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book review of *childhood. An essay on human condition*, by Michael Eskin

Eskin, Michael. *Childhood: An Essay on the Human Condition*. Königshausen & Neumann, 2024.

rhea kuthoore[1]
rutgers university, new jersey, united states of america
orcid id: 0009-0004-6512-1484

The book is divided into three parts. Part One, "*Where We Are: The Age of Childhood,*" presents the central argument that childhood is not superseded nor supplanted by adulthood (33). In other words, we remain children throughout our lives — in a non-figurative and non-developmental sense (33). Childhood, as defined here, is an ontological-existential concept, rather than an ontogenetic, biological-psychological, developmental and moral category referring to the early stages of a person's life (48). Parts Two and Three support this argument: Part Two addresses the question, "What is childhood?" while Part Three explores the ethical implications of this perspective.

An important takeaway of the argument is the claim that we have misunderstood the human condition, and neglected how childhood is the fundamental characteristic of the human condition (56). The author challenges the widely accepted belief that our awareness of mortality, or finitude, uniquely defines the human condition (41). The argument is that while humans possess the concept of finitude—unlike animals such as dogs, birds, or bears—this idea alone is too weak to be the defining feature of the human condition (41). The author asks why other specifically human notions, like 'god,' 'zombie,' 'infinity,' or 'hell,' should not hold the position that mortality holds (41). While I see the author's point, I believe they overlook the profound influence that our awareness of life's finitude has on us. Though other ideas contribute to shaping who we are, the intuition that much of our desires and actions are driven by this awareness of finality cannot be easily dismissed. This is evident from the fact that even the other

[1] E-mail: kuthoorerhea@gmail.com

notions mentioned by the author, such as ‘god’, ‘zombie’, ‘infinity’ or ‘hell’, are indeed ideas that are closely linked to death.

Another important takeaway of the argument is in its challenge to the idea that childhood is a deficient, not-yet-fully-developed form of adulthood; and a pre-rational, immature, early stage in a person’s natural development leading to adulthood (49). On page 238, the author lists numerous historical philosophical views on children, and how they all emphasise childhood in a negative light. This book critically examines how “acting like a child” is often used as an insult, while “acting like an adult” is seen as a mark of maturity. The author counters this perspective, stating, “Childhood should no longer be viewed as a mere developmental phase that we outgrow. Instead, it will be recognized as the very beacon of humanity's future” (56).

This theme aligns with the work of several philosophers who argue that “we remain children throughout our lives.” For Nietzsche, the “child” symbolizes creativity, playfulness, and openness, traits that can persist over time. Similarly, Kohan describes childhood as an experience of timelessness, often found in play, art, and philosophy. Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Reverie,* explores how childhood imagination lingers throughout life. Post-structuralists like Derrida view childhood as an unfinished state, one that is never fully left behind nor completely definable. Agamben, in *Infancy and History,* argues that while adulthood is shaped by linguistic and social constraints, infancy remains a space of freedom and non-conformity. Walter Benjamin, in *Berlin Childhood Around 1900,* emphasizes how childhood is retrievable through memory, shaping our self-awareness. In *The Human Condition,* Hannah Arendt introduces the concept of natality to describe childhood as an ongoing possibility for renewal and transformation. Similarly, Deleuze speaks of “becoming child,” where childhood is not tied to age but is a space for transformation. M. Gubar's kinship model suggests that childhood and adulthood form a continuum, differing by degree rather than kind, showing that these stages are interconnected rather than separate.

In addition to these authors, many scholars in Childhood Studies are re-examining the distinction between childhood and adulthood by exploring

alternative temporalities.A common thread in all these perspectives is that childhood is a state of being in space and time, not merely a phase that ends. It is something that endures and should be nurtured for human flourishing. While one might argue that these accounts romanticize childhood by highlighting only its virtues, they offer valuable responses to the traditionally negative views of children and childhood. Even if these perspectives are not universal or essential, they provide important insights into understanding childhood.

part 2

In Part 2, the author addresses the question, "What is childhood?" by suggesting that childhood is like a wheel with seven spokes, each representing a "fundamental existential condition under which we live and experience" (60). These seven spokes are: intensity through touch, uncertainty from exposure, permeability due to vulnerability, dependence on relativity, strength from size, hunger from lack, and departure due to displacement. The author argues that while these conditions are especially significant in our early years, they continue to shape our lives well into adulthood. I'll briefly outline each of these spokes.

Touch is not simply a biological sense, but an ontological category that represents the connection and intimacy present in our early experiences and that persists throughout life. Exposedness refers to the physical and emotional vulnerability children face from birth. This is evident in how children are dependent on caregivers for their survival, and hence, are vulnerable. Nookishness describes a child's instinct to seek out spaces of protection, security, and shelter, serving as a necessary counterbalance to their vulnerability. Relativity highlights how children understand their strengths, weaknesses, and abilities through comparisons with peers, siblings, and adults. Their learning and experiences are fluid and shaped by their environment. Size reflects how a child's physical stature affects power dynamics in relationships and fuels their imagination about the larger world. As we grow, both physically and emotionally, we still encounter moments when we feel small in relation to greater forces. Lack identifies how childhood is marked by a lack of knowledge, experience, and

control, leading to constant learning, growth, and wonder. Even as adults, we continue to experience desires and gaps that keep us in a state of "becoming." Finally, displacement captures how children frequently experience changes in routines and circumstances, driven by caregivers' control. Although this un-rootedness is more common in childhood, change, loss, and uncertainty remain part of adult life.

Overall, Eskin demonstrates two key points to reach his conclusion: first, that childhood inherently embodies intimacy, vulnerability, a protective instinct, relativity, smallness, lack, and displacement; and second, that these foundational experiences persist throughout our lives. It is evident how these conditions manifest in the early lives of many individuals and how they can persist too. However, we can also identify instances where they are either entirely absent or significantly diminished in the later stages of life. For example, consider a person who is extremely wealthy and powerful, or someone who lacks the need for intimacy. In such cases, the question arises: how can we argue that such people continue to embody their inner child or that the absence of the same inhibits their flourishing?

part 3

In Part 3, the author tackles the question, "How ought we to be?" by introducing the pueritist imperative. This imperative considers "the entirety of the human child as a multifaceted, ontologically-existentially lacking, hungry, desiring, collusive-collective being," and articulates what we ought to do so that we can continue to be what we already are (263). In essence, the author presents the pueritist imperative as a way of being that embraces all seven aspects of childhood, even those that may seem like obstacles to overcome (323). Unlike Kantian ethics, which aims for an autonomous, self-sufficient individual, this approach recognizes that we are always interdependent (263). The main task of the ethics of childhood is to guide us in fully embracing our dependence and heteronomy, not merely resigning ourselves to these states but actively becoming

and willing ourselves to be as dependent and heteronomous as possible, in the most ethically creative and transformative way (286).

So, how can we live in a way that aligns with an ethic of Childhood, given our societal obligations as adults? The author proposes four Pueritist attitudes: (1) the attitude of the Child-as-Child, which reflects our most fundamental, intrinsic identity as children of our parents, regardless of our age; (2) the attitude of the Child-as-Parent, which considers how we relate to humanity at large, including ourselves and our parents, irrespective of age; (3) the attitude of the Parent-as-Parent, which embodies our responsibility and care as parents to those recognized by society as our children; and (4) the attitude of the Parent-as-Child, where we acknowledge our essential condition of Childhood as parents. The first two attitudes represent the wisdom of Childhood, while the latter two reflect the wisdom of Parenthood (290).

Let us quickly discuss the four clauses for better understanding. The attitude of the Child-as-Child involves accepting the role of being used as a means to an end, both by and for the sake of the Child in others and in ourselves (293). By consistently and unavoidably demanding the pure altruism of Parenthood—distinct from merely expecting it—the Child-as-Child has not yet established relationships and relies solely on the dependability of family. This attitude introduces the pueritist imperative into the world, thereby creating the Parent-as-Parent, who is borne by and born of the Child-as-Child (293). In other words, the attitude of the Child-as-Child requires us to acknowledge the pure egoism within each of us and to be present for it. Conversely, the Parent-as-Parent calls on us to recognize the pure altruism in everyone and to support it.

Something very interesting occurs when the Child-as-Child transitions to the Child-as-Parent. The purely egoistic Child not only embraces the pure altruism of Parenthood toward itself but also extends this altruism to its own parent (296). In this way, our child becomes our parent, and in turn, our parent realizes they have always been a child. This dynamic is evident in the way we often hear adults marvel at how much they learn from children—about life, themselves, and more (296). Moreover, it's not surprising when we recognize that the Child-as-Parent is

the original teacher of the Parent-as-Child in the art of being human, both as a Parent and a Child (296).

So what does all this mean in concrete ethical terms?

First, adult children must adopt the pueritist imperative toward their elderly parents (310). Second, the Parent-as-Child is always already engaged by the Child-as-Parent: we are perpetually our children's children, which enables us to become parents in return (310). What's intriguing about this imperative is that it reverses the traditional view, where the parent seeks to perpetuate themselves through the child; instead, it is the children who perpetuate themselves (310). This suggests that parenting involves teaching to not seek detachment (323), to embrace and grow through the uncertainty of one's condition (324), to accept one's inevitable permeability (336), and to avoid striving for self-reliance, independence, and autonomy in conventional ways (337). It encourages us to delve deeper into our weaknesses, as these can be our strengths, and to continue nurturing the insatiability of childhood without falling into greed.

Here, one must ask: doesn't the ethics of Childhood also need to teach us under what circumstances and to what extent we should honor each of these Pueritist attitudes? Is it not risky to undervalue detachment, certainty, self-reliance, and similar qualities? How can we maintain the seven spokes of childhood as we age, especially in light of societal conditioning? Additionally, how do we account for the variations in each of our childhoods within this ethical framework?

There are three important stakes in such an ethics of Childhood. The first is that "we ought to suspend ethical teleology in the name of the child and to stop, once and for all, acting as though the adult were an ethically advanced being, imparting its moral prudence and wisdom to the 'naïve,' 'not-yet-morally-mature' child" (324). The second is that there is nothing to remedy or unlearn about the condition of Childhood—such as the child's presumed unreasonableness, irrationality, emotionality, insatiability, unruliness, self-centeredness, or egoism—in favor of reason, rationality, reserve, self-control, restraint, obedience, and so on. On the contrary, rather than being stifled and deformed into adulthood

due to a misguided ethical teleology driven by what I have termed the adult bias in ethics, the child should be allowed to flourish in and alongside the condition of Childhood (324). The third point is that we must stop burdening children with any generational debts toward their parents (324). The author notes that when childhood is disavowed and suppressed, it often reemerges through the back door, distorted and disfigured, manifesting in the adult's infantile and reckless behavior. This, in turn, casts childhood in an undeservedly negative light (345).

In conclusion, Eskin's remarkable book makes an important contribution towards understanding the human condition — as that which revolves around qualities that are not only present extensively in our early ages, but that extend into adulthood. Such work allows us to not only understand ourselves better but also encourages an ethics of childhood. This will generate important implications in the field of childhood and philosophy. One contribution will be to shift the power dynamic between children and adults and reduce the discrimination against children and their voices. The second will be to allow adults to be in touch with the ways in which they are children themselves and thereby embody a liberatory way of parenting. The third will be to value the qualities of childhood in children themselves, rather than shed a negative light on these qualities. Rather than striving for an ideal way of being a child or an adult that is loaded with unreal expectations, such a philosophy points its fingers towards what *is* and hence, towards an ethics of possibility.

references

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