Commentary on 'Philosophy and childhood'

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The following paper was written in 1999, as the opening speech at the Hobart FAPCA (Federation of Australasian Philosophy for Children Associations now FAPSA) National Conference. I was, at the time, Chair of FAPCA. The keynote speaker at the conference was Professor Gareth Matthews from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and author of, among other books, *The philosophy of childhood*.

As the paper was written as a speech, and not as an academic article, I did not cite all the points made in full academic mode. Rather, for publication in the journal *Critical and Creative Thinking*, I added a list of further reading which gives details for all the articles and books mentioned in the speech.

At the time, I had just completed my PhD (the thesis is cited in the further reading), and taken up the position of International Baccalaureate Coordinator at The Friends' School in Hobart. Subsequently in 2001, a revised and abridged version of the thesis was published by Routledge under the title *Philosophical discussion in moral education*, and readers who are interested in following up some of my points made in the paper can find more detail there.

Original paper

Philosophy and childhood

Wisdom comes with age. Especially philosophical wisdom. Or so the common stereotype would have us believe.

According to many philosophers across the ages, this means that the best philosophy is done through introspective analysis of what our experience and life have taught us—but only after we have lived a fair bit of it. Probably the most famous example is Rene Descartes sitting in his armchair, pondering what it is impossible to doubt.

The problem with this approach to philosophy has been pointed out over recent decades by many feminist philosophers. If you start from the experience of well-off, highly educated white males, you end up with philosophical positions that are biased by this limited experience.

A great deal of interesting philosophy has been done by these same feminist philosophers drawing on their experience as women. Indeed, recent feminist philosophy has turned the same point in upon itself: if feminist philosophy is done solely by white, middle-class females, then the riches that could arise from differing experiences will be lost. The philosophies of difference that have arisen have opened up some rich philosophical ground.

It is not my intent in this paper to explore these new grounds, nor to comment on any of the many versions of third wave feminism that have arisen. Rather, I want to explore the case that the same idea needs to be applied to the relationship between childhood and philosophy.

Of course, there is a distinct disanalogy between the idea of feminist philosophy and 'childhood philosophy'. Much (but not all) feminist philosophy is done by females who have had a good grounding in philosophy through a university education. Such philosophers have access to the communication means available for cutting edge philosophy. Almost by definition, a philosophy of childhood cannot be done by university educated child philosophers, utilising the usual means of advancing philosophical positions.

This really leaves two alternatives: childhood philosophy can be done by children using different means, including possibly collaboration with sympathetic adult philosophers; or childhood philosophy must be a task for the philosopher who pays extra attention to the philosophical implications of childhood.

Both of my alternatives have been explored by our Keynote Speaker, Gareth Matthews. I think it would be fair to say, however, that he has not gone down the first path very far. He does explore philosophical views that children have expressed, for the most part finding that they echo, without foreknowledge, the views of one great philosopher or another. I would venture to say that any of us who have done philosophy with children for any length of time have had the experience of some child advancing a view that we know from our philosophical training.

Yet Gareth has made a stronger claim: that children do, occasionally, come up with a philosophical view that is genuinely inventive, in that it does not appear in the existing literature. For example, he makes this claim for a comment by a student called Sam, who is discussing 'what the universe appeared *on*'. He claims that Sam's conception is reminiscent of, but superior to, a thesis of Plato's. Yet, although the thought is novel, it is Gareth who has developed it and commented on its importance. Sam did not know enough of the history of philosophy to see that a fuss ought to be made of it, nor, I venture to hazard, would he have had the philosophical skills to have been able to write a paper to make the right sort of fuss. We have to rely on a philosopher of the standing of Gareth to do this.

This raises some intriguing possibilities. Perhaps academically trained philosophers should set up child 'think tanks', where children discuss philosophical problems, while adults listen in and identify promising points for later development. How would the children for such groups be chosen? Would they be made up of those who have displayed 'academic promise', as indeed, the ranks of the academic philosophers have been? Or are we after the fresh views of children who are not only philosophically naïve, but also think 'outside the square', for they are the most likely to produce the striking view?

Intriguing though these questions are, I would like to leave them aside for the moment, and concentrate on the second alternative I identified above: that philosophy has to take notice of childhood, just as feminist philosophy has alerted us to the need to take notice of gender. Here again, as I indicated, Gareth has led the way. His book *Philosophy of Childhood* has explored a number of philosophical areas in the light of what we know about childhood. I will refer only to one at the moment, to illustrate the point. Gareth claims that we can explore the philosophy of art better by considering what it would be to say that children produce real art. A philosophical consideration of children in relation to art, he claims, gives us insight, not (only) into children, but into a mainstream sub-species of philosophy.

This is the sort of claim that I wish to explore further. Can we do better philosophy if we take children and childhood into consideration? My claim is that we can, and that we ought. I wish to explore this claim further from my own work. Before I do, however, I need to acknowledge that I am not the first philosopher to recognise this. I have already highlighted Gareth Matthews' own work, and my own ideas have drawn particularly on Chapter 5 of *The philosophy of childhood*. Further, I have also drawn on a number of feminist philosophers who have taken childhood seriously. In this regard, I must mention Annette Baier's influential essay *Cartesian persons*, to be found in her book *Postures of the mind: Essays on mind and morals*, and Seyla Benhabib's work in *Situating the self: Gender, community and postmodernism in contemporary ethics*. Finally, Charles Taylor has also extensively considered the implications of childhood in his *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*.

Yet these philosophical works (Matthews apart) have not contributed to the creation of a sub-specialisation of philosophy called the Philosophy of Childhood, and it would be a rare philosopher who identified this as their field. This stands in stark contrast to, say, feminist philosophy. Indeed, it is not certain that these philosophers even recognise their contributions. When I wrote to Annette Baier, for example, inviting her to attend this conference, she politely declined, saying that she did not really know very much about our theme.

Childhood and reason

Reason, or rationality, has been a central concern of philosophy since before the days of Socrates. It is, according to many philosophers from Plato and Aristotle onwards, the faculty that sets us apart from the animals. There has been a strong tradition of considering Reason (and it is often capitalised in these sorts of accounts) as some thing that humans (read: adults, probably males) possess—a unitary and consistent method for reaching sound conclusions. It is a universal trait of humans.

Strong in this tradition is an opposition between Reason and emotion. Such an opposition is needed to account for the fact that not everyone who considers a particular problem comes to the same conclusion. If Reason and emotions are opposed, then it is easy for the reasoning man to dismiss the thinking of his opponents as being clouded by emotion. Indeed, since women and children are (in this account) notoriously emotional, and hence unable to impose the rule of Reason on their emotions, they can be dismissed as less than human.

One of the most striking formulations of this view is Immanuel Kant's. It is well known, for example, that Kantian metaethics is based on the Moral Law, a law that the rational being imposes on itself through the use of Reason. Indeed, this account leads to the assertion that it is more moral to be emotionally driven to evil deeds, but to just overcome these desires through the use of Reason, than it is to be emotionally inclined to caring behaviour. David Hume famously opposed this view, claiming that 'reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions'. Yet we can see that Hume's view still posits a sharp divide between reason and emotion—he just inverts the hierarchy.

What does a consideration of childhood have to offer to philosophical investigations of reason? My view is that a good look at how it is that we come to be reasoning beings tells us a lot about how we should characterise reason itself. Babies are not reasoning beings in the same sense that adults are. Certainly, they do exhibit behaviour that reflects a

certain level of reasoning, but this level is more like the level seen in animals than in adult humans. Yet, over time, babies develop into adults. We call that time childhood.

Attention to the development of reasoning in childhood requires that we, as philosophers, become interested in empirical studies of children. Child development studies tell us that children do not merely have an inherent reason which unfolds over time. Certainly, there are features connected with reasoning that are 'hardwired' into all humans. Nevertheless, social interaction is essential to the development of reasoning. The work of Lev Vygotsky is very important in this regard: we learn the skills of reasoning by immersion in social situations where the reasoning is carried out by the community jointly. Only when the child starts to internalise those skills can we say that the child is developing reason in this regard.

The implications of such studies for an account of reasoning are profound. Reason is not something we have, which merely requires maturation to unfold. It is a social construction, which we pick up piecemeal, from others, in particular social situations. It is little wonder, then, that reason is always contextualised. The systems of reason—logic, for example—are attempts to widen the contexts of reason, rather than descriptions of a totally decontextualised system. Modern work shows that there are competing systems of logic, and that people do not conform to any one system in all their reasoning in any case. The fact that reasoning is always contextualised has, of course, many implications for teaching, which I will not expand on here.

Attention to childhood also throws light on the question of the relation of reason and the emotions. Firstly, since we participate in social situations through an emotional engagement with others, emotions are inextricably part of the context of reasonableness. They provide the impetus to care about our thoughts, and hence, far from being opposed to reasoning, are an essential aspect of reason.

Secondly, attention to the development of emotions in children shows us that the emotions cannot be merely some sort of raw, unreasoning reaction to events. While they do have a basis in such biological reactions, any display of any emotion is inextricably tied up with social reasoning about its appropriateness, its reasonableness. So the emotions themselves are but a type of reasoning.

None of this is to say that we do not sometimes reason poorly because we allow the emotional aspect of thinking to overwhelm other aspects. This certainly happens. But then, we can also reason poorly because we insist on following an allegedly logical chain of reasoning and ignore the emotional thinking that could set us right. All I am saying is that the appropriate, the reasonable, mix of logic and emotion will depend in large degree on the context within which the thinking is taking place.

The upshot of these, admittedly sketchy, considerations is that reason is a more complex entity than the traditional view would have us believe. Elsewhere I have developed the view that reasonableness should be considered as having five aspects: the critical, the creative, the committed, the contextual and the embodied. Attention to childhood changes our view of reason.

Childhood and autonomy

Autonomy is a concept introduced to moral philosophy by Kant. For Kant, autonomy is following the dictates of Reason, rather than being driven by inclinations and desires, or

by the machinations of others. We can immediately see that the concept of autonomy is closely tied up with that of reason. Since I have suggested that we need a concept of reason that differs markedly from Kant's, then it is not surprising that we also need to look again at autonomy.

The Kantian notion of autonomy, as we have seen, stresses the independence of people. It has been attacked vigorously in recent times because of this, most notably by feminist philosophers who characterise this disconnectedness from others as arising from a peculiarly male point of view. Some feminists have suggested that we should give away autonomy as a moral ideal for these reasons. Yet there do seem to be good reasons for retaining a notion of autonomy: we do wish to claim that morally good people do not merely follow the orders of others, but make their moral decisions in a way that springs from their moral being.

Here, I suggest that consideration of how it is that children develop into morally autonomous adults can help us. It is clear that young children cannot be said to be morally autonomous. We do not hold them legally accountable for their actions for this reason. Yet we do see that they become, in a way similar to that which I have outlined above for reasonableness, more able to make decisions for themselves as they grow and learn. This suggests several things: that autonomy is not an all-or-nothing characteristic; that as adults we should be supporting the development of autonomy; and that developing the capacity to 'think for oneself' depends critically on interaction with, and attachment to, others.

Good autonomous decisions are not made by those who do not think like others, for good decisions follow good decision making processes—that is, good reasoning—and we have seen that children learn to think by involving themselves in situations where others reason jointly and publicly. As children become more capable reasoners, they can become more autonomous. Autonomy cannot, then, involve the cutting of oneself off from others, but must rather be the increasing ability to involve oneself in public reasoning on one's own behalf, without having to lean on the abilities of others. Thus, we can reconceive of autonomy in a way that avoids the feminist charge that it ignores connectedness, while retaining the sense that autonomous persons are in control of their own actions.

Again, the reconceptualisation of autonomy has direct implications for teachers. We cannot use the need to respect children's autonomy as a rationale for not taking on the responsibility to teach them, as is sometimes done. Nor, though, can we treat children as if they lack all autonomy, thus denying them the respect they deserve as becoming-autonomous beings. We cannot neglect to give them the opportunities to practice their developing independence-through-interdependence. Here we see the importance of the notion of scaffolding, drawn from Vygotsky's and Jerome Bruner's work.

Childhood and communicative action

Let's turn our attention away from philosophical positions developed in the past to a more modern system—Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action. Can consideration of childhood enable us to recognise and rectify weaknesses in this system?

First, let me briefly outline the Theory of Communicative Action. Habermas has developed his theory to explain how modern human rationality and action arise through the medium of language. He sketches in three types of action through language: success-oriented action, communicative action and critical discourse. All human interactions can be described in terms of one of these categories.

Success-oriented action (often also called strategic action) refers to cases where people act as individuals aiming for the success of their own actions, without attempting to coordinate their purposes and ends with others. Actors here are using language to manipulate others to achieve their own (often, but not always, hidden) ends.

In communicative action, the parties in such a conversation seek to exchange information, convey experiences and/or clarify meaning through discussion, coming to a common understanding against a background of assumed facts (truth claims) and values (claims of normative rightness). Communicative action is thus not solely about individuals seeking the means to their ends, but aims at reaching intersubjective understanding and a joint agreement on actions.

Actors switch to critical discourse in an attempt to reach consensus on contentious claims about values or truth. This occurs when someone calls into question the truth of one of the facts or values previously taken for granted.

Habermas claims that all social interactions take place in one of these three ways. He does not claim (although he seems sometimes to be interpreted in this way) that actions ought not to be success-oriented, for in certain contexts, success-oriented action is acceptable. He does, however, claim that in modern societies, much that ought to be carried out through communicative action in fact takes place through strategic action. Further, even communicative action does not always take place after a sufficiently rigorous discussion about the meanings of the terms we use.

Habermas' theory has wide ranging implications, such as his account of both truth and moral correctness as being whatever issues from ideal critical discourse. It has been used in analyses of the institutions of society, one of which is education. It is my belief that attempts to apply it suffer because the theory itself is flawed, and that some of the flaws can be corrected by considering that social actors can be children, as well as adults. How does this work?

The roots of Habermas' theory are Kantian, and he assumes something very like the Kantian account of autonomy, together with a modified, but still recognisably Kantian, account of rationality. In this, he seems also to consider only social actors who are already adults, in possession of autonomy and rationality. It is from this assumption of equality in these respects that he disapproves of strategic action in contexts where all actors ought to be consulted. Hence there is a strict demarcation between strategic and communicative action.

But we have seen that children cannot be said to be fully autonomous and rational; nor can they be said to completely lack these characteristics. Further, children can only increase their autonomy and reasonableness if they interact with other members of society, some of whom are further advanced in these respects. Indeed, in order to maximise these increases, some of these more advanced persons will be entrusted with the task of developing them in children: they are teachers.

Yet teaching cannot be analysed in terms of either strategic action nor communicative action. Teachers cannot always negotiate their goals with children, for the children have not yet developed the capabilities to do so. However, the goals themselves include developing the capacities to engage in communicative action and critical discourse, and we have seen that the Vygotskian argument means that teachers have to engage in communicative action and critical discourse with their students in order to do so.

Hence, there must be a type of interaction that mixes, inextricably, strategic action and communicative action. This I have labelled 'pedagogic action': pedagogic action consists in a more experienced person interacting with a less experienced person with the specific aim of developing the latter's abilities. The aim is not negotiated, so that the action has something of the character of strategic action, but the interaction must be communicative action (or critical discourse), otherwise the aim could not be achieved.

Let's look at an example of what I mean. In a community of inquiry, a question that asks a student to give reasons for their assertion simultaneously advances the inquiry at hand (communicative action) and assists in bringing about in the student a realization that reason-giving is a valuable move in discussion (success-oriented action).

The concept of pedagogic action seems not to be limited just to teaching. Obviously, parents will also engage in it. But pedagogic action is not confined to interactions with children. As we have seen, attention to childhood reminds us that neither rationality nor autonomy are all-or-nothing characteristics: persons can always improve in either respect. Hence, situations where a more competent person is assisting a less competent person to improve are restricted neither to the classroom nor to children.

Childhood and virtue ethics

Finally I will turn to a very ancient doctrine which is undergoing a remarkable resurgence at present: Aristotle's virtue ethics. While basing their work very much on Aristotle's remarkable Nicomacean Ethics, modern virtue ethics have made a number of changes, as we might expect. It is notable, however, that by far the greatest proportion of the virtue ethics accounts, from Aristotle on, concentrate on adults, and what it is for a human adult to be a virtuous person. Childhood is not ignored, but in Aristotle it is merely commented on, as a state to be contrasted with adulthood.

For Aristotle, childhood is a time of habituation into the virtues, while adulthood is a time for using practical wisdom. A person who has been habituated into the virtues will habitually act in accordance with the virtues, but to decide what particular actions are actually in accord with the virtues requires a type of wisdom: practical wisdom.

However, there are problems with taking this account to rely on a sharp divide between childhood and adulthood, as it has commonly been taken. This common view has it that children should be subjected, by parents, teachers and other adults, to a regime of unquestioned obedience as they are ordered to act in virtuous ways. Only when their practical wisdom flowers, in adulthood, are they to be permitted to wield practical wisdom for themselves. At this stage they can, if they judge themselves to be less than virtuous in some way, actively choose for themselves to become more virtuous by (as Aristotle puts it) exercising 'a certain kind of study and care'.

However, this characterisation of virtue ethics leaves it totally obscure how children turn into adults. Nancy Sherman has pointed out that habituation itself cannot be a

merely passive process on the part of the child being habituated. For each application of a virtue requires a judgement that the situation has certain characteristics, that make it appropriate to act in this way rather than that. These judgements require reasoning. In a case when an adult is present, the child can be merely told what to do. But in order to be truly *habituated* into the right sort of action, the child must be able to act in the appropriate way without the adult being present. Hence, habituation requires the active improvement of the child's moral judgement.

I assert that we must go further. It is not only that habituation into the virtues needs to engage the child's reasoning, but that the child's ability to reason well itself needs to be developed through the sort of Vygotskian scaffolding that I have referred to earlier. This, we have seen, means that the child needs to be engaged in dialogue concerning not just the right thing to do now, but also an investigation of the reasons why it might be the right thing, and what makes actions right in the first place.

In other words, proper attention to childhood subverts the common interpretation of Aristotle's virtue ethics completely. Far from licensing a 'children should be seen and not heard' upbringing, virtue ethics, as construed through a proper philosophical consideration of childhood, enjoins us to engage children in philosophical inquiry. This is a conclusion that I trust will be welcome to delegates to this conference.

A final word

The thrust of my talk has been to claim that Philosophy has been impoverished by not paying sufficient attention to childhood. This claim parallels the one made by feminist philosophers that, by ignoring gender, philosophy has not been able to come to sound conclusions. I have attempted to illustrate my claim with a number of examples. Interestingly, the cumulative effect of these investigations is that we are warranted in drawing the conclusion that, not only should philosophy take more notice of childhood, but also that children should be helped to take more notice of philosophy.

Reflective commentary

Re-reading this article 15 years on, I am moved to wonder about the extent to which philosophy of childhood, as I have characterized it, has developed in the interim. In many ways, I am not the best person to comment. After finishing my PhD, I returned to the classroom and have not kept up to date with much new writing in professional philosophy. This is even true (though to a lesser extent) in the relatively narrow world of philosophy for children/in schools.

Nevertheless, there have certainly been some signs of progress. The *Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* contains an article entitled *The philosophy of childhood*. Rather unsurprisingly, it was written by Gareth Matthews (in 2002). Sadly, Gareth is no longer with us, having died on 17 April 2011.

Then there are the journals connected to the broad philosophy for/with children movement. For example, ICPIC—the International Council for Philosophical Inquiry with Children—publishes an electronic journal called *Childhood & Philosophy*. Viterbo University publishes *Analytic Teaching and Philosophical Praxis*. This journal itself revives and renames the FAPCA/FAPSA journal *Critical & Creative Thinking*.

Do the articles in these sorts of journals engage with the philosophy of childhood? Sadly, my reading of them has been patchy at best. While many of them are concerned with the theory, practicalities and outcomes of doing philosophy with children in the classroom, quite a few others are more concerned with the intersections of philosophy (and philosophers) with childhood as such. These articles can be roughly divided into two categories: those that take philosophy and apply it to childhood, and those that consider childhood and use its features to interrogate philosophy. It is this latter category that come closest to the idea I expressed in my speech—calling for a philosophy of childhood that might challenge and reinvigorate philosophy in the way that feminist philosophy has.

Perhaps the work that comes closest to what I had in mind is David Kennedy's *The well of being: Childhood, subjectivity, and education* (2006). David certainly engages with the intersection of childhood and philosophy. His main aim, though, seems more to be to get us to reconceptualize our ideas of the child with the aim of thus also reconceptualizing education. To summarize it as such is probably a little unfair to David, because he is also interested in reconceptualizing (adult) personhood in the light of his considerations of the child. Thus considered, it is an example of what I had in mind: that our look at childhood would enable us to reconceptualize a number of major mainstream philosophical issues.

However, I remain disappointed that all this activity—welcome and valuable though it is—seems to me to have remained largely within the boundaries of the philosophy for/with children world (broadly understood). While, as I have said, I cannot claim to be up to date with everything that is happening in mainstream philosophy, I have not seen much evidence that considerations of childhood have made much further impact than the sorts of examples I outlined in the speech. Perhaps I am wrong. I would like to think so.

It seems to me that what is needed is a book that looks back at a number of major philosophical thinkers and themes, systematically demonstrating how a lack of consideration of the fact that all persons start as babies, developing through childhood and adolescence into adults has led to a deficit in the resulting philosophical positions. I guess the model I have in mind here is Genevieve Lloyd's *The man of reason* (1984), though it might be more far ranging in its focus even than that. To have the same impact on mainstream philosophy would be a great achievement.

Had I pursued an academic career after my PhD, I may possibly have attempted to write such a book. I would like to think that a younger academic—maybe one who is reading this article—will take up the challenge.

Further reading

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