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childhood epistemology in *alice's adventures in wonderland*: an autonomous and experience-based field of knowledge

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The authors of the present essay have offered a detailed introduction to the theories it builds upon in the field of children epistemology, focusing on the work of Matthew Lipman (1969; on children and philosophical inquiry), Miranda Fricker (2007), and Dewey, J. (1938; on experience-based learning), Foucault (1977; on knowledge-power relations), as well as on contemporary research conducted by Corsaro (2018) and Prout (2005), Burman (2016) and Oswell (2013); Alanen (2009) and Qvortrup (2011), Burman, (2016) and Spyrou (2018).

What distinguishes the present study from other “philosophical studies of childhood that take children’s intellectual capacities seriously (Matthews, 1994; Schapiro, 1999) often addressing children as subjects of normative debate”, as the authors argue, is that “it renders childhood knowledge visible at textual and discursive levels through epistemic power relations”. Crucially, the authors' findings in the current research fill in a gap in literature by demonstrating “that literary narratives are not limited to thematic, aesthetic, or pedagogical readings, but also contain the potential to contribute to theoretical debates in epistemology. In this respect, the study offers a critical contribution to **an** interdisciplinary dialogue between childhood studies, literary theory, and philosophy of knowledge, positioning childhood epistemology at the center of children’s literature research”.

The authors have posed the research questions and have discussed the theoretical background in a clear way, encompassing a range of philosophical questions, before inviting the readers to immerse themselves in to the textual analysis in the second part of the essay:

This study approaches *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* within the context of childhood epistemology and seeks to answer the following central question: How does the text construct childhood knowledge as an alternative, legitimate, and autonomous knowledge regime in relation to adult epistemology? Accordingly, the article aims to reveal

the epistemic status of children's modes of knowledge production, the reasons why this knowledge is invalidated, and the ways in which the text deconstructs adult-centered conceptions of knowledge. This approach aligns with contemporary childhood studies that conceptualize childhood as a socially and cognitively autonomous category (Corsaro, 2018; Prout, 2005).

In the section 'Theoretical background', the authors elaborate on the existing approaches to childhood epistemology, starting from the dominant paradigm in pedagogical theories and developmental Psychology 'for a long time' perceiving the child in a state of 'becoming'. The authors offer examples of theorists in the above field, such as Piaget (1952) and Schapiro (1999), who challenge the above paradigm, for the reason that they have "conceptualiz[ed] childhood not simply as a developmental stage or a preparatory phase for adult epistemology, but as an autonomous epistemic position operating through distinctive forms of experience, uncertainty, and questioning". The author proceeds with elaborating on contemporary sociological approaches treating childhood as a social construction.

The authors observe, however, that "there is a noticeable lack of studies" in the existing studies that do not "directly problematize the epistemic status of childhood knowledge and its conflict with adult-centered regimes of rationality [...] Although the existing literature in childhood studies frequently discusses childhood in terms of social agency, generational order, or cultural negotiation (Lee, 2001; Oswell, 2013), the epistemic status problem outlined above has not been addressed directly". For this reason, as the authors elaborate, "this article defines childhood epistemology as a critical analytical field that renders visible the child's experience-based, contextual, and plural knowledge production in opposition to epistemic orders in which the validity of knowledge is determined by adult norms, authority figures, and regimes of rationality."

In particular, the authors discuss the sociological and historical perspectives in length, including the perspective developed within the framework of the new sociology of childhood that centers on its positioning within a generational order (Alanen, 2009; Qvortrup, 2011). The authors continue, arguing that “Relations between children and adults are shaped not only by age-based biological differences but also by structural inequalities produced in knowledge, authority, and decision-making processes. This theoretical framework provides a critical ground for understanding why and how childhood knowledge is marginalized by adult-centered epistemologies (Burman, 2016; Spyrou, 2018)”.

The authors clearly set the aims of this study that seeks to fill this gap in the aforementioned theories and practices, by “seeking to define childhood as a domain of ‘being,’ characterized by its own logic, experience-based truths, and autonomous epistemic regime. In this respect, the article aims to fill a gap in literature by offering an epistemological deconstruction through a literary text” – *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

As the writers ingeniously discuss,

in this context, the ‘adult rationality’ that stands in opposition to childhood knowledge and marginalizes it, should be defined not merely as an age-based biological category, but as a specific epistemic regime rooted in Victorian utilitarianism and the rigid positivism of the Enlightenment. This regime constructs knowledge as hierarchical, categorizable, linguistically absolute, and as a form of property serving instrumental utility. Meaning within this rationality is fixed through a predetermined system of social and logical rules. Accordingly, the authority represented by the adult figures in *Wonderland* functions as a normative apparatus of pressure that does not allow for ambiguity, bodily fluidity, or linguistic play. What Alice confronts is not simply the inconsistency of individual characters, but the rigid and linear

epistemic order itself’.

Further expanding on the above, the researchers have selected a children’s author who “directly challenged” the Victorian utilitarianism and conceptualizations of divine omnipotence by presenting in his writings a ‘refreshing alternative to the didactic texts of his times’.

Simultaneously, the authors have investigated a theoretical approach to literature as a genre that renders the reader/researcher an active role in constructing new knowledge, in this case, through challenging the adult-driven didactic pedagogical frameworks and through offering the children a profound and overlooked philosophical voice. In this context, the present authors fill in a gap in Literature through dissociating themselves from traditional interpretations of *Alice in Wonderland* as a fantasy narrative and of its protagonist, as a pedagogical or symbolic figure. Significantly, as the authors also argue, the very literary narrative “renders visible the applicability of epistemic injustice theory within adult-child relations on a concrete analytical level”.

The essay is structured very carefully in many layers, offering a profound and groundbreaking exploration of the theoretical approaches to childhood epistemology. It provides reasons why childhood epistemology should be conceptualized as an autonomous, experience-based field of knowledge in relation to adult-centred epistemologies (though a diagram providing the fundamental distinctions between the two, building on Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Prout, 2005), before proceeding with fulfilling its promise, that is, a thematic analysis process that sheds light on the Epistemological Inconsistency of Adult Authority and the selection of this universal literary text, Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* – an 1865 novel that has planted the seeds of resilience against Victorian morality and utilitarianism, against those power structures conceptualizing knowledge as “a form of property serving instrumental utility” – their impact reaching as far as the

current challenging times. These seeds have since grown into a blossoming tree in the genre of World Literature as they have addressed a world that “makes visible a child’s experienced-based and plural knowledge production”.

Following the theoretical background analysis, the author offers a clear outline of methods and research design – that is, the analysis of *Wonderland* by means of an interpretive and theoretical (qualitative) text analysis method within the context of childhood studies and epistemology literature. The author explains that “to 'bring forth' the epistemic status of childhood within a narrative dominated by adult discourses, it is necessary to capture this epistemological inequality not through numerical data alone, but through in-depth interpretation and discourse analysis”, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase Thematic Analysis that focuses on coding, category construction, and thematization, thus enabling the authors to transform complex data into meaningful insights through a coherent presentation.

The authors have selected “specific scenes [from *Alice in Wonderland*] that intensively contain themes of knowledge production in childhood, questioning attitudes, conflict with authority, and learning through uncertainty”. The analysis is well-founded and has provided a wealth of data complying with the criteria of credibility, transferability and dependability, including a Scene-Based Comparison of the Epistemological Functions of Childhood. The analysis focuses on the child's (Alice’s) reactions to an adult-centred world, and interpretes Alice's *confusion* as “an effect of estrangement that reveals the internal inconsistencies of authority” – against traditional readings of the text. Alice “exposes the opposition between childhood epistemology and adult epistemology”, questioning the latter's legitimacy and “suspending the epistemic framework itself”. By the end of the analysis of three key scenes, Advice from a Caterpillar, A Mad Tea-Party, and The Queen’s Croquet Ground, the reader has delved into the deeper layers of the text and has conceptualized that “knowledge is a fragile and contextual process

rather than a fixed, linear, and hierarchical structure. It functions as a process continuously reconstructed through experience, bodily encounters, and linguistic interaction”.

Significantly, the present authors' high level of proficiency in close reading has enabled a very clear understanding of the narrator's role in “constructing this critique not through explicit didactic judgment, but through a distant and ironic mode of presentation” exposing thus the “fragilities of the adult-centred epistemological structures” through the power of narration, and compelling the reader “to align their epistemic position with Alice's”. Empathizing with Alice, a perceptive reader detects the “adult language’s failure to provide a vocabulary for fluid and multiple identities” and is compelled, alongside Alice, to spurt out the following, in an act of resistance against the “conceptual reservoir” enforced upon her making it impossible for her to vocalize her experiencing of the world :

‘I don't know who I am’. **The** present authors' close analysis of that particular scene in Wonderland depicting the linguistic chaos Alice encounters at the tea-party, is outstanding.

Crucially, and summing up the reasons why the present essay has contributed significant knowledge to the field of philosophy and education, the authors have built on Fricker’s (2007) theory of epistemic injustice to provide an alternative approach that “offers a strong analytical framework for explaining the systematic invalidation of children’s testimonies through adult norms such as rationality and coherence.” The authors have provided solid evidence for the above through a detailed textual analysis, putting forward the following argument at the start of the present essay: rather than probing into merely methodological problems in children epistemology, it is “distrust toward childhood knowledge” that essentially constitutes a structural issue limiting children’s epistemic agency”.

By suspending adult-centered rational knowledge, as the authors conclude,

“Carroll’s narrative constructs childhood experience as an experience-based epistemological field defined by openness to error, uncertainty, and transformation.” Another key concept that the authors shed light on, is that “within this context, learning is not presented as a linear progression or a goal-oriented acquisition process. Instead, it is structured as a fragmented experiential field characterized by temporal ruptures, repetitions, and sudden directional shifts.”

Hermeneutics has provided a response to the epistemic challenge for adults as they are invited to engage into *actively listening to the voice of a child*; vitally, it has provided a response to that omnipresent “distrust” generating a range of methodological problems in the field of children epistemology – with the paradox of hermeneutical injustice remaining ever-present, sometimes and ironically, even canceling out the adults’ strenuous intellectual exercises into hermeneutics.

The present well-structured essay has posed a series of profound philosophical questions that have stimulated the intellectual curiosity of the reader/parent/teacher/scholar, who with the help of the authors, ends up contemplating upon “direct responses” to bridging the divide between adult and children epistemology, when, as the authors suggest, “learning is grounded not in predetermined outcomes, but in awareness emerging through experience.” In this context, the authors continue, “knowledge is produced not through chronological accumulation, but through momentary encounters and contextual awareness. Accessing it requires not a stable method (as Alice’s shifting positions reveals), but forms of perception and action that are continuously recalibrated in relation to situational demands”. Such an understanding dismantles the structures of an adult-centred epistemology and recognizes the children as autonomous learners and active epistemic subjects.

The present groundbreaking research promises to contribute to knowledge

in the fields of Philosophy and Education, but also in the field of modern and contemporary children's literature, which as the authors argue, "could be re-evaluated in light of the findings of this study to explore how childhood knowledge is positioned. Interdisciplinary studies that combine childhood epistemology with reader-response research may further illuminate the epistemic relationships children establish with texts".

For all the reasons above, the present essay without doubt deserves to be published in the established academic journal *philosophy and childhood*.