



Introduction: Ethics of Childhood

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Abstract

This introduction provides a brief overview of the field of childhood ethics. It briefly outlines current debates about children’s autonomy and vulnerability, children’s rights, the relationship between children and parents, and (social and global) justice for children.

Keywords Ethics of childhood · Children · Autonomy · Vulnerability · Justice

Ethics and philosophy of childhood is an emerging field. There are now not only a number of papers and books available, but also two handbooks that provide an overview of the field (Gheaus, Calder, and De Wispelaere 2018; Drerup and Schweiger 2019a). However, the ethics of childhood is by no means limited to academic philosophy; it is also being pursued in the social sciences, law, and education. This is not surprising at all. In the area of law, questions of children’s rights are virulent and, based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, also widely debated (Vandenhoe et al. 2015). Here, many overlaps exist with questions of ethics and political philosophy, which, while primarily devoted to moral rights, always have their political, legal and practical implementation in mind as well (Archard 2004). A variety of moral rights only make sense if they are also implemented as legal rights. In social science research on childhood, several ethically charged paradigms are prevalent and guiding (Kehily 2009). On the one hand, children’s rights are often seen as the basis here as well; on the other hand, the status of children as distinct agents and their claims to respect and recognition are repeatedly emphasized (Mühlbacher and Sutterlüty 2019). Childhood studies do not see children as passive objects of research, but as active subjects. Behind this are undoubtedly ethical convictions that are critical of prevailing social conceptions of children and childhood. That pedagogy, especially

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the philosophy of education, cannot do without an ethics of childhood is not surprising. After all, at its core, it too is concerned with questions of justice and rights, with the appropriate treatment of children by adults and institutions.

The area of the ethics of childhood can be structured along a few central concepts. First, the autonomy of the child is perhaps the most important. Autonomy as a quality worthy of respect and as a moral value to be protected and enabled is arguably one of the central ethical notions, not only but especially in all liberal ethics and political philosophies. It is therefore not surprising that the questions of what rights and duties children have, what they are morally entitled to, and how adults and the state may treat them are frequently discussed with reference to autonomy (Mullin 2014; Noggle 2002; Betzler 2015). Obviously, children are not autonomous agents like adults, at least not all children. Here, a challenge of the ethics of childhood becomes immediately apparent, where it can certainly learn from the differentiated findings of the social sciences, namely that it is necessary to better grasp the child as a subject. Children are an extremely heterogeneous group of people. However, this heterogeneity is not distributed randomly, but can be determined and described along the lines of age and developmental stages. Of course, there is variability and not all children of the same age have the same abilities or the same level of autonomy. Nevertheless, if autonomy in ethics is considered important, it is necessary to start not from one ethics for children, but from many ethics related to different ages and levels of development. In some essays, at least, the two major stages, childhood and adolescence, are taken seriously in their differences (Betzler 2021; Franklin-Hall 2013; Anderson and Claassen 2012). Whether it makes sense to subsume the ethics of adolescence under the ethics of childhood, as is often done in philosophy, may well be doubted. After all, children and adolescents differ very much in their (morally relevant) abilities, including their autonomy, which is indeed recognized on the legal level in almost all countries.

The findings are similar for other central concepts of childhood ethics such as vulnerability or justice. The intuitively plausible starting point that children are more vulnerable than adults and therefore have different rights and duties and need special protection is not very helpful in its generality when it comes to concrete ethical questions (Gheaus 2017; Giesinger 2019; Macleod 2015; Schweiger and Graf 2017). Not only is it first necessary to clarify why a characteristic such as vulnerability constitutes an ethical concept at all, i.e., why it is suitable for substantiating moral claims, but it is also necessary to specify what is meant by the special or greater vulnerability of children. That social relations and especially social and political orders and institutions are to be designed in such a way that children are not harmed by them is only the starting point for the discussion of how this is then to be achieved in practice and what trade-offs with other moral considerations might be necessary here.

This reference to the balancing of moral claims is discussed frequently, especially with regard to parents. The relationship between children's and parents' rights and responsibilities is a central question in the ethics of childhood as well as the family as social, legal and moral institution (Alstott 2004; Brighouse and Swift 2014; Archard 2003). Here, a convergence of social science research on childhood and the philosophical ethics of childhood is striking in that in both there is a preponderance of voices that emphasize the independent moral status of children and thus also take

a critical view of the family and the parent-child relationship, primarily from a child-centered perspective. This is not surprising when one realizes that globally, children still represent a dominated and little respected population, mostly subordinated to their parents. Again, the concepts of autonomy and vulnerability are important to the debate; after all, the subordination of children to the control of their parents is often justified on the basis of their lack of autonomy and reason and their need for protection. In many modern societies, it can be observed that while children are seen as particularly worthy of protection and value, in whom parents also invest a great deal of time and resources, at the same time traditional conservative views of hierarchy in the family remain present. Progressive children's rights that curtail the rights of parents are still unlikely to win elections. This does not mean that there is no moral and social progress in this direction. Although the prohibition of corporal punishment (Lenta 2012) is socially and legally established in only a few countries in Europe, there it has led to a change in this norm and practice within a few decades. Corporal punishment is now largely considered a taboo in these societies, especially in public and in institutions (which is not to say that it does not occur). Increased attention to abuse and exploitation has also led to some improvements. New issues that also arise for the ethics of childhood are new conceptions of family beyond biology and traditional role models (Gheaus 2012; Grill 2020; Cutas and Hohl 2021). Legal recognition is still pending here in many cases, for example, of co-parenting or of shared parenting among several people or poly parents.

As a last important concept of the ethics of childhood I would like to mention justice. Theories of both social and global justice have long been blind to children (Macleod 2010; Schweiger and Graf 2015; Drerup and Schweiger 2019b). Justice was made and conceived by adults for adults. Children often came into view only as passive recipients, for example, of humanitarian aid. The fact that the situation of many children is very bad from a global point of view, i.e. that they suffer particularly from poverty, exploitation and war and displacement, certainly poses some theoretical challenges, which require both a differentiation of the concept of vulnerability and the question of the status of children as profiteers and agents of global justice. Which goods children are entitled to for reasons of justice, and whether classical concepts like resources, rights or capabilities are suitable for them, is part of the philosophical debate as well as the questions of justification, i.e. why children have a moral claim to them (especially contract theories seem to be unsuitable for children here, but this also depends on the conception). Social justice, which is based on the productivity of citizens, i.e. wants to distribute jointly generated wealth, often fails to take children adequately into account (in some cases they appear here only as costs or expensive hobbies (Olsaretti 2013)). The fact that children in many rich countries find radically different life chances based on the socioeconomic status of their parents demands that social justice be conceptualized both between children and between children and adults. Demographic change in many countries, which further shifts the balance of power in favor of the older population, raises new questions of distribution and power, as do all considerations of intergenerational justice, provided that not only the relationship between two adult cohorts is taken into account here, but also the fact that future adults are children today. The climate crisis has given these questions a particular urgency and radicality - significantly, in many countries it is also adoles-

cents who are shaping the protests for political change, which could also serve ethics and philosophy to think again more carefully about the agency of young people.

The texts in this Special Issue can, of course, only shed light on the ethics of childhood. However, they powerfully demonstrate the vitality, innovation, breadth, and timeliness of this new field. They range from applied ethics in the field of child protection and child and youth welfare and the state's treatment of mature minors to questions of children's self-respect and the proper relationship between children and adults.

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