

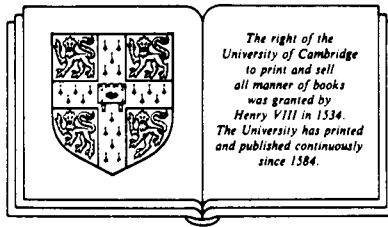
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Children, Parents and Politics

Edited by
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Introduction

Hold childhood in reverence, and do not be in any hurry to judge it for good or ill.

J.-J. Rousseau¹

The moral and political status of children has been something less than a dominant theme of Western philosophical thought. For most philosophers, children have not raised problems of any special interest or difficulty, and what little has been written about them has mostly consisted of variations on a limited and rather platitudinous range of themes: the weakness of children and their need for protection and control; their duty to love, honour and obey their parents; the obligation on parents to care for their children and to mould them according to socially determined patterns. Philosophers by and large have been content to accept without challenge whatever notions of children and their appropriate treatment they have found current.

It has been suggested that philosophers have had little to say about the family because many of them have been ‘rather solitary and childless people’.² No doubt that is one reason why philosophy has ignored children – and ignored women too, since so many philosophers have been unmarried men. But the neglect may stem additionally from a deeper, more disturbing cause. Children have often been regarded, and not merely by philosophers, as somewhat marginal people, whose activities and experiences matter less than those of adult – and especially male adult – human beings. Though children are often found charming and amusing, their thoughts and deeds are weighed in the balance of ‘grown up’ standards and are found wanting. Measured by the criteria of the adult world, a child’s best achievements appear flawed and imperfect, sometimes pointless and silly. No mature person likes to hear his actions described as ‘childish’, for that conveys the criticism not just that, as an adult, he should have done *differently*, but that he should have done *better*. It is surely significant, as Gareth B. Matthews notes in his chapter in this book, that major art galleries

refuse to hang the work of children: for a painting to be produced by a child is for it to be seen as carrying an a priori guarantee of artistic worthlessness.

It is clearly true that childhood, like old age, is at a chronological margin of human life. That does not make children, or the elderly, marginal in a moral sense; they do not have a lesser worth than people we so question-beggingly refer to as being in 'the prime of life', even if their worth consists in their having different pre-eminent qualities. Children are remarkable for their lovingness, spontaneity and freshness of vision, their candour and imagination. To complain that they do not perform as well as adults at tasks more suitable for adults is to apply ludicrously inappropriate standards. Yet children in the writings of philosophers and others have usually been characterised in such adult-orientated fashion, with very negative and dismissive results. To think of children primarily as weak, ignorant, irrational, incompetent, unrestrained and uncivilised impedes working up much interest in how they are treated, and makes it easier to fall into an unquestioning, complacent acceptance of whatever social, educational and political arrangements have arisen to cope with them.

There have been encouraging signs in recent years that the situation is changing and that philosophers, both male and female, are starting to see children and childhood as a topic of major philosophical interest. The last decade in particular has seen an increasing spate of works that challenge the old images and complacencies and demonstrate the potential of philosophy to provoke a rethinking of settled ideas about children. The present volume is a symptom of this new concern. The eleven essays that follow, none of which has been previously published, are written from a variety of viewpoints and cover a number of different problems, but are informed by a common conviction of the value of subjecting our conceptual methods for handling children to critical scrutiny. It is hoped that by bringing together authors from three continents to write about children, impetus will be given to the development of the philosophy of childhood as a recognised subdivision of philosophical study.

That said, it must be added that, as several papers in this collection make abundantly plain, philosophical questions about children interlock in many ways with broader questions of moral and political philosophy. The philosophy of childhood cannot, therefore, be pursued as an entirely discrete sub-discipline; but the mutually fruitful relationship in which it stands to other parts of the philosophical field is extra reason for regarding it as both a viable and a highly profitable area for discussion.

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The essays in the first section of the book explore the categories we employ for thinking about what children are. Ludmilla Jordanova brings an historical perspective to bear in arguing that a timeless, society-irrelative way of considering children is unattainable, and that children are 'constructed in particular social settings'. She uses evidence from the past to support the claim that attempts to say what is 'natural' about children face great difficulties, and emphasises that a society's view of childhood is suffused with its moral assumptions.

In a similar vein, William Ruddick, in 'When Does Childhood Begin?', is concerned with remarking the way in which 'political, meta-physical, biological and ethical factors jostle with one another' when we try to set out what we mean by 'childhood'. The task of determining the beginning of childhood (is this at conception? at quickening? at birth? or after infancy?) is made immensely more problematic because while 'childhood is a stage of growth and development, it is also a social and political status'. Ruddick sensitively traces the often conflicting influences which the various strands in our thought about childhood have on our treatment of children, and asks what the moral and political implications would be of abolishing the category of childhood altogether.

Judith Hughes, in 'Thinking about Children', sounds a warning note about some of the recent philosophical writing about children which has, in her opinion, concentrated unrealistically on the question of children's political emancipation. Such writing, she argues in a subtle criticism, often shows little understanding of the reality of childhood, of actual children's needs and desires – 'it has little to do with children and much to do with a critique of liberal democracies'. To treat a child other than as a child is a form of oppression; though *how* that means that children should be treated will vary from one society to another.

If it is true that some writers have exploited children in their desire to find a stick with which to beat liberal democracy, it is also true that the position of children in liberal democratic polities is a legitimate and important topic of concern. To what forms of authority are children of various ages rightly subjected? How much power over their offspring should parents wield, and to what extent should the state place restraints on the foundation and on the exercise of authority in families? How soon and in what manner should children be released from paternalistic constraints and be inducted into the citizen body? To what extent, if any, are the traditionally favoured theoretical devices of liberal de-

mocracy, such as the social contract, applicable to the justification of adult–child relations in a society like ours? Questions like these are the business of the chapters in Part II.

Some liberal democrats have worried that the structure of authority in families is difficult to justify, given that children do not become members of families through their free consent. In ‘The Family, Democratic Politics and the Question of Authority’ Jean Bethke Elshtain makes the observation, with which Judith Hughes would sympathise, that parental authority, as a form of stewardship, is a *conditio sine qua non* of parenting. But she argues that parental authority need be no source of embarrassment to liberal democrats, as the family, at its best, can be ‘the locus for the emergence of socially responsible, autonomous human beings’ possessed of greater individuality than if they had been produced by some more uniform, centrally controlled social process, however democratic.

There follow chapters by Richard Lindley and myself, in which the consistency of application of liberal principles by modern Western states to, respectively, teenagers and young adults is questioned on other grounds. Lindley argues that the liberal democrat should be deeply dissatisfied with our present treatment of teenage children, and favour extending to them a range of rights and responsibilities which will give them much more control over their own lives. In my own chapter, I investigate how a consistent liberalism should respond to the flux of generations within a society, and to the fact that young people arriving at the threshold of adult life are obliged willy-nilly to accept the economic and power structures already in place as the price of being allowed access to the privileges of the adult citizen body. Lockean notions of consent seem to have little application in the real life scenario facing the young adult, who has little say over the return obtained for labour and services from the existing holders of social goods.

In a highly original essay, Stephen R. L. Clark proposes that the raising of children, with the coercive paternalist practices it involves, far from offering occasions for liberal soul-searching, actually provides a sounder model of morally ideal human relationships than any form of social contract theory. He draws both on ancient Stoic sources and on natural history to support his view that ‘care for our world and our posterity [is] the centre of moral action’. Truly marginal people would be those free to bind themselves or not in a voluntary association with others; non-marginal people enjoy ‘the more positive right and duty to participate in the growth and development of the

tribe'. According to John Harris, in 'The Right to Found a Family', there is indeed a normal human entitlement to play a part in the growth and development of the tribe, though in certain quite limited circumstances, which he carefully attempts to delineate, there might be an obligation on some individuals *not* to form a family, and even on the public authorities to prevent their doing so.

The essays in Part III are concerned with adult attitudes to children's lives and experiences and, from quite diverse angles, pose questions about what we should value and seek to preserve in them. Gareth Matthews' essay, 'Child Art and the Place of Children in Society', urges that a closer attention to children's art not only assists us to understand more about their thought and sensibility, but also 'can help us appreciate the nature and significance of adult art, indeed, of art *ueberhaupt*'. In his opinion, hanging children's art is a step not merely towards children's liberation (in one sense of that much abused term), but towards adult liberation – the extension of our imaginative boundaries – as well.

In 'Should All Seriously Disabled Infants Live?' Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer argue that it is the kind and quality of life a child is capable of having, rather than some abstract 'right to life', that provide the proper basis for medical decision-making, and that to keep a severely handicapped infant alive or to subject him to excessively painful surgery constitutes grave abuse.

The subject of Tom Regan's chapter, which brings the collection to a close, is abuse of a different and less controversial sort. Regan begins by observing that using children for pornographic purposes, or in other ways to satisfy the sexual appetites of adults, is wrong, but then takes various standard moral theories to task for being unable to explain just why it is wrong. As an improvement on these theories he proposes a fresh account (the 'respect account' – in fact a modified Kantianism), according to which subjects-of-a-life ('biographical beings') are not to be used as mere means to satisfy the desires of other subjects-of-a-life. Apart from the intrinsic interest of its contents, Regan's essay is valuable for showing how paying closer attention to the moral status of children can put us in a better position to criticise and refine our general moral theories.

'Childhood has its place in the sequence of human life', wrote Rousseau; 'the man must be treated as a man and the child as a child'.³ This book attempts to cast light on childhood as a distinctive and valuable phase of human life, and to clarify the moral issues surrounding child–adult relationships. If it succeeds in

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drawing childhood and children just a little closer to the centre-stage of philosophical discussion, it will have adequately justified its existence.

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Geoffrey Scarre
May 1988

NOTES

- 1 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: Everyman's Library, reprinted 1976), p. 71.
- 2 Onora O'Neill and William Ruddick, 'General Introduction' to *Having Children: Philosophical and Legal Reflections on Parenthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 3.
- 3 Rousseau, *Émile*, p. 44.