

The Children's Table

Childhood Studies and the Humanities

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The University of Georgia Press Athens and London

2013

Childism

The Challenge of Childhood to Ethics and the Humanities

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If the humanities focus in some way on “the human,” including its meanings, diversities, constructions, and possibilities, then it would be curious to neglect the third of human beings who happen to be under the age of eighteen. This situation would appear all the more peculiar if the humanities are charged, as many argue, with challenging normative assumptions and investigating historically marginalized voices. Yet to a large extent children and youth do in fact occupy the periphery in contemporary humanities scholarship, arguably more so than any other social group. The oddness of this situation is compounded by the fact that childhood studies have become increasingly prominent in the social and biological sciences.

In this chapter, I take a critical look at my own field of philosophical ethics in order to propose a more child-inclusive humanistic methodology. I argue for what I call a new “childism” that would be somewhat analogous to recent forms of feminism, womanism, race theory, queer theory, and the like. By “childism” I mean the effort not only to pay children greater attention but to respond more self-critically to children’s particular experiences by transforming fundamental structures of understanding and practice for all. Children will take a central place in humanities scholarship only if there is a revolution on a similar scale to the revolutions that have occurred in connection with other “minorities.” Art, literature, history, culture, philosophy, religion, and the like would need to be considered narrow and stunted

if they did not account for age in addition to gender, sexuality, class, race, and ethnicity.

The field of philosophical ethics is a useful test case for childism because here children are rendered second-class citizens in especially profound ways. It is true that children are often considered *objects* of justice, care, and responsibility. But the field almost entirely neglects children as ethical *subjects*. The question I ask here is not how ethics can be applied to children, for ethics is adult-centered to begin with. It is rather how a fuller understanding of children’s lived experiences in the world can transform basic ethical assumptions and norms, regardless of whether one is considering particular issues concerning children or not. Feminism has reconstructed ethical ideas, for both women and men, around new understandings of gender, agency, voice, power, narrative, care, and relationality. Childism should similarly rearrange the ethical landscape around experiences such as age, temporality, growth, difference, imagination, and creativity.

As long as there has been scholarship, there has been scholarship about children, from the ancient Greek academy to twentieth-century developmental psychology. What is introduced by the new field called “childhood studies” is a historically new sense of children’s agency and social constructiveness. What I propose to call childism grows out of recent efforts in this field, led by the social sciences, but childism also takes the field in transformative directions that the humanities are especially suited to articulate. Allow me to use the feminist metaphor of “waves” to describe how to move from childhood studies to childism.

What may be called a “first wave” of childhood studies (my own term, not one from the field) arose in the 1980s primarily among sociologists who recognized that children are actors and constructors of meaning in their own right and within diverse social and historical contexts. This idea challenged what was perceived as the dominant Western norm of childhood as a period of passive development, a presocial and premoral time of adulthood-in-the-making. As two founders of childhood studies put it, “Children must be seen as actively involved in the construction of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live.”¹ Furthermore, childhoods are socially constructed, by children and adults alike, in relation to diverse and changing historical contexts.² Finally, as social agents, children must be seen as legitimate subjects of human rights.

A “second wave” of childhood studies can be identified with increasing efforts since the late 1990s to include children themselves as research and societal participants. The idea is that children should not just be studied and treated as objects of adult research and policy but also from the points of view of children’s own concerns and agendas. Children should be empowered to help formulate research questions, contribute to academic and policy conferences, and take part in larger social and political processes. Research should take a “dialogical approach” that “engag[es] with children’s own cultures of communication.”³ This new movement has given rise to a variety of innovative scholarly methodologies such as using video, narrative, drawing, and the internet. This second wave also takes up questions of social policy, investigating how children may be empowered as citizens, political participants, parliamentarians, legal self-advocates, culture makers, media users, and the like.⁴

The analogy between these first two waves of childhood studies and the first two waves of feminism is not perfect, but it does suggest a shared struggle to gain, first, social agency and then, second, social equality. My argument is that it is now time for a “third wave” in childhood studies—which I am calling “childism” proper—that is still more radical. This would be modeled in certain respects on the kind of third-wave feminism advocated by Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, and Leslie Heywood.⁵ Third-wave feminists started to argue in the 1990s that the goal of research and activism should not be limited to gaining equality to men, since equality itself is framed by a history of male power. The goal should be to restructure basic social norms and power themselves in response to excluded female experiences. Work, politics, culture, academics, family, and sexuality should be fundamentally transformed in light of the differences and diversities of gender.

Along somewhat similar lines, childism would seek not only to understand children’s agency and to empower children’s participation but also to ask how children’s different and diverse lived experiences call for structurally transformed scholarly and social norms. This task is already under way, albeit not under the name “childism.” The clearest example can be found in studies of children’s citizenship, where some now argue for a “children-sized citizenship” based on the idea of broad human interdependence instead of on the idea of adult autonomy.⁶ This reconstruction of historical structures does not necessarily follow the same lines for children as it has done for women and other groups, for children are not historically marginalized in

exactly the same ways. But the idea is the same: that it is not enough just to include excluded groups; in addition, social spaces need to be reorganized.

I would like to distinguish this notion of childism from the only other two uses of the term that I am aware of. One is the literary theorist Peter Hunt’s concept of a “childist” criticism for children’s literature, in which the critic “invite[s] adults to read as children” by “taking into account personal, sub-cultural, experiential, and psychological differences between children and adults.”⁷ Though I am sympathetic to this idea, it remains closer to second-wave childhood studies in that it elicits children’s experiences but does not go further and seek to restructure norms and practices of reading for all literature. The other is the psychoanalyst Elisabeth Young-Bruehl’s use of the term on a par with negative terms such as “racism” and “sexism” as a means of identifying the ways that societies justify antichild prejudice and oppression.⁸ While, again, this notion is useful, it is important to identify not only what victimizes children but also what empowers them.

A third-wave childism of the kind that I propose faces unique methodological challenges. Most obviously, children have generally had less experience than adults in standing up for themselves. One distinction of being a child is a relative inexperience in asserting one’s own differences. In some areas children have more experience than adults, such as of the internal workings of educational systems or the complexities of child soldiering. But taken as a whole, the younger a human being, the less experience she is likely to bring to restructuring the social contexts in which she lives. Age actually makes a difference when it comes to the educational, economic, and political resources that are available to one for transforming socially entrenched norms. Put differently, while many groups face social marginalization, children’s marginalization is compounded by having, on the whole, less experience fighting marginalization in the first place.

As a result, childism calls for a new methodological approach in the humanities and the social sciences, one that I would broadly describe as a *hermeneutical ellipse*.⁹ An ellipse is a stretched out circle with two centers rather than one, like the orbit of the earth around the sun: a circle that is decentered, asymmetrical, distorted around a second focal point. This metaphor is meant to suggest an amendment to the traditional “hermeneutical circle” in which human experience is interpreted, first, in relation to its prior historical and cultural contexts and then, second, from the interpreter’s own unique point of view in response to those contexts.¹⁰ But this procedure

favors the greater interpretive power of adults, of those with greater educational and social resources in the world. The notion of a hermeneutical ellipse stretches this methodological circle, in a broadly poststructuralist fashion, to make it responsive not only to social agency but also to social difference. Understanding and practice need constantly to be *decentered* around other lived experiences.¹¹

The goal of scholarly and societal reflection, whether about children or not, should then involve both historical criticism and historical expansiveness. No interpreter can pretend to understand human experience without responding to the experiences of those who exercise relatively less control over the very interpretive enterprise itself. Only in this way might children be included in humanistic scholarship as not only objects but also subjects. For children participate in such a hermeneutical ellipse just as much as adults. From the moment of birth (perhaps even earlier), children begin both to absorb historically entrenched social norms *and* to respond to the differences in the experiences and understanding of others around them. Indeed, children may be faced with this methodological task even more sharply than adults, since, being newer to the world, they are called on to expand their own horizons radically. The point, however, is that social understanding depends not only on interpretive agency but also on the more complex capacity for reconstructing worlds in response to differences.

Such a hermeneutical ellipse also offers a more dynamic model for scholarly interdisciplinarity. What childism suggests is that diverse disciplines should not only work across normative boundaries but also open themselves up, in the process, to decentering and transforming their own disciplinary norms. The goal of an elliptical interdisciplinarity would be less the merging of disciplinary fields than the endless retesting of substantive and methodological disciplinary assumptions against diverse approaches to human experience.

Allow me to illustrate this childist methodology by reflecting on my own field of philosophical ethics. This field is instructive because it has in fact practiced forms of childism in its long historical past, albeit in highly limited ways. Here I would like to examine, in broad terms, how Western philosophical ethics has thereby simultaneously humanized and dehumanized children and how it may be restructured today along more radically childist lines.

The history of Western ethical reflection on children can be made visible

through a three-part typology. One way childhood has been approached can be termed "bottom up." In this view, children reveal humanity's original capabilities for goodness and love, qualities that should ground all social relations and institutions. While individuals and societies tend to become corrupted over time, it remains possible to recapture humanity's original inner purity. The dominant metaphor here is of human beings as plants: we are tender shoots that need to be nurtured from the ground up if we are to have fruitful, strong, and healthy moral societies.

This narrative has informed ethical thinking throughout history; it is manifested, for example, in the very first command of the Jewish Bible to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28), where children are not only literal consequences but also symbolic exemplars of prefallen moral goodness. The New Testament gospels similarly describe Jesus as an infant incarnation of God and his disciples as "children of God," and Jesus himself claims that "unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."¹² Early church theologians such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Cyprian, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom consistently hold up children as images for adult imitation on account of their simplicity, freedom from desire, sexual purity, and indifference to worldly status and wealth. The seventh-century Muslim Qur'an frequently describes children as "blessings" from Allah, by which it is meant that they are models of what societies should most value. Likewise, in modernity, the romantic philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau pictures children as "noble savages" whose natural freedom is the true basis for just and democratic societies. And the founder of modern Protestantism, Friedrich Schleiermacher, takes children to represent "the sacred sphere of nature" and the true "image of God" in this world.

This kind of bottom-up ethics, still powerful today, has both strengths and weaknesses when it comes to responding to the experiences of children. On the one hand, it has the obvious benefit of humanizing children profoundly, since it considers children's voices and agency to be socially foundational. On the other hand, it tends, as have similar approaches in connection with groups such as women and ethnic minorities, to sentimentalize children and thereby marginalize their actual moral struggles, complexities, and diversity.

An opposed childist approach to ethics can be labeled "top down." This view understands human nature as starting out in childhood as fundamen-

tally disordered and unruly, thus requiring an imposition from above of a rational, traditional, or divine order. Children here epitomize humanity's inborn selfishness, sin, or rebellion against moral law; because of this inborn immorality, human nature must be civilized into higher moral principles. The metaphors here are less likely to involve plants than animals: human nature needing training and discipline. The most influential ethicist here is the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, whose two great works in social theory, the *Republic* and the *Laws*, discuss childhood in depth and call for humanity's natural childish barbarism to be stamped out by a philosopher-king's imposition of rational order. Childhood is similarly understood as a model of moral disobedience in certain parts of the Bible; so we find Paul, for example, issuing an injunction to "put an end to childish ways." The early Christian theologian Augustine refers to babies' tantrums and self-centeredness as proof of humanity's "original sin." The Qur'an at times uses children as models of the need for a higher "submission" ("Islam") to spiritual discipline. The Protestant reformer Martin Luther asks: "For what purpose do we older folks exist, other than to care for, instruct, and bring up the young?"¹³ And in the modern period, René Descartes describes children's irrationality as the antithesis of his "ideal of cognitive autonomy," while Immanuel Kant views moral education as the discipline of "changing [children's] animal nature into human nature."¹⁴

Top-down childism, also still widely influential today, has its ethical advantages and disadvantages too. The most important advantage is that it views children as engaged from birth onward in the full human moral struggle: between desire and reason, self and society, earthliness and transcendence. The disadvantage is that children are thereby dehumanized in a different way: they are seen as incapable of their own moral agency and so as in need of passive adult training.

A third childist ethics from history can be called "developmental." Here, the start of human life is viewed as neither innocent nor unruly but morally neutral or blank. What is learned from childhood is that the moral capabilities of selves and societies must develop gradually over time. Humanity's natural potential turns out well or badly depending on its progress over individual life cycles and collective history. The metaphors here tend to feature nonliving objects: blank pages, lumps of wax, uncarved statues, uncut jewels.

For example, Aristotle argues that human nature is not initially irrational

but rather *prerational*, containing an implicit moral potential that may become realized in stages. The twelfth-century Muslim abu Hamid al-Ghazali views children as born "soft like the soft clay in which any seed can grow" or like "a precious uncut jewel devoid of any form of carving, which will accept being cut into any shape."¹⁵ Similarly, the Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas views ethical reasoning as developing according to "natural law" over seven-year phases of the human life cycle. The sixteenth-century humanist Desiderius Erasmus points to the ability of the child's mind to absorb both good and bad teachings over time. And, most influentially today, John Locke argues that children are not unruly animals but "blank slates" or "wax" ready to be written upon or molded in gradual phases with all the skills and discoveries of science and reason.

Ethical developmentalism is also influential today, particularly in moral psychology and the politics of "developing" nations, but it too has both its pros and its cons. A key advantage is that it refuses to either sentimentalize or demonize children but instead emphasizes their increasing moral capabilities. But its major drawback is that it views children principally through the lens of what they *are not yet*, namely fully "developed" adults. In this view, then, childhood is by definition a time of moral incompleteness or lack.

Such an analysis of history constitutes only half of our hermeneutical ellipse. It is also important, if philosophical ethics is to be transformed in light of children's experiences, to imagine new and more child-responsive understandings of ethical norms for today. Children's moral lives must not only deconstruct history but also reconstruct it more expansively. While the social sciences have much to learn from the kinds of humanistic history I have been describing, the humanities can in turn learn a great deal from social scientific descriptions of actual childhood experiences. Here I briefly sketch the outlines of a more fully childist ethics that I have formulated more extensively in my *Ethics in Light of Childhood*. I do so in response to three of the more basic ethical questions that are pursued throughout humanist history: What does childhood teach about humanity's basic moral being? What does it suggest about societies' true moral aims? And what does it require when it comes to moral obligations to one another? My answer, in a nutshell, is that being ethical means creating ever more expansive responses to one another's differences with respect to lived experience.

What can most importantly be learned about moral nature from child-

hood is that it is neither passively determined by social contexts nor purely free and agential but rather interdependently creative. By "interdependent creativity" I mean that, from birth to death, human beings reconstruct their already constructed moral worlds. This essentially poststructuralist view envisions human moral nature as traversing an endless moral ellipse: always already culturally constructed but always also de- and reconstructing. On this view, children are not passive recipients of top-down values, bringers of bottom-up moral agency, or blank slates developing their moral reason. Rather, they are active participants who engage in the same moral dynamics as adults by reconstructing their moral surroundings over time.

Consider the example of Ying-Ying Fry, a girl adopted from China as an infant by a family in San Francisco and author of a book titled *Kids Like Me in China*, which she wrote after revisiting her original orphanage at the age of eight.¹⁶ Having been abandoned outside a police station when she was only a few days old, Fry is profoundly shaped by larger forces in her moral environment: the likely painful decision of her birth mother, the larger context of her biological family, Chinese cultural norms, the desires of her national government, national global economic realities, and so on, beyond any conclusive reckoning. At the same time, even as an infant, she is faced with the moral task of creating meaning for herself, which she does by reinterpreting the sights, smells, and sounds that she now encounters, forming bonds with new caregivers and other children, engaging social and cultural constructs, and in general making sense of her experiences and relationships. Likewise, when she writes her book at age eight, Fry finds herself already conditioned by all her infant experiences plus a vast range of further influences, such as U.S. cultures, the beliefs and actions of her adopting parents, their larger families, and an endless array of social, class, economic, political, and global realities. Still, her moral nature continues to consist in the ability, as her book attests, to recreate the meanings of her experiences in the context of evolving moral horizons.

Studying the experiences of children like Fry allows philosophical ethicists to arrive at more profound and complex understandings of human moral nature overall. Methodologically speaking, the ethicist's task is no different from Fry's. Both must reconstruct their own already constructed moral horizons in light of new experiences involving different others. The difference is a matter only of degree: the time an adult ethicist has had to incorporate wider reaches of life. The moral task for every human being

is to create moral worlds from within a constructed, contested, and interdependent moral terrain. Or, put differently, it is to engage in moral play.¹⁷

If so, then childism also provides new perspectives on the age-old question of what moral life should strive to accomplish, what teleological aims or purposes it should pursue. As we have seen, various childisms of history have come to different conclusions. The moral aim can be understood variously as the achievement of higher social order, the fuller expression of in-born instincts, or the gradual progress of moral reason. My proposal is that the moral aim should be understood instead as the creation of increasingly expansive social horizons.

Let us take the example of new work in childhood studies on the diverse experiences of child soldiers.¹⁸ Throughout history and still today, children have fought in wars, revolutions, and resistance movements and have committed acts of mass violence and terrorism. They have been both heralded as heroic and liberating agents and bemoaned as manipulated and traumatized victims. Around five hundred thousand children are soldiers today. Perhaps the most famous is Ishmael Beah, author of a memoir recounting his experiences fighting for the government army as a young teenager in the Sierra Leone civil war.¹⁹ At age thirteen, Beah lost his entire family and village to rebel soldiers, wandered with friends for months in the countryside, was recruited to participate in countless killings, genocides, and rapes, and was eventually rescued by UNICEF and became a UN consultant.

What can be hoped for a species that, even in its earliest years, can embrace the worst kinds of violence but also achieve the heights of redemption and renewal? The answer cannot be found in collective order, individual self-expression, or developed rationality. Rather, both children and adults are called on to confront their own always-too-narrow perspectives and to struggle for more expansive relations with others around them. Like Beah, each of us is embedded in limited moral horizons that are nevertheless also capable of being broadened (or narrowed) through experience. Put differently, childhood reveals a deeper complexity to moral life's temporality. Inherited moral assumptions from the past ought to be continually decentered, over individual lifetimes and shared histories, in order, hopefully, that we might move in the direction of more fully interdependent human relations in the future.

Perhaps the most complex ethical question to consider from a childist point of view is that of obligations to each other. This question is particularly

difficult today because, ever since the Enlightenment, it has primarily been answered on the basis of respect for individual autonomy. This construct tends to suggest a distinction between morally competent and independent adults and morally incompetent and dependent children. Children's supposed lack of moral autonomy has been understood in various ways: in terms of their captivity to immediate wants and desires (Kant), their weakness in the face of worldly pressures (Rousseau), and their lack of moral development (Locke). But in all cases, children become secondary players in moral relations.

Consider, however, the example of Michael, a fifteen-month-old playing with a friend, taken from Gareth Matthews's studies of children's philosophical thinking: "[Michael] was struggling with his friend, Paul, over a toy. Paul started to cry. Michael appeared concerned and let go of the toy so that Paul would have it, but Paul kept crying. Michael paused, then gave his teddy bear to Paul, but the crying continued. Michael paused again, then ran into the next room, returned with Paul's security blanket, and offered it to Paul, who then stopped crying."²⁰

Michael is not acting premorally or amorally but morally. He recognizes that his friend is in distress and decides to respond. He may not respond in the same way as an older child or adult, but he recognizes at least two important things: that his own actions are causing his friend pain and that he has an obligation to come up with a creative solution that responds to his friend's particular experiences. Ethicists will miss these moral dimensions if they reduce moral obligations to mere respect for autonomy. Yes, Michael respects his friend. But, in a more complexly passive-active sense, he responds to his friend's different experience. He not only acts but also allows his friend to challenge and reshape his own thinking. His action is moral because it creates a new response to his friend's previously unseen alterity.

This more dynamic sense of moral obligation is better explained through poststructuralist ideas of responsibility to lived experiences of difference. As Emmanuel Levinas puts it, "My exposure to another in my responsibility for him . . . is exposure to the openness of a face."²¹ I cannot enter into the details of poststructuralism here, but I would suggest that it too could use a degree of childist revision. A pure openness to otherness would still marginalize children, because, on the whole, it assumes a subject who is resistant to openness (a critique already made by feminists), and it fails to recognize that children demand not only openness to them but also agency

on their behalf.²² As the example of Michael suggests, ethical obligations are more accurately described as responsibilities. These responsibilities do not require the destruction of the self as moral center but rather the *decentering* of its existing moral horizons. This elliptical obligation is neither to find a common rationality with the other nor to allow the other to deconstruct the self altogether. It is instead to respond to one's own and others' different life experiences by creating more expansively human relations over time. In this case, like Michael, each of us is forever just starting out on a journey of moral growth.

This revisioning of ethics is of course merely an illustration of the possibility for childist scholarship. I would like now to show, very briefly, how a childist ethics might be applied to a concern that has been central in the field of childhood studies, namely, children's rights. So long as children's rights remain the province of the social sciences alone, they cannot be provided the needed fundamental critique of their historical conceptual underpinnings. More specifically, what is needed is a radical reimagining of the meaning of *human* rights. Rights language has proven vital over history to the well-being of men and women and increasingly now also children. Yet when it comes to children in particular, the very notion of rights is faced with the peculiar challenge of having historically been grounded exclusively in the experiences of adults. Such is the larger historical and ethical context of the situation described by Annette Appell in this volume. The reason children lack so many rights today is not just that rights have not sufficiently been applied to them but more fundamentally that supposedly "human" rights are in fact primarily grounded in adulthood.

Human rights were conceived of by their Enlightenment architects as demarcating an explicitly adult public realm. This argument is made in three ways that roughly parallel the three historical forms of childism I have described. Locke, the very founder of the modern concept of rights, views rights as the way governments support individuals' "self-preservation" against each other; but, owing to his developmental perspective, he argues that children must therefore be treated as the "property" of their parents until they are rational enough to hold rights to self-preservation without harming themselves or others in the process.²³ Rousseau claims, in a bottom-up way, that human rights exist to ensure that all citizens are equally included in the formation of a society's "general will," except children must be excluded because they need a prolonged seclusion in the private home in

order to become strong enough to withstand being corrupted by society.²⁴ And Kant views rights in a top-down fashion as humanity's submitting itself to self-legislation by higher moral reason, as opposed to ruling itself by force or tradition, but, again, rights must be denied to children because children are overwhelmed by passion and desire and therefore incapable of rational autonomy.²⁵

Despite this unpromising ethical groundwork, however, the lives and experiences of children have provoked child advocates, governments, and the international community to respond by increasingly applying rights language to them.²⁶ This is most visible in the gradual expansion of international children's rights frameworks. The very first truly global agreement in the history of humankind, in fact, is the League of Nations' 1924 Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child, a one-page document that calls for what have since been termed five "provision" rights for children: to receive the means for development, nutrition, health, shelter, aid relief, and education.²⁷ Provision rights are essentially Lockean or developmental rights to the basic social goods needed for self-preservation. On what basis are they now extended to children? The implication is that complex and globalizing societies can no longer assume that children can solely depend on families for support, which is similar to what the then growing international labor movements and antipoverty drives (both of which already included children) likewise suggested. Locke's dichotomy between independent adults and dependent children ignores the ways in which both adults and children are in fact interdependent both in families and across societies.

The next great international children's rights agreement is the United Nations' 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which calls for guaranteeing children ten rights: six "provision" rights along with four more that have been called "protection" rights.²⁸ These are not rights *to* something but rights *against* harm from others: including, in this case, against racial, sexual, religious, political, and other kinds of discrimination; neglect, cruelty, trafficking, and exploitation; child labor; and separation from parents. Protection rights are basically Kantian or top-down kinds of rights because they impose a larger public order upon humanity's otherwise violent tendencies. They are now, however, extended to children on the basis, it appears, not so much of children's autonomous freedom as of their passive suffering from abuse by those with greater power. The founding purpose of the United Nations, as expressed in its 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (an

almost entirely protection rights document), was to prevent future horrors of the kind that had been perpetrated during World War II. The mass violence and genocides of this period not only did not spare children but very often they affected children more than adults. Indeed, children may be the social group *most* in need of societies' protection rights, and so protection rights themselves must be understood less as preservers of social order than as responses to social vulnerability.

Finally, and most importantly, the United Nations' 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most widely ratified document in all of history (every country except the United States, Somalia, and South Sudan is party to it). It outlines forty children's rights and in significantly greater breadth and detail than before. Approximately eighteen are "provision" rights and approximately sixteen are extensions of "protection" rights. But it contains a third and new kind of right for children, the six so-called "participation" rights: the right to be heard, the right to freedom of expression, freedom of thought and religion, freedom of association, the right to privacy, and the right to access to media and information. Participation rights are closer to Rousseau's bottom-up model in that they seek to include in the general public will the agency, voices, and citizenship of all. The main, though not the only, reason these rights are now extended to children is because of a growing sense of children's social agency led by the then new childhood studies movement, which was instrumental in the convention's drafting.

I cannot enter here into the various explanations that have been offered for why rights should be extended to children and not just adults.²⁹ I would just like to observe instead these types of children's rights movements ultimately demand a fundamentally transformed understanding of human rights as such. For what is really happening, however implicitly and incompletely, is that the very notion of human rights is being expanded in response to children's previously excluded lived experiences. This shift can be described, using the ethical considerations I have outlined, as a movement toward a view of human rights as societies' creative responses to human difference. On this view, the purpose of rights is not to guarantee, encourage, or protect individual agency but to decenter collective life around humanity's widest possible experiential diversity. Existing structures of social, cultural, and power relations should constantly be deconstructed and reconstructed in order, all at once, to provide for those they exclude, protect those they do harm, and increase participation for those they silence. In

short, human rights exist to help societies expand their moral imaginations and thereby grow in humanity.

I have proposed that childism offers a more transformative method for responding to children's experiences, both in scholarship and in societies. Rather than simply applying adult-constructed norms to children's lives, thinking and action should engage in a self-critical hermeneutical ellipse in which children's diverse differences are able to decenter historical assumptions and practices. What is more, childism is not just for children. It also aims to offer new methodologies for thought and action in light of considerations of age. I have shown how this method might be put to use in my own field of philosophical ethics, both as a means for gaining new perspectives on historical constructions and as a catalyst for imaginative new thinking. Ethics should move beyond its traditional adult-centered bases in autonomy, social order, and rational development to embrace more broadly humanistic bases in responsiveness to the diversity of experience. Likewise, human rights will be adequate to children's lives only if they are fundamentally reconceptualized as social responses to human difference.

Childism also has implications for larger humanistic study. The humanities, in my view, do not live up to their name if their very practices and concepts systematically marginalize a third of the planet's human beings. Given, however, that it is chiefly going to be adults who conduct humanistic scholarship, a more elliptical methodology is needed in which difference is empowered to transform historical assumptions. Childism can function similarly to feminism in many respects. But it should go beyond feminism and not finally depend on the othered group in question having to lead the scholarly and political charge. Childhood suggests that a more inclusive methodology means not only giving voice to experiences of otherness but also, in an endless cycle, expanding structures of shared understanding in response.

Finally, childism has implications for the field of childhood studies. This is an area in which the humanities can contribute to greater methodological complexity. My view is that the distinction between humanistic and scientific scholarship, while useful for establishing disciplinary boundaries, can also obscure larger scholarly goals. In the case of children, the larger goal should be not only to understand children's constructed agencies, or even to include children as research participants, but above all to respond to

children's lived experiences by transforming understandings and practices. Only in this rather elliptical way, I submit, can the table be reconstructed to include children.

Notes

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3. Pia Haudrup Christensen, "Children's Participation in Ethnographic Research: Issues of Power and Representation," *Children and Society* 18.2 (2004): 174.
4. Barry Percy-Smith and Nigel Thomas, eds., *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation: Perspectives from Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2010); John Wall "Can Democracy Represent Children? Toward a Politics of Difference," *Childhood* 19.1 (2012): 86–100.
5. Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Leslie Heywood, *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
6. Marc Jans, "Children as Citizens: Towards a Contemporary Notion of Child Participation," *Childhood* 11.1 (2004): 40.
7. Peter L. Hunt, *Criticism, Theory, and Children's Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 191, 198.
8. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Childism: Confronting Prejudice against Children* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).
9. See John Wall, "Childhood Studies, Hermeneutics, and Theological Ethics," *Journal of Religion* 86.4 (2006): 523–48.
10. Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, trans. John B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
11. See my *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 87–110 and 167–77.
12. Matthew 18:3–5; Mark 9:33–37; Luke 9:46–48.
13. Martin Luther, *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 45, ed. Walther I. Brandt (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 351–56.
14. Anthony Krupp, *Reason's Children: Childhood in Early Modern Philosophy* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2009), 28, 31; Immanuel Kant, *Education*, trans. Annette Churton (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 11, 6.
15. Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *Revival of Religious Learnings*, trans. Fazlul Karim (Karachi, Pakistan: Darul-Ishaat, 1993), 101–2, 64.

16. Ying Ying Fry, with Amy Klatzkin, *Kids Like Me in China* (St. Paul, MI: Yeong and Yeong, 2001), 2–3.

17. See John Wall, “All the World’s a Stage: Childhood and the Play of Being,” in *The Philosophy of Play*, ed. Wendy Russell and Emily Ryall (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

18. See Daniel Thomas Cook and John Wall, eds., *Children and Armed Conflict: Cross-Disciplinary Investigations* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). See also James Marten’s chapter in this volume.

19. Ishmael Beah, *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

20. Gareth Matthews, *The Philosophy of Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 57.

21. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being; or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 180.

22. See my *Moral Creativity: Paul Ricoeur and the Poetics of Possibility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

23. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, in *The Works of John Locke*, vol. 5 (London: Sharpe and Son, 1823), 126–33, 138, 179–80.

24. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Charles Frankel (New York: Hafner, 1947) 4, 9.

25. Immanuel Kant, *The Philosophy of Law: An Exposition of the Fundamental Principles of Jurisprudence as the Science of Right*, trans. William Hastie (Edinburgh: Clark, 1887), 114–17.

26. I have traced this evolution in detail in “Human Rights in Light of Childhood,” *International Journal of Children’s Rights* 16.4 (2008): 523–43.

27. See United Nations, “Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child,” <http://www.un-documents.net/gdrc1924.htm>. See also UNICEF’s classification of children’s rights in “Convention on the Rights of the Child,” http://www.unicef.org/crc/index_30177.html.

28. See University of Minnesota Human Rights Library, “Declaration of the Rights of the Child,” <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/kldrc.htm>.

29. See, for example, Michael Freeman, “Why It Remains Important to Take Children’s Rights Seriously,” *International Journal of Children’s Rights* 15.1 (2007): 5–23, and Barbara Bennett Woodhouse, *Hidden in Plain Sight: The Tragedy of Children’s Rights from Ben Franklin to Lionel Tate* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).