an instructor in a college logic class to realize that perfectly intelligent adults not only commit

logical fallacies attributable to, say, a rocky love life, or an all-night party, but also fallacies, such as, for example, the gambler's fallacy, that are standard for our species, even for fully mature adults of our species.

Here is another problem. Where does philosophy fit into this account of cognitive development? Does it fit anywhere? At one point in his career Piaget hoped to find in children's questions a recapitulation of the development of philosophy. At that time he was tempted to accept the idea that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," that is, that the development of the human individual recapitulates the development of the race or species. (Piaget later gave up the recapitulationist hypothesis, or at least qualified his acceptance of it quite substantially).

The recapitulationist idea, promising as it seemed to Piaget in 1933,³ didn't work out as a way of understanding the philosophical thinking of children. One reason it didn't work out is that, even if there is some interesting similarity between the questions and reasoning of children and the questions and reasoning of Presocratic philosophers, it is simply not the case that people standardly go on to recapitulate the rest of the history of philosophy. That is, it is not true that, say, early adolescents standardly go through a Cartesian phase, followed by a Humean or Kantian period, followed by a Hegelian stage, a logical positivist state, and finally reach Deconstructionist maturity! If there is a standard pattern at all, it is this: Whereas many people have at least some philosophically interesting ideas as children, they grow up to be, with very, very few exceptions, utterly **unphilosophical** adults. Thus the idea that cognitive development consists in passing through stages of increasing cognitive adequacy until one

finally reaches some stage of full maturity simply does not apply to philosophical thinking.

Yet children not uncommonly express philosophical interests. My grandson, Julian, when he was two, asked his mother, "What is awake?" It isn't clear whether he was troubled by a dream he had had, or whether he was just trying to figure out the experiential difference, if any, between being asleep and being awake.

How does one answer Julian's question? Instinctively one takes the third-person point of view and points out the difference in, say, the family dog, Sadie, between times when Sadie is awake and wagging her tail, and times when she is zonked out on her rug. A similar contrast can be drawn between times when Julian's older sister, Pearl, is asleep and times when she is awake and fully active, indeed, competitively active.

But what do we do on the morning when Julian comes downstairs to report on what seems to be a dream he has had? No doubt we appeal to a TV analogy and explain that sometimes, when we are asleep, we get something like a TV picture in our head. The next morning, when we wake up, we have a story to tell, as if we had been watching a strange soap opera during the night.

Piaget initiated a study of the stages in which children come to be sophisticated about that inner TV show. Julian's sister, Pearl, had moved rapidly along Piaget's scale of advancement in understanding dreams when Julian asked his question, "What is awake?" When her baby cousin, Sophie, was over visiting, and fell asleep in her stroller, Pearl extended the shade of the

stroller so that the sunlight would not fall on Sophie's face. "She needs to be in the shade," Pearl explained, "so that she can see her dreams better." Clearly the inner TV model of dreaming lay behind Pearl's concern. When Pearl's mother told me about Pearl's attempt to give Sophie good viewing conditions for dreaming I thought about the announcement flight attendants sometimes make on airlines that passengers sitting next to a window should lower the shade so that the picture on the monitor might be brighter and clearer!

But suppose, as philosophers, we move from considering the dreams of *others*, and the dreams we can ourselves remember having had on *other* occasions, to our present experience. As I report in my book, *The Philosophy of Childhood*, Jodi, a three-and-a-half-year-old, once asked his mother over the breakfast table, "Mamma, are we live or are we just on video?" Jodi's question makes use of a complex analogy. Perhaps Jodi had seen a video of himself made by a Camcorder. He wanted to know whether what he was observing and taking part in was the real live thing, or just a replay.

Back to my granddaughter, Pearl. At age five she told her mother one morning about a dream she had had during the night. She said there were scary animals in the woods and a skeleton covered with green stuff that looked like pesto. "Were you scared?" asked Pearl's mother. Pearl said she wasn't. Then she qualified her answer. "I was scared in the dream," she explained, "but I wasn't really scared." Pearl tried to make clear that she, herself, was located outside her dream. (Piaget would have applauded that effort.) Pearl's mother asked how it could be that she was outside her dream. Pearl replied, "My dreams are in my

mind,” pointing to her forehead, “and I am here.” Pearl’s mother, who, as I happen to know, has had plenty of interesting philosophical thoughts ever since she was much younger than Pearl is now, asked Pearl how she knew that she is located on the outside of her dreams. Pearl’s reply was simple. “You see me, don’t you?”

Pearl and Jodi were trying to handle a question that has nagged at philosophers for centuries. “How do I know whether I am now dreaming?” This question, which I call the “Epistemological Dream Problem,” is closely related to, but nevertheless distinct from, what I call the “Metaphysical Dream Problem.” The Metaphysical Dream Problem is expressed in the question, “How do I know whether *all* life is my dream?” Children do think about that problem, too, as my discussion of Tim’s question in my book, *Philosophy and the Young Child*, makes clear. Tim, about six years of age, asked, while busily engaged in licking a pot, “Papa, how can we be sure that everything is not a dream?” When Tim’s father admitted he didn’t know and asked Tim how he thought we could tell, Tim licked his pot a few more times and responded, “Well, I don’t think everything is a dream, ‘cause in a dream people wouldn’t go asking if it was a dream.”

But let’s return to the Epistemological Problem. How do I know whether I am *now* dreaming? So far as I know, no one has ever thought of any completely satisfying response to it, although philosophers—and children!—are still working on it. Aristotle even suggests that there couldn’t be any completely satisfying response to it. His reasoning seems to go this way. The only completely satisfying response to “How do I know whether I am now dreaming?” would be some foolproof test for determining

whether or not I am dreaming. Suppose there were such a test. Suppose it were pinching oneself and then seeing if everything were just as before. Obviously this test would be useless because one could always be *dreaming* that one had pinched oneself and *dreaming* that everything was just the same.

Pearl’s test (“You see me, don’t you?”) seems just as ineffectual as pinching, or checking one’s own EEG. After all, one could be just *dreaming* that one’s mother had responded appropriately to this question. Still, as Descartes pointed out long ago, the robust coherence of waking life is about the only reason we can have for taking seriously what seems to be happening right now and not writing it all off as a bad dream.

Anyway, you won’t find anything like Pearl’s test in Piaget, or in any of the literature on dreaming that developmental psychologists have produced since Piaget wrote *The Child’s Conception of the World*. Why not? Simply and obviously, because that test doesn’t fit into any sequence of stages in which kids come to develop a competence that a normal adult standardly has. In fact, as you will have recognized by now, there is no such thing as a competence that adults standardly have for dealing with the epistemological dream problem.

I don’t, of course, mean to suggest that thinking about philosophical dream problems is the main cognitive interest or achievement of childhood that fails to fit the Piagetian scheme of cognitive development. I do mean to suggest that children often have philosophically interesting thoughts. Moreover, I also think that having philosophically interesting thoughts is one of the clearest cases of a cognitive achievement that does not lend itself to purely developmental assessment, at least when the

standard of adequacy is taken to be the competence of the normal adult.

None of this means that the schemata of developmental stages in cognition needs to be rejected across the board. Many cognitive competencies do develop in stages that can be usefully studied in a Piagetian fashion. However, we should in no way restrict the range of cognitive interests and achievements we are willing to recognize in children to the ones that can be located on some sequence of stages that culminate in the assumed adequacy of adulthood.

One important implication of this last point is that, as parents (or grandparents!) and teachers, we should not restrict the range of discussions we are willing to have with our children to issues on which we can be assumed to have, simply by virtue of our age and experience, the upper hand—let alone, the final answer!

Piaget is not only the father of the psychology of *cognitive* development, he is also the father of the psychology of *moral* development. Piaget, however, wrote only a single book on moral development, whereas his follower, Lawrence Kohlberg, wrote a large number of articles on moral development and worked out an influential testing method for identifying the stage of development at which a given subject may find herself at a given time.

Of course, stage-theories of moral development were not new with Piaget and Kohlberg. Rousseau had a stage theory and such theories go back to ancient times. For Aristotle there are, perhaps, four stages. There is, first, the untrained period of infancy. Then comes a rather long period of training, during which the child is habituated to do the virtuous thing. Next there is the

fully virtuous stage when the teenager comes to do the virtuous thing, not for fear of punishment or in hope of reward, but truly because it is the virtuous thing to do. And, finally, there is the philosophical stage in which the young adult, who takes Aristotle's equivalent of Ethics 101 at the Lyceum, begins to reflect on what Aristotle calls the "why."⁴

Kohlberg altered the developmental scheme he inherited from Piaget in two important respects. First, he dropped the assumption that the culminating stage in the sequence would have to be one that adults normally reach. He was quite willing to accept the conclusion that most people would not get beyond stage 3 or 4 (the "Conventional Level") and almost no one would reach stage 6 (or any higher stage if, as he sometimes suggested, there might be higher stages).

The other respect in which Kohlberg deviated from the Piagetian model was to eliminate the assumed connection between progression through stages and biological age. What he insisted on was that one couldn't skip a stage and one couldn't ever "backslide." (Incidentally, it took some adjustment to his testing tool, which is based on responses to moral dilemmas, to protect the assumption that there can be no backsliding.)

What is common to all the stage theories of moral development is the assumption that young children are pre-moral beings. I have tried to argue in my chapter on Moral Development in *The Philosophy of Childhood* that this assumption is not only theoretically questionable, it is also morally objectionable. Even very young children can, in appropriate circumstances, function

as genuine moral agents, as sensitive and respectful teachers and parents will be able to testify. In fact, sometimes a child in the family is the moral conscience of the whole family.

Before we go any further, let me restate, in somewhat fuller form, my minimal set of desiderata for a philosophy of childhood:

1. It should include a **well-articulated conception of childhood** that is appropriately realistic about the capacities of children and at the same time appropriately respectful of their inherent worth.
2. It should make clear how there can be **goods of childhood** whose value is neither derivative from the goods of adulthood nor vulnerable to devaluation by developments in later life.
3. It should make room for the possibility that children may have **genuinely cognitive interests** that are **not standardly valued by adults** around them.
4. It should help us understand how children can be **genuine moral agents**.
5. It should provide a **framework for understanding children's rights and obligations** in the family and community, as well as **parents' rights and responsibilities** with respect to their children.

I want now to comment briefly on these desiderata.

As for developing a well-articulated conception of childhood, it will not surprise you to learn that I am partial to the “little

investigator” model of childhood. I certainly do not, however, think that investigating is all there is to childhood. Certainly play is centrally important, but play is also sometimes at least part investigation. In any case, there are many other aspects of childhood that anthropologists and child psychologists have to tell us about.

One reason I am partial to the “little investigator” model is that it demands proper respect for the job of being a child. Another reason is that it makes room for the parent or teacher to join the investigation so as to make it a joint venture. Let me bring out a little bit of what I mean by this by reporting on a teacher I have worked with in an elementary school, Jackson Street School, in Northampton, Massachusetts, just across the Connecticut River from where I live.

This teacher, her name is “Mary,” is one of two teachers in a combined first and second grade class in Jackson Street School. Several years ago Mary used some materials a colleague and I had written to go with a story by William Steig called “The Real Thief.” This story is really too advanced for first-graders, or even second-graders, but Mary imaginatively paired her kids so that a strong reader could help a weak reader get through the story. And then she began the discussion.

The thief in the story is a little mouse, Derek, who accidentally discovers that he can get into the King’s treasury. He begins “borrowing” the King’s jewels, finally even the crown jewel, the Kallikak diamond.

The King’s guard, Gawain, a goose, is charged with the crime, and eventually convicted on purely circumstantial evidence. At that point Gawain flies out of the courtroom and disappears. The rest of the

story raises interesting ethical issues that my materials encourage the children to explore.

What caught the attention and imagination of the kids in that first-and-second-grade class, however, was the idea of circumstantial evidence. They became preoccupied with questions of evidence. The lawyer wife of a colleague went to the class to talk to the children about legal evidence. For the rest of the school year, the children asked over and over again, “What evidence do we have for that?” It could have been science, or history, or math—any subject, and any interesting claim—the children wanted to know what evidence we have for that!

I offer this story as a parable. Children have the ability to be much more independent thinkers than we normally allow them to be. The downside for teachers and parents who are willing to respect their children as independent thinkers is that they will have to think freshly about what they think they know and how they think they know it. But the downside brings with it an exciting “upside.” Any parent or teacher who is willing to consider what evidence we have for things we cannot even remember having questioned before thereby gets an opportunity to think freshly about something that, up to that point, had been simply accepted fact. This is nothing less than the opportunity to be a philosopher along with one’s child!

I have admitted that I am partial to the “little investigator” model of childhood. And I have suggested that children, if they are given an opportunity to share and discuss their thoughts and ideas and even encouraged to play some role in structuring their own schooling and family life, will be able to enrich the lives of their teachers and

parents, as well as their own lives. These comments are meant to point in the direction of a more balanced conception of childhood. In place of a purely **deficit** conception of childhood, where the aim of living is just for the children to grow up and become normal adults, I suggest that we should try to develop a **mirror-image** conception of childhood. As a crude, but perhaps helpful, generalization, we can say that the strengths of childhood tend to be the weaknesses of adulthood, and vice versa. Thus children have fresh eyes to see what most of us adults no longer see, curiosity to understand what we take for granted, and minds that detect puzzles, incongruities, and perplexities that we have, most of us, long ago become inured to. We adults, on the other hand have lots of information, many sophisticated skills, deeper understanding about some matters, and much experience to share about how to negotiate the challenges of life. The point of good parenting and good schooling should be to help our children gain some of our adult advantages without losing as many childhood advantages as most of us adults have already lost.

I have now said a little—a very little, I’m afraid—about my first desideratum, a well-worked-out conception of childhood. There is obviously much, much more to be said. But I turn now to desideratum #2, the idea of helping us understand the non-derivative goods of childhood. Here I am going to have to content myself with reminding you of the intrinsic value of child art. To integrate our appreciation of child art as a non-derivative good of childhood we need to do something more than display our own children’s art on the refrigerator at home, or study the stages in which children go from making aesthetically interesting drawings and paintings to producing

conventionally realistic ones that are, for the most part, aesthetically worthless.

In the fall of 1984 the Museum of Modern Art in New York put on a wonderful exhibition entitled “‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern.” That show displayed in unforgettably beautiful ways striking similarities between arresting pieces of tribal art and works of 20th Century art created by leading painters and sculptors of that period. While the show was on, I had a conversation with William Rubin, who was the Director of the Exhibition and was then curator for painting and sculpture at the MoMA. I asked Mr. Rubin if one couldn’t mount a similar exhibition on 20th Century art and child art, since child art has affinities with some of the best known art of the century quite analogous to the affinities of tribal art with modern art. Mr. Rubin responded flatly that no such show would be mounted at the MoMA while he was curator of painting and sculpture there.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because,” he replied, “so long as I am curator here there will be no art exhibited that is not first-rate art, and no children’s art is first-rate art.”

“Don’t you think a few years ago many people would have said something similar about the tribal art in your current show?” I asked.

“No,” Mr. Rubin replied firmly, “at least not people with taste. The first tribal art shown in Europe [he went on] was brought there by traders, who had no taste. But once people with taste could see good examples of tribal art, they recognized that some of it was first-rate art.”

“Do you suppose that people with taste have looked at child art with primarily aesthetic criteria in mind, and not educational or developmental criteria?” I asked.

“They must have,” Mr. Rubin replied.

“Have you?” I asked.

“No,” he answered quite simply.

At about the same time I was having this conversation with William Rubin, the Detroit Institute of Arts asked Rudolf Arnheim, professor at Harvard, about putting together an exhibition of just the sort I myself had imagined. Although he did not want to take on the assignment, he enlisted Jonathan Fineberg, at the University of Illinois, in the project. The Detroit Art Institute, as it turned out, never mounted the projected exhibition, but museums in Munich and Bern did, and the exhibition book for their shows was published in 1995 in appropriately lavish form, first in German, and then two years later, in English, as *The Innocent Eye: Children’s Art and the Modern Artist*.⁵

The exhibition book for the MoMA show, ‘*Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art*,⁶ offers a wonderfully helpful way for one who is educated in modern art, but not in tribal art, to come to appreciate the aesthetic values of tribal art. Similarly, Jonathan Fineberg’s *Innocent Eye* offers someone who is appreciative of celebrated modern art, but has not taken child art seriously, a chance to come to appreciate what is so special about some of the best children’s art.

As for desideratum #3, recognizing the cognitive achievements of childhood not standardly valued by adults, philosophical

thinking in children shows most clearly what I have in mind here. I have given a few examples of such philosophical thinking above. There are more examples in my books, *Philosophy and the Young Child*,⁷ and *Dialogues with Children*.⁸

Concerning desideratum #4, I have sketched in my chapter on Moral Development in *The Philosophy of Childhood* the sort of account that I think would honor the research in moral development done by Lawrence Kohlberg and the dissenting suggestions by Carol Gilligan, as well as the work in moral sentiment done by Martin Hoffman. At the same time, the account I favor would leave open the possibility that even a small child might be able to act as a genuine moral agent, and not just as a pre-moral agent, as Aristotle and Kohlberg require.

Desideratum #5 raises the vexed issue of children's rights and obligations, but also the issue of parental rights and obligations. Once again, Aristotle is a good starting point for considering this issue. He regarded children as the property of the father. On the ground that there can be no injustice "in the unqualified sense" towards what is one's own, he reasoned that a father cannot be unjust to his child. Until children reach their majority, according to Aristotle, they, like the father's chattel, are, as it were, "part of himself," and, since "no one chooses to hurt himself," there can be "no injustice towards oneself" and hence no injustice committed by father toward a child. (*Nicomachean Ethics* 5.6, 1134b8-12) With our present-day awareness of child abuse, we may find these words hard to take seriously. Yet, in certain important respects, we have not moved very far from the view Aristotle expresses.

Today even pets and farm animals have minimal legal protection against abuse. Children enjoy, at least in principle, much more extensive legal protection; and certainly enlightened people have become much more sensitive to the prevalence of child abuse, which they strongly condemn. Nevertheless, there are many respects in which, legally and morally, children are still treated today as the property of their parents. And that "property" conception of children makes it hard to be sure that children will enjoy the protection against abuse they need, and the love and support they both need and deserve.

John Locke suggested that parents hold their children in custody from God, until their maturity. According to him, all parents are placed

by the Law of Nature, under an obligation to preserve, nourish, and educate the Children they had begotten, not as their own Workmanship, but the Workmanship of their own maker, the Almighty, to who they were to be accountable for them. (*Second Treatise of Government*, sec. 56)

Locke added that the power "that Parents have over their Children, arises from that Duty which is incumbent on them to take care of their Offspring, during the imperfect state of Childhood." (*Second Treatise of Government*, sec. 58)

The idea that one holds one's children in custody from God might be a very attractive one in a society united by a common theology. But it seems to be of no general use in our own multi-cultural and largely secular society.

If, like Plato, we thought of children as the property of the state, then parents could be thought of as having their children in

custody for the state. But we are not, most of us, comfortable with that idea either. As it is, we can perhaps do little better than think of the society as having a legal and moral interest in protecting the welfare of its children—an interest that underlies and justifies legal protections against child abuse, as well as welfare measures that do something to promote their health and provide for their education. One might want to add, as I do, that a liberal society also has an interest in validating and protecting certain children's rights. But how such a claim could be justified goes well beyond the scope of this paper.

What about the obligations of children to their parents? Aristotle thought that the debt children owe their parents for their very existence underlay an obligation to honor and obey parents, especially, of course, the father. But his moral theory also assured him that children need to be habituated to do the virtuous thing so that their parents, in particular their fathers, should serve as their moral authority. There is an echo of this idea in John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*,⁹ which is arguably the most important contribution to moral theory of the 20th Century. In speaking of what he calls "the morality of authority" and identifies as the "first stage in the sequence of moral development," Rawls has this to say:

. . . it is characteristic of the child's situation that he is not in a position to assess the validity of the precepts and injunctions addressed to him by those in authority, in this case his parents. He lacks both the knowledge and the understanding on the basis of which their guidance can be challenged. Indeed, the child lacks the concept of justification altogether, this being acquired much later. (463)

Rawls specifies no standard age range for this first stage of moral development, but the assumption seems to be that it standardly reaches well into the elementary-school years. Moreover, and this is the part I want to emphasize, Rawls makes no provision for the genuine moral agency children can so obviously exercise—at least within restricted spheres, for example, in dividing up cookies, or in working out how a younger child, or a handicapped child, should be awarded compensating advantages in playing a game, say soccer, or jump rope.

And then there is the problem about how it can be that adults generally, but especially parents and teachers, have moral authority over their children simply by virtue of their biology. Plato had Socrates point out in the dialogue, *Euthyphro*, that "holy" can't really mean "what the gods love, or approve of," even if everything the gods love or approve of is genuinely holy. Nor, one might add, can "just" or "morally right" mean "what Mom, or my teacher tells me to do," even if everything Mom or my teacher tells me to do is, in fact, just, or right.¹⁰

As kids soon realize, the authority figures around them, even the very best of them, are morally flawed. So what is the warrant for their moral authority? Does it rest simply on the utilitarian justification that, if we grant authority status to parents and teachers, society will function well enough so that most children will be able to grow up to be morally autonomous agents?

Offering such a utilitarian justification for the general assumption that parents, teachers, and police officers are moral authorities may be the best we can do.¹¹ But, if so, we had better drop the Rawlsian talk about how children should accept the moral authority of their parents and teachers

because they cannot “assess the validity of the precepts and injunctions addressed to them”—as if parents and teachers and police were, just by virtue of their age and position, able to do enough ethical theory to “assess the validity” of the “precepts and injunctions” they address to the children they are responsible for!

A completely adequate philosophy of childhood would not only fill out my very sketchy discussion of how to meet the five desiderata I have identified; it would also show how these points fit together to give us the adequate conception of childhood demanded by desideratum #1. I have suggested that we abandon the **deficiency** models of childhood, even in the highly sophisticated form these models take in, among others, Aristotle, Piaget, and Kohlberg. Instead, I have suggested that we try to develop a **mirror-image** model that will invite the sharing of perspectives and the enrichment of both adulthood and childhood alike. How such a model could be worked out in detail, let alone how it could be used to address the most horrible threats children face today, I must leave to the future.

It is probably obvious to you already that I have a special interest in pointing toward a philosophy of childhood that will make it clear how it is possible to have genuinely philosophical dialogues with young children and why it is valuable to both adults and children to have the experience of such dialogues. Let me sketch an example.

Last June I traveled to Osaka, Japan, to give some lectures. I asked to be able to do some philosophy with a 5th-grade class while I was there. The class I got was wonderful. The children read a Japanese translation of a

story I had written, based on a passage in Plato. In my story a teacher asks the kids in her class if they have ever been perfectly happy. One child in the class, Roy, explains that he was perfectly happy when he had a chigger bite on his bum and enjoyed scratching it so much that, at the moment, he didn't want anything else. That, he said was perfect happiness.

The main character in my story doesn't want to accept Roy's claim about perfect happiness. But his sister, Heather, says that Roy is right: Perfect happiness is just enjoying something so much that, at the moment, you don't want anything else.

The kids in my 5th-grade Japanese class got into the topic right away. After some preliminaries, Yoshimoto came directly to the point: “No matter how happy a person is,” he explained, excitedly, “that person should have more desires than just this one,” that is, more desires than the wish to enjoy, and continue to enjoy, scratching an insect bite.

Several other children made comments along the same line and then Tomoharu developed Yoshimoto's point further. He said, “For each person complete happiness needs to include many more things to make that person happy.” Karini made an important breakthrough in the discussion when she said, “Perfect happiness must last a long time [to be perfect].” Her comment reminded me of Aristotle's saying in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that *eudaimonia*, happiness, is not a momentary, or even a short-term thing, but rather a certain kind of activity of soul in a *complete* life. Yuuho took Karini's point and clarified it further by adding, “One happy moment is not enough for perfect happiness.”

One child, whose name I never got, added a humorous note when she said, “If scratching an insect bite is complete happiness, what happens when you have many insect bites? How will you even know which insect bite to scratch?” Everybody laughed. But the point was also a serious one.

The discussion was brought to a memorable conclusion with a remark from another child whose name I didn’t get. That child said this: “Scratching an insect bite and enjoying it so much that, at the moment, you don’t want anything else, is only one petal of the flower of happiness.”

A satisfactory philosophy of childhood should, among other things, make it clear how it is possible to have a philosophically rich discussion with children and why it is so valuable, both for the teacher or parent and for the kids, to have had the experience of thinking together about the nature of perfect happiness. I can testify that having this experience is at least one petal in the flower of happiness—for me, certainly, and I think for the kids in my Japanese philosophy class as well.

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¹ Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

² Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983.

³ See especially Piaget’s “Children’s Philosophies,” in *A Handbook of Child Psychology*, 2nd ed., Carl Murchison, ed., Worcester, MA: Clark University Press, 1933, 534-47.

⁴ For a helpful account of Aristotle’s theory of moral development, see M.F. Burnyeat, “Aristotle on Learning to be Good,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, A.O. Rorty, ed., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, 69-92.

⁵ Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

⁶ New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984.

⁷ Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.

⁸ Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.

⁹ Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.

¹⁰ See Chapter 4 of my book, *Socratic Perplexity and the Nature of Philosophy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999.

¹¹ See Laura M. Purdy, *In Their Best Interest? The Case Against Equal Rights for Children*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992.

