

# THE LIBERATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Amy Glaser

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Approved by:

Doug MacLean

Anthony Weston

Lynda Stone

Alex Worsnip

Rebecca Walker

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## ABSTRACT

Amy Glaser: The Liberation of Young People  
(Under the direction of Doug MacLean)

Youth liberationists call for an end to oppression, specifically *adultism*, the oppression of youth by adults. Notions of equality have played an important historical role in liberationist efforts to dismantle oppressive systems. The equality of young people has seemed by some to be an absurd contention, undermined by the “obvious” incapacities of at least very young children to make their own choices. Against this view, I argue that people of every age are equal not only in their interests (their similar interests matter equally), but also in their agency: where adults and children are relevantly similarly situated – and they often are – they have an equal claim to make their own choices. I look carefully at arguments against youth liberation, and claim that these anti-liberationist arguments wrongly attack children’s equality of agency on the basis of adultist notions of rationality and moral development.

I argue for replacing traditional liberal notions of rational autonomy with notions that recognize the context-sensitivity of agential efficacy, and I claim that this brings to light young people’s unique strengths and skills, which are often overlooked. I consider research that challenges adults’ self-perception as reason-responsive wills unto ourselves, as well as research that examines children’s relatively greater capacities for learning, open-mindedness and imagination, all of which are core human virtues.

I move on to describe adultism at length, insisting that oppression has a macroscopic structure and is thus difficult to recognize. Drawing on literature from the *new childhood studies*, a burgeoning interdisciplinary field, I explain the construction of childhood, children’s

marginalization and powerlessness within an adult-centric world, and their subjection to violence and economic deprivation, the totality of which constitute the oppression of young people.

Finally, I seek to make the aims of the youth liberation movement more plausible by looking at particular institutions and areas of our lives, and imagining what kind of practices and policies a liberationist approach might recommend. Children, who know better than anyone else the hazards and frustrations of living in an adultist culture, ought to be the leaders in the task, incumbent upon all of us, of finding a better way.

For Jadie and Ilene

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## INTRODUCTION

### I. Oppression and Liberation

Liberation movements seek to end oppression. ‘Oppression’ is a name for the ways in which some groups of people unjustly dominate, control and harm other groups of people. Like other liberation movements, youth liberationists are calling for an end to oppression, specifically *adultism*, the oppression of youth by adults. Adultism is to the youth liberationist what sexism is to the feminist, and racism to the anti-racist. Youth liberationists believe that there is an unjust, adult-centered hierarchy and set of barriers whose undoing would necessarily make the world a better place; contributing to this undoing is, thus, morally incumbent on all of us. Like other forms of oppression, adultism is sometimes hard to see, especially for adults, who occupy the position of power in the hierarchy.

Adultism mirrors other forms of oppression in more than just its invisibility. One way that adultism is like other oppressions is that it reinforces an existing binary: all people are seen as falling into one of two groups – youth or adult – with little or no recognition of anything in between. This is a conspicuous attribute of all oppressions. Sexism, for example, ignores and stigmatizes those who do not fit within sharp, socially-enforced boundaries between two sexes,<sup>1</sup> and speciesism points to an all-important gulf between humans and every other living creature.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, adultist attitudes and structures portray persons above a particular age as having crossed a critical moral dividing line. 8-year-olds are grouped with babies as morally distinct

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<sup>1</sup> Frye, especially Chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> Singer, 251-255.



from 20-year-olds, just as chimpanzees and pigs are seen by the speciesist as morally more like oysters than people. In both cases the differences between groups (adult/child, human/nonhuman) are exaggerated, while within-group differences are minimized and glossed over.<sup>3</sup>

Another way that adultism is like other oppressions is that it is intersectional, in the sense that different forms of privilege and oppression overlap and interconnect in the lives and identities of individuals. The liberationist doesn't claim that all members of an oppressed group are worse off than all members of a non-oppressed group, as if each person were a member of only one category. The claim is more nuanced; it is that an individual's membership in an oppressed group is a *liability* – being part of the group leads to their<sup>4</sup> subjection to a number of barriers and challenges that do not exist for members of the corresponding privileged group – while membership in the privileged group, in contrast, is inevitably advantageous.<sup>5</sup> Every individual is a member of multiple groups; some of these groupings might lead to an individual's advantage, others not. But when one is a member of multiple oppressed groups, these oppressions intersect and work together to solidify and intensify the individual's inferior status. It's tough to be queer in a world where queerness is stigmatized, legislated against, and often the subject of violence, but it's tougher to be a queer youth, when the homophobia of the adult world is presented as legitimate, one's self-perception and identity are seen as illegitimate because one is young, and parents are granted authority over everything one does.

Relatedly, adultism is like other oppressions in that all oppressions are interlocking: liberation for one group is connected to liberation for all other oppressed groups. Some *anti-*

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<sup>3</sup> Cudd, 70.

<sup>4</sup> I use 'they,' 'them,' and 'their' as singular pronouns to avoid gendered language where possible.

<sup>5</sup> Frye, 31.

*liberationists* (those who are opposed to youth liberation) worry that the liberation of young people would be at the expense of adults, that freedom for young people would make life difficult for adults, who would be forced to cater to their needs and whims. But youth liberationists seek an end to all oppressions, “The fundamental rule should be no victimization, in either direction.”<sup>6</sup> The liberation of children would make the world better for everyone.

Finally, adultism is like other oppressions in that it calls for a liberation movement. Adultism warrants a collective response, one that seeks to make adultism visible and undo it. When we recognize that we are part of an oppressive system, we are called upon to identify the ways in which our own habits and practices contribute to that system, and to try to dismantle it. This is a full-time job, but it is not one that is always accompanied by prescriptions for specific, clear-cut, concrete individual actions. How adultism translates into what is morally required by each one of us, especially those of us who live and work closely with children, is complicated. But there is a moral demand on us *collectively*: oppression is a form of injustice, which means it ought to be undone. There are endlessly many ways that oppression shapes not only what we *do*, but also even how we think and speak. So there are endlessly many ways to resist oppression.

## **II. The Youth Liberation Movement**

The youth liberation movement emerged alongside other movements for social justice. Advocates of youth liberation drew on the language and tenets of liberation movements for other groups. Like these other liberation movements, youth liberationists saw systemic, group-based injustice and demanded radical change. Many of these liberationists were youth themselves. Youth Liberation of Ann Arbor, for instance, called for full civil and human rights for young people and an end to adult chauvinism, along with eight other demands in their *List of Wants*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Farson, 5.

John Holt and Richard Farson backed up their aims. In *Escape from Childhood*, Holt argued that children should have all of the legal rights granted to adults, and he criticized what he called the *institution* of childhood, the “attitudes and feelings, and also customs and laws, that put a great gulf or barrier between the young and their elders...that make it difficult or impossible for young people to make contact with the world around them, and even more, to play any kind of active, responsible, useful part in it.”<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, in *Birthrights*, Farson claims that youth are discriminated against by every societal institution and that young people have a “right to full humanity,” which we unconsciously deny.<sup>9</sup> Ted Clark, in *The Oppression of Youth*, describes how the oppression of young people within both families and schools serves to reinforce the established social order and the elevated status of the ruling class of a “society centered on power and profit.”<sup>10</sup>

Extensive writing on youth liberation has come from feminists who explicitly defend the analogy between youth liberation and feminism.<sup>11</sup> Shulamit Firestone devotes a full chapter of *The Dialectic of Sex*, “Down with Childhood,” to a discussion of children’s liberation. In it, she claims that youth liberation is a necessary extension of the women’s rights movement, that to stop short of children in feminist efforts towards women’s liberation is to fail to go far enough. She writes that the oppression of women and children is “intertwined and mutually reinforcing,” such that we cannot “speak of the liberation of women without also discussing the liberation of

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<sup>7</sup> Gross and Gross.

<sup>8</sup> 25-26.

<sup>9</sup> 1.

<sup>10</sup> 32.

<sup>11</sup> Firestone, Thorne.

children, and vice versa.”<sup>12</sup> Drawing largely on the work of Philippe Ariès’ *Centuries of Childhood*, Firestone traces the development of the concept of childhood from the Middle Ages, when there was “no such thing as childhood,”<sup>13</sup> – no separate vocabulary to describe children, no special children’s toys, games, or styles of dress; children were “miniature adults,” moving into adult apprenticeships almost immediately in a society where families were “composed of large numbers of people in a constant state of flux.”<sup>14</sup>

Firestone claims that the oppression of children as a distinct class emerged alongside the development of the concept of childhood itself, both of which were inextricably bound to the creation of the modern nuclear family and contemporary schooling, where children are completely segregated from the adult world and even from other children who are slightly older or younger.<sup>15</sup> While this oppression looks different within different socioeconomic classes, by prolonging the dependency and powerlessness of young people, the nuclear family unit at the same time ensured the subservience of women, on whom the responsibility for caring for children wholly fell.<sup>16</sup>

### **III. The U.N. Convention on the Rights of Children and The New Childhood Studies**

The UN Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCRC) offers a solid starting point for achieving worthwhile social aims for children globally. Its ratification by 196 state parties – the U.S. is notably absent on this list – proves its potential as a point of broad, global agreement about children’s basic needs and entitlements. The Convention also brought children’s rights to

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<sup>12</sup> 72.

<sup>13</sup> 76.

<sup>14</sup> 75.

<sup>15</sup> 93.

<sup>16</sup> 90-91.

the forefront, not only their rights to protection and welfare, but also to *participation*. Article 12 of the Convention affirms the child's right to have a say in matters that concern them, and to have their views taken into account in accord with their age and maturity. The Convention also recognizes children's evolving capacities, and their rights to religion, expression, and freedom of thought. Whereas children's welfare had come into focus in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and children's lives greatly improved as a result, the adoption of the UNCRC in 1989 marked another "dramatic alteration in the worldview of children."<sup>17</sup> Now children were seen not just as vulnerable objects in need of protection, but as *actors*, individual agents with their own ideas and values, capable of making a meaningful difference.

Later, in Chapter 1, I'll reject the notion of a right to self-determination and participatory rights in general. I think these misconstrue the value of agency, marking a moral cutoff or threshold for who acquires the right, dividing all agents into two groups, those who have the right in question and those who do not. While the concept of participatory rights may be useful for marking some cutoffs for legal or pragmatic purposes, we should develop moral concepts that more closely capture the continuum of differences that take shape as our capacities for effective agency change over time.

Nonetheless, the UNCRC points us in the right direction by recognizing children as active participants, and it provided a new and useful framework for studying children. The UNCRC inspired the emergence of new approaches to studying young people's lives, as several academic conferences in the early nineties took up the themes discussed in the Convention. Most significantly, a conference at City University of New York in 1991 led to the creation of a new interdisciplinary approach to childhood now known as the *new childhood studies*. The *new childhood studies* is characterized by a broad commitment to youth liberation and to viewing

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<sup>17</sup> Cohen (2002), 49.

youth as an oppressed class, but analytic philosophers have been conspicuously absent from conversations taking place within that rapidly growing field and less receptive to the ideals of youth liberation than other children's theorists. In Chapter 4, I discuss the new childhood studies more fully, and I urge philosophers to join this growing field aimed at children's liberation.

#### **IV. What Follows**

In Chapter 1, I introduce the Principle of the Equality of Agency, which states that relevantly similar instances of agency are equally morally valuable, and I claim that children and babies are morally equal in the sense that the Principle of the Equality of Agency extends equally to them. The value of young people's agency – that is, their capacity to act *from the inside* – like the moral value of adult agency, varies according to whatever features turn out to matter. It is because they are equal to adults in this *indeterminate* sense that children have an equal claim to have their agency be taken seriously, to be considered on the basis of relevant factors and not irrelevant ones, and to be judged similarly in cases that are relevantly similar. This principle is *indeterminate* in that it doesn't tell us which features in fact matter to the value of agency.

When I speak of a claim to  $x$ , where  $x$  is some type of action, I'm talking about one's claim to the freedom to be able to  $x$ . It is not a claim to be forced to  $x$ , or to *have* to  $x$ , but to *get to*  $x$  (or at least get to *try to*  $x$ ), should one choose. One's claim to agency or self-determination, more generally, is a claim to be free to exercise one's agency, to get to move oneself about. The claim to the freedom to  $x$  is thought to be grounded in the value of the freedom to  $x$ , which is distinct from the value of  $x$ -ing. It may be valuable to be free to smoke cigarettes, but there's hardly any value (or at least not the same value) in the smoking itself. Sometimes it's valuable to get to make disvaluable choices. I say more about claims in Chapter 1.

A second way that children are morally equal is in a more substantive, *determinate* sense. Given the range of features that turn out to matter to the value of agency – and I say something about what these are – the freedom of young people and adults to make choices is equally valuable generally. Thus I make a preliminary case that young people have an equal claim to freedom. At the very least, I maintain, we cannot confirm the conclusions of opponents of liberation who claim that adults have a right to freedom, and that children lack this right, since we fail to give children’s agency the equal consideration required by the Principle of the Equality of Agency.

In Chapter 2, I consider three of the strongest anti-liberationist views I’ve encountered and argue that they violate the Principle of the Equality of Agency introduced in Chapter 1. All three of the anti-liberationist views I consider seek to secure the inferior status of young people, in part by denying that young people’s inferior status is unjust. They claim that adults have an exclusive right to make their own choices because only adults are rationally autonomous. I show how the anti-liberationists, despite their arguments to the contrary, violate the Principle of the Equality of Agency by assigning young people and their choices an inferior status.

In Chapter 3, I criticize the liberal notion of autonomy on which the anti-liberationist positions are based. Feminists have insisted that rational autonomy as a human ideal ignores the extent to which humans are essentially embedded in relationships with others and that our wellbeing comes from taking part in these relationships, including by caring for others. I argue for a context-sensitive account of agential efficacy, and I deny that adults are unique in our capacity to pursue valuable ends, moral or otherwise. I claim that we share these capacities with children, and I consider context-based accounts of autonomy and development that could give children’s agential strengths the status they deserve. I also look at empirical research that

concludes that adult perceptions of ourselves as essentially rational creatures are a form of self-deception – we are less rational and more determined by our biology and context than we think. I also point to research that suggests that we have underestimated the cognitive capacities of babies and very young children. Chapter 3 takes direct aim at the anti-liberationist's insistence that adults have, and children lack, a right to self-determination based on the former's exclusive possession of rational autonomy.

In Chapter 4, I discuss adultism in more depth, drawing heavily on work by Marilyn Frye, and on Ann Cudd's book-length analysis of oppression, the most thorough discussion of the nature of oppression by an analytic philosopher. I consider what Cudd argues are the definitive components of oppression and claim that adultism shares these features with other forms of oppression. I show how the anti-liberationist contributes to adultism by denying youth a right to agency and how this denial itself is rooted in adultism. I consider the new childhood studies and urge philosophers to get on board with this expansive, interdisciplinary program aimed at young people's liberation.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss the practical goals of the liberation movement in more detail. I look at what liberated communities might be like and at how social contexts, including norms and institutions, can be shaped to promote young people's liberation and agency. I also show that youth liberation is consistent with a variety of legal practices, caretaking strategies and age-based restrictions, and I consider specific instances of justified paternalism for youth and adults (including age-of-consent laws) and show how these instances augment (rather than undermine) the case for youth liberation.



## **V. Youth Organizing**

In 2006, at age 25, I helped four teenagers organize a march and rally from North Carolina's Board of Education to the state capitol. They brought together more than a hundred of their peers from across the state, and advocated for the passage of the NC School Violence Prevention Act, which explicitly protects North Carolina students from bullying and harassment based on gender identity or sexual orientation. That act passed in 2009. The march and rally were the vision of the youth who organized them, and were part of a larger effort to create Insideout180, a youth-run organization for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender non-conforming, queer and allied youth. I've since worked with hundreds of young people who are leading movements for social justice, from Black Lives Matter to campaigns for transgender students, environmental justice, the rights of undocumented immigrants, and more. While youth are and have been on the front lines of so many social justice movements, in the United States and elsewhere youth activists and leaders have had to go against the grain, pushing against social forces that more often silence, discount, and exclude them. Today, as I write, high school, middle and elementary school students across the country have staged a massive walkout to protest gun violence in schools. The walkout is spearheaded by student survivors of the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas high school in Parkland, Florida on February 14, 2018. These students are unusual not in speaking out for social change or leading a mass movement, but in being listened to by adults. In at least one school, the students who walked out were punished with corporal punishment.<sup>18</sup>

In my efforts to help young people found and direct an organization aimed at queer youth liberation, the largest obstacle we have faced is not homophobia, or anti-gay acts or hatred, but adultism. The training that youth have received to be passive and to do what they are told to do

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<sup>18</sup> Bellamy-Walker.

by adults has been hard to undo. We have had to consistently push against norms that, for instance, give adults (even unaffiliated adults who visit our community only once) the sense that their voices are more important in shared spaces. Visitors to the space look to adults for direction or answers to questions, even when youth are the ones who know the answers and are giving directions. The organization is regularly overlooked for funding opportunities and for collaboration. Our youth don't display the adult-centric symbols of professionalism that funders seek as signs of legitimacy. The youth wear jeans and t-shirts and represent themselves with hand-painted banners and logos, rather than banners and logos created by graphic designers and professionally printed. I have been told by prospective funders that the lack of professionalism dissuaded them from contributing, but the notion of professionalism itself is adult-centric.

Spaces convened and directed by young people, in which young people's opinions are taken seriously and their ideas are affirmed as worth pursuing, are an anomaly. In my experience, when youth are presented with opportunities to be meaningfully in control of their lives and engaged as leaders in their communities, they need to be *re-trained* to utilize these opportunities. When they do, the results are often profound.

In Insideout180, teenagers call the shots. Youth leaders receive financial compensation for the time they put in, and they interview and must approve new adult support staff before new staff are added. At one planning meeting, a ten-year-old learns some basic html code in order to update our website, or a teenager facilitates a discussion among the rest of our younger group (12 and younger) about their goals for the year. Adults are always nearby to provide support, and they are often called upon to share their unique expertise through workshops and trainings, or sometimes just by listening. But youth are at the forefront. Their vision, energy, idealism, and leadership are crucial to the organization's success. A central mission of the organization is to

challenge the gender binary, to open up modes of expression for young people with a variety of gender identities. While adults are often puzzled by these ideas, as they have come to see binary gender norms as a fixed, necessary part of the natural world, young people are more easily able to break down restrictive social boundaries, more eager to escape the gendered boxes into which they are still being forced, and more able to express themselves freely and authentically, once they have a safe and supportive space in which to do so.

But, even in Insideout180, there is a constant tendency, by both youth and adults, to shift the balance of power back to adults. For youth to have a meaningful say in the organization's direction, it is not enough to include them, along with adults, in group decision-making. In a group composed of half adults and half youth, adults will do almost all of the talking, youth will still have to fight to be heard, and it will take some effort (or prompting by adults) for them to build up the confidence to speak in the first place. They would still need to assimilate into an adult culture. Though our executive board is comprised solely of youth, youth leaders constantly revert to seeking permission from adults, even though the power structure is explicitly defined so that youth have the final say, and even though the adults from whom they seek permission often have less experience with the organization, and thus less seniority. We have deliberately worked against these norms, partly by setting up a separate board of adults to handle legal and financial obligations behind the scenes, so that youth can focus exclusively on fulfilling their mission, and by adopting a consensus model of decision-making.

Nonetheless, norms for youth deference and passivity are part of a systematic, interconnected set of adult-imposed harms and barriers. This interconnected system includes the most severe forms of child of abuse and neglect, but other, insidiously subtle, often invisible ways in which young people are routinely subordinated and “othered” in a world designed and

run by and for adults. These subtler forms of adultism exacerbate the more egregious harms of physical and sexual abuse and neglect. In our world, young people are stereotyped as incompetent and irrational, and adults get to make all of the significant decisions. Youth are told again and again in a myriad of ways that they have to wait until they are older to have a meaningful say in shaping their lives and their communities.

Liberating young people would transform the way youth think about themselves and allow them to flourish as models of authenticity, creativity, and other human virtues. Youth have unique skills and talents that can serve as inspiration to adults, that can help make us better people. Young people's leadership is crucial to efforts for social justice, as they are less cynical, less dogmatic, and less set in their ways than adults. In the following pages, I begin to develop the philosophical grounds for youth liberation. I start out in Chapter 1 with a defense of a contentious claim: that people of all ages are morally equal in their claim to agency. I move on to build the case for youth liberation on this foundational principle of young people's equality, and I show how opponents of youth liberation and the status quo have both undermined young people's equality.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE EQUALITY OF YOUNG PEOPLE

The oppression of young people calls for a liberation movement. Like other liberation movements, youth liberation finds secure footing in a notion of moral equality. Movements for equality are perhaps best understood as a response to existing *inequalities*. We can understand what equality movements are *for*, in part by more fully appreciating just what they are *against*. In particular, the targets of contemporary liberationist critiques are the inegalitarian, hierarchical societal structures that favor some groups over others, elevating the moral and political status of the favored groups, and relegating all non-group members to an inferior status. When two groups are treated unequally and are sorted according to these social hierarchies, the favored groups' interests are routinely given more weight; the favored group is taken more seriously and is more respected. By *interest*, I mean whatever contributes to an individual's wellbeing. In cases of group-based inequality, the favored group dominates and controls the inferior group, sometimes simply by having more access to a variety of forms of power and privilege within the society. When liberation movements claim that people are equal, they mean simply that these sorts of group-based inequalities are morally unfounded.

#### **I. Peter Singer's Principle of the Equality of Interests**

Peter Singer discusses the basic principle of equality that grounds movements for racial and gender justice (we can call it the Principle of the Equality of Interests), arguing that the same principle extends to nonhumans.<sup>1</sup> The Principle of the Equality of Interests states that relevantly

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<sup>1</sup> 7.

similar interests deserve equal consideration.<sup>2</sup> Singer emphasizes that the Principle of Equality of Interests is a prescription that demands equal consideration of all beings with interests, not a description of actual similarities among beings.<sup>3</sup> The Principle of the Equality of Interests does not require that all beings are alike descriptively, or even that there are no important differences that correspond to racial or gender categories, for example, or other social groupings. Importantly, Singer claims, the case for equality ought not to rest on the assumption that all groups are descriptively alike in terms of intelligence or other abilities.<sup>4</sup> For one, we want the Principle of the Equality of Interests not to rest on that assumption because future research may reveal that some such differences between groups exist. The potential for such discoveries should not threaten the basic moral equality of all individuals. Singer points out that a society that designated power exclusively to members of the population with I.Q.s over 100 would not thereby be a just one.<sup>5</sup>

Relatedly, he says, feminists who advance equality between the sexes and advocate for abortion access for women are not committed to securing abortion access for men too.<sup>6</sup> This is not true; some men – particularly transgender and intersex men – can become pregnant, and thus are equally entitled to abortion access.<sup>7</sup> But Singer's main point remains: we are comfortable recognizing substantial descriptive differences between groups of people at the same time that

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<sup>2</sup> 5-7.

<sup>3</sup> 5.

<sup>4</sup> 4.

<sup>5</sup> 4.

<sup>6</sup> 2.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Hempl.

we assert the moral equality of their members.<sup>8</sup> Differences between species likewise do not undermine the moral equality of all species. The Principle of the Equality of Interests, Singer concludes, is a basic demand that anyone with interests ought to have one's interests taken into account.<sup>9</sup> This demand is consistent with there being important differences not only between the beings or groups themselves, but in the moral implications of these differences, in how members of different groups ought to be treated. A society's concern for the wellbeing of children warrants different social policies than an equal concern for the wellbeing of pigs.<sup>10</sup>

Singer's call for equal consideration of all beings with interests may thus be read as a call for a sort of disposition. Since Singer equates having interests with sentience, that is, the capacity to experience pleasure and suffering,<sup>11</sup> the relevant disposition includes a readiness to consider the suffering of any being who can suffer. The Principle of the Equality of Interests is indeterminate in that it doesn't specify which descriptive features are relevant to the value of one's interests. To insist that all species are equal in Singer's sense means that every species' members' interests ought to be judged equally – the same in cases that are relevantly similar – and on the basis of relevant features and not irrelevant ones. It's a call for recognition that the value of one's interests varies according to the descriptive features that matter, and not according to features that don't matter. Moreover, interests that are alike in the relevant ways matter equally; they are equally important. But the principle itself remains open on whether two interests are in fact relevantly similar, and on which features determine the value of a particular

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<sup>8</sup> 5.

<sup>9</sup> 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> 6.

<sup>11</sup> 8-9.

interest. This is why the principle applies independently of the descriptive differences between beings.

But Singer is not only advancing equality in this indeterminate sense, he is also defending a more substantive equality claim by telling us something about which features in fact turn out to matter and which don't. Race, gender, and species membership, he thinks, along with intelligence and rationality, do not make a difference to the strength of one's otherwise similar interests.<sup>12</sup> Internally identical pains don't count for more in intelligent beings than in unintelligent beings, because when the experience of the pain is identical, the beings' intelligence is irrelevant. This is not to deny that more intelligent beings might suffer in ways that less intelligent beings cannot (and vice versa). In contrast, the intensity of a pain sensation does make a difference to the strength of one's interest in avoiding the sensation, because severe pain sensations are worse than mild ones.<sup>13</sup> Two pains that differ in intensity are not internally identical.

Thus in addition to the indeterminate equality captured by the Principle of the Equality of Interests – the value of everyone's interests ought to be judged consistently and on the basis of relevant features and not irrelevant ones, whatever these turn out to be – Singer is also endorsing a type of *determinate* equality, at least between humans and the animals we raise for food and experimentation: humans and farm and lab animals are all capable of severe suffering and thus have some interests that are in fact equally valuable.<sup>14</sup> Humans, dogs, and rats all have an equal interest, for example, in avoiding the pain from having perfume dropped into their eyes, or their stomachs sliced open. Unlike the Principle of Equality of Interests, which holds independently of

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<sup>12</sup> 9.

<sup>13</sup> Singer, 18.

<sup>14</sup> 9-16.



the descriptive similarities and differences among beings, this further determinate claim *does* have implications for the descriptive similarities between humans, dogs and rats. It implies that the internal experience of having perfume dropped into our eyes or our stomachs sliced open would be importantly similar for all of the beings considered.

One might consistently hold that all beings are morally equal in the indeterminate sense but not in the determinate sense. You might think, for example, that humans and oysters have an equal claim to have our interests be judged on the basis of relevant features and not irrelevant ones. That is, you may agree that the value of oyster pain, like human pain, varies equally and according to whatever features matter: intensity, duration, and the like. You may agree that to the extent that they are relevantly similar, human and oyster pains matter equally. But you might at the same time believe that because oysters lack a central nervous system, they simply aren't capable of feeling pain sensations that are as intense or robust as human pain sensations. This would mean that human pain counts for more, generally, than oyster pain, because human pain is importantly and relevantly different from oyster pain. This would not be a violation of the Principle of the Equality of Interests. We need not deny the indeterminate equality of all beings in order to hold this view about the internal, qualitative differences between oyster pain and human pain. We may consistently deny the determinate equality of human and oyster pain while nonetheless asserting that the Principle of the Equality of Interests applies equally to humans and oysters.

Singer states the Principle of the Equality of Interests in terms of the moral obligations of moral agents: agents have an obligation to consider similar interests equally.<sup>15</sup> But the principle also applies to the moral value of the interests of the moral patients themselves. The relevantly similar interests of moral patients are morally equal, and this can be understood separately from

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<sup>15</sup> 6.

the obligations that moral agents have regarding those interests. And we can say that the beings themselves, the moral patients, are also morally equal in this sense. “All animals are equal,” as the title of the Singer’s chapter on nonhuman equality proclaims,<sup>16</sup> in the indeterminate sense that the Principle of the Equality of Interests extends equally to all beings with interests. For Singer, we are all also morally alike in a determinate sense: humans and the nonhuman animals with which we primarily interact, farm and lab animals specifically, are descriptively alike enough that similar treatment of similar interests requires radical changes in how we treat nonhuman animals. For starters, we are morally required to stop eating them.<sup>17</sup>

In the next section I defend the equality of young people and their claim to agency. The Principle of the Equality of Interests follows from a basic principle of justice, which requires that relevantly similar cases be judged similarly. The equality of young people’s agency – their capacity to move themselves about from the inside – also follows, in an indeterminate sense, from this basic principle of justice requiring similar treatment of similar cases. But like the determinate equality of particular interests, the determinate equality of young people’s agency requires more substantive claims about the similarities and differences between adults and children. I argue in this chapter and the following chapters that children’s agency is morally equal to that of adults’, both in an indeterminate and a determinate sense.

## **II. The Principle of the Equality of Agency**

The basic principle of equality underlying Singer’s claim that similar interests matter equally is that any cases that are relevantly similar are morally alike and thus ought to be judged similarly. Put differently, there must be a relevant descriptive difference to make a moral difference between two cases. This can be read as a supervenience claim: the moral supervenes

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<sup>16</sup> 1.

<sup>17</sup> 17, 163.

on the descriptive. Singer's emphasis is on interests because he is concerned to advocate for the interests and wellbeing of nonhumans. But we could easily shift the spotlight to a being's *agency*, that is, a being's capacity to move itself about in the world from the inside, to actively participate in its life. To be an agent means to be able to *do things*, to be able to *act*, rather than just have things *done to* one, or be *acted upon*.

To exercise one's agency is to exercise that capacity; it is to act. It is Harry Frankfurt's sense in which a spider crawls across a table as opposed to being blown by wind in the same direction. When I speak of an agent's freedom, I mean that an agent has whatever is required to exercise their agency, that is, to *act* or meaningfully participate. Freedom is not all-or-nothing. As a child, I might have the freedom to move around my house, but not to go outside, and the boundaries of my freedom might expand as I grow older. As an adult, I might have the freedom to move to another city in the U.S. but not to take up residence in another country, at least not without undergoing a complex immigration process, which, for many, is prohibitive. Which options are available to free agents is a complex matter that depends on the agent's particular qualities and context. We are limited by the choice of salad dressings at the grocery store, and by the choice of local grocery stores. Even if we move to a different locale to get access to different grocery stores, we'll face other limitations. Choices are structured by the people and things in our surroundings. No one is free full stop.

Singer's Principle of the Equality of Interests is that relevantly similar interests are equally valuable. An analogous principle holds for agency, and it is just as compelling.

Principle of the Equality of Agency: relevantly similar instances of agency are equally valuable.

The reason to treat agency separately from interests is to remain neutral on whether the value of agency is fully determined by the extent to which one's actions further one's interests. If we

were to focus solely on the equality of interests in securing the equal value of agency for young people, we would quickly be entangled in questions about the relationship between agency and the furthering of one's interests, and I want to sidestep these questions for now.

Opponents of youth liberation often deny young people's equal claim to agency on the grounds that granting youth the freedom to act, unlike freedom for adults, runs counter to young people's interests. Adults are granted freedom on the grounds that they are better at securing what's in their interest. For now, I want to avoid this controversy. Fortunately, the Principle of the Equality of Interests and the Principle of the Equality of Agency both follow straightforwardly from the basic principle of justice introduced above, that relevantly similar cases are morally alike. They are both indeterminate in that they leave open the question of what the relevant similarities and differences are. Importantly, the Principle of the Equality of Agency leaves open whether the value of agency is fully determined by the relationship between one's agency and one's interests. That's why we can maintain that young people are equal in the sense that the Principle of Equality of Agency extends equally to them, without taking a stand just yet on what determines the value of agency and thereby the strength of one's claim to freedom.

There is, by the way, a *prima facie* case to be made that the value of agency obtains independently of the extent to which an agent's actions promote the agent's interests. Adults value our freedom to act in altruistic or even stupid, self-destructive, or hurtful ways as much as we value the freedom to make decisions that promote our interests. If we define altruism as acting to further another's interests at the expense of one's own, and if we think getting to act in altruistic ways is valuable at least some of the time, then we have a plain case of the value of acting that obtains independently of whether the act furthers the agent's interests. It's good to get to make choices, even when the choices we make are not so good for us or others. So getting to

act seems to have value that obtains at least somewhat independently of whether an act promotes an agent's interests. This strengthens my case for treating the equality of interests and the equality of agency with separate principles, though that case was already strong enough. We treat agency and interests separately in order to avoid taking a position on whether agency has value that is independent of one's interests.

To understand the moral status of an agent's agency, it is helpful to elucidate the notion of a moral claim. To have a claim to the freedom to perform some action  $x$  means simply that there are some legitimate moral considerations that speak in favor of one's getting to  $x$ . One's claim to the freedom to  $x$  depends on the moral value of the freedom to  $x$ . When the freedom to  $x$  is morally very valuable, one has a strong claim to the freedom to  $x$ . When it is less valuable, the corresponding claim is not as strong. Having a claim to  $x$  (even a right – the strongest kind of claim – to  $x$ ) does not entail that one ought, all things considered, to be free to  $x$  because there may be conflicting claims that render one's freedom to  $x$  unjustified. But in the absence of competing claims, having a claim to the freedom to  $x$  does entail that one ought to be free to  $x$ .

The notion of claims is useful since it allows us to consider the strength of one's claim to the freedom to perform some act  $x$  as a matter of degree, unlike the twofold notion of having or not having a right to  $x$ . We can think of a right as the strongest kind of claim there is. But by focusing on the notion of claims, rather than rights, we can get clearer on the relative strengths of individuals' claims to agency, independently of whether the claims are strong enough to count as rights. This allows for a more nuanced portrayal of the strength of particular claims to agency than the notion of rights allows.<sup>18</sup>

A claim might be overriding, regardless of how strong it is in itself, when it is stronger than any competing claim, or it might not be overriding, when another competing claim is more

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<sup>18</sup> I say more about this in Chapter 2, Section IV.

important. When one has a claim to the freedom to  $x$ , one's freedom to  $x$  ought to be respected and taken seriously. How important this is in a particular case depends on the strength of the claim, which is in turn determined by the value of the freedom to  $x$ . Sometimes one's claim requires action from others, sometimes inaction. If I have a claim to the freedom to pick my socks or to express myself by dancing, then in the absence of stronger, competing claims, others in a position to do so ought to let me do so, or make it possible for me to do so. If I have a claim to an education, then absent stronger, competing claims, I ought to have access to an education.

The view that rights are the strongest types of claims there are, the claims that are most valuable, might be contested. I have a right to paint my house or to use my car whenever I want, one might insist, even though these things are not that important, while you have no right to my car no matter how morally worthy your reasons for wanting to use it. There are at least two responses to this objection. First, I am not breaking with tradition to hold that rights are supposed to be very important. When a group fights for their rights, they are not fighting for rights to paint or drive, but for the most important things we all value: rights to speech, safety, education, healthcare, political representation, and so on. And, second, if your car is available, and I am in dire need – say I'm having a potentially fatal allergic reaction, with no other way to get to a hospital, or say that your car was parked improperly and is now barreling toward a child with no one in the driver's seat – then I do have some claim to drive your car. The stronger my reasons, the stronger my claim. Property rights are important too, perhaps even so important that they outweigh most other conflicting claims, but property rights are not the most important things in the world. They are not more important than life itself.

The Principle of the Equality of Agency means that all agents have an equal claim to agency in an indeterminate sense. Relevantly similar cases of agency are equally valuable, and

thus two agents who are relevantly alike with respect to *x*-ing have an equal claim to the freedom to *x*, whatever the relevant similarities turn out to be. The Principle of the Equality of Agency entails that *whatever* the relevant descriptive features are that determine the value of agency in a context, where they are relevantly similar, the value of agency – and thus one’s claim to agency – is also the same. The principle applies to all agents, including people of all ages, for the same reason that Singer’s equality of interests principle applies to anyone with interests. To exclude some agents from the Principle of the Equality of Agency would be to arbitrarily deprive them the chance to have their agency be considered and judged equally on the basis of whatever features turn out to matter to the value of agency.

When I say that children are morally equal in their claim to agency, I mean first and foremost simply that the value of children’s agency – like that of any agent’s – ought, equally, to be judged by relevant features and not by irrelevant ones. The principle posits the same type of indeterminate equality as Singer’s principle, equality that obtains independently of which features turn out to be relevant to the value of agency and independently of the extent to which people of different ages possess those features. Like Singer’s indeterminate principle, the Principle of the Equality of Agency demands a certain respectful disposition, a willingness or a readiness to take any agent’s agency into account, and to judge instances of agency consistently, by a unified standard that determines the value of agency in a context on the basis of whatever descriptive features turn out to matter to the value of agency. But it doesn’t by itself tell us which features determine the value of agency in fact.

### **III. The Determinate Equality of Young People’s Agency**

The Principle of the Equality of Agency is not by itself very substantive because it does not tell us which features matter to the value of agency. As I explained, the indeterminate

equality of all beings' interests is consistent with the determinate *inequality* of their interests.

Oysters may be subject to equal consideration of like interests even if oyster interests are generally less important than human interests because oyster pain sensations are less robust than human pain sensations. Similarly, people of all ages may be equal in their claim to agency in this indeterminate sense, even if adult claims to agency are generally stronger than children's because of differences between adults and children. However, believing in the indeterminate inequality of young people and adults is likely to lead to the conclusion that children and adults are unequal in the determinate sense, too. If we are not taking children equally seriously to adults, we are unlikely to conclude that children's choices matter equally to adults'.

Like the indeterminate equality of interests, the indeterminate equality of agency obtains independently of descriptive differences between adults and children. In this section, however, I want to make a preliminary case that the further, more substantive type of equality also obtains. I want to endorse the more contentious claim that children often do, in fact, have an equal or stronger claim to agency than adults. I want to endorse the determinate equality of the agency of children and adults generally.

First, consider cases of agency exercised by people of different ages that at least at first glance seem relevantly similar. Consider two people deciding which color socks to wear, or whether to sing and dance in a park or to remain quiet and still, or whether to receive a hug from a relative. Children's claim to agency is typically discounted on grounds of incompetence or irrationality. Children are thought not to have an equal claim to make their own choices because it is said that granting children freedom would guarantee their self-destruction. But in the examples mentioned, where we can assume there are no significant consequential differences, putative differences between adults and children seem irrelevant. Why should rationality or



competence matter to the value of getting to dance freely, or to resist an unwanted hug, when rationality is (at least sometimes) irrelevant to performing the act in question?

Child liberationists will insist that children have an equal claim to self-expression and to make their own choices, at least in cases like these. Liberationists, that is, will insist that sometimes adults and children *are* in relevantly similar circumstances with respect to the value of their agency, regardless of putative differences in competence or rationality. It follows from this liberationist position that violating a child's agency in cases like these is as seriously wrong as violating an adult's. I think, moreover – for reasons introduced below and discussed at greater length in the following chapters – that the value of children's agency is often enough equal to or greater than the value of adult agency that we should insist on the moral equality of children's agency generally.

I have considered cases where youth and adults are (at least putatively) in relevantly similar circumstances. Another reason for thinking that children's claim to agency generally is as strong as adults' is that children possess character traits that make them better agents in many contexts than adults. Babies cannot sign housing contracts or apply for jobs, but they are excellent at soliciting compassion and caretaking, at getting people to like, love and adore them. Children are better at authenticity, at expressing their true selves; they have been deemed better at abstract art and creativity; their imaginations are more vivid and exploratory.<sup>19</sup> Children seem to have more energy, stamina, and resilience. These are genuine human skills, not just relegated to the realm of "child's play," but vital for human flourishing and for creating a world we all want to live in. This is part of the reason why it's important for children's agency to be respected and deemed equally worthy in its own right, and it is also a reason that children's input ought to

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<sup>19</sup> See Gopnik, 47-73; Taylor (1999).

be included in communal decision-making and broader efforts for social change. These considerations enhance young people's claims to agency relative to adults.

Young people are constantly helping adults lighten up and see what's important. As I write, a child in this coffee shop has captured everyone's attention. The child is smiling and engaging everyone at every table, without a word, standing in the middle of the room. We all wave and smile back. The child looks me in the eye; they are completely open and unafraid. For a moment, we all look up from our laptops and are in touch with something more human in us. We are more in touch with and more aware of each other. The most tightly-wound adults come out of their shells in the presence of children. I've seen children get their awkward, self-conscious parents to dance in mixed-age groups. Children hold fewer grudges. They encourage their parents to stop smoking, to be more active and to get outside, and they are great at loving unconditionally. They are more willing to be vulnerable, to forgive, to say what they really think. In many ways, adults might be *better*, more fulfilled choice makers if we let ourselves be inspired by children more often, if we were all a bit more childlike. These are all reasons that children should have more power; these are reasons for thinking children sometimes have a stronger claim to agency than adults, and a stronger claim to agency than they are traditionally granted. I look more closely at children's unique strengths in Chapter 3.

I have been discussing cases in which children's unique skills give them a stronger claim to agency than adults, but it is important to recognize that incompetence, *lacking* a particular skill, might also render a person's agency *more* valuable. For a toddler learning to walk, every freely taken step is significant. If it is important for adults to have spaces that they can safely and successfully navigate, it is even more important for toddlers. And the best way to get better at making decisions is to practice making them. Children whose agency is respected and equally

valued get more practice making decisions. Recognizing a child's legitimate claim to walk across the room and pick up a toy, and giving them the space to do so, strengthens the muscles required for choice making generally. Freedom to make smaller-scale choices has important consequences as the child's attention gradually shifts to larger-scale, more significant choices. The adult form of our prefrontal cortex, the parts of our brains responsible for executive decision-making, takes shape through its exercise during childhood.<sup>20</sup>

Importantly, the determinate equality of young people's agency is not undermined by legal or practical considerations that may legitimize treating them differently. As we will see in the next chapter, opponents of youth liberation claim that adults have a right to freedom and children lack it in part because there's no way to design social systems that respect a child's or a baby's right to choose. Adults get to make their own choices and babies don't because having a legal system – a morally worthy goal – requires us to draw that line between them, to specify who should be free legally overall. But the indeterminate equality of young people means that to the extent that young people and older people are relevantly similarly situated, to the extent that they possess the same relevant features, their agency is equally valuable and thus their claim to agency is equally strong.

Practical or legal considerations, while they may warrant legal discrimination or the attribution of different legal rights, do not change the relative value of agency for the agents themselves. People of all ages who are relevantly similar, relative to the act under consideration, have an equal claim to agency, even if practical considerations require us to distinguish between them. This is support for the view that a toddler and an adult might have an equal claim to resist an unwanted hug, even if, for practical reasons, only the adult's claim (and not the toddler's) can be legally recognized. The determinate equality of children's and adult's agency should not be

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<sup>20</sup> Gopnik, 13.

denied on grounds of broader practical or legal considerations that are distinct from the relevant features of the people themselves.

In this section, I have been building a preliminary case for the determinate equality of young people's agency. I have argued, first, that children and adults are sometimes in circumstances that are relevantly similar and thus have an equal claim to agency in those cases, regardless of their rational autonomy. Second, I have pointed out that sometimes young people's claim to agency is stronger than adults', at times because young people possess skills that adults lack, at other times because young people's skills are underdeveloped relative to adults'. Finally, I have insisted that legal or practical considerations are not a legitimate basis for denying the moral equality of young people's otherwise similar instances of agency.

The case I have built is merely suggestive, in part because I have not yet considered opposing viewpoints. In the next chapter, I pause to consider the strongest cases against young people's equality that I have encountered. The central thesis of these anti-liberationist positions is that adults have, and youth lack, a right to self-determination. That is, anti-liberationists insist on the *inequality* of young people's agency, insisting that adult freedom is more valuable and thus that adults have a stronger claim to agency, across the board. After considering the anti-liberationist views in more depth, we will be in a better position to defend the equality of young people's agency more fully.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE CASE AGAINST YOUTH LIBERATION

In this chapter, I present a variety of arguments against the moral equality of children and adults, and I begin to build a case against these arguments. In Section I, I explain in a generalized way the central dispute between youth liberationists and those who oppose youth liberation (anti-liberationists). In Section II, I present three different defenses of the anti-liberationists' main conclusion: that adults have, and youth lack, a right to self-determination. In Section III, I pause to consider a position defended by James Dwyer, who agrees with anti-liberationists that children and adults are morally unequal in some respects. Unlike the anti-liberationists, however, Dwyer insists that young people are morally *superior* to adults, and that young people's interests are therefore more important than adults' similar interests.<sup>1</sup>

In Section IV, I start to build the case against the anti-liberationist argument, and I show that the case I begin to build can be extended to Dwyer's view as well. I argue that Dwyer and the anti-liberationists violate the Principle of the Equality of Interests and the Principle of the Equality of Agency,<sup>2</sup> respectively, by denying the indeterminate equality of people of all ages. Consideration of Dwyer's position will help us see why it's wrong to deny young people's equality in either direction.

The Principle of the Equality of Interests and the Principle of the Equality of Agency entail that young people's interests and choices are, in general, neither morally superior nor

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<sup>1</sup> 4.

<sup>2</sup> I discuss these in Chapter 1.

inferior to adults'. Both principles require that we give equal respect and consideration to people of all ages, though they allow for differences in the types of treatment that result from equal consideration and respect. I think that by denying an important aspect of children's equality, Dwyer and the anti-liberationists fail to give young people's interests and choices the respect and consideration they deserve. The anti-liberationists err in part by failing to take children and adults equally seriously as social actors in their own right. Like members of all races, genders, and species, we are all equal in that our relevantly similar interests and our similar instances of agency matter equally. It is because of this that we are equally deserving of respect and consideration.

In the chapters that follow, I respond more fully to the anti-liberationist. Specifically, in Chapter 3, I challenge the traditional notions of rationality and autonomy on which all three of the anti-liberationist arguments depend. Then, in Chapter 4, I look more closely at adultism, the oppression of young people, and claim that denying young people a right to self-determination reinforces and is reinforced by their oppression more broadly. Finally, in Chapter 5, I discuss specific examples of justified paternalism and imagine what liberation for children might be like.

## **I. Liberation and Anti-Liberation**

Youth liberation is a movement founded on the central thesis that youth ought to be freed from *adultism*, a ubiquitous, oppressive binary power structure that secures young people's inferior status legally and socially. This structure is binary in the sense that it treats all people as falling into one of two categories – youth or adult – with little or no recognition of a middle ground between these two groups. Youth liberation is often immediately discounted as too radical and too sweeping in its critique of the existing culture.<sup>3</sup> Like critics of liberation

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<sup>3</sup> Archard (1993), 74: "There are problems with any polemic, especially one designed to demolish a conventional wisdom. The central one is that rhetorical criticism of this kind is anxious to do as much damage as possible."

movements for other groups, including people of color, women, non-heterosexual people, and nonhumans, critics of youth liberation are quick to defend the existing hierarchical structures as natural or necessary on the basis of perceived features of the oppressed group.

In contemporary American culture, age segregation is ubiquitous. Most U.S. schools separate students by age, so that young people are cut off throughout most of their young lives from people even a couple years older or younger than they are. More emphatically, our culture imposes a boundary that separates youth from adults overall. In the U.S., this boundary is marked most forcefully at age 18 by laws that differentiate people above and below this age, but it is reinforced in thousands of other ways by social practices that treat youth as an inferior class. Not only are young people's interests routinely discounted and disvalued relative to adults – youth are disproportionately victims of violence, abuse, humiliation and ridicule; public spaces tend not to cater to their needs; there are no safe, viable transportation options for youth, relatively few opportunities for public expression and leisure, and a general lack of meaningful opportunities to interact with the broader world around them<sup>4</sup> – so also are their choices. Adults are seen as having a right to do what they want, generally, as long as it doesn't harm others. Young people are seen as lacking this right. Instead, adults are granted the authority to make decisions for young people, to tell young people what to do, and to force them to do it whenever adults deem force warranted.

Adults are said to enjoy a wide range of freedoms that youth are denied – the freedom to choose their political representatives, to move about in the world, to pursue projects and hobbies that interest them, to wear and eat what they want, and, more generally, to have their choices be effective. Youth are denied these freedoms legally and practically; during most of their waking hours, they are told what to do and how to do it by adults who occupy carefully designed (often

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<sup>4</sup> I take up these themes in Chapter 4.

financially compensated) authoritative roles. Youth get no say in who their representatives will be – they also are usually seen as not having a legitimate claim to be able to choose what to wear. When they are granted this claim to choose their clothing, it is notably weaker than an adult's corresponding claim, which is fortified by the adult's right to freedom generally.<sup>5</sup> Adults are given space to make choices, and these choices warrant respect even when they are self-destructive, but children's choices are often dismissed on the grounds that they conflict with children's interests.

Youth liberationists have argued that this differential valuing of youth and adult choices involves an unjust double standard, and, moreover, that the sorting of youth and adults into two distinct categories is a social construction aimed at preserving adult power and privilege.<sup>6</sup> They maintain that our social practices and the ways we think and talk about people of different ages create the illusion that there are two distinct groups of people and that there are vast differences between these two groups and significant homogeneity within them.<sup>7</sup> For youth liberationists, the age-based division of all people into two categories, and the corresponding illusions of between-group difference and within-group homogeneity underlie the double standard that leads to the inferior treatment of young people.

This double standard concerns which circumstances warrant an individual's freedom and how much one's choices *matter*, that is, how strong their claim is to pursue those choices, how seriously their choices ought to be taken, and conversely, which conditions legitimize interfering with them. Liberationists point out that as far as current practices are concerned, these questions

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<sup>5</sup> On claims and rights, see Chapter 1, Section II.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Farson, 26-41; Holt; Harris; Cohen, 44-45. For more on the social construction of childhood, see Chapter 4, Section I.

<sup>7</sup> Holt, 25.



have one answer for adults, and a different answer for young people. The problem that liberationists describe is not just that youth are completely deprived of control over their own lives, but that, like the wires of a bird cage,<sup>8</sup> this deprivation and the double standard in which it is rooted contribute to young people's oppression more generally.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, anti-liberationists defend the need for drawing a single age-based line that separates all younger people from all older people socially, legally and morally. The line is drawn at different ages by different thinkers, and for most it is rough around the edges, but they agree that a single line needs to be drawn somewhere, even when they admit that additional, less prominent lines might also be drawn. That is, the binary distinction between youth (or, as we will see, alternatively, very young children) and adults may not be the only important age-based difference to recognize, but it is the central one. Anti-liberationists defend standard practices that treat young people and their choices as inferior, including strict age-based segregation and the complete control that adults are granted over the lives of young people. Adult control over young people requires the division of youth and adults into two identifiably distinct categories. In this sense, anti-liberationists seek to preserve the status quo, children's present "place" in society,<sup>10</sup> and they are explicit in denying both the necessity and the appropriateness of calls for radical change.<sup>11</sup>

Anti-liberationists argue that adults' choices warrant freedom – adults ought to get to make their own choices – on the grounds that adults are autonomous, and they understand autonomy as the capacity for effective choice-making or self-government. The skills taken to

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<sup>8</sup> Frye, 4-5.

<sup>9</sup> Cohen, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Purdy, 57.

<sup>11</sup> Purdy, 125; Archard, 207-208; Schapiro, 721. Unless otherwise noted, references to Archard are to his (1993) *Children: Rights and Childhood*.

underlie this capacity include rationality, which gets spelled out differently on different accounts. Anti-liberationists agree that autonomy is a necessary condition for grounding a right to freedom, and that adults meet this condition and children don't. Thus anti-liberationists deny that there is a double standard at play that unjustly disvalues young people's choices. Instead, their appeal to autonomy is an attempt to articulate a single standard for granting someone a right to freedom, and they try to show that only adults meet that standard. By focusing squarely on securing and defending adult control over young people, anti-liberationists ignore the broader social structures that constitute adulthood.

Below I discuss three prominent anti-liberationist defenses of autonomy as the basis for attributing rights to freedom: one based on the Kantian ideal of acting in accord with the categorical imperative, another that points to consequentialist considerations, and a final defense rooted in "common sense" presuppositions of modern political liberalism. These three positions are prominent and well-developed strategies for defending young people's inferiority. Indeed, they also arguably align with the most ubiquitous and well-trodden strands of moral theory. I consider their shared commitments, as well as some important differences among the three views. These differences are important for understanding the nuances of my response to anti-liberationism, which takes shape more fully in Chapter 3.

Tamar Schapiro, Laura Purdy, and David Archard each subscribe to one or another version of the following intuitively appealing argument:

1. Rational autonomy is what matters for attaining a right to self-determination.
  2. Adults are rationally autonomous and children aren't.
- Conclusion: Adults have a right to self-determination and children lack this right.

I present three versions of this anti-liberationist argument. All three versions appeal to a notion of rational autonomy. Though they offer different analyses of rational autonomy, they agree that

it is a mental capacity – a competence – possessed by individuals, and they construe this competence as a normative ideal, something it is good to have. Indeed, on all three views, rational autonomy forms the very basis on which one enjoys a right to self-determination. We can think of self-determination as the exercise of one's agency, or moving oneself about from the inside, though I will argue later that anti-liberationists sometimes unfairly pack a more substantive conception of rational choice-making into the notion of self-determination.

The rationally autonomous agent is a familiar figure in contemporary philosophy. He has his emotions and intentions all in order. He generally pursues what he deems valuable, and is pretty good at reasoning through complex situations to make the best decisions. We might think of his prototypical activity as buying a house or applying for jobs after law school. The rational agent has clear plans for his life, and his desires generally align with them. He knows what he wants and how to get it, and he attends to the needs of others in proper proportion to his own.

In contrast to the rationally autonomous agent buying a house or pursuing a career in law, imagine a family picnic, in which family members of all ages engage in a variety of activities. A parent and teenager are prepping the food, a sibling plays the ukulele while a group of relatives ages two to ninety-two sing along, and a game of catch has spontaneously arisen. The activities at the family picnic appeal to all ages, and people of all ages can participate in them. Even the youngest infant is included, visibly excited to be outside, and then eventually crying to be fed and changed. She is young enough that she needs to be held, but she has a clear preference for who does the holding, and she makes it known. She likes to be near the music.

While the family picnic is intended to exemplify an ageless space, a space where people of all ages can participate and this participation can be valued equally, even here, for the anti-liberationists, there is an important age-based boundary to mark, a boundary that fixes the right

to self-determination. For one to have a right to self-determination means, for the anti-liberationist, that one has the strongest kind of claim there is to make one's own choices. One's having a right to self-determination implies that one has a legitimate, overriding claim to be able to have one's choices be effective, to be "left to lead their own lives as they see fit."<sup>12</sup> The reason that adults have a right to self-determination is that, for adults, getting to exercise their choices is taken to be of supreme value. The freedom to self-determine is taken to be the appropriate default for adults; that is, it is supposed to be wrong to interfere with an adult's choice except and to the extent that there is some good reason to do so. For the anti-liberationist, youth are not granted the same default.

For anti-liberationists, part of the reason that autonomy is a necessary condition for having a right to self-determination is that autonomy renders one's freedom to self-determine very valuable. For those *below* the relevant boundary, there is no such right to self-determination; young people's self-determination is seen by the anti-liberationist as markedly less valuable than adults'. Since youth are taken to lack a right to self-determination, interfering with a young person's choice is never thought to constitute a violation of their right to choose. On this picture, the ten-year-old's claim to spend some time chatting with his uncle, rather than, say, be forced for no reason to join the music circle, is much less demanding than the uncle's claim to do the same. And if an aggressive in-law forces a hug or a kiss on an unwilling relative, the gravity of the offense, or at least the extent to which it violates one's claim to self-determination, depends on the age of the victim.

This is what is entailed by drawing a line that distinguishes the value of choice-making for adults and children, and consequently the strength of each group's claim to make choices. Those above the boundary are thought to have the strongest claims to freedom. While those

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<sup>12</sup> Archard, 77.

below the boundary may have some claim to freedom, theirs is weaker than that of those above the boundary. Indeed, it is precisely this division in the strength of claims to freedom that the boundary is supposed to mark; anti-liberationism in its most general terms just is the view that the division is morally justified, and that therefore, so are the social, legal and political systems built on that division.

## **II. Three Anti-Liberationist Positions**

I begin with Tamar Schapiro's characterization of childhood as a predicament. Schapiro endorses an explicitly Kantian account of the difference between adults and children, claiming that adults have, and children lack, a will of their own, that is, a principled, regulative, authoritative self that adjudicates between one's conflicting motivations.<sup>13</sup> This view counts as a version of the caretaker thesis, the anti-liberationist position that differences between youth and adults warrant young people's wholesale subjection to adult control. I move on to consider Laura Purdy's version of the caretaker thesis, which defends adult paternalism on utilitarian grounds, insisting that children need to be temporarily subject to adult control in order that they can exercise rights of self-determination as adults. Purdy's defense of paternalism, I argue, overcomes some of the shortcomings of Schapiro's. In particular, by recognizing that the differences between youth and adults are differences of degree, and not of kind, Purdy's account more accurately represents the changes we undergo as we transition from youth to adulthood. Nonetheless, like Schapiro's, Purdy's account mischaracterizes both children and adults.

Finally, I turn to David Archard. Archard sees himself as occupying a more acceptable middle ground between the caretaker thesis and youth liberation by granting adolescents equal

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<sup>13</sup> 729.

rights of self-determination but denying them to very young children.<sup>14</sup> I think Archard's defense of paternalism towards children is the most nuanced and strongest of the three. Archard's account also goes a long way towards liberating older children, whom Archard believes to have crossed the crucial moral threshold. Nonetheless, Archard's account also suffers from notable difficulties.

### *Tamar Schapiro's Childhood as a Predicament*

Schapiro starts from our everyday attitudes and intuitions: that we have special obligations to young people, to *raise* them, "whether they like it or not," and that there is a different significance in what young people say and do.<sup>15</sup> We also don't hold young people responsible in the same ways that we hold adults responsible for what adults say and do. We take children's actions less seriously, "or, rather, we do not take it seriously in the same way."<sup>16</sup> She sets out to defend these intuitions by asking *what is a child?* She seeks a principled way to distinguish between adults and children that justifies the differences in how we treat children and adults.<sup>17</sup> Her answer is that children's agency, unlike adult agency, is undeveloped.<sup>18</sup>

Schapiro appeals directly to Kant, viewing adults as active, autonomous agents whose decisions ought to be respected.<sup>19</sup> The criterion for active agency is rational autonomy, the ability to reflect on one's choices and ask how one ought to act. Active agency also requires the ability to vote and to make independent choices. Those who are not fit to vote, but nonetheless have

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<sup>14</sup> 93.

<sup>15</sup> 716.

<sup>16</sup> 717.

<sup>17</sup> 717.

<sup>18</sup> 730.

<sup>19</sup> 719, 723.

some reflective capacities, some capacity to act on the basis of reasons, are dependent and thus imperfect. Because of this, they occupy a political second class. For Kant, this included all women and children, as well as other groups.<sup>20</sup> Unlike nonhuman animals, who are fully determined by their instincts and unable to consider how they ought to act, children face a special predicament, according to Schapiro. Children are able to reflect on their choices, to think about how they should act, and to consider the force of conflicting motivations within them. But unlike adults, children are not yet able to regulate their wills in accord with reason, that is, they are unable to act on principle and in accord with the categorical imperative.<sup>21</sup> Importantly, Schapiro denies that we should think of the transition from childhood to adulthood in terms of degrees. For her, the difference between youth and adults is a difference in moral and political status. This status is a difference of kind, not of degree. Degrees of difference, she claims, cannot be the whole story in discussions of children's status relative to adults', much as, according to her, the difference in status between a master and an apprentice cannot be fully captured by their differing degrees of skill.<sup>22</sup>

Schapiro compares children to Kant's pre-political society.<sup>23</sup> On Kant's view, she claims, persons in the state of nature feel the normative force of claims of property rights and justice, but since there is no central authority, they lack the basis for justifying these claims. This is a tension that leaves people in the pre-political society in an unstable place. Thus, people in the state of nature ultimately need to "pull themselves together" to form a society.<sup>24</sup> Like the pre-political

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<sup>20</sup> 720.

<sup>21</sup> 722-723.

<sup>22</sup> 725.

<sup>23</sup> 725.

<sup>24</sup> 728.

society, children are in an unstable state. They feel the normative pull of different reasons and motivations, but they lack an “established deliberative perspective,”<sup>25</sup> the basic unified structure necessary to speak in one’s own voice, and the authority to adjudicate properly between conflicting motivations. It is their lack of a unified self, a voice of their own, that warrants adult paternalism towards young people. This is what Schapiro means when she says that adult agency is fully developed and children’s is not.<sup>26</sup>

On Schapiro’s account, the way that children move from childhood to adulthood is through play.<sup>27</sup> What children say and do should not be interpreted as genuine expressions of their wills, but as forms of play. Even 16-year-olds, on her view, are merely provisional selves.<sup>28</sup> This is why we say “he’s only a child,” or, of a teenager, “he got in with the wrong crowd.”<sup>29</sup> In addition, she thinks, we should see children as gaining the capacity to exercise discretion within an ever-increasing range of domains.<sup>30</sup> Adults have special obligations to children, she concludes, because childhood is seen as a “temporary deviation” from the norm of adulthood.<sup>31</sup> Children are not wild animals, and thus we cannot treat them any way we please.<sup>32</sup> Instead, we have an obligation to help them escape the limits of childhood, to become adults. We do this by refraining from interfering with their actions in certain domains of discretion wherein they are

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<sup>25</sup> 733.

<sup>26</sup> 730.

<sup>27</sup> 732.

<sup>28</sup> 733.

<sup>29</sup> 733.

<sup>30</sup> 734.

<sup>31</sup> 735.

<sup>32</sup> 735.



able to exercise free choice, and by helping their agency develop. Our responsibility as adults is to help children escape the unstable and non-ideal state of childhood and to awaken them to their own freedom.<sup>33</sup>

Schapiro succeeds in bringing the Kantian ideal of rational autonomy to bear in the discussion over children's rights, but the standards she evokes for securing a right to freedom are perhaps too stringent, even for adults. Kant's rational ideal is a paradigm of the liberal notion of autonomy, construing rational autonomy as a mental capacity – indeed *the* definitive cognitive feature – of human adults. Rational autonomy is seen as the ideal form of agency, a type of sovereignty that individuals have over themselves. This gives adult humans a unique moral status. In contrast, Purdy and Archard both ease the requirements for freedom, construing the relevant competence as a matter of degree and as a collection of distinct skills and traits of character. For them, unlike for Schapiro, the difference between those who are rationally autonomous and those who aren't is not a difference in intrinsic moral status. Instead, for Purdy and Archard, the moral line between children and adults follows from a pragmatic need to distinguish between those who are generally competent "enough" to lead their own lives and those who aren't.

*Laura Purdy and the Caretaker Thesis*

Schapiro and Purdy offer different defenses of the caretaker thesis. Purdy summarizes and rejects what she takes to be two main liberationist attempts to defend equal rights for children, one based on considerations of justice,<sup>34</sup> the other on considerations of consequences.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> 736.

<sup>34</sup> 21-22.

<sup>35</sup> 15.

According to Purdy, the liberationist argument based on justice is that equal rights for children follows from a basic principle of justice, which states that like cases ought to be treated alike.<sup>36</sup> Purdy claims that proponents of this view appeal to a notion of rationality that is too inclusive, according to which rationality is a mere capacity to reason instrumentally.<sup>37</sup> Her claim is that liberationists argue that attributing different sets of rights to youth and adults is unjust because youth and adults equally meet this minimal standard of rationality.<sup>38</sup> She thinks the liberationist holds further that assigning equal rights to youth and adults has better consequences than withholding adult rights from younger people.

Instead of construing rationality as the mere capacity for instrumental reasoning, Purdy advances a more restrictive notion of rationality, which includes the ability to plan systematic “utility-enhancing projects and having a rational life plan,”<sup>39</sup> and she argues that basing the right to self-determination on this more restrictive notion of rationality has better consequences for young people, their future adult selves, and society generally, than basing the right to freedom on the liberationist’s more inclusive notion of rationality.<sup>40</sup> Her more restrictive notion of rationality involves traits that youth lack: extensive experiential knowledge, the capacity to accurately judge other people’s interests, and character traits,<sup>41</sup> or “enabling virtues,”<sup>42</sup> such as self-control, “the

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<sup>36</sup> 28.

<sup>37</sup> 21.

<sup>38</sup> 21.

<sup>39</sup> 55.

<sup>40</sup> 87-88.

<sup>41</sup> 54.

<sup>42</sup> 47.

capacity to resist temptations that interfere with a previously set goal.”<sup>43</sup> Purdy’s response to the liberationist argument from justice is thus that assigning different rights for children and adults is not a violation of the principle that requires similar treatment of like cases because adults and children differ in morally relevant ways.<sup>44</sup>

For Purdy, developing the capacities of rationality in her restricted sense is also necessary for children’s moral development, which makes cultivating these traits essential to “the survival of civilization.”<sup>45</sup> She appeals to a developmental model,<sup>46</sup> pointing out that people go through a series of distinct developmental stages on their way to maturity. Since, on this model, children are in a “special period of learning,”<sup>47</sup> during which the desirable traits she names are most effectively instilled, she insists that children need to be carefully controlled by adults. She argues that young people need “loving but firm control,”<sup>48</sup> meaning strict, adult-imposed boundaries and discipline. Compulsory schooling is the prototypical example Purdy gives of a worthwhile limit on children’s freedom, one that is necessary for shaping children into adults with traits she deems desirable.<sup>49</sup> On her view, we rightly deprive children rights of self-determination in order that they will be able to exercise rights of self-determination as adults. She takes these consequentialist considerations to undermine the liberationist’s call for more (equal) freedom for children.

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<sup>43</sup> 47.

<sup>44</sup> 54.

<sup>45</sup> 54.

<sup>46</sup> 113.

<sup>47</sup> 116.

<sup>48</sup> 209.

<sup>49</sup> 169-173.

According to Purdy, granting children the same rights as adults would weaken parental authority by “severing the asymmetrical legal ties that now bind parents and children together,” rendering parents “more reluctant to provide for their children the kind of early training that now appears to be necessary for responsible and moral behavior later,” and “adolescents would be less likely to take their parents’ guidance seriously.”<sup>50</sup> Moreover, equal rights for children would abolish compulsory schooling and it would “propel many children into the workplace at an early age, where, without education, they would be prepared for only the most menial jobs,”<sup>51</sup> further exacerbating socioeconomic inequality. For Purdy, granting equal rights to children would be like “releasing mental patients from state hospitals without alternative provision for them.”<sup>52</sup> She thinks that these are all good consequentialist reasons not to assign the same rights to children and adults.

Purdy’s arguments above are negative arguments, in the sense that they aim to discount and reject liberationist calls for equal rights for children. Purdy believes her methodology shifts the burden of proof to the liberationist, who must show that a new way of treating children is preferable, given the strong enough case she builds in defense of “common sense”<sup>53</sup> practices that restrict children’s choices in ways that would be inappropriate for adults.<sup>54</sup> While Purdy’s description of the differences between youth and adults is more accurate than Schapiro’s, since Purdy recognizes these as differences of degree and not of kind, I think that like Schapiro, Purdy has misunderstood the liberationist position and failed to establish her conclusion that young

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<sup>50</sup> 214.

<sup>51</sup> 215.

<sup>52</sup> 217.

<sup>53</sup> 211.

<sup>54</sup> 100.

people's segregation and subjection to adult control are morally mandated by the former's unique traits and capacities.

*David Archard's Middle Ground*

David Archard criticizes both youth liberation and the caretaker thesis, advancing instead a "middle ground" position, holding that "not *all* children should be denied rights, but not all children should be given them. Instead there should be a presumption that younger children cannot whereas older children, that is teenagers, can exercise rights of self-determination."<sup>55</sup> Although the case he builds is admittedly inconclusive,<sup>56</sup> and although his position is an improvement over Purdy's since he has lowered the age of segregation, Archard's view is still squarely in the anti-liberationist camp. Archard is defending the practice of drawing a distinct boundary between younger and older people and assigning control and a right to self-determination exclusively to the older group. In this way, he is attempting to fortify and justify the binary distinction that youth liberationists cite as a central component of young people's oppression.

Archard's key strategy is to disarm the standard attacks against drawing a boundary between youth and adults, in particular the charges that any such boundary is necessarily arbitrary, and that it falsely portrays youth as incompetent.<sup>57</sup> We set particular speed limits even though they are imperfect guides to what counts as safe driving. Likewise, he believes, we are warranted in implementing age-based restrictions if age is a good indication of the probability that someone's competence warrants the restriction. The speed limit is justified even if in some circumstances one can drive safely above the limit, just as the age restriction is warranted even if

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<sup>55</sup> 93.

<sup>56</sup> 93.

<sup>57</sup> 85-97.

some people below the limit are competent enough to do what they're being restricted from doing.<sup>58</sup> If enough people below the limit are competent enough to do what they're being restricted from doing, this is evidence that the line has been drawn in the wrong place, but does not speak against drawing a line *per se*.<sup>59</sup> This is an argument that it's not arbitrary to draw a sharp boundary even when variation at the margins means that there is an imprecise match between the boundary and the features it is set to distinguish. If age is a reliable, albeit inexact, indication of someone's competence, at least the competence to make important life choices, then this argument speaks in favor of assigning the legal right to make choices based on age, by responding to the worry that any particular age would be arbitrary.

And while he argues at length against the charge of arbitrariness, Archard offers only a brief sketch in favor of drawing a line in the first place: "if society does need to separate and categorise persons, then lines of separation will have to be drawn, divisions between the categories agreed. This is especially likely when the society in question has developed a legal system."<sup>60</sup> He continues, "Anyone who uses the language of rights – as do child liberationists – must be prepared to exclude *some* things from the class of rights-holders. Child liberationists are not necessarily animal liberationists, and the latter are not necessarily flora liberationists...There would be no distinguishing status at all if nothing lacked rights."<sup>61</sup> He also appeals to developmental psychology to insist that human development occurs through a series of successive stages and that while there aren't "radical breaks" between the stages, the

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<sup>58</sup> 86-87.

<sup>59</sup> 87.

<sup>60</sup> 88.

<sup>61</sup> 87.

developmental model does see certain “distinct cumulative and qualitative changes,” which he thinks supports the use of age-based categories to determine the distribution of rights.<sup>62</sup>

Archard’s arguments for basing the distribution of legal rights on age presuppose that age is a reliable indication of one’s competence (after all, he points out, “the very young display serious incompetence”),<sup>63</sup> and he insists that possessing particular rights requires particular competences, that is, the ability or capacity, to exercise the right in question. The reason is that rights are supposed to correspond to what is of “sufficient, perhaps even overriding, importance or value to us,” but if, for example, “children cannot in fact make choices then, obviously, making choices is not something that can have value for them.”<sup>64</sup> And indeed, on grounds of incompetence, he denies children – at least infants and very young children – liberty rights, that is, rights that involve the exercise of free choices, such as rights to vote, to speech, to religious worship, etc.<sup>65</sup>

In addition to liberty rights, Archard distinguishes welfare rights, rights to the “protection and promotion of fundamental elements of our well-being,”<sup>66</sup> or our most basic and strongest interests, such as health and education. While very young children clearly have interests, and thus on Archard’s view count as possessors of welfare rights, they lack the capacity to exercise their welfare rights independently, that is to secure the protection of their most basic interests for themselves.<sup>67</sup> For Archard, one’s having a right to self-determination requires both the

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<sup>62</sup> 88.

<sup>63</sup> 89.

<sup>64</sup> 92.

<sup>65</sup> 92.

<sup>66</sup> 92.

<sup>67</sup> 92-93.

possession of liberty rights and the independent exercise of welfare rights.<sup>68</sup> Archard holds that younger children are not self-determining agents and thus denies them rights of self-determination.<sup>69</sup>

Archard argues for attributing rights of self-determination to older, but not to younger, children by appeal to a “central and influential presumption of modern liberal political philosophy,” which holds that adults should be “left to lead their own lives as they see fit,” because they are rational, autonomous decision-makers.<sup>70</sup> He cites the motivation for this view in J.S. Mill’s *On Liberty*, that rational autonomy renders adults the best judges of what’s in their interests, and “acting on the contrary presumption, that others may know better, is likely to lead to far worse outcomes.”<sup>71</sup> Put differently, “liberals presume that normal, sane adult human beings are capable of making sensible choices about how to lead their lives.”<sup>72</sup> It is this capacity that undergirds adults’ right to self-determination. “The capacity in question is most frequently described as that of rational autonomy,” and he explicates the notion of rational autonomy by appeal to three others: rationality, maturity, and independence.<sup>73</sup>

Rationality, for Archard, is a type of instrumental rationality that requires certain cognitive competences, including the possession of coherent desires that one can prioritize and act on accordingly, which in turn requires the knowledge and experience necessary to be able to

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<sup>68</sup> 93.

<sup>69</sup> 93.

<sup>70</sup> 77.

<sup>71</sup> 78.

<sup>72</sup> 93.

<sup>73</sup> 93.



form reliable beliefs about the world.<sup>74</sup> The relevant notion of maturity, for Archard, is also derived from Mill. It includes emotional balance, “with stable and relatively invariant desires and clear plans for their lives.”<sup>75</sup> The child is considered, in contrast, “temperamentally unstable, prone to sudden and dramatic changes of emotion, flitting from one desire to another,” and thus more likely to make impulsive decisions in the grip of these flitting emotions.<sup>76</sup> By independence, Archard means having the “personal resources,” to be able “to act out one’s choices.”<sup>77</sup> While one’s independence in this sense is normally affected by one’s socioeconomic status and other external features, for infants and the very young it is not: “infants and the very young are dependent upon adults to act for them.”<sup>78</sup>

I have summarized Archard’s argument for holding that children, at least very young ones, and adults are unequal in their moral claim to be able to make their own choices: adults and older children have, while infants and very young children lack, a right to self-determination. Archard sees the possession of a right as grounded in features whose possession is a matter of crossing a sort of threshold or moral watershed.<sup>79</sup> One’s having a right to self-determination requires rational autonomy, which for Archard includes instrumental rationality, maturity and independence. He grounds his argument in what he takes to be a basic tenet of modern political liberalism, that rational, autonomous adults, because they are rational and autonomous, should be left to live their lives as they see fit. Infants are clearly not rationally autonomous; older children

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<sup>74</sup> 93.

<sup>75</sup> 94.

<sup>76</sup> 94.

<sup>77</sup> 95.

<sup>78</sup> 95.

<sup>79</sup> 118.

are. Somewhere between these ages, one becomes rationally autonomous, at which point one crosses an important moral watershed, and acquires once and for all a full right to self-determination. The age at which age to draw the line to recognize one's legal right to self-determination may be a matter of contention, but we are justified in drawing the line *somewhere*.<sup>80</sup>

### **III. James Dwyer and the Moral Superiority of Children**

Recently, a friend of mine who is also a parent was told by her auto mechanic that her car was unsafe to drive with a child. If it's unsafe for her child, I thought, isn't it equally unsafe for her? But children are more important, she said. We care more about what happens to them. She got rid of her car. James Dwyer defends this type of thinking by arguing for the moral superiority of children, insisting that young people outdo adults on all counts by which we conventionally ascribe moral status.<sup>81</sup> Dwyer's view is worth pausing to consider here. I will argue that like the anti-liberationists', Dwyer's argument conflicts with an important principle of equality.

Based on the findings of empirical psychologists, Dwyer creates a list of features that trigger four mechanisms on which he claims we base our ascriptions of moral status. He calls the items on this list *markers of moral status*. They are the features a being has to have for it to matter in itself, for us to owe it respect. The list includes being alive, being sentient, being in relationship (having others who care about you), higher cognitive functioning (including being the subject of a life – with desires, perception, an ability to act, preferences, a sense of a future, rationality, moral agency, and autonomy), and even (perhaps) talent, beauty, virtue, and innocence.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> 89.

<sup>81</sup> 4.

Indeed, one central aim of Dwyer's is to reject single-criterion views of moral status.<sup>83</sup> These views ground moral status in some single feature, such as personhood or rationality, and claim that something either has or lacks this feature, and thus counts as a moral subject or does not. On Dwyer's view, whether a being is a moral subject (that is, whether we ought to consider it non-instrumentally in making decisions that affect it) is a matter of many different features; a being may have some or all of these features, and each of these features may be possessed to different degrees.<sup>84</sup> Children, according to Dwyer, possess a very high degree of most of the qualities that are treated as markers of moral status, whereas others (maybe snails and very, very old people) possess very little.<sup>85</sup> For example, he claims children are more alive:

we should consider the degrees to which preadolescent children and middle-aged adults respectively manifest growth through metabolism, reproduction, adaptation to the environment, ingestion of food, self-produced mobility, expressiveness, spiritedness, animation, reactivity to stimuli, goal directedness, a will to live, and ambition. It seems indisputable that on most of these attributes constitutive of aliveness, young children outdo adults, and in dramatic fashion.<sup>86</sup>

Dwyer goes on to point out that children grow faster, both intellectually and physically, that they are constantly in motion, and that they are more active.<sup>87</sup> These are some of the reasons that he thinks children are morally superior.

Like the anti-liberationists, I think Dwyer is too reliant on our everyday intuitions, and not sufficiently attuned to the ways that oppression shapes those intuitions. Dwyer wants to make

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<sup>82</sup> 32-44.

<sup>83</sup> 3, 44-53.

<sup>84</sup> 3.

<sup>85</sup> Ch 5.

<sup>86</sup> 151.

<sup>87</sup> 151-153.

sense of why we tend to think a child's pain matters more than a cat or dog's identical pain. The markers of moral status, for him, are whatever we actually take to matter morally (once this is adequately subjected to rational scrutiny). On his view, the widespread intuition that a person's suffering matters more than a cat or dog's, *even when the suffering is identical*, means that people have a higher moral status than cats and dogs, and this is due to some difference between people and dogs, other than the suffering itself.<sup>88</sup> I think this approach too quickly reinforces whatever oppressive or otherwise unjust intuitions we happen to hold.

Consider, as Dwyer notes, that we assign very different significance to the suffering of a factory-farmed animal than to the identical suffering of a household pet. Dwyer takes this to suggest that dogs are objectively more morally significant than cattle and then sets out to identify the features that underlie this objective difference.<sup>89</sup> (Being cared about by others makes it onto his final list, and for him may be what makes the difference in the case being considered.) On my view, in contrast, the difference between our concern for cattle and dogs more likely suggests that these concerns are heavily influenced by contingent aspects of our culture (in this case, especially, the factory farming industry). Rather than search for grounds on which to base our discriminatory feelings and practices, we should instead first investigate the social forces that give rise to such disparate responses to the like suffering of different kinds of beings.

On Dwyer's view we tend to reach the height of our moral worthiness between 6 and 12 and decline thereafter, as we enter and pass through adulthood.<sup>90</sup> One's moral status in turn determines to what extent we ought to consider one's interests. For example, those of higher moral status ought to have their interests taken more seriously. On Dwyer's view, it's not just

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<sup>88</sup> 135-136.

<sup>89</sup> 11-12.

<sup>90</sup> 183.

that children's choices or interests are usually stronger. More radically, for Dwyer, children's interests ought to be taken more seriously than adult interests, *even when the interests themselves are identical*. The moral superiority of children means younger people's interests deserve greater (rather than equal) consideration.<sup>91</sup> This is a direct violation of Singer's Principle of Equality, as Dwyer notes.

Dwyer is not an anti-liberationist, but his view has similar shortcomings. Both Dwyer and the anti-liberationists deny children's equality, not just in the determinate sense, but in the indeterminate sense that children don't even get to have their identical interests or choices considered equally. Dwyer thinks that because children possess the markers of moral status to a greater degree than adults, children's interests (even interests that are otherwise identical) should be weighed on a different moral scale. Anti-liberationists think that because adults are rationally autonomous, their choices (even choices that are otherwise identical) should be weighed on a different moral scale. Both views are in plain conflict with the principles of equality I have been discussing. I turn now towards a defense of this claim.

#### **IV. Dwyer and the Anti-Liberationists Violate Equality Principles**

Archard defines choice and self-determination in terms of rational autonomy. He reserves the labels 'choice' and 'self-determination' for actions of agents who are rationally autonomous in his sense. In doing so, he has by fiat prevented toddlers and very young children from counting as choice-makers or self-determined agents in the first place.<sup>92</sup> Denying that young children's purposeful actions count as choices allows Archard to dismiss the unfairness charge: we are not unfairly devaluing children's freedom to choose compared to adults because whatever children are doing does not count as choosing in the first place. Children don't get the

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<sup>91</sup> 184.

<sup>92</sup> 92-93.

right to freedom because the relevant freedom is the freedom to self-determine – to have one's choices be effective – and children aren't self-determining agents. Schapiro makes a similar move, denying that children have the capacities (among them self-government) whose exercise freedom is thought to protect. For Purdy, like the others, children are thought not to warrant freedom because they are thought not to be capable of effectively acting freely. One who lacks a capacity for self-determination cannot enjoy a right to self-determination. For the anti-liberationist, this is as it should be.

But this move raises a problem of its own. If we build a substantive liberal conception of rational autonomy into the concept of self-determination, then it is not clear why the liberal conception ought to ground a right to agency, that is, a right to *act*, to steer one's life from the inside. When I talk of freedom, I mean freedom in a broad sense. For agents who lack the capacity to be "running their own lives," freedom nonetheless includes a broad notion of agential *efficacy* – the freedom to express oneself, to participate actively where and how one is able, to move oneself about, and to *act* (purposefully *or* impulsively). The anti-liberationist denial to children of a right to self-determination encompasses this broader right to freedom. Agents who are not rational, on this picture, have no right to *active participation*, no right to do whatever it is they're doing. Since one's claim to freedom is based on the value of freedom, the difference the anti-liberationists mark between children and adults' claims to freedom indicates a difference in the value the anti-liberationists attribute to the freedom of children and adults.

For anti-liberationists, when adults are granted the right to freedom, it doesn't just apply to rational decision-making, but more broadly to any of the variety of actions and activities in which rationally autonomous adults participate, including actions based on impulse. And when children are denied a right to freedom, this doesn't just mean that children lack the right to run

their lives or plan their futures. On this picture, children lack the right to *act* more broadly. Children have no right to exercise their agency. Adults have this right. While they may have some claim to act in some cases, children's claim to agency is decidedly weaker than an adult's corresponding claim, according to anti-liberationism. The problem for the anti-liberationist is to say why, if they include rational autonomy as an essential component of self-determination, self-determination ought to ground one's claim to agency, which includes much more than merely rationally autonomous agency.

On the other hand, if we want to preserve the normative force of self-determination and count self-determination as the only compelling grounds for one's claim to agency, then self-determination should not be defined in terms of the substantive liberal conception of rational autonomy. Many types of activities do not require the kinds of capacities that anti-liberationists include in their notion of rational autonomy. When these capacities are not relevant to a particular activity, the value of the freedom to participate in the activity should not depend on whether one possesses the capacities. The value of having the freedom to stretch one's limbs or express oneself by singing or dancing should not depend on one's ability to act on the basis of reasons or to control their impulses.

It's valuable for toddlers to be free to stretch and sing and dance, even if they can't yet plan their futures. The fact that children sometimes cannot help but to sing or dance impulsively enhances the value of their freedom to do these things. It makes it more awesome when they do them than when adults do them. There's something precious about the unselfconscious, fully expressed, erratic behaviors of toddlers. Their lack of self-judgment and inhibition in some cases add to the value of their freedom. And as for adults, the freedom to do these things is valuable in itself, not just to the extent to which doing them promotes one's interests. This follows from the

Principle of the Equality of Agency. If the value of agency is grounded in self-determination, then self-determination ought to include activities like these – singing and dancing and stretching one’s limbs – which do not – at least do not always – require rational autonomy.

By insisting that adults are self-determined agents and that children are not, and then cashing out the notion of freedom in terms of self-determination, anti-liberationists violate the Principle of the Equality of Agency. They are not willing to give young people’s agency equal consideration, or to recognize the equal value of their choices in cases that are relevantly similar. On Archard’s view, for example, not only are children’s actions morally inferior to adult actions in that children have less of a claim to act, but the actions of young children are not even candidates for moral equality since adult actions are a different kind of thing. For Schapiro, too, children’s actions, due to children’s failure to appreciate the categorical imperative, are not the types of things that could warrant freedom, since freedom is understood as the freedom to self-govern. For both of them, as well as for Purdy, adult actions are in a separate and superior moral category. On all three views, actions guided by choices, which only older people are even capable of making effectively, are more prestigious, more significant, and more valuable than the mere behaviors of non-autonomous agents. Only the former achieve the sanctified status of a right.

For the anti-liberationist, adult choices matter more, even for choices that don’t themselves involve rational autonomy. Adults not only have a stronger claim to be able to sign contracts and choose their career paths, they are seen by the anti-liberationist as having a stronger claim (a right, which children are seen to lack) to do anything they want, so long as they do not violate others’ rights thereby: dance, make art, or resist unwanted hugs. Anti-liberationists are alike in insisting that an adult has a *right* to choose, while the child, if they have any kind of



moral claim to agency, has something much less strong, less serious, less demanding, and less deserving of respect than a right. That is the whole point of rights: to draw moral distinctions that are of utmost importance.

Dwyer makes a similar error, although there are important differences. When Dwyer maintains that children are morally superior to adults, this means that the interests of adults and children do not deserve equal respect and consideration. For him, because children possess the markers of moral status to a greater degree than adults (growth, aliveness, etc.), a child's interest matters more than a similar interest of adults. The problem with Dwyer's view is that growth, aliveness, etc. are irrelevant, for example, to how bad it is to be in pain. Growth and aliveness don't make children's pain worse than adults' similar pain because growth and aliveness have nothing to do with how much pain hurts or how bad it is to be in pain. We can object to Dwyer's moral distinction between the interests of pets and of factory-farmed animals on similar grounds.

For both Dwyer and the anti-liberationists, children and adults are not only unequal in a determinate sense, but they are thought to be unequal in an indeterminate sense as well. Indeterminate inequality is more profound than determinate inequality because the latter follows from the former. If children's agency is not counted equally (indeterminate equality), the value of their agency will be deemed determinately unequal. For anti-liberationists, children's agency is unequal to adults' agency in an indeterminate sense because children are not seen as appropriate candidates for having a right to freedom. Dwyer differs from anti-liberationists in adopting different methods to establish his conclusion, but they are alike in holding that adults and children are indeterminately unequal in important respects. This violation of the Principle of Equality of Agency renders anti-liberationist conclusions about children's determinate inequality suspect.

By grounding one's claim to agency – conceived as a right to self-determination – in one's possession of rational autonomy, anti-liberationists err in other ways, too. By drawing a twofold moral distinction between those with a right to self-determination and those without it, anti-liberationists misrepresent the changes that we undergo as we develop the capacities they identify as crucial for having the rights in question. The rational capacities they identify – self-control, the ability to anticipate consequences, judge others' interests, etc. – develop gradually. The assertion that there is some all-important moral binary or critical moral divide, and the subsequent sorting of all people into two moral categories (those with a right to self-determine and those without one) overlooks the fact that change and growth happen gradually.

Moral distinctions must correspond to non-moral ones. Changes in one's claim to freedom ought correspond to gradual changes in the underlying capacities that are relevant to one's claim to freedom. Moving from not having a right to having one is an extremely significant and abrupt moral transformation, but the non-moral changes that anti-liberationists take to undergird this moral transformation are sometimes non-linear, subtle and insignificant. The extent to which the capacities taken to underlie rational autonomy are exercised in a particular choice may vary greatly from decision to decision, even for one person at a single age.

By lowering the age of segregation, Archard advocates for more inclusion of teenagers in the social and political spheres, and he points out that though one lacks a right to self-determination, one may nonetheless be able to participate in some ways, for example, in political processes.<sup>93</sup> He acknowledges that people of different ages have a variety of competences and can participate to varying degrees in decisions that affect them. Even for Archard, the answers to questions about who should get to do what sorts of things are complex and nuanced, not twofold

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<sup>93</sup> 101.

or straightforward.<sup>94</sup> But then we can ask why we should posit an all-important moral dividing line between very young children and older children in the first place. Should very young children really be subject to the control of older children? The right to self-determination is supposed to be all-encompassing and extremely important.

If anti-liberationists want to maintain that the value of one's freedom depends on the underlying capacities they identify (and I challenge this assumption in Chapter 3), then they should at least swap the twofold notion of a right to self-determination for a notion that is not binary. Speaking of one's claim to self-determination, rather than one's right, as I pointed out in Chapter 1, would allow them to represent moral changes as they take shape gradually, corresponding to gradual changes in the underlying capacities that anti-liberationists view as essential. This would be a fairer representation of the value of freedom since it would allow us to avoid positing a moral distinction where there is no underlying non-moral one. But this would no longer justify the inferiority of young people as a distinct class.

Drawing a moral distinction where there is no underlying non-moral distinction is another way in which anti-liberationists violate the Principle of the Equality of Agency. The supposition that a moral line distinguishes the value of freedom for people above and below a certain age-based cutoff leads to the result that people above and below the cutoff can be descriptively exactly alike in all ways except age, but have an unequal claim to freedom. Thus, two people who are alike in their capacities relevant to rational autonomy may nonetheless have unequal claims to freedom, depending on where the line is drawn. Again, the anti-liberationist thinks the line marks an important moral distinction, not just a legal one. The problem is not just that the legal line is marked at midnight on a particular birthday, but that the moral line is thought to correspond to a particular age-based boundary, albeit a blurry one.

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<sup>94</sup> 98-111.

Archard and Purdy's main defense of a binary power structure that segregates adults and children into separate moral tiers are legal and pragmatic considerations that they believe require it. Archard believes that we have moral reasons –it's morally good to have laws, and laws require divisions – to deny children an equal claim to self-determination.<sup>95</sup> Purdy goes further to suggest that eliminating this binary power structure could lead to the collapse of civilization, failing to provide children with the support and moral guidance they need in a hostile and uncaring world.<sup>96</sup> And even if, as mandated by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children *were* granted a right to participate in decisions that affect them in accord with their age and maturity, Archard suggests, it would still be adults who (rightly) get the final say over how much control children are to have in particular contexts.<sup>97</sup> Anti-liberationists seem to suggest in unison that there are no viable alternatives to denying young people an equal right to agency. They think that because the only sensible social and moral policy is for adults to have the final say about who gets to do what, children's moral claim to do what they are trying to do, in any context, is inferior to adults'. They insist on young people's inferior claim to agency (on their lacking a right to self-determination) even when we consider an action by an adult and a child who are otherwise similarly situated within a particular context.

But the Principle of Equality tells us that people of all ages are equal in the indeterminate sense that their relevantly similar features are morally similar too. In order to accurately judge the similarities between individuals, we should set aside broader concerns about the types of logistical or legal practices that are needed. If two individuals are alike in the relevant ways, then they are morally equal, and their freedom to act is equally valuable, no matter the contexts in

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<sup>95</sup> 88.

<sup>96</sup> 53.

<sup>97</sup> 66.

which we consider them. The moral value of a child's freedom to choose does not vary according to whether the society within which that child resides has a legal system. Denying children's equality of agency on the grounds that having a legal system requires that denial is like denying the moral equality of slaves on the grounds that having an economic system requires that denial. Both insist that two individuals who are otherwise exactly alike may nonetheless occupy distinct positions in a moral hierarchy, due to broader societal considerations.

Liberationists hold that because children and adults have an equally strong moral claim to agency in cases that within a particular context are exactly morally alike, such as choosing one's socks or resisting a hug, we should seek better social structures that honor these equally strong claims, rather than grant adults control over all of young people choices independently of the type of the choice under consideration. Suppose for a moment that anti-liberationists are correct that there is no better way. Suppose that legal control is rightfully granted exclusively to adults. Even then, we should recognize that an adult may seriously violate a child's *moral* claim to agency when the adult exercises their legal right to control the child. And this violation is every bit as morally significant as a relevantly similar violation of an adult's claim to agency, even if the moral equality of the adult and child's choice is difficult or impossible to protect legally. That is, children's moral equality of agency is not undermined by legal or practical considerations, even if these considerations warrant an unequal distribution of legal rights. That the adult ought to have the final say in which decisions the child is allowed to make does not mean that the adult's say-so makes it the case that the child has a claim to act. Adults can be wrong to deny a child's fully equally legitimate claim to agency, even on occasions when it makes sense for the adult to be in charge.

Moreover, this supposition that there is no better legal or pragmatic way to protect young people's moral equality and their wellbeing is premature. Liberationists point out that children could be active participants whose input is equally valued, even in societal decisions about freedom and the distribution of power. Children and adults could decide together how much control anyone ought to have in a certain context. Imagine mixed-age, community-based conflict resolution teams, as a support for families in conflict. The anti-liberationist denial to youth of a right to self-determination involves a failure to imagine alternative societal arrangements within which children's equal claims to agency could be recognized and respected. Children can be especially helpful in imagining these alternatives. In Chapter 5 I say more about these alternative arrangements, partly to help expand our imaginative capacities in the interest of designing better social systems.

I have been arguing that anti-liberationists violate the Principle of the Equality of Agency by failing to give children's agency the equal respect and consideration it deserves. They fail to take children seriously. They do this first by characterizing freedom and self-determination by reference to capacities (rational autonomy) that they take adults, and not children, to possess, thereby denying the inherent value of children's freedom and agency. By characterizing freedom in terms of rational autonomy, anti-liberationists are unable to recognize the possibility that the freedom of what they take to be rational and non-rational agents is at least sometimes equally valuable.

Second, anti-liberationists fail to take children seriously by imposing a twofold structure on underlying non-moral capacities that do not admit of a binary distinction. Dwyer avoids this mistake by insisting that moral status is a matter of degree. The anti-liberationists' reason for drawing the twofold distinction is that they believe that around a certain age, one crosses an

important moral threshold, whereby the possession of the capacities in question renders one autonomous, where autonomy is construed as a kind of agential efficacy, or self-government. For Archard, this is the ability to effectively act out one's choices, for Purdy it's the ability to take on longer-term projects, and for Schapiro, it's the capacity to act on the basis of reason, in light of one's conflicting motivations. Thus the three are alike in viewing adults as the sole creatures who are capable of the effective exercise of free agency, and it is this capacity – also known as autonomy – that is thought to ground their right to freedom.

In Chapter 3, I look more closely at this conception of autonomy. Recall the difference between the indeterminate equality captured by the Principle of the Equality of Interests and the Principle of the Equality of Agency, on the one hand, and determinate equality, on the other. Even if the anti-liberationist were to recognize young people's equality in the indeterminate sense entailed by the Principle of the Equality of Agency, they might nonetheless deny their determinate equality. If my arguments above are correct, this would require significant revisions to the anti-liberationist position. Nonetheless, the point remains that we might recognize that young people have an equal claim to have their agency be judged by consistent standards, that their relevantly similar actions matter equally, but nonetheless deny that that their actions are ever – are at least in general – relevantly similar. On this basis, the anti-liberationists might insist that equal consideration of child and adult agency confirms adults' superior claim to self-determination. In Chapter 3, I look more closely at this position, which concerns children's determinate equality. I challenge autonomy as the determinate basis for grounding one's claim to freedom, along with the anti-liberationists' insistence that adults have it and children don't.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **AUTONOMY AND THE VALUE OF FREEDOM**

In Chapter 1, I argued for children's equality of agency. First, I claimed that children are equal in an indeterminate sense – they are equally covered by the Principle of the Equality of Agency, in that the value of their agency varies like the value of adult agency only according to the relevant descriptive features. The Principle of the Equality of Agency requires that we give children's agency equal respect and consideration. And second, given the features that are relevant to the value of one's freedom to exercise agency – sometimes competence, sometimes incompetence, sometimes skills that adults tend to possess to a greater degree than children, sometimes skills that are unique to children – I made a preliminary case that children are also morally equal to adults in a determinate sense. At the very least, I insisted, claims of the inferior moral status of children's agency in the determinate sense are suspect, given our systematic failure to give young people equal respect and consideration, as required by the Principle of the Equality of Agency. The variety of considerations that might underlie the value of freedom in a particular case warrant a broad age-egalitarianism when it comes to determining the strength of claims to freedom generally.

In Chapter 2, I examined three anti-liberationist arguments for the inferiority of young people's agency. Anti-liberationists maintain that adults have a right to self-determination and that children lack this right. I showed how the anti-liberationist positions violate the Principle of the Equality of Agency. First, they do this by characterizing freedom in terms of rational



autonomy. Child and adult agency cannot be valued equally on this picture because child and adult agency are thought to be different sorts of things; only the latter is a candidate for freedom. Since claims to freedom are based on the value of freedom, by denying children's equal claim to freedom, children's freedom is being undervalued relative to adults'. Second, anti-liberationists violate the Principle of Equality of Agency by marking a moral distinction in the value of agency, and consequently one's claim to freedom, where there is no underlying non-moral distinction. The descriptive capacities that anti-liberationists themselves take to underlie this moral distinction develop gradually; moral changes ought to correspond to this gradation of non-moral changes.

In this chapter, I look more closely at the notion of autonomy, which all three anti-liberationists take to be the determinate grounds for granting a right to freedom. They argue that adults' choices warrant freedom – adults ought to get to make their own choices – on the grounds that adults are autonomous. Anti-liberationists understand autonomy as the capacity for effective choice-making or self-government. The skills taken to underlie this capacity include rationality, which gets spelled out differently on different accounts. Anti-liberationists agree that autonomy is a necessary condition for grounding a right to freedom, and that adults have it and children don't. Indeed, on their picture, autonomy is the very thing that freedom is thought to protect.

Recall the anti-liberationist argument presented in Chapter 2:

1. Rational autonomy is what matters for attaining a right to self-determination.
  2. Adults are rationally autonomous and children aren't.
- Conclusion: Adults have a right to self-determination and children lack this right.

In Section I, I review the three versions of this anti-liberationist argument and their shared commitments. In Section II, I reject premise one of the anti-liberationist argument by challenging the anti-liberationist notion of autonomy as the basis for the value of agency. It is that notion –

conceived of as a capacity for effective choice-making – that makes premise one of the argument seem plausible. The anti-liberationist conception of autonomy is susceptible to a number of criticisms issued by feminists against liberal conceptions of rational autonomy more generally. Feminists accuse the liberal conception of being overly individualistic, and of presupposing a type of political solipsism, which I will explain. I think all three anti-liberationists adopt liberal conceptions of autonomy that are vulnerable to the feminist critique.

In the spirit of the feminist critique and building on the preliminary case I made for children's equality in Chapter 1, I maintain that whether one can effectively act depends on contextual features, including one's relationships with others, as well as what it is one is trying to do. Once we direct our attention to the contextual nature of effective action and decision-making, we can see that if the grounds for attaining a right to particular liberties were based on competence or the capacity to effectively exercise the liberties in question, children would outdo adults in a variety of areas. Children are just better than adults at doing some kinds of things. Recognizing our interdependence and our shared political aims brings children's unique skills to light. Unique skills of children include the pursuit of some moral and non-moral values, and some skills whose exercise is important for social transformation. I will show how the arguments I present in Section II echo the feminist critique.

In Section III, I move on to reject premise two of the argument presented above. I consider research that suggests that adults aren't as rational as we take ourselves to be, and I discuss the empirical conclusion of many social scientists that babies and very young children are more cognitively competent than we suppose. Challenging the premises of the anti-liberationist argument presented above is one step towards rejecting the anti-liberationist conclusion that adults have, and children lack, a right to self-determination.

Finally, in Section IV, I point the way towards a broader conception of autonomy that provides the grounds for granting youth an equal claim to self-determination. Philosophers have reconceptualized autonomy, personhood, development and wellbeing in ways that center social relationships, caring, and interdependence, and these reconceptualizations provide some of the tools for better thinking about children. I consider a few plausible, well-developed accounts of autonomy and development that are broader than the standard liberal conceptions to which anti-liberationists appeal. The accounts of autonomy I consider are examples of views that, unlike traditional liberal conceptions, recognize the context-dependence of one's capacity for effective agency, and thus could serve as components of a framework in which children's choices are given equal respect and consideration.

### **I. Autonomy According to Anti-Liberationists**

Recall the anti-liberationist positions of Schapiro, Purdy, and Archard. Schapiro held that adults are rationally autonomous in a Kantian sense, in that they are able to adjudicate between conflicting motivations and act in accord with the categorical imperative. To be rationally autonomous in this sense means not only that one is able to ask "what ought I to do?" but to give due weight to one's conflicting internal motivations, and then guide one's will in accord with reason. Children are taken to differ from adults in this respect; for Schapiro this means that children's agency, unlike adults', is undeveloped. Children, on this account, lack a unified self, an "established deliberative perspective," or a unifying, justificatory source, which provides the basis for right action. Importantly, the passage from children's undeveloped agency to adults' developed agency is not simply a matter of degree. For Schapiro, between childhood and adulthood, we actually cross an important moral divide, after which we are fully rationally autonomous. The role of adults in the lives of children is to help them escape their non-ideal state

of non-rationally autonomous agency, and to help them become rationally autonomous by awakening them to their own freedom. Schapiro, like the other anti-liberationists, thus conceives of freedom as the exercise of autonomy.

Like Schapiro, Purdy claims that only adults are rationally autonomous. In defense of this view, she develops a notion of rational autonomy that is more restrictive than other notions. While, according to her, the more inclusive notions she considers identify rationality with a capacity to reason instrumentally, and thus fail to distinguish between youth and adults (since children, too, qualify as rational according to this minimal, more inclusive standard), Purdy puts forth a more restrictive notion of rationality, which she believes requires more substantial capacities than the more inclusive notion. Key abilities for Purdy are the ability to formulate and follow a “rational life plan,” and to take on “utility-enhancing projects.”<sup>1</sup> These require the capacities to resist temptations that interfere with previously set goals, to accurately judge others’ interests, and much more.

Purdy believes that adults, and not children, possess rationality in this more restrictive sense. She also believes that the more restrictive notion of rationality is preferable to the more inclusive notion for determining who deserves freedom. Her reasons are primarily consequentialist. Granting freedom only to those who are rational in the more restrictive sense has better consequences than granting freedom to everyone who is even minimally rational in the more inclusive sense. For a review of the relevant consequences, see Chapter 2. These consequentialist considerations also ground Purdy’s response to the youth liberationist who claims that denying freedom to children is unjust. It is because of differences between children’s and adults’ rational capacities that depriving children freedom has better results and thus is

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<sup>1</sup> 55.

warranted and not a violation of justice. In particular, denying children's freedom is not a violation of a principle that requires like treatment of similar cases, according to Purdy.

While Purdy holds that even adolescents and teenagers fail to meet the standards of rational autonomy, Archard believes that older youth, like adults, have crossed a critical moral threshold. For Archard, rational autonomy is competence at making choices, and those who are rationally autonomous, due to their possession of this competence, ought to be left alone to make their own choices. Rational autonomy, for Archard, includes the capacity to reason instrumentally, but much like Purdy's account, it includes much more than this minimal requirement. For Archard, in addition to instrumental reason, rational autonomy includes some level of maturity and independence. Maturity includes emotional stability, and having clear plans for one's life, while independence involves the capacity to act out one's choices,<sup>2</sup> or to make sensible choices about their lives. Very young children lack these robust capacities, and thus ought not to be free to make their own choices, while adults have these capacities and thus have a right to self-determination based on their rational autonomy. For Archard, age is a good enough indicator of whether one counts as a rationally autonomous to justify the distribution of legal rights to freedom based on age.

While Schapiro, Purdy, and Archard each develop different conceptions of rational autonomy, and thus different bases for attributing rights to freedom, there are several important points of convergence among the three views. First, rational autonomy in each case is seen as a form of mental competence. Archard and Schapiro emphasize particular capacities while Purdy also emphasizes particular habits of character, which she believes take time to develop.<sup>3</sup> On all three accounts, typical adults, who are seen to possess the relevant competence, warrant freedom

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<sup>2</sup> Archard, 95.

<sup>3</sup> Purdy, 81.

no matter how stupid or unreasonable their decisions sometimes are. Freedom is seen as the free exercise of the capacities relevant to effective choice-making. On their picture, children do not warrant freedom since they are thought not to be capable of exercising the relevant capacities. Children don't get to make their own choices because children are thought not to be capable of making the types of robust choices that freedom is thought to protect.

Also important for all three anti-liberationists is that rational autonomy is a property of individuals, and is independent of one's context and not relative to the choice at hand. Whether an agent is rationally autonomous depends on the agent's internal characteristics and is independent of one's environment in the sense that one's rational autonomy is not constituted by one's environment. On these accounts, we could, in principle, drop a rationally autonomous individual into any alternative setting, confronting any choice, and as long as they remain the same mentally or internally, they will remain rationally autonomous. This is the sense in which autonomy, for the anti-liberationist, is constitutively independent of one's context. This constitutive independence can be distinguished from causal independence, in the sense of there being a causal disconnect between the agent's environment and the agent's rational autonomy. None of the anti-liberationists considered explicitly maintain that an agent's rational autonomy is causally independent of her environment. But they all agree that rational autonomy is a feature of individual agents and thus is not constituted by the agent's environment. On their view, children move through a universal progression of stages of development towards a plateau of rational autonomy.

Another point of convergence worth noting is that on all three anti-liberationist accounts, rational autonomy is construed as a normative ideal. On all three views, rational autonomy renders adult freedom more valuable than children's freedom, and it is on this basis that adults

alone are granted a right to freedom. Indeed it is in pursuit of the ultimate aim of children themselves *becoming* rationally autonomous that children's freedom is seen as justifiably curtailed, and children are seen as rightly subjugated to adult power and paternalism. The extent to which an agent ought to be able to freely exercise agency is taken to depend on the value of one's free exercise of agency, which in turn is taken to depend on whether the agent is rationally autonomous. Rational autonomy is the normative standard against which everyone's agency is measured; non-rational agents are seen both to be subject to and to fall short of that normative standard. Children are thought not to warrant freedom because they fail to meet the standards that ground the value of freedom. On all three accounts, freedom for children is thought not to be as valuable as freedom for adults, and thus not guaranteed, because children are deemed incapable of acting freely.

## **II. Critique of the Anti-Liberationist Conception of Autonomy**

The anti-liberationists conceive of autonomy as a capacity for effective choice-making. Freedom is thought to be warranted only by individuals who are capable of being in control of their lives. Since children lack the capacities to make good choices, others are rightly granted control over children's decisions, and this means that children lack the right to choose. Children do not get to self-determine, to exercise their agency. They may sometimes have some claim to do what they're doing, but they are thought by the anti-liberationists not to share a default entitlement to make their own choices, which is granted exclusively to adults.

The first problem I raise for this position is its insistence that effective choice-making consists in some particular set of capacities, which is fixed universally, that is, independently of one's context. If we don't beg the question by defining choice-making in terms of some set of capacities, we can ask what it takes to be capable of being an effective *do-er*. Of successfully

doing things, rather than just having things done to you. What are the capacities required for actively participating in one's life, for navigating from the inside? What does it take for agents to effectively exercise their agency?

The answer will be different for different creatures in different contexts. For adult humans, effectively navigating the types of situations in which we find ourselves sometimes (but not always) requires the types of skills related to long-term planning that the anti-liberationists hold dear. But for bald eagles, for example, rationality presumably has nothing to do with it. For eagles, getting around does not, as far as we can tell, require long-term planning or the ability to think through and decide what's valuable. Eagles would not be better at catching prey if they were rational, just as humans would not be better at retirement-planning if they were good at catching prey. Eagles need different skills than adult humans to get around in the world. But this does not mean that one or the other is more capable or deserving of being in control of their lives, or that eagles' freedom is less valuable than adult humans'. Whether an eagle is doing the "sensible" thing, should not be determined by a criterion of rationality.

Likewise, babies need different skills to survive than both adults *and* eagles. Sure, there are some choices babies can't make. But then there are other things that they do exceptionally well. Whether they are capable of acting effectively, just as for adults, depends on what they are like, what they are considering or trying to do, and what contextual features make it possible or impossible for them to do it. Of course there are different degrees of freedom relative to different types of choices we might try to make. There are different degrees to which we have what it takes (on the inside and on the outside) to do the thing in question were we to try to do it. But this is true for everybody. All agents are capable of effectively exercising their agency to



different degrees in different contexts, and in some contexts, with regard to some choices, not at all.

The capacity for being a free agent is not unique to adults. It is not the case that the value of freedom is greater for adults because adults alone are capable of agential efficacy. Anyone can be an effective agent in the right context. And even adults' agential efficacy can be undermined by their circumstances. Poverty, homelessness, drug addiction, and illness can all impede one's "sensible plans for their lives," and threaten one's capacity to make "good" choices in light of one's longer term goals. Sometimes circumstances cause adults to abandon longer term goals altogether, and to act instead on instinct for survival in the moment. Very young children, too, have demonstrated a profound capacity to survive on their own in these most dire types of circumstances,<sup>4</sup> which is not to suggest that it's good for them to have to.

Children can be effective agents with regard to some choices and in some contexts, particularly those contexts where they have adequate support. This is not to say that children should get the support to do whatever they want to do. Nor should adults get to do whatever they want to do. The point is, more modestly, that when it comes to acting freely, adults and children are importantly alike. We are all capable of being effective agents in some realms and not others, and the efficacy of our agency in any realm depends largely on our relationships with others. Furthermore, our claim to agency is not undermined or diminished by this dependence. Physically disabled adults who need help filling their basic needs do not thereby relinquish their claim to freedom. They are not thereby any less deserving of respect as agents. Children's small sizes or reduced physical strength are no defense for their socially enforced powerlessness.

Of course, very young children and adults are typically different in which types of ends they are capable of pursuing, as well as which types of ends they tend to pursue. No toddler can

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<sup>4</sup> Holt, 24.

set and follow a career path. But Archard is wrong to think that this means that toddlers need adults to act for them, as if they are completely incapable of acting for themselves. Very young children can and do act for themselves, and it is crucially important that we respect this capacity, as I've been reminded emphatically by many 3-year-olds. Whether a toddler should have the space to move freely in the world, or even just within a particular environment, such as a restaurant or home, should not depend on the toddler's capacity to get a job, file tax forms, or find housing, all of which are presumably required for one to be able to act out one's choices on Archard's account. Toddlers should not need to see themselves as subject to a moral law in order to be respected as purposeful agents or given space and support to act freely. Again, the value of freedom – and one's corresponding claim to freedom – does not depend on rational autonomy, construed in the traditional sense.

Adults are better at long-term planning. Toddlers are better at learning and open-mindedness. Which skill is more important depends on what one is doing. If the value of agency is determined by one's competence, or their ability to do what they're trying to do, the value of agency will vary depending on the relevance of one's traits to what one is doing. It will not vary according to age. To say that toddlers have an equal claim to agency does not mean that they have an equal claim to be able to sign legally binding contracts. But it may mean that they have an equal claim to choose to be near the music rather than the game of catch, or not to be hugged against their will, at the family picnic.

A second problem for the anti-liberationists' liberal conception of autonomy concerns its insistence that the value of freedom is greater for adults because adults alone are capable of pursuing or realizing what's valuable, morally or otherwise. I am reminded of a story in *Good and Evil*, by Richard Taylor, in which someone sticks a needle through a beetle, affixes it to a

tree, and returns days later to see the beetle still slowly moving its legs, struggling against the air to get somewhere.<sup>5</sup> I take it that this is problematic at least partly because it's a pointless suppression of the beetle's agency. If it's good to have eagles and beetles freely doing the kinds of things that eagles and beetles do, then eagles and beetles, like humans, are capable of acting so as to realize what's valuable, and not just coincidentally, but reliably, and in a deep and sustained way. They're built to do those things. This is a problem for anti-liberationists insofar as they base adults' unique claim to freedom on their supposedly unique capacity to act so as to realize value. I am claiming that this capacity is not unique.

Babies, like eagles and beetles, regularly act so as to realize what's valuable. There's value in what babies do when they play an active, participatory role in our families and communities. And the value of a baby's freedom doesn't stem merely from the baby's capacity to act so as to realize value, which it shares with eagles and beetles. If Purdy is right that part of what gives adults a claim to act, part of what makes their freedom valuable, is their capacity to pursue what's *morally* good, in particular, she will have to extend that claim to babies, too, because babies have been shown to pursue what's morally good. Babies express empathy and concern for others' suffering, and they issue judgments of justice and fairness.<sup>6</sup> When a child offers a hug to a crying adult, or is more receptive to a generous puppet than to one who hoards all the candy, these are not just erratic or haphazard displays of moral sentiment, but genuine and deeply rooted expressions of moral concern and awareness. In fact, I think babies possess some moral skills that adults lack. Babies have genuine virtues. They are better at forgiveness and vulnerability, at humility and at changing their minds. Unlike many adults, young children are usually not bogged down by regrets or grudges, self-judgment, arrogance, or the need to be right.

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<sup>5</sup> 264-265.

<sup>6</sup> See Bloom (2013, 2010); Gopnik, 202-233; Smetana; Turiel.

In contrast, for Purdy, as for traditional liberal theorists, the capacity to act morally must be cultivated. Children learn to exercise the types of self-control and other-regarding attitudes and habits that are necessary for creating the world we want to live in. It is in part in the service of teaching younger people how to pursue what is of value that children's freedom is thought to be rightly curtailed. Children and babies are thought to be wildly impulsive and self-centered, doing what they feel like in the moment without the capacity to consider how what they feel like doing relates to what is of value. This leaves children generally incapable of action that realizes value, moral or otherwise. On this picture, children are just not very good at acting in their own or other's interests. For Purdy, children may sometimes happen, by chance, to "get it right," that is, to act so as to realize what is of value, but without the character and dispositions required to think through what is of value and then act on their deliberations, they are rightly denied self-determination rights; they are rightly denied an equal claim make their own choices. For Purdy, acting morally "depends not just on having an impulse to do the right thing but also on the ability to decide what the right thing is."<sup>7</sup> This deliberative capacity must be carefully cultivated and instilled by adults.

Consideration of children's unique skills shows why it is a mistake to view moral action as a trait that needs to be cultivated, one that requires the capacity for moral reflection and deliberation. Consider the paradox of hedonism, that believing in hedonism and pursuing the greatest pleasure might be contrary to one's goal of achieving maximal pleasure. The norms used to assess the value of an action might differ from the norms one ought to follow when choosing how to act. Relatedly, one's free action might be very valuable even if one is incapable of deliberation. The extent to which a baby's free action is valuable (morally or otherwise) might have nothing to do with rational autonomy or deliberation whatsoever. This doesn't mean the

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<sup>7</sup> 82.

action's success, its "getting it right," is merely coincidental. A baby's free actions may reliably conform to valuable norms, even though babies don't reason according to norms. Consider that for adults, deliberation sometimes distracts from what's morally valuable, causing us to repress or second-guess our more authentic expressions of self and care. Sometimes moral wisdom comes from the inhibition of our deliberative capacities, something younger children are better at than adults.

Third, and relatedly, I challenge the anti-liberationist contention that attributing a claim to freedom only to adults is more conducive to creating a better world than attributing freedom to everyone. It is not the case that denying children freedom is required for promoting our collective wellbeing. Something like this line of thinking underlies all three anti-liberationist views. For Schapiro, only adults are capable of acting on reason or on universalizable principles. For Purdy, the catastrophic state of the world means we couldn't possibly lower our standards for who gets to make choices. Adults' mediocrity at securing a livable future for society at large means adults couldn't possibly "get any stupider" without a serious risk of societal collapse. This is a reason for extending the period during which young people are subject to control of adults, rather than shortening or eliminating it. We're already bad enough at securing our collective ends. To make collective decision-making more accessible to children – who aren't capable of recognizing moral value – would almost guarantee our demise.<sup>8</sup> And for Archard, too, the world goes better when we allow adults to make their own decisions, rather than granting control of their decisions to someone else. This is not so for children, who cannot make their own decisions.

Against these views, I maintain that children's unique skills are desperately needed in our collective efforts for social change. Children's moral wisdom – and because of it, their freedom

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<sup>8</sup> 82.

to act and participate – are important for making the world better. Reshaping the world is going to require a variety of skills, including imagination, creativity, resilience, and optimism. Children’s unique capacities would suggest that children need more opportunities to participate in our collective lives. Children have a claim to agency because their impulses are sometimes valuable. But children’s claim to agency is sometimes grounded their unique skills, which can help them and all of us reach (morally and otherwise) valuable ends. Moreover, active participation in collective decision-making promotes additional skills that are useful for collective decision-making. Here, I agree with John Holt, who advocates a society that is “open, accessible, visible to all its citizens, young and old, and in which every citizen, however young or old, has the right to play an active, serious, responsible, and useful part.”<sup>9</sup> Children’s freedom is not just something to tolerate – it is essential to positive social transformation.

So far in this section, I have argued, first, that autonomy should not be conceived of as a universal set of skills, or a particular mental capacity of individuals, whose possession underlies a capacity for effective agency. Instead, what it takes to be an effective agent or choice-maker depends partly on one’s context, including what one is trying to do, and what support is in place for one to be able to do it. This means that the value of choice-making is not greater for adults due to their unique capacity for agential efficacy. Agential efficacy is not unique to adults; anyone can be an effective agent in the right context. Second, I have argued that adults’ capacity for acting so as to realize value, or to promote moral value more specifically, is also not unique. Adults share with babies and eagles their capacity to act so as to realize value, and they share with babies their capacity to promote moral value, specifically. Finally, I have claimed that granting freedom exclusively to adults and withholding it from children is not required or even the best way to promote a better world. Children have unique skills, which makes their freedom

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<sup>9</sup> (1976), 135.

and participation in collective decision-making especially important for creating the world we want.

My arguments in this section align with familiar feminist critiques of liberal conceptions of autonomy. The problems for the anti-liberationist that I have addressed above arise from their commitment to liberal conceptions of autonomy. The feminist critiques hold that these liberal conceptions are overly individualistic and lead to a type of political solipsism. On all three anti-liberationist accounts, making choices effectively, or in ways that are normatively desirable (autonomously), requires rationality, conceived of as a mental capacity of individuals, conceptually distinct from the individual's biology and social setting. I have argued against the anti-liberationists that the capacity for agency is constitutively context-dependent.

Recognizing that children are as capable as adults of exercising agency in the right circumstances, that children's active participation is sometimes as valuable as adults', and that children have unique skills (some whose exercise is important for achieving worthwhile social changes), involves normative standards for agency that center interdependence and the context-sensitivity of our capacity for action. Appreciating the value of children's freedom requires that we abandon the liberal notion of rational autonomy, which conflates the capacity for effective choice-making with a set of cognitive skills that liberals believe are universally held by and exclusive to individual adult humans. It also requires that we stop sanctifying that skillset over all others. Feminists have said as much already.

Feminists have long criticized liberal notions of autonomy on the grounds that conceiving of autonomy as a mental capacity of individuals requires the abstraction of individuals from their social settings, a view Alison Jaggar calls *abstract individualism*. Anti-liberationists abstract individuals from their social settings by ignoring the extent to which agential efficacy, and

corresponding norms for agency (which norms its good to conform to), are context-dependent. When more attention is paid to context and to our mutual interdependence, children's unique agential strengths can be brought to light, and their freedom becomes a possibility. In contrast, conceiving of freedom as the protection of the exercise of a particular cognitive capacity of individual adults, abstracted from their social contexts, precludes the possibility of children's freedom and precludes children's freedom from counting as equally intrinsically valuable in the first place.

Feminists have pointed out that the social constitution of complex mental states – of how we think of and identify our *selves* – undermines abstract individualism. Anti-liberationists err not just in sanctifying the capacity for choice-making, construed as a mental capacity of individuals that is constitutively independent of context, but indeed for missing the fact that choices themselves, the mental and physical states that comprise choice-making, are constitutively shaped by our surroundings. Identifying complex inner states such as emotions and desires, those states that we take to be constitutive of our selves, requires that we be embedded in a web of social relationships that give meaning to the raw data we interpret through introspection.<sup>10</sup> Who we are, essentially, is determined in part by the meanings we assign to our complex internal states, which in turn are partly constituted by our social setting.

For example, deciding to come out as non-heterosexual in my late teens involved a complex interplay of emotions, beliefs and desires, most of which would have been unintelligible outside the context of a heteronormative society characterized by compulsive heterosexuality. The notion of *coming out* itself requires a societal presumption of heterosexuality as the norm. The idea that one can meet the normative standards for agency only through the possession of rational autonomy, which is taken to be a kind of agency possessed by individuals and not

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<sup>10</sup> Scheman; Jaggar, 43.



socially constituted, overlooks that the internal states that comprise agency are themselves socially constituted. Later, in Section IV, I consider context-sensitive accounts of autonomy that do not presuppose abstract individualism.

Jaggar rejects abstract individualism on the grounds that it leads to a kind of *political solipsism*,<sup>11</sup> the idea that humans are essentially self-sufficient individuals with separate, if not conflicting, needs and interests from one another and from the communities they comprise. A presumption of egoism corresponds to political solipsism. Even for theories of rationality that contain a moral, and not just a prudential, component, the moral component is thought to be what allows us to subjugate our egoistic tendencies to reason, given our principled awareness of others' ends. Presumptions of political solipsism make their mark on the anti-liberationist conceptions of autonomy. The idea that normal adult humans are essentially self-sufficient beings whose capacity for reason and self-control gives them a right to be left alone underpins the case for adult paternalism towards children.

For Archard, freedom is being left to make one's own choices. Adults are seen as self-sufficient, uniquely capable of acting on their own. Archard appeals explicitly to independence in his conception of autonomy. He thinks that while whether someone is independent in some cases depends on context, for infants and the very young it does not. "Infants and the very young are dependent upon adults to act for them."<sup>12</sup> The purpose of the state on the standard liberal view is seen to be to procure maximum individual freedom, in the sense of allowing adults to make their own choices. Archard's rational adult is just the kind of person whose freedom the liberal state is seen to protect. He is an expert on the fulfillment of his own interests. More precisely, he knows well enough what he needs that it is better that he get to decide for himself

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<sup>11</sup> 40.

<sup>12</sup> 95.

what to do, than to relinquish control of his decisions to someone else. For Schapiro and Kant, too, the rational individual is the authority on achieving his own ends, which are necessarily moral ends, given his rational constitution.

Like the liberal conception, with its corresponding presumption of egoism, Schapiro and Purdy's conceptions of autonomy both presume that we need to be taught how to act morally. On all of these views, we naturally tend towards egoism. When non-rational agents "get it right," it is coincidental, *unprincipled*. It is only through reason that we can recognize the demands of morality and act according to them consistently, or in a deep and sustained way. Purdy thinks, in addition, that we need time to develop virtuous habits. This is why babies and other non-rational agents are subject to a prolonged period of *unfreedom*. This is why children's agency is relegated to the control of others.

For feminists, political solipsism and the corresponding presumptions of self-sufficiency and egoism are impugned by the very fact that reproduction requires the sharing of resources and a division of responsibilities for caring for the young; our biology requires that we live together in social groups. "[W]ithout what liberals construe as 'interference,' there would be no human individual at all."<sup>13</sup> Interdependence is a conceptual, as well as a biological, necessity. We are built interconnected; our moral propensity to care for one another is biologically embedded. This makes good sense of the moral sensitivities and awareness displayed by toddlers and babies. We care about others because our lives are bound up together.

My arguments against anti-liberationists echo the feminist critique in calling for more attention to our interdependence and to the contextual nature of freedom and agential efficacy. Purdy thinks it is the liberationist who mistakenly subscribes to liberal values, sanctifying freedom, particularly children's freedom – in the sense of non-interference – above all other

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<sup>13</sup> Jaggar, 43.

worthy ends. But rejecting freedom as non-interference leaves room for conceptions of freedom that take interdependence more seriously. These views are better able to accommodate the value of children's free agency than views that base the value of freedom on rational autonomy.

Freedom – being able to *act* – requires input from others. Once we focus on interdependence and context, realizing that the freedom to be an effective agent is a function of our interconnections, not independent of them, different values, other than rationality, come into focus. These considerations speak to the often-overlooked similarities between children and adults.

Jaggar claims that more attention to our biology centers values of community and cooperation as normative ideals, and regards egoism, competitiveness, and competition as “puzzling and problematic.”<sup>14</sup> On this communitarian picture, the ideal human agent is not one who is capable of acting out their choices independently, as it is on Archard's account, nor it is someone who can deliberate or act on principle, as it is for Schapiro and Purdy. Instead, the ideal agent is an active participant in relationships and communities involving reciprocal care. People are essentially caring, social actors, rather than rational individuals. Children and adults are equally meaningfully embedded in relationships, and equally capable of playing an active, participatory role. Freedom arises from our participation in these loving, supportive, interdependent relationships and communities. In Chapter 4, I look more closely at the new childhood studies, which takes these forms of freedom and participation more seriously than traditional accounts.

Attention to the contextual features of agential efficacy highlights children's unique strengths. I have mentioned that toddlers are better than adults at forgiveness and being non-judgmental. I think they are also better at living authentically in the moment and feeling emotions that ought to be felt. These are not inconsequential attributes, properly relegated to the

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<sup>14</sup> 41.

realm of “child’s play.” In fact, they capture our deepest human values; they are capacities we ought to cherish. It is always with a slight sense of regret that I observe toddlers outgrowing their sense of awe and their openness and willingness to connect intimately with others, as well as their vulnerability and their submersion in the present moment, as they succumb to arbitrary adult norms for behavior and etiquette, and our judgments of one another.

A final point worth noting is that the anti-liberationists I have considered are alike in including some version of *having a self* in their notions of rational autonomy. They include things such as having a relatively stable, unified self, capable of resisting temptations and acting on one’s deepest principles and desires. Self-determination, anti-liberationists agree, “starts from a self.”<sup>15</sup> In addition to all the reasons I’ve discussed above, young children are denied freedom on the grounds that they lack the relevant kind of self.

To be sure, the possession of somewhat unified, relatively consistent desires that cohere with one’s overarching life goals make one more capable of making some decisions. Some responsibilities require a basic emotional stability and foresightedness that take time to acquire. The sense of our selves as existing through time and the parts of us responsible for executive decision-making have been shown to develop over time. But those who lack the stable emotional dispositions necessary for taking on some responsibilities are not thereby less *themselves*. In fact, adults’ relatively longer time exposed to societal pressures can lead to *inauthenticity*, to a disconnect between one’s true self and one’s choices. And children’s “fleeting” emotions can be genuinely important for acting authentically. Fleeting emotions and desires make one *more* able to do what they really want to do, not less. Adult emotions, too, are often conflicting and unprincipled. This doesn’t undermine our individual identities; it accentuates them.

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<sup>15</sup> Archard, 82.

Denying that children are acting from a will of their own in accord with their true selves, or asserting that young people are merely provisional selves, or that they lack a self altogether, is demeaning. It is another way that we fail to take young people's agency seriously. To deny young people a self is to overlook them; it is to fail to see them as purposeful agents and unique subjects of experience, as individuals worth getting to know. It is one way in which children are made into an absent referent, in Carol Adams' sense, a way in which children "are both there and not there."<sup>16</sup>

I have been arguing against premise one of the anti-liberationist argument, against the view that autonomy – construed as the capacity for effective agency, which in turn is grounded in a notion of rationality conceived of as a distinctive cognitive feature of individual adults – is the sole basis for attributing claims to freedom. Instead I have drawn our attention to the context-sensitivity of one's capacity for effective agency. Whether one can be an effective agent depends on the suitability of one's skills to the activity under consideration, as well as contextual features of one's environment and relationships. I have tried to show that attention to context yields different agential standards than those that are traditionally acknowledged: in some contexts, children are better than adults at exercising agency, including the pursuit of moral and non-moral value. I have also pointed out that children's freedom is important to social change, since social change will require skills that young people possess to greater degrees than adults: creativity, open-mindedness and imagination, for example.

Finally, I have claimed that my arguments against anti-liberationism align with familiar feminist critiques of liberal conceptions of autonomy, liberal conceptions to which anti-liberationists are implicitly committed. Feminists have accused the liberal conceptions of presupposing abstract individualism and political solipsism. I have tried to show how abstract

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<sup>16</sup> 22.

individualism and political solipsism show up in the anti-liberationist accounts. My focus on the contextual nature of effective agency is a way of rethinking autonomy in response to the feminist critique. In the following section, I look at additional attempts to rethink autonomy and human development in ways that appreciate their context-sensitivity.

### **III. Relational Accounts**

In this section, I join Diana Meyers and Jennifer Morton in advancing notions of autonomy rooted in our social contexts. I also consider a context-sensitive account of human development articulated by Urie Bronfenbrenner. This shift to a focus on context and relationships, which takes up the spirit of the feminist critique, can move us from the liberal ideal of *acting out our choices*, conceived as something adults do by and for themselves independently, to a more inclusive ideal of *participating actively in our lives*, which anyone of any age can do in the right circumstances and with the right support in place. Children, as much as adults, can flourish as free agents when they have the necessary care and communal support. Relational accounts of autonomy can accord this freedom the status it deserves by counting it as a kind of autonomous agency.

Constitutively relational accounts of autonomy view autonomy as a function of one's internal capacities taken together with one's environment, in much the same way that vision is a function of both sight and light. Constitutively relational accounts bring out the commonalities between younger and older people. Our common dependence on and relationships to particular others are not viewed as a liability, but as valuable features of our lives to be cultivated and promoted. Adults, as much as children, depend on these relationships for their wellbeing. The anti-liberationist fails to appreciate the value of interdependence by sanctifying rational autonomy, and taking independence to be an essential component of it. On this anti-liberationist

picture, independence is part of why rational autonomy makes self-determination valuable. In contrast, I have been claiming that interdependence is not only a valuable component of effective agency, but conceptually and biologically necessary. In essence, there is no such thing as “making one’s own choices;” for adults and children alike, our choices are shaped by both internal and external factors. And this (at least sometimes) is a good thing. Freedom, more broadly, is valuable independently of the extent to which and the particular ways in which our agential efficacy depends on others.

Diana Meyers develops a relational account of autonomy that construes autonomy as a matter of degree, not all-or-nothing. Meyers distinguishes between *programmatic* and *episodic* autonomy, where programmatic autonomy consists in one’s ability to act out the answers to larger questions one poses about one’s life, such as questions about the role of spirituality in one’s life or what career to take up. Episodic autonomy is confined to a particular circumstance at a particular time. Episodic autonomy consists in one’s acting in the moment on what one really wants to do. One may have some measure of episodic autonomy without programmatic autonomy. Meyers is careful to distinguish between doing what one wants, and doing what one *really wants*, a divide whose recognition she attributes to Freud and Marx. She describes a form of *autonomy competency*: an autonomous agent must “express one’s authentic self by exercising assorted introspective, imaginative, reasoning, and volitional skills.”<sup>17</sup>

The distinction between episodic and programmatic autonomy might be problematic in some ways. Perhaps the distinction is degeed, not dichotomous, and it seems plausible that programmatic decisions are reducible to the smaller scale, moment-to-moment decisions we make every day. After all, you haven’t really decided to adopt a spiritual practice if you don’t then begin to practice it. But the distinction is still useful for thinking about young people’s

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<sup>17</sup> 10.

autonomy, since it construes autonomy as relative to the particular choice at hand. Anti-liberationists point to children's incapacity to make bigger life choices as a justification for depriving them a right to make smaller scale, day-to-day choices about what to do in the moment. The child might be thought to have an unequal claim to choose how to participate at the family picnic because he can't (and shouldn't) take on the overarching task of planning the picnic in the first place. But for Meyers, a person may achieve episodic autonomy – in a full and equal sense – even when they are not capable of making bigger life choices. The anti-liberationist denies children's equal claim to self-determination; this is an overarching, comprehensive claim whose scope includes episodic and programmatic choices.

As I've argued, while babies may not have the wide array of skills that Meyers considers essential for autonomy, babies can be effective, authentic agents in the right circumstances. They might be effective at communicating their emotions, or exploring their curiosity and desire for play. And we can honor children's equality of agency by granting them an equal claim to make smaller-scale choices while at the same time recognizing that they lack the skills to take on larger-scale decisions by themselves. That the adult has the final say in which smaller scale decisions the child is allowed to make does not mean that the adult's say-so makes it the case that the child has a claim to act. Adults can be wrong to deny a child's fully equally legitimate claim to agency, even on occasions when it makes sense for the adult to be in charge.

On another account, Jennifer Morton criticizes the view that there is some universal, context-independent set of norms, the following of which renders one an autonomous agent. For Morton, in contrast, which set of norms it is rational to follow depends on one's circumstances. For example, Morton claims that the norm that requires rational agents to resist succumbing to



immediate pleasures in order to advance longer-term goals that they deem more valuable depends on an agent's placement in an environment with adequate resources.

But when we consider agents reasoning under scarcity, for example in conditions of poverty, it may be rational for agents to prioritize meeting their immediate needs efficiently, even at the cost of fulfilling longer-term goals, and even when the agent deems the fulfillment of longer-term goals more valuable than fulfilling immediate needs. This is because deliberation is habitual, and often in conditions of scarcity, meeting one's immediate needs is more important to how well or badly one's life goes overall, than longer-term planning. For instance, one might be faced with the question of whether to starve or save money for retirement. Since deliberation is habitual, it may make sense to form one's habits based on which habits best promote one's ends given one's typical circumstances, even though the habits one develops might lead to actions that do not promote the ends the agent deems most valuable in some circumstances. Such actions still count as rational on Morton's view, in that they arise out of habits that it is rational to adopt. The relevance of Morton's view for youth liberation is its attack on the liberal idea that whether one is autonomous can be determined by a universal standard. Different agents are subject to different criteria for whether they are making good choices, or *acting well*, based on their psychology and their circumstances.

Bronfenbrenner's developmental model has proved useful for thinking about children's capacities and autonomy with attention to the child's contextual setting. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model looks centrally not just at the development of the individual, but of the individual within a variety of contexts, named microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems. Microsystems include the individual's immediately surrounding communities, such as a school or preschool community or the child's family and neighborhood; microsystems

overlap to form mesosystems. Exosystems include social systems that impact but do not directly involve the child, such as the parents' workplace. And macrosystems include all of these subsystems, plus the larger society.

The ecological model provides a framework for thinking about the autonomy of young people, since it allows us to construe the child's needs and capacities in a more holistic way, appreciating the extent to which these are shaped by context. By shifting the focus away from the individual by themselves, and widening the scope of interest to include broader cultural settings, the ecological model allows us to appreciate the variation and complexity that exists as people age in the contexts of different social groupings. The ecological model provides an additional basis for revising concepts such as competence and autonomy, viewing these as complex contextual features of an individual in relation to their environment, and not as features that an individual possesses on their own. And the ecological model brings into focus the oppressive social forces that affect our estimations of children's development. Notably, developmental models have been accused of misconstruing children's abilities due to adult-centered perspectives. With a concept of autonomy that is context-sensitive, we get a greater framework for understanding the unique strengths of young people and attributing to these strengths the normative status they deserve.

These context-sensitive models of autonomy and human development allow us to imagine normative standards for agency that do not automatically favor adult capacities. Children, especially very young ones, who cannot always make accurate assessments of the outcomes of their choices, and who may have more dynamic emotions and desires than adults, may be subject to different normative standards than adults for determining their success at agency. For example, toddlers and babies are exceptionally good at soliciting care and support

from adults. They are easy to love. This makes them better agents – better at getting what they want and need – given their unique dependence on adult support. And babies don’t just have agential strengths according to standards that are unique to them; indeed, they have some traits that genuinely make them better *people* – open-mindedness, forgiveness, and vulnerability, to name a few. In the next and final section, I look more closely at the unique skills of babies and very young children, and I call into question the superior capacity for rationality that adults take ourselves to have.

#### **IV. Babies and Adults are More Alike than We Think**

Until now, I have accepted the anti-liberationists’ claim that adults have the capacities they take to be relevant to rational autonomy and children don’t. Though I have challenged the normative implications of the putative differences between children and adults, as well as the idea that there is some universal set of skills that underlie the capacity for effective agency, I have not yet denied that the descriptive differences between children and adults are basically what the anti-liberationists take them to be. In this final section, I make this further move.

Feminists have claimed, largely by considering the experiences of women, that adult humans are not essentially, and nor should we strive to be, rational individuals with coherent desires who are experts on identifying and then acting on their own interests and their moral obligations. Recent empirical research has unambiguously backed up these claims. Schapiro, Purdy, and Archard articulated familiar, well-developed conceptions of rationality and autonomy, and used them to impugn the case for children’s liberation. Here I review some experiments taken to demonstrate that adult humans are fundamentally *irrational*, according to these traditional conceptions. The outcomes of these experiments speak against Schapiro, Purdy and Archard’s claims that adult humans are rationally autonomous in the senses they propose. At

the very least, they give us good reason to lower the bar for what it takes to “make sensible choices.”

The illogicality of adult humans was demonstrated in the 1960s with Peter Wason’s selection task, where he demonstrated normal adults’ incapacity to fully grasp the basic logical rule of modus ponens by analyzing their performance on logic puzzles. Later experiments, such as those by R.A. Griggs and J.R. Cox, showed that adults’ ability to grasp the basic rule of modus ponens varied greatly depending on the subject matter of the puzzles. When they were reasoning about abstract numbers and letters, participants failed to demonstrate their mastery of the rule. But when the same logical puzzles were presented involving practical matters such as the drinking age instead of abstract symbols, participants demonstrated a much better grasp of modus ponens.

What these experiments, and hundreds of others since, have been taken to show is that our capacities for logic are not as strong as we think and that these capacities vary greatly depending on the context. Basic logical reasoning is necessary for instrumental rationality. But if our capacity for logical reasoning is highly influenced by context and much weaker than we take it to be, so too is our capacity for instrumental rationality. In those contexts that challenge adults’ abilities to grasp basic logical rules, we may be more like children than we tend to suppose. Children’s grasp of modus ponens may vary similarly, based on contextual features not previously considered in estimations of their overall rational competence. I have yet to find experiments that look specifically at children’s ability to grasp modus ponens.

Adults’ mastery of basic logic is not the only component of the anti-liberationist’s view that has been challenged empirically. So has the coherence and reasonableness of adult desires. A more recent experiment by Dan Ariely, Leonard Lee, and Shane Frederick demonstrates that

human beer preferences are influenced by irrelevant information and the timing the information is received. Stable desires, which are required for Purdy and Archard's account of autonomy, should be affected only by relevant factors and not by irrelevant ones. But adult desires are influenced strongly by factors no one thinks are relevant. Ariely points to statistics that suggest that whether a country has a high rate of organ donors is determined by how its residents are presented with the option to become organ donors (whether they have to check a box on a form, or abstain from checking a box).<sup>18</sup> These forms of *predictable irrationality* challenge the anti-liberationist conceptions of adults as people who make rational choices. Many of our rational choices are fully determined by factors we don't actually care about.

Jonathan Haidt makes a related claim challenging the idea that moral judgments are caused by moral reasoning. Haidt defends a social intuitionist model of moral reasoning, claiming that most moral judgments are issued automatically and that moral reasoning is normally a post hoc construction aimed at defending one's automatic moral intuitions. This model is presented in sharp contrast to the standard rationalist models of decision-making appealed to by the anti-liberationist. Like feminists and other social scientists, Haidt's social intuitionist model also pays more attention to the social and cultural influences on one's moral intuitions, and deemphasizes private moral reasoning in explaining how we reach our moral conclusions, and ultimately, how we decide what to do. Haidt is also like the others in challenging our experiences of ourselves as essentially rational creatures who make wise choices based on principle. Objective reasoning, according to Haidt, is an illusion, and philosophers have been wrong to worship it. But this is just the type of objective reasoning that children are thought, uniquely, to lack, and on the basis of which children's equal claim to self-determination is denied.

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<sup>18</sup> Johnson and Goldstein.

There are more experiments like these, and I need not look closely at all of them. They share the conclusion – one that now enjoys broad support<sup>19</sup> – that adults are just not the hyper rational beings we take ourselves to be. The presumption that there is a gulf between child and adult rationality has been challenged by these empirical studies that have in effect “talked us down,” from our perceived sovereign status. It’s not just that we are imperfect at reasoning; in many contexts we are very bad. Our decisions do not flow from a will of our own, a distinct mental capacity to take into account all the relevant information and then preside over our conflicting motivations by acting on principle.

Instead, we are essentially bodies, part of the physical world, normally unaware of the ways in which we are heavily influenced by our surroundings. We make decisions based on instinct and habit, or based on features we don’t even notice; perhaps most of the time we just do what we feel like. To be sure, we spend a lot of time reasoning, but this reasoning is often backwards-facing; we reason in attempts to justify opinions we already hold or actions we’ve already undertaken or decided to undertake. Research on human rationality has consistently demonstrated that we are just not as rational as we take ourselves to be. This view of our selves as autonomous creatures who are good at determining what’s in our (or others’) interest and then acting on it in principled ways is a form of self-deception. The standard rationalist model of autonomous decision-making has been shown to be an inaccurate representation of how we actually make choices, and this impugns the case for adults’ exclusive right to self-determination based on based on rational autonomy.

Paralleling research that accuses adult humans of overstating our own rationality, there is an emerging and rich body of research that accuses us of understating the rational, moral and cognitive capacities of babies and very young children. I have already pointed out some of the

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<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Haidt, Ariely, Kahneman, Tversky.

unique skills of babies. Babies have also been shown to understand cause and effect and to discern other people's cognitive states even before they are able to speak.<sup>20</sup> Garreth Matthews argues that children's rational capacities, including their basic grasp of philosophical questions and issues, challenges standard estimations of very young children's cognitive abilities.<sup>21</sup> Debra Van Ausdale and Joe Feagin present three- and four-year-olds' use of racial constructs as a challenge to Piaget's developmental model. Children are better, faster learners than adults. They are natural experimenters; they have been shown to be more aware and more conscious of their surroundings, in the sense that they can take in more information at once, though they are poorer than adults at focusing in on one particular stimulus. While adult consciousness is more like a spotlight, Alison Gopnik compares baby consciousness to a lantern. In a famous video, we are asked to count the number of times a basketball is passed among players on a court. Meanwhile, someone in a gorilla costume walks in plain view across the center of the screen. The point of the video is to demonstrate the power of selective attention. Most adults are so busy counting the basketball tosses that they miss the gorilla.

Very young children are more likely to spot the gorilla.<sup>22</sup> Babies are also better at imagining ways the world might be. This is due to the early stage of development of their prefrontal cortex. The adult capacity to make long-term decisions is attributed to the role of our prefrontal cortex in *inhibition*. In order to decide on a course of action, we have to eliminate alternative possibilities. But Gopnik argues that counterfactual thinking, the ability to imagine alternative ways the past and future might be, and then act so as to bring about the changes we

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<sup>20</sup> Gopnik, 54-63.

<sup>21</sup> (1994, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> 117.

desire, is what makes us human, and thus that, with their superior capacities for imagination due to their prefrontal immaturity, babies could be seen as a kind of superadult.

“If we focus on adult abilities...then babies and young children will indeed look pretty pathetic. But if we focus on our distinctive capacities for change, especially imagination and learning, then it’s the adults who look slow.”<sup>23</sup> Gopnik concludes that to the extent that adults strive for open-mindedness, creativity, innovation, open learning, and imagination, we should learn to think *more* like children. I suspect that as children increasingly come to be seen as legitimate research subjects in their own right, children and babies will continue to demonstrate that they possess other valuable human qualities to a greater degree than adults, and to a greater degree than we suppose.

On a different note, one’s claim to agency depends not just on competence or what one is good at, but indeed, sometimes *incompetence*. One’s incapacity to do a certain thing *x* sometimes enhances one’s claim to be able to try to *x*, in part (but not only) since trying to *x* is precisely how one develops the capacity to *x*. For a toddler learning to walk, every freely taken step is significant. If an adult’s freedom to walk around is valuable, a toddler’s is even more so. Gopnik has pointed out that the prefrontal cortex is *most* active during childhood, and its activity during this time shapes its adult form.<sup>24</sup> Evidence suggests that postponing the inhibitive role of the prefrontal cortex actually leads to higher IQs in adulthood. Keeping your mind and imagination open longer might make you smarter.<sup>25</sup> In some cases, the freedom to *x* may be more important and valuable for those who lack the capacity to *x* than for expert *x*-ers. And children’s freedom is not valuable solely because of the benefits it confers on them as adults, for this would be another

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<sup>23</sup> 11.

<sup>24</sup> 13.

<sup>25</sup> Gopnik, 14.



way of failing to take children seriously in the present. Instead, freedom – getting to make choices, move yourself about, and participate meaningfully as a social actor – is valuable in itself, equally for both children and adults alike. I have tried to establish this by showing the variety of features – competence and incompetence among them – that might make it valuable for one to be able to do whatever it is that one is trying to do.

My main point in this chapter is that liberationists do not need to start from scratch in denouncing the ideals of liberalism on which the case for anti-liberation rests, or in devising better ways to for thinking about the value of children's agency. The principles of liberalism that elevate adult agency over children's depend on notions of rationality that have been successfully challenged. The writing I've considered by feminists and social scientists is not representative of all feminists or social scientists, and I am not claiming that their views are immune to criticism. But the terrain they map has been well trodden and is useful for identifying some problems with the anti-liberationist's position.

If instead of self-sufficiency, we center relationships of care and community, we bring the similarities between youth and adults into focus and can work towards envisioning a societal ideal that enhances wellbeing by promoting interdependence and caretaking, and that values freedom and effective agency of people of all ages equally by cultivating necessary mechanisms of care and support for people of all ages. Reconceptualizations of autonomy are well underway and provide a better route to a more fulfilling world for people of all ages. A broader conception of autonomy promotes a shift of attention from the question of who, because of their limited cognitive abilities, should be denied the right to act, to the more worthwhile question of how we can facilitate agency and active participation for a wide variety of beings with an even wider

array of skills and strengths, as well as weaknesses, dependencies, and vulnerabilities.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model helps to flesh out this picture.

We can then shift our focus to creating contexts in which even toddlers and babies are able to act, that is, to actively participate in their lives and in our communities. When we value children's freedom equally, we try to make it possible for them to participate when and how they choose. For very young children this might mean letting them struggle to climb into a chair – better yet, providing more chairs their size – asking their permission, or at least letting them know, before picking them up, or creating more hazard-free, pedestrian-centered, public spaces. My purpose here is not to provide the fully developed mechanisms or language for achieving youth liberation (I take up that work more in Chapter 5), but to further impugn the case for dividing all people into two groups and then granting to one group a full right to self-determination, while fully withholding that right from the other group. I have done so here by looking at additional attempts to challenge the basic tenets of that dichotomous power structure.

A final point is that our place in the social groups we comprise sometimes threatens our autonomy by misshaping our values and desires or limiting our options. Relational accounts of autonomy, due to their focus on interdependence and social circumstances, lead us to consider ways in which our capacities, desires and stated preferences may be *deformed* by an oppressive society. The existence of oppression presents an additional challenge to political solipsism and to the authority of individuals' judgments about how to achieve self-fulfillment. On liberal conceptions of rational autonomy, it is difficult to see how an autonomous agent's consistent desires and stated preferences could themselves be problematic.

Anti-liberationists do not account for the ways in which the social and political contexts in which we exist often undermine our capacities to act so as to realize or promote what's of

value. The anti-liberationists' insistence that adult agency is more sacred than young people's because adults, unlike children, have reached a state of moral and rational maturity falters partly because it is based on misconceptions of human fulfillment and societal ideals misshapen by an oppressive society. The appeal to rationality itself unfairly privileges features adults take ourselves to have, while simultaneously devaluing children's unique traits. Sanctifying liberal notions of rationality and the capacity to act in one's own interest, even when coupled with recognition of a moral requirement to consider the interests of others, overlooks young people's unique moral insights and other strengths *qua* agents, depriving them of power they could and should be able to exercise. And this deprivation actually shapes what they are able to do. In the next chapter, I look more closely at adultism, and at how the denial to children of a right to self-determination both reinforces and is reinforced by oppression.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ADULTISM

Let's pause for review of the last few chapters. Anti-liberationists argue that young people are inferior in their claim to agency in that young people lack a right to self-determination. Anti-liberationists grant adults an exclusive right to make their own choices on grounds of competence, and then cash out the notion of competence in terms of rational autonomy. In Chapter 1, I argued that youth agency is equal, first, in the indeterminate sense that young people deserve to have their similar instances of agency weighed similarly, and, second, in the determinate sense that young people's agency is often enough as valuable as adult agency to count equally generally. In Chapter 2, I looked at three arguments against youth liberation, and I made the case that they all three violate the Principle of Equality of Agency. Then, in Chapter 3, I criticized the anti-liberationists' notion of rational autonomy, arguing instead for a context-sensitive understanding of agential efficacy, and claiming that this would help to center children's unique moral and non-moral skills. I appealed to feminist critiques of the sanctified role of rational autonomy, conceived as a cognitive feature of individual adults, and I discussed empirical research that shows that adults are less rational and babies more cognitively competent than we suppose. The feminist critique and the empirical research both impugn the anti-liberationist's case against young people's equality and speak against the hierarchical, binary system that marks adult choices as more valuable. I described some context-sensitive accounts of autonomy and human development that overcome difficulties facing traditional liberal views appealed to by anti-liberationists.

Forestalling the case against youth liberation does not amount to a positive defense of the youth liberation movement. In order to defend the movement for youth liberation, we need to understand why the “present place” of children is unjust, and thus why a liberation movement is needed. Understanding the need for a liberation movement requires a closer look at adultism, the oppression of young people. Building on accounts of oppression developed by Marilyn Frye and Ann Cudd, I will claim that adultism is a systematic, interconnected, and institutionally backed set of harms and barriers, both physical and psychological, perpetuated by adults towards children. Adultism is not simply the conscious favoring of adult choices, nor is it merely the control that adults are granted over children. Even if the anti-liberationists could show that adult paternalism towards children is warranted, this would not amount to showing that adultism doesn’t exist or that youth liberation is wrongheaded. Adult paternalism towards children and explicit favoring of adult choices are both *part* of adultism, but they are not the whole thing.

Once we get a sense of the *macroscopic* structure, of how the distinct components of adultism fit together, we will be in a better position to understand why youth liberation is so important. The cases made for adult control normally do not take into account the broader implications of adultist systems and structures, and the relation between these and adult paternalism, and thus do not speak to the broader goals of the liberation movement. Even if strict adult paternalism is necessary, broader adultist systems and structures are unjust nonetheless, and the existence of this injustice gives us a collective obligation to undo it. Either way, there is much work for youth liberation to do.

While anti-liberationists have been univocal in denying that youth are oppressed, the *new childhood studies*,<sup>1</sup> a burgeoning interdisciplinary academic field, recognizes and works against adultist systems and structures both within and beyond the academy. I begin in Section I by

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<sup>1</sup> See Lenzer, Corsaro, Qvortrup, James and James, Woodhouse, Mason and Fattore, Mayall (1994).

looking more closely at the new childhood studies, specifically the new childhood theorists' unanimous conviction that childhood is a social construction. I look closely at writing of the new childhood theorists in the hopes that their collective recognition of youth as an oppressed group will encourage philosophers to get on board with this expansive research program, which is devoted to young people's liberation and to their being taken seriously as equal participants in the social world. I will describe a number of parallels, some of which have already been explored by others, between women's studies and the new childhood studies, and their respective commitments to liberation.

In Section II, I look more closely at oppression, drawing on analyses of oppression developed by Ann Cudd and Marilyn Frye. Cudd and Frye both describe oppression as an interconnected web of social forces. Frye discusses the effects of oppression on our *bodies*, including the difficulty of undoing patterns of behavior whose impacts are deeply, physically embedded within our musculature, while Cudd describes at length the material and psychological harms that are constitutive of oppression. Both insist that oppression has a macroscopic structure, one that essentially involves harms inflicted by groups of people on other groups, not just at the level of individuals, and thus is sometimes difficult to recognize. Frye and Cudd both emphasize that oppression shapes our social institutions themselves and thus exists beyond personal prejudice or an individuals' conscious favoring of some groups over others. We can and do participate in and perpetuate oppressive structures even if we don't mean to, and our schools, legal systems, health care systems, and even our language perpetuate these structures as well.

Youth liberationist Howard Cohen makes this point in relation to children's oppression:

...we may take no comfort in our own good intentions or kindly feelings toward children. As adults in a society which oppresses children, we are part of the problem...As a society, we have come to understand that there is not only personal bigotry, but institutional racism; not only male chauvinism, but

economic and social discrimination against women. We are now being asked to acknowledge that there is not only child abuse, but systematic mistreatment of children.<sup>2</sup>

In Section III, I describe some components of the mistreatment and marginalization of young people. I also call into question some standard practices and ways of relating to children that are commonly accepted as non-problematic. I hope to clarify some of the ways in which youth are relegated to an inferior status legally, socially and morally. I claim that young people's subordinate status, including their complete subjection to adult control and the denial to them of rights of self-determination, constitute oppression, as understood on Frye and Cudd's accounts. I also briefly consider young people's material oppression, including violence and economic deprivation, more fully. I argue that patterns of violence and economic deprivation comprise part of an oppressive system and result from children's marginalization and disrespect for their voices and experiences. I set aside until Chapter 5 a more thorough discussion of the practical possibilities of youth liberation, of what liberation might be like, and of specific examples of both justified paternalism (for youth and adults) and the intergenerational sharing of power.

### **I. The New Childhood Studies and the Construction of Childhood**

The injustice of the broader systems and structures by which young people are reduced, marginalized, and subordinated to adult interests and power has been explicitly recognized by scholars working within the *new childhood studies*, an interdisciplinary research program whose inception at a 1991 conference at Brooklyn College at City University of New York signified a break from previous thinking about children. The new childhood studies marked a paradigm shift<sup>3</sup> in the way children are seen and approached within history, law, sociology, psychology

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<sup>2</sup> 9.

<sup>3</sup> This point appears repeatedly in the literature, but see especially James and James, Qvortrup, Corsaro.

and other disciplines, and it has gained steam through the creation of children's studies departments around the world.<sup>4</sup>

The new childhood studies is devoted to viewing children from an interdisciplinary and holistic perspective, and it is critical of the ways in which traditional research on children has been circumscribed within distinct disciplines with almost no interdisciplinary dialogue. The field is also multidisciplinary in that new childhood theorists seek not only to incorporate an explicit interdisciplinary focus within their research, but also to bring together research on children that is underway within the confines of separate disciplines, even when this research lacks an explicit interdisciplinary focus. New childhood theorists insist that boundaries between disciplines need to be challenged, and research on children within particular disciplines needs to be informed by and considered against conversations taking shape within other disciplines. New childhood theorists also encourage different academic departments, outside of children's studies, to take up an explicit focus on young people as a unique social class.

The new childhood studies is a *liberationist, anti-adultist* approach to studying children, characterized by a number of additional overlapping commitments that are taken to set it apart from previous research on children. The new approach recognizes children as equal and competent social actors in their own right, in the present, which necessitates the centering of children's equally important voices and agency in children's research. New childhood theorists also agree that childhood is a social construction, shaped differently in different places, within different demographics, and in different historical periods. The social construction of childhood is directly related to the imbalance of power between children and adults, which leads children's theorists directly to address other types of power and oppression, and their intersections. Inherent

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<sup>4</sup> Universities with Childhood Studies Departments or Childhood Studies Theorists: Rutgers University, City University of New York – Brooklyn College, Hampshire College, University of Nebraska – Lincoln, University of Jyväskylä, University of Queensland, University of Western Sydney, University of Oslo.



in the recognition of children as equals is a critique of adultism and of children's marginalized place within existing, conventional social and social scientific practice. Childhood theorists see their commitment to viewing children as equal and active participants as a departure from traditional theorizing about children. The social construction of childhood means that children's inequality is not a biological given, but can be challenged and changed. This is why the new childhood studies is also at its core *transformative* and committed to radical change both within and beyond the academy.

The themes that have emerged within the new childhood studies parallel themes in other disciplines, such as women's studies and African American studies, that have arisen in response to the historical exclusion of particular groups – both as researchers and subjects of research – from traditional academic disciplines. Much like theorists in these other fields, the new childhood theorists are critical of traditional disciplines for failing to take up a specific focus on young people. Youth liberationists, including the new childhood theorists and some philosophers, call attention the construction of childhood through the stereotyping of young people, adult-centered ideological perspectives that degrade, marginalize and objectify young people and render them invisible, adult cultural domination most apparent in the pervasiveness of strict adult paternalism, and the relation of all of these to the systemic violence, neglect, and economic deprivation experienced by young people. Below I make the case that these unique group-based harms and limitations facing young people constitute their oppression.

New childhood theorists are unanimous in their conviction that childhood is a social construct. They criticize the dominant conception of young people as a distinct, natural class, with a unique and unified set of biologically determined needs and capacities that distinguishes them, as a whole, from adults. The conceptual distinction between child and adult does not, as

they say, carve the world at its joints, but involves the complex interplay of social norms, expectations, and adult-centered ideological perspectives that shape our conceptions of people of different ages, creating a dichotomous, hierarchical social ordering where there is no underlying, dichotomous biological division. Leena Alanen has termed this process *generationing*, bringing out an analogy with the concept of *gendering*, where both are processes by which people are hierarchically categorized in relation to one another through social practice.

Part of the justification for seeing childhood as a construction is cross-cultural and historical variation in how children are socialized within their respective societies. Philippe Ariès provided the classic historical text on the construction of childhood, arguing that childhood was nonexistent in the Middle Ages. Children dressed liked their adult counterparts; joined in adult activities, and began working as young as age four or five. An article in *The New Yorker* compares American children to children in Peru, describing an anthropologist's trip down the Urubamba River in the Peruvian Amazon with a family from the Matsigenka tribe and their six-year-old family friend, Yanira, who asked to come along. Yanira was "calm and self-possessed" and made herself useful throughout the trip, sweeping sleeping areas, helping stack leaves they collected and even fishing for crustaceans, "which she cleaned, boiled, and served to the others." By age two, children of the Matsigenka tribe regularly heat food over open fire, and by three they use knives and machetes. "By the time they reach puberty Matsigenka kids have mastered most of the skills necessary for survival."<sup>5</sup>

The article cites a study contrasting the children of the Matsigenka tribe with American children in 32 middle class families in Los Angeles.<sup>6</sup> The children from LA often refuse to help with household chores, never contributing without being instructed to, and capable children ask

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<sup>5</sup> Kolbert.

<sup>6</sup> Ochs and Izquierdo.

for or demand assistance with simple tasks such as untying their shoes or getting a fork from a drawer. These behaviors of middle class American children are arguably forms of indirect oppression, by which members of oppressed groups adopt the oppressive beliefs and attitudes of the dominant culture. The examples also constitute evidence of the ways in which social devaluation of children's choices can stunt the development of their capacities.

Anti-liberationists insist that viewing childhood as merely constructed is an exaggeration. Archard points to traits that young people share universally. "Children learn to walk, recognize and manipulate objects, talk, etc. at roughly the same ages whatever the society in which they are brought up."<sup>7</sup> But the examples he gives concern children in the first year or two of their lives only, suggesting a lack of any obvious biological distinction that could form the basis for the division ubiquitously drawn between children and adults overall. Babies learn to walk and manipulate objects at around the same time in any culture, but even by the time they are two or three years old, there are vast differences in what children in different cultures and in different historical periods are able and expected to do. The natural differences pointed to by the anti-liberationist do not correspond to the distinction drawn through social practices between youth and adults generally.

Still, there *are* at least some natural differences that correspond to age and it is worth looking for universal similarities among peer groups in different cultural and historical contexts. Younger people have existed for a shorter amount of time than older people. We also all start out small and get bigger, with additional physical and psychological needs and capacities that change through time. These changes are more dynamic for younger people – the rate of change slows as we age. Barbara Woodhouse, who argues through narrative for the centering of children's voices and agency in securing their moral and legal rights, discusses two developmental models of

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<sup>7</sup> 89.

human maturation. Woodhouse looks at Jean Piaget, who describes four distinct stages as young people move from childhood to adulthood, and Erik Erikson, who marks ongoing stages of maturation, on through adulthood and old age. Woodhouse thinks the developmental models each provide useful ways for construing human maturation, and she enriches them both by setting them within the ecological framework inspired by Urie Bronfenbrenner that I discussed in Chapter 3.<sup>8</sup> Consideration of the ecological model brings to light the ways in which the differences and similarities among people of different ages are shaped by contextual features, including oppression.

Youth liberationists do not need to deny that there are any underlying natural differences between people of different ages, possessed universally by members of particular peer groups across cultures, nor that there are biological features that change gradually as we grow. They do not in principle need to take a stand on the accuracy of the developmental models, or the extent to which various features possessed by people of different ages are a result of biology or social constraint. While youth liberationists can remain neutral on whether most childhood traits are biologically determined or socially inculcated, they do insist that the division of all people based on age into two hierarchically-structured moral categories is a result of social practice, not of any underlying natural or binary differences or similarities. Moreover, they claim, some differences that falsely appear to be natural differences between adults and children are actually the effects of deeply entrenched oppressive social patterns. These putative natural differences are then taken to justify the broader system of adult domination, not just adult paternalism, but more general aspects of young people's powerlessness and marginalization that are part of the status quo. It is useful to consider this idea in light of the feminist distinction between sex and gender.

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<sup>8</sup> 21-23.

Feminists have often seen the sex categories of male and female as a natural, biologically fixed dichotomy separate from gender. Gender, in contrast, was seen as a classification scheme that distinguished men and women socially, and was at the root of women's social inequality. The distinction between sex and gender provided a solid basis for feminists to criticize patriarchal culture. Due to its social underpinnings, gender was seen as more malleable than sex, allowing feminists to criticize the social differences drawn between genders, especially those that situated women as subordinate to men, without denying biological differences. Distinguishing between sex and gender gave us a way to pull apart harmful social practices from the biological distinctions that are mistakenly taken to justify these practices.

Marilyn Frye criticizes the sex/gender distinction, contending that sex and gender are *both* constructed in the sense that social practices shape not only our social expressions of gender, but our bodies themselves. Women are culturally mandated to have smaller postures, for example, but their musculature actually shapes itself to these demands. Women's spines actually grow in accord with the reduced postures that they adopt due to social pressure. Moreover, the underlying binary distinction between the sexes is itself called into question by the prevalence of intersex infants and by medical practices that view intersex infants as in need of surgical *correction*, even when surgical interventions are purely cosmetic. According to Frye, we bully each other into a dichotomous gendered power structure; without all the bullying there might be six or seven gender categories, or none at all. We just don't know.

The distinction between sex and gender has been used by new childhood theorists to draw parallels between the process of *gendering* and that of *generationing*. Generationing is the process by which we categorize people as children or adults, creating through social practice the illusion of two distinct, natural age-based categories. Alanen distinguishes natural from social

childhood, marking a distinction analogous to the one between sex and gender. For her, this distinction suggests that childhood

is not a natural phenomenon and that human offspring are not automatically children; instead they would need to be seen to become children, and always in a particular time, in particular locations, by force of particular processes. A distinction created between the two allows us to think of childhood and its sociality autonomously from the other side, and not as a societal response to the foundation that is the ‘natural child.’<sup>9</sup>

Although Alanen denies altogether the biological basis for distinguishing children from adults, insisting that childhood is entirely constructed, liberationists needn’t take a stand on which features of younger people are natural and which are social. Similarly, Frye is not concerned to deny that there are natural differences between men and women. Her point, again, is that social forces have shaped two distinct categories on the basis of which we seek to justify the power and privilege of those in one category over those in the other. Without these social forces, we might not have the power scheme that we do. In the case of children, we might instead have more inter-generational integration and social arrangements that make possible the sharing of power between youth and adults, and that equally honor young people’s voices and agency. We might have a more graded landscape detailing the types of choices that people of different ages ought to be able to make, a landscape that does not conform to a dichotomous structure.

Without social childhood constructed through social practice, there might be no underlying “natural childhood” to begin with, no important and unique feature possessed by all and only the members of some important-to-distinguish class of younger people. Like the cultural winds of patriarchy, the winds of adultism have shaped two classes of people where a different collection of forces might have shaped five or more, and “not necessarily hierarchically

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<sup>9</sup> 40.

related.”<sup>10</sup> We don’t know what younger people would be like without the social construction of childhood, because young people cannot be considered separately from the cultural contexts in which they exist. In our culture, the construction of childhood has meant the creation of two importantly distinct age categories, the disempowerment of all of the members of one of those categories through the withholding of their rights to self-determination, and their subsequent subordination to the power of members of the dominant category.

One difference between sex and age is that there is an obvious continuous passage from birth through old age, whereas the idea that biological sex, specifically the difference between male and female, is also a continuum or at least non-binary is less obvious, and we don’t normally pass from one sex to another. The fact that we pass between ages, whereas we don’t usually pass between sexes, is a difference between adultism and sexism, but it doesn’t disarm the charge that we treat children unfairly. The continuum of change from birth through old age, however, does provide support to the liberationists’ rejection of the age binary, which construes adulthood as a unified state, importantly distinct from every younger age.

The dichotomous division of biological sexes is enforced through elaborate practices that shape and mold bodies that don’t fit within the binary. We think everyone is fully male or fully female partly because when someone isn’t, surgeons respond with procedures to force them into one category or the other. Although we may acknowledge universal characteristics of particular age groups, there is not the same illusion of a natural binary that distinguishes all older people from all younger people. Everyone agrees that aging is degreed. We mark people’s ages at every year of their lives, sometimes – especially for very young children – even month to month. Our age classification system, then, is more fine-tuned than a simple system that marks people as youth or adult without considering what lies between. Noticing that some people lie outside of

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<sup>10</sup> Frye, 38.

rigidly enforced boundaries between two sexes is important for disarming the binary sex distinction, which is crucial to dismantling patriarchy, much as appreciation of the continuum of change from infancy through old age is important for dismantling adultism.

Related is the idea that we were all once children. Fond memories of the experience of childhood may dissuade adults that adultism exists, but adults have been accused of misremembering their childhoods. Getrud Lenzer, founder of the new sociology of childhood, claims that adults have forgotten what it's like to be children, and yet create "most of what we know about children." She hopes that the new childhood studies will "contribute to providing children and childhood with a voice that is commensurate with their reality and not exclusively an adult construction."<sup>11</sup> Sari Knopp Biklen accuses traditional childhood researchers of imagining "insider status" based on false memories that problematically divert attention from children's own accounts of their experiences, ignoring the authority of children's interpretations of their own experiences as well as the power dynamics between adults and younger people.<sup>12</sup> Later I discuss Alice Miller, who describes the psychological mechanisms by which we repress painful memories of childhood and subsequently go on as adults to inflict more suffering on the children in our care.

Anti-liberationists regularly accuse liberationists of overlooking important differences between youth and adults. To the contrary, dismantling the binary social construct and unequal distribution of power between youth and adults would help bring to light the qualities that people of different age groups actually possess. Dismantling the binary brings out the nuances obscured by the exaggeration of within-group similarities and between-group differences. For example, the notion of a right to self-determination, granted only to those above a certain age range,

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<sup>11</sup> 213.

<sup>12</sup> 19.



overlooks cases in which young people's unique features (particular competences or *incompetences*) give them a claim to act that is as strong or stronger than adult claims. Thus, the binary obscures the moral complexity of our claims to agency.

Shifting our focus from the binary distinction between youth and adults to the differences and similarities between people of multiple different peer groups gives us more information about what people are like at each age than simply looking for similarities and differences between youth and adults overall. Also, including a child's cultural context in our investigation of the features that the child possesses is crucial to developing a comprehensive understanding of that child's traits and capacities. Liberationists consider what the child is like in relation to the contexts in which they live – since the liberationist focus is at least in part on the oppressive forces within these contexts – and not as a separate biological fact that is independent of culture. Recognition of the complex interplay of oppressive forces, the constructed nature of the binary that separates youth from adults overall, and the inaccuracies of our own childhood memories allows us to more fully appreciate the qualities of people of different ages.

Some may reject the accusation that there is an age-based binary system in place to begin with. We already distinguish babies and toddlers from children, adolescents and young adults socially and morally. As I've mentioned, we recognize not just a distinction between youth and adults overall, but distinct age groups under each of these two umbrellas. The views of the anti-liberationists, too, recognize multiple age-based distinctions, not just a single one. Social forces respond to multiple age classifications besides youth and adult. Indeed, I think elderly people are also victims of oppression; it follows that the contours that characterize the distribution of power based on age are more nuanced and multifaceted than a simple binary. Indeed, older children

may seem to act in oppressive ways towards younger children, drawing on their age as a defense of their superiority.

Nonetheless the binary distinction between adults and everyone else is prevalent. When older children assert their superiority over younger ones, their defense is their proximity to adulthood. Lighter-skinned brown people face advantages over darker-skinned brown people, but this does not impugn the existence of racism as a binary power scheme that privileges white people. It is because of their proximity to whiteness that lighter-skinned people are privileged relative to darker-skinned people.

Anti-liberationists are clearly committed to defending a binary conception of aging. Attributing rights of self-determination exclusively to adults is their smoking gun. A right to self-determination is binary in that it divides the holders of that right from the non-holders. And it is exclusionary in that it is intended to justify the status quo of strict age-based segregation (specifically the exclusion of all younger people from the world of adults), which is under attack by the youth liberation movement. Younger people are excluded from the world of adults by being denied an equal claim to agency. To the extent that anti-liberationists want to decentralize the age binary, to back off of their claims that adults are importantly different from everyone younger, and to acknowledge that humans at different stages of development are not hierarchically related, but morally equal (in the senses I discussed in Chapters 1 and 2), their position begins to merge with the liberationists'. Nonetheless, the notion of a right to self-determination will remain fundamentally anti-liberationist as long as it is used to draw an important moral divide between all younger and all older people.

In this section I have discussed the new childhood theorists' notion of generationing, based on the feminist distinction between sex and gender, to clarify the social dimensions of

conceptions of childhood, and I discussed cross-cultural and historical variations of childhood as a defense for viewing childhood as a social construction. I also explained why youth liberation is compatible with there being some underlying natural similarities and differences between people of different ages, but it is not compatible with the existing, binary social and moral hierarchy that subordinates youth to adults. I claimed that rejecting this binary allows us to more fully appreciate the moral, social and biological differences among people of different ages, and I argued for the importance of viewing children within the variety of cultural contexts in which children actually live and grow. In the following section, Section II, I describe two prominent analyses of oppression and outline the distinct forces that constitute oppression. In Section III, I show how children are subject to the forces of oppression outlined in these analyses.

## **II. Oppression**

The concept of oppression plays a unique role in helping us understand and shape our moral landscape. Identifying particular types of oppression as such allows us to recognize the features they share with other types of oppression, and it ties our oppressive practices, beliefs, and behaviors to a long history of thinking and writing on oppression. The idea is that oppressions such as racism and sexism, for example, are different manifestations of a similar phenomenon. Racism and sexism are both deeply and historically entrenched, institutionally backed, systems or networks of interrelated practices, behaviors and beliefs that result in some groups having a variety of forms of unjustified power over others. Recognizing the commonalities in the power structures that characterize racism and sexism is important for undoing them both.

Construing racism and sexism as existing, entrenched historical systems raises a problem for many philosophers, who often mistake oppression for mere conscious bias or personal

prejudice. Equating oppression with a bias or preference for one's own group over others actually obscures existing oppressive structures. Racism, for example, privileges white people at the expense of nonwhite people, so using the term 'racism' to name any form of conscious prejudice in favor of one's own race, whatever one's race happens to be, overlooks the many ways in which white people, specifically, have unjustly dominated and harmed nonwhite people globally and throughout history. 'Racism', 'sexism', and 'adultism' refer rigidly to existing systems of power by which some groups of people have in fact dominated other groups of people, and not to group-based bias or prejudice generally, which may in principle occur by members of any group towards any other group, history aside.

Oppression is an unjust, group-based system of harm or limitation.<sup>13</sup> Since it involves interactions between social groups, oppression is a social phenomenon. Anne Cudd's in-depth analysis of oppression asserts that while ontologically reducible to the individuals who comprise them, social groups are conceptually distinct entities and are explanatorily indispensable for understanding human behavior. For Cudd, a social group is a set of individuals who share common social constraints, and a social constraint is a pattern of rewards or penalties that attach to the choices of individuals. When a social constraint is *institutional*, it applies to individuals based on their social roles, and independently of their individual characteristics. "Oppression," on Cudd's account, "consists in the existence of unjust and unequal institutional constraints."<sup>14</sup> An institutional constraint is unequal when it impacts the life outcomes of members of some groups differently than others, and it is unjust when there is no justification for this differential impact.

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<sup>13</sup> Frye, Cudd.

<sup>14</sup> 52.

Like Cudd, Frye looks at the ways that oppression shapes one's options. When one is oppressed, on Frye's account, "one is caught in a bind, caught between systematically related pressures."<sup>15</sup> She compares oppression to a birdcage, claiming that part of the reason oppression is difficult to recognize is that it is difficult to see how one element of an oppressive structure, on its own – like one wire of a birdcage – could serve to harm or restrict members of the oppressed group. Since oppression is a network or pattern of interrelated barriers, it is only by shifting the level of perception to that network or pattern as a whole that we can comprehend the oppressive force of individual oppressive acts. We have to shift to a macroscopic level of perception in order to see the cage as a whole. We have to look at how particular actions and practices fit within an overarching oppressive structure. She considers the practice of men opening doors for women, insisting that the practice only "pretends" to be helpful, when in fact is part of an overarching pattern by which women are reduced and seen as dependent.<sup>16</sup>

Victims of oppression are necessarily members of particular groups, since oppression is perpetuated by groups against other groups. It is in virtue of one's membership in the group that one is subject to the oppression. Accounts of oppression therefore often look closely at how groups are formed and maintained. For Frye, whose focus is on sexism, the grouping of all people into two distinct sexes proceeds through an elaborate pattern of marking and announcing our sexes, which she claims is "absolutely pervasive and deeply entrenched in all patterns of behavior..."<sup>17</sup> Our behaviors and practices create the illusion of two distinct sexes, which is essential to structuring a hierarchy in which men have power over women. We create this illusion through sex-marking and announcing, and by needing to know the sex of everyone with

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<sup>15</sup> 3.

<sup>16</sup> 6.

<sup>17</sup> 21.

whom we interact, even in passing. Frye points out, “In everything one does, one has two complete repertoires of behavior, one for interactions with women and one for interactions with men.”<sup>18</sup>

As I pointed out above, we also perpetuate the illusion of two distinct sex categories by surgically altering the bodies of intersex infants, a sizeable portion of the population, whose physical features (including hormonal make-up, chromosomes and/or genitals) do not fit neatly within a male/female dichotomy.<sup>19</sup> Frye’s emphasis on the social shaping of sex categories, even at the level of one’s physical or biological features, impugns the standard distinction drawn between sex and gender, in which sex is seen as biologically determined, and gender as a social construct. On Frye’s account, even our biology – our physical bodies – are shaped by social practices. “Socialization molds our bodies; enculturation forms our skeletons, our musculature, our central nervous systems.”<sup>20</sup> Our social practices exaggerate the similarities within each sex, as well as the differences between sexes, creating the illusion that there is an important twofold distinction to be drawn.

According to Cudd, who recognizes the similarities between her and Frye’s accounts, stereotyping – a form of categorization by which one structures the social world into in-groups (groups of which the perceiver is a member) and out-groups (groups of which the perceiver is not a member) – is the basis for the formation of social groups and thus drives oppression. Cudd appeals to research on stereotyping within cognitive psychology to claim that stereotyping plays a crucial role in the structuring of oppressive systems. Importantly, like sex-marking and sex-announcing, stereotyping involves a biased exaggeration of within-group sameness and between-

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<sup>18</sup> 20.

<sup>19</sup> Dreger.

<sup>20</sup> 37.

group difference. Furthermore, we learn stereotypes from our social surroundings, in which some groups are stereotyped more favorably than others. Stereotypes are also self-perpetuating, making them stable, lasting cognitive structures that are difficult to change. Cudd maintains that stereotyping is the underlying cognitive mechanism of oppression.

As has been broadly recognized, we don't know how much of an exaggeration of within group sameness and between group differences there is within oppressive social groupings, because we don't have a way to see what people would be like in circumstances that aren't oppressive. Since oppression shapes us, we don't know what we would be like without it. J.S. Mill makes a similar point about sexism. Women's exclusion from political spheres negatively impacts their skills for political participation, which seems in turn to justify their exclusion. But Mill recognizes that women's political skills would be different were women not excluded from the political realm. The pervasiveness of sexism leaves us unable to know what women would be like in a non-sexist culture. Frye concurs:

we do not know whether human behavior patterns would be dimorphic along lines of chromosomal sex if we were not threatened and bullied... The cultural and economic structures which create and enforce elaborate and rigid patterns of sex-marking and sex-announcing... construct two classes of animals, the masculine and the feminine, where another constellation of forces might have constructed three or five categories, and not necessarily hierarchically related.<sup>21</sup>

Frye's attention to this point leads to a shift in her understanding of sexism. Sexism is not, as she originally believed, the marking by others of one's sex as relevant when one's sex is irrelevant. Instead, she claims, the rigid and ubiquitous patterns of sex-marking and sex-announcing, actually *make* sex relevant when it otherwise wouldn't be. This is how sexism operates: the distinctions we draw between sexes actually make a significant difference to what we are like; they shape us physically and psychologically so as to divide our species into

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<sup>21</sup> 36.

dominants and subordinates, in order to maintain a dominant/subordinate power structure.

Sexism includes all of the forces that perpetuate this pervasive structure.

Cudd provides a detailed catalogue of the specific forces of oppression, and we can follow her in drawing a primary distinction between material and psychological forces of oppression. The material forces of oppression include violence and economic deprivation, which reinforce one another to “form an effective prison,”<sup>22</sup> around the oppressed group. Cudd defines violence as the use of physical force to intentionally inflict physical harm on another or on their material possessions. Systemic violence targets members of a social group, and thus harms all members of the group, even those who are not direct victims of the violence. This is because when harm is directed at members of a social group, and this becomes known, those who share that group membership experience a threat of future harm. The link between group harm and individuals’ experiences shows how systemic violence is also connected to the psychological forces of oppression: the impacts of violence may include not only physical harm to one’s body or material possessions, but also terror, trauma, and other psychological effects. When the violence is systemic, or directed at a social group, all of that group’s members suffer psychological harm from the violence because they all face threats of future violence in virtue of their group membership. The psychological component of oppression also includes those psychological forces that are not directly related to violence or economic deprivation.

Group violence also leads to a group’s economic disadvantage by limiting the choices of group members, and sometimes by physically weakening or disabling them, eliminating economic opportunities. Cudd gives an example of the further social constraints imposed by economic deprivation itself. Because of segregated housing, for instance, black people often get information about job opportunities from other black people, whose options are also unfairly

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<sup>22</sup> Cudd, 118.



limited. So they form preferences for what their limited circumstances allow. Inner city black youth form dreams about becoming star athletes or artists.<sup>23</sup> Cudd also distinguishes direct and indirect forces of oppression, where direct forces include limitations imposed from outside of one's group – slavery or employment discrimination, for example – while indirect oppression includes ways in which members of oppressed groups are coopted into perpetuating their own oppression. As in the example given of black youth, indirect economic oppression causes members of oppressed groups to make economic choices that are ultimately against their own good and the good of those with whom they share group membership. This is one of the many reasons why oppression is hard to undo.<sup>24</sup>

Since it is a group-based harm, oppression is often difficult to perceive. This is partly because members of oppressor groups can act in oppressive ways without themselves or their victims realizing that they are perpetuating oppression, unaware of the group-based structure of the oppression. Oppression does not require that its perpetrator intend to harm members of a group as such.<sup>25</sup> And as with the different types of economic oppression, psychological harm can be direct – when it is inflicted by members of the dominant group against members of the subordinate group – or it can be indirect, whereby members of an oppressed group perpetuate psychological harms through their own beliefs and choices. Finally, Cudd distinguishes between point and cultural forces of oppression, where point forces occur within individual interactions, and cultural forces are more diffuse throughout a culture. “Cultural psychological forces form the background social beliefs and desires within which we perceive ourselves and others and act on

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<sup>23</sup> 152.

<sup>24</sup> 154.

<sup>25</sup> 156.

those beliefs and desires,” and they can be “invisible and insidious.”<sup>26</sup> And as with other forms of group-based harm, group-based psychological harms harm all group members due to the threat of future harm.

Cudd goes on to catalogue the different types of psychological oppression. Point forces of direct psychological oppression include terror and trauma, specifically PTSD and other impacts of violence, which reduce the capacity of the victim to cope with future challenges and instances of oppression. They also include humiliation and degradation, which can lead to shame, anger, a sense of resignation, and low self-esteem.<sup>27</sup> Finally, point forces of direct psychological oppression include objectification, which involves ignoring a person’s fully equal status, and reducing them to objects whose purpose is to fulfill the desires or satisfaction of another.

Among the cultural forces of direct psychological oppression, Cudd includes traditions and conventions, religious practices and beliefs, ideologies – that is, “political, social, and scientific theories that purport to offer rationalizations of tradition and convention”<sup>28</sup> – and cultural domination. Cultural domination occurs when a group fails to be recognized, accommodated, or respected by the dominant culture. Cudd gives some examples of cultural domination: compulsory heterosexuality – the presumption that everyone is and ought to be heterosexual – and the situation of deaf people in hearing society.

Indirect oppression, again, are the forces of oppression perpetuated by members of oppressed groups themselves who have internalized the oppressive beliefs and values of the broader culture. Among the indirect forces of psychological oppression, Cudd counts shame and low self-esteem, false consciousness, and deformed desires. Shame and low self-esteem involve

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<sup>26</sup> 157.

<sup>27</sup> 163-164.

<sup>28</sup> 170.

feeling unworthy or not good enough, a sense of one's own inferiority. Shame and low self-esteem can be caused by violence and economic deprivation, as well as by other direct forces of oppression including humiliation and degradation. False consciousness includes false beliefs that are formed in oppressive circumstances and that perpetuate the oppression. This includes the false beliefs that women's appropriate role is in domestic service, for example, or that black men are more prone to commit violence, or that wealthy people deserve to be wealthy.<sup>29</sup> Finally among the indirect forces of oppression that Cudd considers are deformed desires, desires misshapen by an oppressive society. Deformed desires are adapted to oppressive circumstances and would not exist were it not for the oppressive circumstances.

Importantly, oppression is cyclical.<sup>30</sup> Oppression is a self-perpetuating system. On Cudd's account, through indirect forces of oppression, oppressed groups are coopted into perpetuating their oppression, while both direct and indirect forces of oppression weaken group members, rendering them unable, or less able than they otherwise would be, to cope with future challenges, harms, and limitations caused by oppression. Frye points to the difficulty of changing our habits. Since our muscles and skeletons are actually physically molded by our patterns of behavior, changing these patterns is extremely difficult.<sup>31</sup> These considerations are all part of the reason that oppression is so difficult to recognize and undo.

For Cudd, oppression involves social constraints on one's choices. Notice that this requires the capacity for choice-making and that oppressed persons must occupy particular social roles and participate in social institutions. Here the new childhood theorist's insistence on viewing young people as equal participants and social agents is important, since it suggests that

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<sup>29</sup> Cudd, 178.

<sup>30</sup> Cudd, 79.

<sup>31</sup> Frye, 37.

people as young as infants meet at least some of the requirements for being the type of being who could be subject to oppression. My criticism of anti-liberationists who restrict the notion of choice to include only actions backed by rational autonomy are also relevant. Much like the anti-liberationists, Cudd's view implies that agents who are not capable of making choices (for her, this may at least include nonhuman animals and infants) are not capable of being oppressed.

Recall from Chapter 2 that some anti-liberationists deny that youth actions count as choices, and on this basis deny children's equal claim to agency. One argument that I presented against the anti-liberationist in Chapter 2 holds in response Cudd's appeal to choice-making. However we construe the notion of choice-making, it will be a capacity that develops gradually. So if oppression depends on one's capacity to make choices, then whether one is the type of being who could count as being oppressed will also be a matter of degree.

But more importantly, placing more value (or disvalue) on the restrictions and harms that face choice-makers than on *prima facie* equivalent restrictions and harms that face non-choice-making agents, is unfair. A wheelchair-inaccessible culture, one that is designed by and caters only to the needs of able-bodied people, may negatively impact all wheelchair-bound individuals in some ways that are relevantly similar, independently of their choice-making capacity. Or, alternatively, choice-makers and non-choice-making agents might suffer similar harms from a health care system that marginalizes them. And these harms might be equally constitutive of an oppressive system. One's capacity to make choices might be, at least in some respects, irrelevant to the harm one experiences as a result of one's marginalization within some social system or institution. My point is that whether one counts as oppressed should not depend on one's capacity for choice-making. This is a way of unfairly disvaluing the relevantly similar interests of non-choice-making agents.

It's seems easy to adjust Cudd's account to eliminate the emphasis on choice-making. We could construe oppression as unjust social and institutional constraints, without insisting that oppression requires the capacity for making choices. We could simply construe social constraints as rewards or penalties that attach to one's actions, more broadly, or that shape one's options independently of rational autonomy, and thereby include the systematic devaluing of a group's interests, or the group's negatively impacted life outcomes, and avoid the choice-making requirement.

### **III. The Oppression of Youth**

Cudd catalogues the forces of oppression, drawing three overarching distinctions: point/cultural, material/psychological, and direct/indirect. Humiliation, objectification, invisibility, othering, degradation, and cultural domination are all important cultural forces of psychological oppression that are reinforced by traditions, conventions, and ideologies on her account. That these forces are cultural means, again, that they are diffuse throughout a culture. Young people are subject to all of these forces of oppression, some directly (imposed from outside) and others indirectly (reinforced by youth themselves). The indirect forces of oppression that Cudd accounts for, and to which youth are subject, also include shame, low self-esteem, false consciousness and deformed desires.

As we've seen in Chapters 1 and 2, young people's supposed incompetence has been taken as a justification for exclusive adult control – only adults are given a right to agency. This undervaluing of young people's choices relative to adults' fits within a broader system of adult domination. We are told to honor and listen to our parents. Nowhere are parents instructed to honor or listen to their children. In this section, I introduce some additional components of adultism, mostly those related to these cultural forces of psychological oppression. Cudd and

others have recognized the connections between psychological oppression and more heinous forms of violence against groups, and I address these briefly. My aim is not to complete an investigation of the relevant forces, but to point that investigation in the right direction.

New childhood theorists have focused at length on the contextual features of children's lives, including the nature of power and its relation to the construction of childhood and other oppressive systems. They have looked closely at the stereotyping of young people as it contributes to the construction of childhood, including the ways in which media and consumer culture shape adult conceptions of young people,<sup>32</sup> and the denial to youth of their status as knowers,<sup>33</sup> which undermines the legitimacy of young people's unique insights and experiences. Attention to the construction of childhood leads new childhood theorists to directly address the power dynamics of other social constructs. For instance, Jessica Taft acknowledges some ways in which her status as an adult impedes the relationship between her and the children she researched, but she is at the same time cognizant that the impact of her age in her research with children was deeply influenced by her and her subjects' race and class.<sup>34</sup>

Stereotypical representations of young people have been explored in depth, with various authors claiming that youth are represented as cute, innocent, troubled, at-risk, incompetent, and/or irrational.<sup>35</sup> Woodhouse is surprised that children are stereotypically seen as *pre-agential* and passive, especially as she documents the narratives of youth who repeatedly break these stereotypes. Berry Mayall claims that children are "not regarded as contributors to the social

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<sup>32</sup> Bolzan.

<sup>33</sup> See Mason, 91-7.

<sup>34</sup> 204.

<sup>35</sup> See Woodhouse, Bolzan, Mayall.

order”<sup>36</sup> and that as a result their “knowledge and experience is commonly disregarded.”<sup>37</sup> Mayall contends that children are rendered invisible by social norms, with the exception that those who transgress these norms are seen as “victims of adult behaviour or as threats to the social order.”<sup>38</sup> Jan Mason insists that youth are considered non-knowers, “at the bottom of a hierarchy of cognitive authority,”<sup>39</sup> incapable therefore of playing an active role in setting a research agenda and of speaking for themselves. Mason writes that an adult-centric paradigm has “constructed childhood in terms of a contrast with adulthood, as a time of ‘becoming’ and incompetence. Children have been conceptualized as ‘lesser than’ adults and fused within families as passive dependents.”<sup>40</sup> Anti-liberationists, too, rely on some stereotypes of youth, as they seek to defend “common sense” conceptions of young people as irrational and incompetent, in their attempts to deny youth their equal rights to agency. Degrading stereotypes of young people abound.

Stereotyping helps construct the illusion of a binary, which forms the basis of the inequalitarian power dynamic between youth and adults. It also contributes to young people’s indirect oppression. Negative stereotypes cause young people to think negatively of themselves, acting in accord with stereotypical expectations. The behaviors of middle class children from LA are a case in point. The decentering of young people’s unique knowledge and insights, and the failure to take their voices and agency seriously lead youth to discount their own significance. While elaborate research confirms the negative impacts of stereotyping on other oppressed

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<sup>36</sup> 79.

<sup>37</sup> 80.

<sup>38</sup> 80.

<sup>39</sup> 96.

<sup>40</sup> 91.

groups, as well as the implicit presence of biases towards these groups, stereotyping and implicit biases that harm children have received less attention. This is a further sign of children's marginalization within our culture and within the academy, and not evidence that negative stereotypes and biases don't exist for children. Social and behavioral scientists, psychologists, historians, and philosophers ought to follow in the footsteps of the new childhood theorists by taking up an explicit focus on young people so that we can further understand the mechanisms of young people's stereotyping and marginalization, as we have for other groups.

Importantly, researchers in the field of new childhood studies are also conscious of the ways that adult-centered conventions, ideologies and conceptual schemes reproduce the adultist power structures that they at the same time seek to scrutinize. They claim that traditionally the social scientist's exploration of children's issues has been informed by what other adults think and think they know about children, and does not give a central place to children's own voices, insights, and experiences, as shared by them directly. Amy Best – in an anthology devoted to centering children in children's research, both as subjects and as researchers, and critical of children's prior exclusion – is, like the other authors in the collection, “mindful of the role of the social sciences in disempowering youth and defining them in narrow and limiting ways.”<sup>41</sup> Research agenda decisions, Best claims, are shaped by dominant representations of young people within our culture.<sup>42</sup>

New childhood theorists have analyzed these representations and the role of oppression and power in theorizing and researching children and are critical of the exclusion of children's first-person voices and perspectives in shaping and informing the study of children. While many of them acknowledge that unlike other marginalized groups, youth will never be equally

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<sup>41</sup> 18.

<sup>42</sup> 17.



positioned as researchers within the field of childhood studies, and they disagree on the extent to which youth can play an active role in both setting and pursuing the research agenda within this field, they emphasize that mainstream discourse within a variety of disciplines has overlooked children as a special class and discounted the value of their perspectives, excluding and “othering” them, and rendering them invisible. This exclusion and the rendering of children as invisible follow from the negative stereotypes of children that discount the legitimacy of their unique knowledge and insights, relegating their perspectives to an inferior role and discounting young people as knowers in the first place.

Much as academic feminism began by noticing that science has been shaped by the interests, concerns, and experiences of men, traditionally ignoring women’s participation in social life, childhood theorists insist that scientific discourse (even discourse about children) is shaped by adult interests, concerns, and experiences. Some childhood theorists call for the inclusion of a children’s standpoint in science in order to rectify the exclusion and marginalization of young people. This call draws its inspiration from women’s standpoint theory,<sup>43</sup> and advocates for the deconstruction of adultist concepts and frameworks within the social sciences, much as earlier feminists sought to challenge the conceptual frameworks within male-dominant scientific discourse. “Here we can see the logic of the first stage of academic feminism – adding women into science – repeated. Now children, too, were ‘added’ to existing accounts of social life where previously only adults had been identified as actors.”<sup>44</sup> Alanen

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<sup>43</sup> Alanen, 42.

<sup>44</sup> Alanen, 35.

insists that incorporating a children's standpoint in social science will require changes in the power relations between children and adults.<sup>45</sup>

The exclusion and invisibility of children in education extends beyond the university setting to primary and secondary schools themselves, where children, still seen as occupying the bottom rung of a knowledge hierarchy, are the intended recipients of the knowledge that is being disseminated. It has been widely acknowledged that schools contribute to young people's marginalization, and education theorists have been some of the biggest proponents of youth liberation. Schools render children an absent referent,<sup>46</sup> even if only by physically segregating them from the broader adult culture for most of their waking hours. Being required to be in school further precludes young people from political participation, since state and federal legislative bodies tend to be in session only during school hours.

Due to their perceived status as non-knowers, youth are prevented from having any say in the content of their educational curricula, the structure of their schooling, and any other significant decisions about their schooling, which are normally made by school boards, faculty, and staff (all adults). These decisions (such as school start times) are commonly made with a primary focus on adult needs and desires (adult work schedules) and on children's futures *as adults*, rather than on children's present needs, interests, and perspectives. Mayall suggests that school regulations on students' bodies (such as facing consequences for fidgeting or not sitting still) are "in the interest of adult timetables and agendas and not self care."<sup>47</sup>

Donna Berthelson describes her experience researching early-childhood classrooms in Australia, "the teacher remains at the centre, the one whose beliefs, decisions, and outlook count

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<sup>45</sup> 42-44.

<sup>46</sup> See Adams.

<sup>47</sup> 185.

most in giving shape to what happens in the environment.”<sup>48</sup> Berthelson describes most dialogues between students and teachers as following a pattern of Initiation-Response-Evaluation, where the teacher poses a question, the student responds, and the teacher evaluates the response. Berthelson claims that this pattern excludes children’s voices, and she recommends a more expansive approach to dialogue between teachers and students that legitimizes, makes more space for, and builds on children’s contributions. Similarly, Helen Woodward advocates involving children in assessments of their educational growth, insisting that this involvement is essential if the assessments are going to be accurate and just. And Neriman Osman describes students’ subjective experiences of powerlessness within the school setting. She finds that children want control, they want to contribute to the formation of school policies and to participate in decision-making processes.<sup>49</sup> They both want and do not receive “respect within the educational institution.”<sup>50</sup>

Roger Holdsworth argues that school activities often lack productive outcomes or serious purposes, deferring these to “learn for later.” He thinks taking children seriously in schools requires giving them “serious things to do.”<sup>51</sup> In advocating for giving children serious things to do, Holdsworth is more concerned to look at how adult institutions could make room for children’s serious participation, rather than with whether children themselves want to do ‘serious’ things, or the extent to which, from children’s own perspectives, they feel alienated or connected to what they do. Focusing on adult institutions and structures builds on the idea that the social role of children results from a complex interplay of social forces and institutions, and

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<sup>48</sup> 202.

<sup>49</sup> 186.

<sup>50</sup> 186.

<sup>51</sup> 139.

not just from the child's own 'nature.' Holdsworth contends that youth having a voice is fundamentally about adults having ears.

Courts also render children invisible and subjugate their interests, voices and agency to those of adults. Woodhouse describes her work as a lawyer with children in the foster care system. The "Supreme Court has never held that a foster child has a right to legal representation, a right to speak in his own court case, a right not to be deprived of property without due process, or a right to contact with his family."<sup>52</sup> This is in contrast to adults in state custody, for whom these same rights have been granted.<sup>53</sup> Dwyer claims that the law in the United States and the United Kingdom has "treated children instrumentally, as mere means to the satisfaction of their parents' desires or the supposed needs of their parents' community, even in contexts where the interests children had at stake were much greater than those of the adults involved." He cites as an example *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, a court case that famously granted Amish parents an exemption from compulsory schooling for their children. Here, Dwyer says, the state blocked legal requirements that it deems necessary for young people's fundamental interests and welfare, subsuming these to adults' religiously infused desires. He claims that we rarely see analysis of court cases involving children couched in terms of children's rights, rather than parent's rights, suggesting that child welfare is not the primary concern of the courts.<sup>54</sup>

Dwyer compares children's place in law with that of incompetent adults who require legal guardianship. Legal guardians of incompetent adults do not have the right to harm or ignore the fundamental interests of the adults in their care due to the former's religious convictions.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> 5-6.

<sup>53</sup> 5-6.

<sup>54</sup> 15.

<sup>55</sup> 18.

Instead, unlike children, incompetent adults are seen as equal in moral status to other adults. He argues that the automatic granting of control to biological parents over their offspring places much more weight on the value of relationship interests for parents than for infants, even though infants obviously have much more at stake in the state's selection of their parents, than parents have in the state's granting of legal authority over their biological children. And he continues:

Courts are dismissive of young people's privacy and dignitary interests, in public and private settings, authorizing searches and forms of discipline in schools that would not be tolerated towards adults...In divorce cases, children's interests are considered only after their parents' rights of association and residential choice have been satisfied, and children, rather than the parents who cause the family dissolution, must shuffle around among residences in order to maintain relationships with their parents and extended family members.<sup>56</sup>

Although he recognizes that there is no unified attitude toward children, he believes that there is a pervasive tendency to discount children's interests relative to adults'. Parents make decisions from what to eat for dinner to where to live based on their own preferences, and family households are organized around adult needs.<sup>57</sup> I remember a friend sharing on social media that their kids had "taken over" the family room, gluing their own art to the wall. This "family" room, the biggest, most central and comfortable room in the house, was not really for the whole family. Instead most of children's activities, as well as opportunities for artistic expression and for shaping space in response to their own preferences and ideas, were confined to the "playroom" in the basement. Dwyer points out that family meal times are often structured around adult schedules, and that three meals a day might not be the best regimen for younger people with smaller stomachs.

And we are even less respectful of children's interests when the children are other people's children. In conflicts between adult and child preferences, other adults almost always

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<sup>56</sup> 20.

<sup>57</sup> 21.

assume that the adults' wishes are objectively superior. A sign in a local establishment makes this undeniably clear. The sign is an anomaly only in that it makes explicit what is almost always implicit in public spaces: that public and retail spaces are *adult spaces*. The sign reads,

Ponysaurus Brewing Co. is proud to welcome families into our beer garden.  
However, first and foremost, this is an adult space. It is not a park or playground.  
Children are welcome here if their behavior does not negatively impact the experience of guests who are here to enjoy the company of other adults.

Adults sometimes adopt behaviors in public that negatively impact the experiences of other adults. Same-sex displays of affection are an example. We don't normally automatically side with the person who is negatively impacted, especially when their experiences of others are influenced by prejudice or an unfair favoring of one's own preferences. Notice that the sign prioritizes the preferences of adults, specifically adults who are there with other adults. Even adults who are there to enjoy the company of children are not granted equal respect. The sign also insinuates that the only *non*-adult spaces are parks and playgrounds. There is nothing wrong with adult spaces *per se*; it is okay for a business to cater to the needs and interests of particular social groups. The problem is not only that this establishment discriminates against children even at the same time it invites them into the space; it's that almost all establishments discriminate against children. Adult-sized toilets and countertop heights in retail establishments make it difficult for smaller youth to be meaningfully involved in (or even observe) public life. There aren't public spaces for youth to express themselves or make their voices heard, but all public spaces feature the voices and other forms of expression of adults.

What counts as acceptable behavior in public should not be determined solely by adult preferences. Adults who insist that a space remain quiet might negatively impact the experience of children who are also there to enjoy the company of others. In the case of adults with special needs, accommodation, not outright banishment, is seen as a worthwhile goal. No other social

group is seen as justifiably banished from public spaces. Safely accommodating children's energy and preferences in public space is not an impossible task. Staff, physical design, and other resources would need to be devoted to this task. If this sounds preposterous, perhaps that is due to the normalcy of public and retail establishments devoting resources exclusively to meet adult needs. That public design caters to adult interests also shows how children's economic deprivation is related to their broader marginalization.

The routine disvaluing of young people's agency on the basis of their supposed incompetence is also a form of degradation and contributes to young people's invisibility and silencing. Young people's actions are attributed a lesser moral status because of the actor's age; this follows from the denial to youth of a right to self-determination, and it leads to their exclusion from public and political dialogue and decision-making, and the deprivation of their power within schools, families, and public spaces. Denial of the right to self-determination is supposed to serve as the justification for broader adult domination and the status quo. This further degrades children's agency, diminishing the perceived value of their freedom relative to adults' freedom. Like the new childhood theorists contend, on this view youth are disregarded as social actors, and not taken seriously as knowers, difference-makers, or co-creators of culture and society.

Adults habitually interfere with and control what children do. A toddler is trying to climb onto a chair; the adult sees them struggling and lifts them onto the chair.<sup>58</sup> A young child barks like a dog to a parent's friend; the parent insists that the child say 'hello' instead of barking. At a restaurant, a child wants to explore under their table. The parent insists that they stay seated. Parents tell their children how to color and how to play. Almost any time I say 'hello' or ask a question to a young child, their caretaker responds on their behalf, or insists that the child

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<sup>58</sup> See Gerber on allowing infants to struggle.

respond, regardless of whether the child seems to want to talk to me. Sometimes children are just slower to respond (perhaps because they are not used to be spoken to directly); parents insist that they hurry up. People who care for children constantly force them to behave in ways that adults deem normal, polite, or acceptable, regardless of what the child wants or intends to do, and regardless of the reasonableness of adult behavioral norms. On a walk to a park, a parent reprimands their child for playing (pausing to jump back and forth over a stick) on the sidewalk. Social structures support parents in going to great lengths, including using corporal punishment, to make sure children do what they're told.

As I write, I witness a very typical encounter that further demonstrates the silencing and exclusion of youth in public spaces, as well as the undervaluing of children's agency.

[After ordering food with an adult, a child takes a seat at one of many open tables in the restaurant.]

Adult: Let's sit at this table; that one's too big.

[Child and adult move to a different table.]

Adult: Get that scowl off your face; you have a lot to be happy about.

Child: Don't tell me what face to be.

[They proceed to argue, the adult repeatedly shushes the child, who is becoming quite agitated. Eventually the adult changes the subject, begins pointing out words, reading them aloud, and quizzing the child on how to pronounce them.]

Child: Stop saying boring things.

Adult: Why are you mad?

Child: [Getting louder] I'm mad because you're telling me boring things. I don't want to work on reading now; I already did that at school. We're in a place to eat and you're making me do boring things.

At this point the adult persisted, the child grew louder, and the adult became visibly self-conscious as other restaurant patrons began watching the encounter. Suddenly, she grabbed the child by the arm and dragged him away into the bathroom. While anti-liberationists allow that some adult interference with children's choices is unwarranted, the denial to children of a right to self-determination leads to a culture in which children's agency is routinely discounted, as this example illustrates. Even the child's facial expressions are subject to adult critique and control.



Interfering with and discounting children's agency, even when there is no good reason for it, is taken to be a less serious affront than the same behavior directed at adults. These sorts of examples illustrate the devaluing of children's agency; they are also examples of adult cultural domination, silencing, and degradation.

We also regularly demean children by humiliating them. I am reminded of Jimmy Kimmel, a late-night television show host, who asked parents to video tape their children after being told that the parent ate all of their Halloween candy. The resulting video clips have received more than a hundred million views. The children are profoundly upset; they scream and cry and yell in great distress, but their responses are viewed as entertainment. We would feel differently about deceiving an adult to feel the same degree of pain and frustration, and then broadcasting it on television and online. Because the subjects in the videos are children, it is not even noticed that they are being humiliated or that they are being put into an extreme psychological state that no one would want to be in. Appreciating the child's interests in these cases involves understanding that children often place very high importance on things that adults dismiss as insignificant. Both attitudes are appropriate for individuals of their respective ages.

I was having lunch at a restaurant with a 7-year-old who asked a question that another restaurant patron found laughable; he laughed out loud, making fun of my friend and commenting to the people at table nearest to us. My friend was confused. He knew he was being made fun of, he wasn't sure why, and it didn't feel good to him. Disrespect for children's privacy is a related phenomenon. I remember the humiliation I felt in sixth grade when a teacher confiscated and threatened to read aloud a note I had written to a friend. Adults don't tolerate these sorts of behaviors toward other adults.

We also frequently lie to children, discounting their interest in and preference for not being lied to. We lie to children not only for the sake of protection, as we sometimes lie to adults. Instead, our lies to children are often frivolous, based in our own desires for fun, entertainment, or tradition. Parents I know have gone so far as to defend their lies to children by claiming absurdly that children want to be lied to. We give children false information about Santa Claus and fairies, claiming that these lies expand children's imaginations and give them a worthwhile opportunity to participate in make-believe. But children don't need to be lied to in order to exercise their imaginative capacities to the fullest extent. When children aren't being lied to, they have no trouble distinguishing between reality and make-believe; this doesn't undermine their imaginative expertise.

Ignoring a person's agency or their interests (in not being lied to, for example) are also forms of objectification. And there are many other ways in which we objectify children and dismiss their agency. Adults talk *about* children in their presence, not *to* them. I frequently witness parents telling their toddlers to perform their latest trick, or say their newest word for other adults, without regard for whether the child wants to do this. We say, in response to our children's insistence to the contrary, "No, it's not cold in here, it's hot," or "That food's not gross, it's delicious."

The language of the anti-liberationists perpetuates adult cultural domination further by viewing children in relation to adults. Schapiro describes childhood as a non-ideal deviation from adulthood, pointing to Kantian conceptions of adult rationality as "a standard relative to which certain agents can count as undeveloped,"<sup>59</sup> while Archard speaks of immaturity and incompetence. These are contrastive notions, contrasted with what are taken to be the

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<sup>59</sup> 737.

constitutive features of adulthood, specifically those related to rational autonomy. These notions are negative in the sense that they point to a lack or absence of some desirable trait or skill, which adults are taken to have. These paradigms extend beyond anti-liberationism. Dwyer describes the prevailing historical view of childhood as “mere preparation for adulthood, a state of being unfinished relative to the human *telos* of cognitive and physical maturity.”<sup>60</sup> And Matthews argues at length against this deficit conception of the nature of childhood, which he believes is prevalent.<sup>61</sup>

Rational autonomy is viewed as an important plateau in a human being’s development. Of course we understand that people keep changing after they reach adulthood, but adulthood is commonly construed as a type of end or achievement, while childhood is seen as its predecessor. Children are pre-adults: *becomings*, rather than *beings*.<sup>62</sup> Defining children negatively, in relation to adults, is a form of othering. It is part of why children’s present interests are often eclipsed by the interests of the adults that today’s children will become, which is why we often fail to fully appreciate the nature of the moral demands that young people make on us in the present. One example is subjecting young people to schooling practices that they don’t deem worthwhile, for the sake of some future benefit. Like Holdsworth reminds us, most school activities are like this, their value taken to be realizable only at some later date, and not seen as meaningful or important in the present. To be sure, the future matters too, and it’s good to think ahead and to balance our present interests and desires against our longer-term future interests, but the phrase ‘children are the future,’ along with the types of common social practices I have described, ignore that children exist, matter, and make a meaningful difference now.

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<sup>60</sup> 1.

<sup>61</sup> (1994, 2008, 2009).

<sup>62</sup> See Qvortrup, Thorne, Alanen.

And as with all other oppressed groups, young people face systemic violence and economic deprivation. Child abuse and less severe patterns of deliberate harm towards young people are generally known to exist *as patterns* – after all, young people are more vulnerable to these sorts of harms given their relatively small bodies and inability to identify these harms as wrong. Young people, as a group, are targeted for violence and face disproportionate rates of abuse; this much is well-known and well-documented,<sup>63</sup> though most people probably don't realize the extent of the harm that is directed towards young people.

While we have come a long way since the time when young people were considered the property of their fathers and regularly tortured, maimed and sold, child abuse remains prevalent and particularly egregious due to children's increased vulnerability. Alice Miller describes the cycle by which adults come to repress the abuse they experience in childhood, and go on to abuse others. She estimates that far more of us are sexually abused than we realize. The silence surrounding sexual abuse until the early 1990s has made the repetitive cycle of abuse nearly impossible to undo. Fortunately, Miller claims, adults can and should *rewrite our programs*.

Unlike plants, we can recognize the psychological mechanisms involved: the suppression of painful memories due to intense social pressures, including those that challenge the legitimacy of young people's experiences and knowledge, and the resulting harm that we as adults go on to cause to other children. Miller accuses Freud of mistakenly placing responsibility for adult neurosis on children's unconscious desires. Freud's theory of the Oedipal complex attributes neurosis to the repressed sexual desires of infants and young children. In fact, Miller thinks, neurosis follows from children's experiences of sexual abuse perpetrated by adults, and the

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<sup>63</sup> Child Trends and the Children's Defense Fund are two nonprofits that keep updated statistical information on child abuse.

reason Freud failed to recognize this is that, partly because of bias in favor of adults, he was unwilling to accept how widespread such abuse was.

The existence of child abuse as a patterned phenomenon – children face unique harms due to their status as children – is not particularly contentious. Young people’s economic deprivation is also uncontested. At my bank, you must be 18 to open a bank account. What is not generally accepted is that these harms and economic restrictions are a constitutive part of an oppressive system. Again, like Frye pointed out, if we look at one component of that system (such as young people’s increased subjection to violence or their economic deprivation on its own), it might be hard to see why that barrier is oppressive. But equipped with the knowledge of the complex structure of oppressive forces, we can now see how violence and economic deprivation of children fit within a broader power structure. Children who don’t feel powerful, or whose experiences and knowledge are routinely discounted, or who believe they are proper subjects of the violence involved in corporal punishment, are less able to identify the wrongs of child abuse. They are less likely to be able to stand up for themselves, or to trust their instincts. Some of these connections have been empirically observed and documented.<sup>64</sup>

Youth liberationists have also long pointed out that arguing for young people’s economic power does not mean that youth should be able to work in abusive, unsafe, or unhealthy work environments. Nor should adults work in these circumstances. Alternatives to young people’s complete economic deprivation should be sought before they are dismissed as impossible. New childhood theorists are cognizant of the connections between violence towards children, children’s economic deprivation, and broader adultist societal structures.

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<sup>64</sup> See Saunders and Goddard, Kingston, Robinson.

Consider also corporal punishment, which we can define as actions that are intended both to hurt their victims without harming them, and to further the good of the victim. Notice that on Cudd's account, corporal punishment does not count as violence, since it is not intended to harm someone, but "merely" to hurt them, and the intended outcome is the victim's own well being. Even destruction of physical property counts for Cudd as more violent than corporal punishment. But hurting a child *is* a form of violence; it is an assault on one's bodily integrity, and the same action would be more widely condemned as violent and illegal assault if directed at an adult. Recognizing the violence and injustice inherent in hurtful acts intended for the "victim's own good," perpetuated against an adult, while denying that the same act inflicted on children is a form of violence or injustice, is one way of demeaning children and taking them less seriously.

Perceiving corporal punishment as a less serious affront when it is directed at young people rather than at adults is a form of demeaning young people's interests, particularly their interest in not being deliberately hurt. And corporal punishment is still widely practiced and even more widely accepted as a legitimate practice. The causal link between undermining children's bodily integrity and more severe forms of abuse has been noted. "It is precisely because children have been treated as children and not as equals that they have been fair game for adults, exploited, abused, and even tortured and arbitrarily done to death."<sup>65</sup> Bernadette Saunders and Chris Goddard contend that words for the physical discipline of children (such as smacking and spanking) downplay the seriousness of these offenses and may degrade children.<sup>66</sup> Corporal punishment, and the other forms of marginalization I have described, further subject children to more serious forms of abuse by undermining their claims to dignity and self-esteem. Violence

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<sup>65</sup> Harris, p. 138.

<sup>66</sup> 113.

towards children, including corporal punishment, and its psychological effects thus involve both direct and indirect forces of oppression.

In this section, following the contours of Cudd's catalogue of oppressive forces, I have given some examples of adultism. I have discussed several psychological forces of adultism, including those that Cudd names within her account of oppression more broadly. Objectification, humiliation, adult cultural domination, invisibility, othering, and degradation are forms of young people's direct oppression. These lead to young people's shame, low self-esteem, false consciousness and deformed desires, which are forms of indirect oppression on Cudd's account. Then I moved on to consider briefly the relationship between these psychological forces and children's material oppression, which includes violence and economic deprivation. I have presented evidence drawn from my personal experience, as well as arguments defended by other childhood theorists. Further empirical research into these areas is necessary for a more complete understanding the nature of adultism. Again, my aim has not been to say everything there is to say about adultism, but to point further research efforts in the right direction.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **YOUTH LIBERATION**

I have been arguing that young people are morally equal in their claims to agency and that the inferior moral, social and political status to which they are relegated in our society is a form of oppression. Youth oppression includes, but is not limited to, young people's complete subjugation to adult control. The argument that adult agency is more valuable than younger people's – and therefore that adults have a right to self-determination, which younger people lack – imposes a dichotomous power structure, distinguishing everyone below from everyone above some threshold or moral watershed. Anti-liberationists argue that this dichotomous power structure is necessitated by legal and pragmatic considerations. Schapiro held that the capacity for reason in a Kantian sense is a requirement for freedom, fully possessed by adults exclusively, while Purdy and Archard agree that distinguishing morally between two distinct groups, youth and adults, is necessary pragmatically within a consequentialist framework due to relevant differences between youth and adults, and thus is not a violation of justice. This, I think, is an implausibly strong stance, relying on the presupposition that no better way is possible.

Youth liberation, in contrast, contends that the dichotomous moral divide is neither necessary nor just. Youth liberationists call attention to the continuum of change we experience as we age, and to the impact of oppressive practices and structures on young people's evolving capacities and other traits. While anti-liberationists claim, in defense of the status quo, that there is an important hierarchical binary division to recognize, and that it separates all youth from all



adults and privileges adult choices over younger people's, liberationists respond that relevant age-based moral distinctions are neither binary nor hierarchical.

These two contrastive approaches – liberation and anti-liberation – bring to light distinct sets of questions and challenges in shaping a world that is responsive to young people's needs and potential. For example, anti-liberationists ask whether 2-year-olds should be able to vote and, taking the answer to be a resounding, "no!" situate the issue as part of a defense of adult paternalism towards children. Liberationists, on the other hand, ask instead how we can make our political processes more inclusive of young people's participation. Where anti-liberationists ask if children should be able to drive, liberationists seek to make our transportation systems more accessible to children, focusing, for instance, on pedestrian safety and accessibility. That current systems preclude children's participation is not a justification for this preclusion. Self-driving cars may soon reshape the conversation entirely.

Anti-liberationists point to the shortcomings of proposed alternatives to young people's powerlessness within our culture. Liberationists, in contrast, focus more optimistically on the strengths of alternative proposals, and in a spirit of possibility and collaboration, seek to build on existing ideas towards better ones. For example, Archard lists the problems with Howard Cohen's proposal that children be given "child agents," to help them make decisions, and he points to these shortcomings to argue against youth liberation.<sup>1</sup> A liberationist, in contrast, might ask how Cohen's proposal could be made to work, or how a different proposal could overcome Cohen's challenges. Where defenders of the status quo shut down alternative approaches, proponents of radical change seek to open up space for new ideas and possibilities to emerge.

Anti-liberationists shy away from radical ideals that are unlikely to be achieved without changes in the basic structures and presuppositions that characterize our relationships and social

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<sup>1</sup> See Cohen (1980); Archard, 75-76.

systems, changes that may admittedly be difficult to come by. For example, Purdy claims that communal living situations are unlikely to become widespread in our lifetime, so we should focus on improving relationships within families, the structure we already have.<sup>2</sup> Liberationists are more willing to challenge these basic structures and presuppositions, and still to advocate for particular practices in the actual world, given that these basic structures and presuppositions are still with us. This distinction corresponds to the Rawlsian distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory, where ideal theory develops principles of justice responsive to our ultimate aims, and non-ideal theory develops practices and policies for improving our actual, non-ideal world, by reference to our ultimate aims, but aware that these have not yet been met.

In this chapter, I consider some alternatives to the status quo of young people's marginalization, silencing, and enforced powerlessness. I seek to make the aims of the youth liberation movement more plausible and articulate by looking at particular institutions and areas of our lives, and imagining what kind of practices and policies a liberationist approach might recommend. I also look at a variety of liberationist approaches that are already underway. Not only is the hierarchical moral binary that is taken to distinguish youth and adults unfounded, innovative challenges to this basic framework are becoming more common and are gaining momentum.

Specifically, I look at voting, families, education, and sexuality. I discuss examples of existing liberationist institutional structures, practices, and ideas. My hope is to fuel the imaginations of child researchers and other people who work closely with youth, in part to respond to the anti-liberationists' implausible assumption that no better way (other than marking a binary, hierarchical division) is possible. Children, whose imaginative capacities are demonstrably greater than adults', and who know better than anyone else the hazards and

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<sup>2</sup> 124-25.

frustrations of living in an adultist culture, ought to be the leaders in this task, incumbent upon all of us, of finding a better way.

## **I. Voting**

Durham for All, a group in my city, seeks to unite a mass movement of ten thousand residents around a five-point platform that includes housing, education, sanctuary, economic justice and democratic inclusion for everyone. They explicitly view voting as a collective act, and seek to unite the voices of local residents, independently of citizenship status or voting rights. They point out that though black men gained the right to vote before black women, black communities still stood together at the voting booths, united under the leadership of the community, which included people with and without the right to vote. This required those with the right to vote to adopt a collective, rather than individualistic, attitude towards voting, and to remain accountable to the community. They point out how isolating actually casting a vote on election day can be, and they say that uniting ten thousand people to stand together at the voting booth is not about citizenship status or having the right to vote, but about making space for collective action. The idea is that those with and without voting rights come to a collective decision about which candidates to get behind, and which legislation to support, and then those who can cast their votes together on behalf of the whole community. This is not deny the importance of undoing unjust, exclusionary policies for who is allowed to vote. On the contrary, an inclusive, participatory democracy has unique potential to address and rectify these injustices.

Viewing voting as a collective act, and cultivating a participatory mass movement of local residents creates space for young people in the political process and promotes their inclusion in a multitude of ways other than voting. Durham for All has followed a historical tradition of mobilizing residents with a series of “mass meetings,” where people come together

to commit to standing together around the issues they care about. These meetings make space for children, partly by providing childcare, but also by adopting inclusive language and building an energized atmosphere that feels lively and fun. Several young people choose to participate, rather than separate themselves into the childcare space, and others come and go as they please, moving back and forth between the two spaces.

Movement leaders insist that political action takes place in the streets as well as the voting booth. They want to mobilize people to create opportunities other than voting to advance the movement's five-point agenda. It is important to create an age-inclusive culture of working towards broader social and political changes, so that adults and youth come to participate in self-government together in meaningful ways beyond voting. In a culture in which only half of the population votes, and where, for many people, voting is the full extent of their political participation, eliminating the age requirement for voting is not the only way to create a political system that is fair and responsive to the needs of young people. It is not the only way for young people to exercise political power, and it should not be the sole focus of discussions about young people's political inclusion. As youth become more involved in the political process, their ideas and opinions can help shape and frame the question of voting rights. Young people's leadership, experience and perspectives should be centered in conversations about the voting age.

The standard focus of the anti-liberationist regarding voting is on justifying the exclusion of those who are presumably unfit from helping to elect their representatives. Archard admits that people too young to vote can participate in democratic institutions in ways other than voting, but his aim is not to enhance and promote this inclusion, but to justify young people's exclusion from voting. Youth allies should focus instead on mobilizing people of all ages in the political process. An active and engaged community, in which people of all ages are respected as equal,

will be better fit to decide the question of who should be allowed to vote. Present arguments for denying young people the right to vote are based on misconceptions of what young people and adults are like, which are pervasive and are warped by an adultist culture. Where the conceptions of the differences between youth and adults are more accurate, it is likely that the undervaluing of young people's agency has shaped what young people are actually capable of. I argued at length for these positions in Chapters 2 and 3. More research would be required to know exactly how societal perceptions shape and impact young people's political participation.

Even the most prominent youth liberationists, while they insist that any age limit is unjust, don't think we should do away with the age limit "all at once." Holt writes that we could gradually lower the voting age until age is no longer relevant.<sup>3</sup> I agree that doing away with the voting age "all at once," especially where youth are not valued as independent knowers and are seen as objects, not subjects, where education is viewed as a passive activity of absorbing information, and young people undergo intense training to do what they are told and are rarely challenged to think for themselves, eliminating the voting age immediately might not go over well; the concern that youth would simply do what their parents tell them to in the voting booths might not be unfounded. We need to work for now towards the broader social and political inclusion of young people. Young people would develop different capacities in a world devoted to their liberation; future contexts may result in a reframing of the conversation, so as to render present conclusions about this question, which arise in an adultist culture, impertinent.

It is also worth noting – as was demonstrated by the results of the 2016 US presidential election – that adults are not competent at self-government. Adults are driving mass extinction and are responsible for widespread malnutrition, poverty, and displacement, leading to the extreme and avoidable suffering of millions of people. Catastrophic climate change will likely

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<sup>3</sup> 155.

extend this number into the billions within the present century. The destruction of our natural habitats threatens not just the collapse of complex civilization, but of entire ecosystems.

Arguments for young people's exclusion from political decision-making dominate childhood studies within philosophy. Against these, I maintain that young people's resilience, their lack of cynicism and dogmatism, and their more vivid and wilder imaginations make their meaningful political participation essential for broader social change, especially concerning the need for a transition to a sustainable societal infrastructure.<sup>4</sup>

You may think that even a culture in which young people are liberated and politically engaged may end up with some justified lower age limit on voting. Such a limit would have to be much lower than age 18; even Archard concedes that teenagers have the skills and capacities that ought to be required of voters. And he claims that speed limits need not be perfect guides to safe driving, much as the lower age limit would not need to differentiate exactly between those with and without the relevant capacities. Since there is variation in how individuals develop, he says, the age limit would just have to be "good enough;" we would have to find the age at which the probability that one possesses the relevant capacities is high enough to warrant giving people of that age the right to vote.

It is worth pointing out a difference between voting and speed limits. Most people take voting to be a basic human right. The consequences of elections have more profound and far-reaching consequences than speed restrictions. To deny someone the freedom to drive faster than 65 miles an hour is not a very serious limitation; our interest in fast driving is not very central to our wellbeing. Finding the exact speed that is "good enough" to distinguish safe driving from unsafe driving is sufficient for the greater good that comes from having established speed limits in the first place. But being denied the right to vote is a far more serious limitation. It is an

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<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 3.

affront to one's basic humanity and citizenship. It is a form of forced exclusion from the social world and the collective political process of self-government. It means one's interests will not be directly represented in political processes. And if any good comes from denying youth the right to vote, this has not yet been demonstrated.

We need a higher standard for denying someone the right to vote than we do for denying one the freedom to drive however they want to. That one *probably* doesn't have the relevant capacity is not good enough. Even if we did determine some "relevant" competence for voting, and found some best age limit to determine the "high enough" probability that one possesses that competence, at least for those who do have the relevant competence, but who happen to be under the age limit, being denied the right to vote is as serious an offence as anyone of any age who possesses the relevant competence being denied the right to vote. Imagine if, in convicting someone of a crime, we didn't require proof that they actually committed the crime, only that they were part of a social category that has a high "enough" probability of committing the crime. This would be an abhorrent policy. Having the freedom to choose one's representatives and to have a say in legislation and other policies by which one is directly impacted is like being considered innocent until proven guilty: a basic and essential moral entitlement. One should not be denied either on the basis of one's membership in a social category.

And it has been argued that one's competence is not even relevant in the first place. Farson points out that we grant the right to vote to senile adults, psychotics and adults hospitalized for mental illness. He cites Avrum Stroll, who says that wisdom, maturity, education, and responsibility are not prerequisites for self-government, but the outcomes that

self-government seeks to produce; and that it is through the process of political participation that we learn to self-govern effectively.<sup>5</sup>

The stake that youth have in governmental decisions strengthens the case for their right to political participation, including their right to run for political office. Younger people in government should be a priority, not discouraged or prohibited. Young people have desperately needed energy and new ideas. Their unique perspectives make their participation more valuable, not less. They have more at stake in governmental decisions, since youth have more of their lives left to live. This is especially true for offices such as school board positions, which impact young people most directly.

The minimum age required to run for public office in my state of North Carolina is 21.<sup>6</sup> This month in North Carolina, in separate districts, two people, ages 19 and 20, were prevented from entering the race for city councils. In Kansas, six teenagers are currently running for governor, while the legislature scrambles to block the participation of young people as gubernatorial candidates in the future. In 1972, the Human Rights Party backed Sonia Yaco for a position on the school board in Ann Arbor, Michigan. At 15, Yaco was the youngest candidate for a school board in Michigan ever, and although her candidacy was blocked by the school system, she still received 8% of the vote as a write-in candidate.<sup>7</sup>

Young people deserve access to political power so that their interests can be represented directly. As I write, a landmark lawsuit, *Juliana v. U.S.*, is underway. Twenty-one youth plaintiffs, ages 10-21, allege that by causing climate change, the U.S. government has violated the youth's "constitutional rights to life, liberty, and property, as well as failed to protect

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<sup>5</sup> 178.

<sup>6</sup> NC Constitution, Article VI.

<sup>7</sup> *Ann Arbor Sun*, May 1972.



essential public trust resources.”<sup>8</sup> If the plaintiffs win the suit, this will require thoroughgoing changes in U.S. climate policy. The case gives some indication of the breadth and depth of changes that would be required if young people’s interests were represented and taken seriously within our government.

Suppose Archard is correct that teenagers, at least, ought to have the right to vote and to full political participation. In that case lowering the legal age for voting or running for public office won’t be enough to position young people as equals. Their historical exclusion would likely impact not just the rate at which they vote, but the likelihood of younger candidates getting elected. They would inevitably face a disadvantage due to their prior exclusion and discrimination against them. A truly equitable political system would need to address this, to augment and amplify young people’s participation until they establish equal footing, and until they command the respect they deserve. I imagine that those who obtain the right to vote when the voting age is lowered would be the most vocal advocates of abolishing the voting age altogether.

The worry that children too young to be fit to vote would negatively impact election results is an example of hyperbole, an unfounded concern that arises out of the habitual desire to continue an oppressive regime. If the concern is that 2- and 4-year olds would end up voting or running for office, this would be more likely to result from paternalistic pressure from parents who are unwilling to respect their children’s self-generated desires and interests. 2-year olds would not vote out of their own desire for political engagement and representation. The potential problem of 2-year-olds voting would be a problem created by adults. On the other hand, if liberationists are right that youth are unfairly deprived access to political spheres, that their energy, wisdom, and leadership are sorely needed in our collective efforts at self-government,

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<sup>8</sup> Our Children’s Trust.

whether that is limited to teenagers, or includes younger children too, then what is lost by depriving youth the vote is much greater than what might be lost through “overextending” voting rights. Given these considerations, a policy for who gets the vote that is unjustifiably narrow is likely far more threatening to our collective wellbeing than one that is overly inclusive. This is all speculative, but then so is the argument that youth ought not to be allowed to vote. We cannot accurately assess young people’s potential in a society in which they are oppressed.

In the end, though, it is important to point out that while most liberationists advocate abolishing the voting age, this is not entailed by the principles of youth liberation per se. Equality for young people is, in principle, consistent with a voting age limit. Equal rights does not require identical rights, and it allows for legal differentiation on the basis of relevant characteristics, which may exist, for example, in the case of 2-year-olds voting. Youth liberation does not require suffrage for babies, just as animal liberation does not require suffrage for cows. And we could, in principle, recognize the need for a binary, age-based legal cutoff, without insisting that the moral features it is set to distinguish are themselves binary. That is, even if it is necessary and justifiable to deprive very young children the right to vote, this does not mean that the relevant cutoff corresponds to a binary moral distinction in the value of agency or participation between children and adults.

## **II. Families**

The nuclear family model privileges a particular family structure, which is reified by a number of “commandments.” Monogamy, heterosexuality, self-sufficiency, paternalism, age-segregation, gender- and age-based division of labor and perceived value of labor, the commandments to be fruitful and multiply, and to honor thy parents, are all examples of compulsory norms and values that go along with the nuclear family model. This structure

promotes the dependency of young people on, and their vulnerability to, only one or two adults, resulting in an autocratic *adultarchy*, wherein adults are able to rule by fiat, and unhappy youth (and parents) are provided no way out. There are numerous ways to push back against this model. In order to advance youth liberation, we need a culture that incentivizes an exploratory attitude towards family structures, one that encourages trying out new ways of living with and relating to one another.

Liberationists have long argued that youth should have alternative living arrangements available to them. In the first chapter of Holt's *Escape from Childhood*, he describes asking a class of junior high school students who among them would live away from home at least some of the time, if they legally could. "Every hand shot into the air, so quickly and violently that I half expected shoulders to pop out of joint."<sup>9</sup> Like Holt, Farson claims that children have a basic right to alternative home environments, pointing out that there is no justification for thinking the nuclear family is the only type of living arrangement that can meet children's needs.<sup>10</sup> In fact, he thinks, the nuclear family model makes parenting exceedingly difficult.

Others discuss these difficulties at length. Vicki Larson describes parenting within the nuclear family as a "lonely, isolating, and exhausting business," and writes that, "even in so-called 'normal' families, children can't escape some sort of dysfunction, whether they're being raised by a parent who is depressed, adulterous, emotionally cold, smothering, absent, angry, passive-aggressive, narcissistic or addicted."<sup>11</sup> Our favoring of the nuclear family is not just narrow, in the sense that it deems acceptable only *one*, out of an infinite array of viable, healthy

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<sup>9</sup> 30.

<sup>10</sup> 45.

<sup>11</sup> 6.

childrearing structures, but it is also sexist, heterosexist, and unfairly biased to favor monogamous couples over any other parental structure.

It is sexist because women traditionally bear the brunt of childcare responsibilities, often forgoing opportunities for education and career advancement in order to raise their children. It is heterosexist because it is based on the idea that families should contain one man, one woman, and their biological offspring. If not for this heteronormative model, what reason would there be to insist that families contain exactly two parents, rather than, say, three or four? Anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy insists that *alloparenting*, sharing responsibilities for bringing up offspring among non-biologically related caretakers, is a central cause of human's evolutionary development and larger brain size. A model that makes space for alternative family structures and for shared care of offspring will provide more viable lifestyle options to youth and adults who are unhappy or seeking alternatives to the nuclear families within which they are presently stuck.

Some philosophers have argued for supplementing the nuclear family model with additional modes of support for parents and children, while others have sought to dismantle that model altogether. Anca Gheaus defines parents as a child's primary caregivers, those most directly responsible for the child's wellbeing, and then builds the case for the importance of nonparental care, arguing that it is wrong not to expose children to it. She defends "a system of universal, compulsory, and state-regulated childcare similar to the existing system of universal compulsory education."<sup>12</sup>

Gheaus claims that nonparental care is a way to diversify the present monopoly of care that parents have over their children, in order to limit children's vulnerability to bad parenting and to redistribute blame for caretakers' mistakes and shortcomings, which are inevitable in

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<sup>12</sup> 484.

human relationships. Nonparental care is important not because nonparents provide better care, but because they will make different mistakes. She insists that the obligation to provide nonparental care arises out of considerations of fairness for both parents and children. Parents need care, too, and one form of care that parents receive with state-sponsored childcare is *time*, in this case, time to rest and pursue their own projects, free from the responsibilities of caring for their children. Since the responsibility for caring for children falls disproportionately on women, state-regulated childcare provisions could alleviate gender inequality, as well as socioeconomic and other “home-inherited” disparities.

Normally we view the proper role of the state in the care of children as *reactive*: the state is seen as becoming legitimately involved in the care of children only in the most extreme cases of abuse and neglect. Gheaus’s arguments for the provision of nonparental care by the state offer a positive and proactive conception of the state’s role in supporting children, by providing active support to families and helping to prevent the most extreme forms of child abuse and neglect from arising in the first place. While Gheaus’s defense of nonparental care leaves the nuclear family basically intact, merely supplementing it with external support, others have proposed more radical alternatives to this basic family structure, and such alternatives exist.

As a teen, I lived for several months on a *kibbutz* in Israel, where for their last two years of high school, teenagers lived in their own houses with other teens. Their parents were in houses nearby, able to provide support if needed. The young members of the kibbutz felt like siblings to one another, and they had close relationships with adults with whom they were not biologically related. The entire community was accessible by foot, designed for pedestrians, not cars, so children of all ages could wander or travel freely. The distance from their parents gave teens

more freedom, and they were able to develop skills for living on their own, but in a safe and structured environment.

We can imagine similar models taking shape in the US or elsewhere. Here, while we do provide minors with the opportunity through legal emancipation to escape their households, legal emancipation is exceedingly difficult to obtain, and requires that the young person demonstrate the ability to maintain their own residence and employment independently. But demonstrating independence in this sense, especially in our presently disconnected, individualistic nuclear-family-obsessed culture, is perhaps *most* difficult precisely for those youth most in need of emancipation.

Instead, we should cultivate alternatives to living with one's parents (*or* one's children) that are available in both extreme and less extreme circumstances, and seen as legitimate, acceptable and normal ways of dealing with the ups and downs prevalent in every long-term relationship. Purdy points out that giving children the right to leave their families at will would require granting the same right to parents, insinuating that allowing parents to freely leave their families would be an intolerable practice. But children cannot be safe and adequately emotionally supported by parents who don't want them. In the case of parents who no longer want to be parents, alternatives to the nuclear family structure should be sought, if only to provide children with adequate support and emotional investment of others, which they need and deserve.

Working with queer youth, I have witnessed young people who are not safe in their households (even if they are not physically abused or show no physical marks of maltreatment by adults), or who are depressed, self-injuring, suicidal, or at risk of homelessness, stay with friends for days at a time, until turbulence in their homes is resolved, or returns to a more stable

and manageable state. Often, LGBTQ youth in crisis need just a few days of support away from their parents to regain their stability and return home. Parents, too, would benefit from getting to take genuine breaks from their kids, without this undermining their love for their children, their commitment to parenting, or their qualifications as parents.

Parents who are LGBTQ allies, especially when their own children are queer or transgender, are often willing to provide safe space for their children's friends and classmates who would not be safe otherwise. When they do, they are at risk of being convicted of kidnapping. We could instead formalize and legitimize this practice, perhaps providing incentives for families to take in additional children on a short- or even long-term basis. We could promote cultural norms that don't criminalize or judge harshly parents and children who feel the need to be away from one another. We could provide "group homes," for children who want them, not just for children who need them, and intergenerational conflict resolution teams could decide which families to prioritize in providing alternative accommodations. As a way to mitigate adult paternalism towards young people, young people could be given the opportunity to appeal parental decisions that they deem unfair, by involving these community-based, mixed-age conflict resolution teams before the family gets to the point of needing or desiring alternative accommodations in the first place. There ought to be a way for children to advocate effectively for their needs and interests within families in cases of disputes and controversies that do not warrant the involvement of courts, lawyers and judges. Currently, outside of cases of extreme neglect and abuse, children have no avenues for redressing wrongs against them perpetrated by their legal guardians.

We could also democratize practices within the traditional nuclear family. For example, in the case of divorce, parents are the ones responsible for the dissolution of the family, but the

burden of the family's dissolution often falls disproportionately on children, who are forced to move between homes in order to maintain contact with both parents. Alternatively, I know one family whose parents, after separating, co-leased an apartment and took turns living with the child individually in the home they had once all shared. While some may view this as an excessive sacrifice that these parents made for their child, morally praiseworthy, but not obligatory, in normal custody arrangements we expect and take for granted that children will sacrifice in ways that are even more significant, and at the time in their lives when security and stability are most crucial to their development. Children get no praise for these great sacrifices. Indeed, they have no other choice.

The distinction between work and play is also relevant to the democratization of families and the distribution of labor within them. Much as women's work of childrearing goes unnoticed and uncompensated, not considered "work" at all, so the activities of children are often deemed frivolous or "unproductive." Leena Alanen argues for *stretching* the notion of work in order to reshape how we think about the contributions of children within a range of social spheres. "Stretching the notion of work does even more: by assuming and elaborating on specific activities as children's work, new issues come into view for consideration, such as the social valuation of children's activities, benefits, and profits that accrue to their work," and "the distribution of these benefits."<sup>13</sup> Within families, children not only can contribute to the work of maintaining a household, but should have a say in which household maintenance tasks get taken up. For example, washing clothes is important for ensuring family members' basic health and hygiene, but whether to fold clean clothes is a matter of preference. Involving children in the work of maintaining a household requires respecting their preferences for how the household gets maintained.

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<sup>13</sup> 36, 37.



### III. Education

Anti-liberationists point to compulsory education for minors as an example of the legitimacy of depriving children a right to self-determination. They say compulsory schooling is beneficial to society as a whole and to young people, even though it certainly restricts their freedom. Purdy's example of an implausible alternative is a 6-year-old who announces she is not going to school one day, and therefore isn't required to go.<sup>14</sup> But I think this alternative only seems implausible given certain background facts about our current educational system.

Liberationists of the 1970s issued scathing attacks on public schooling, arguing that the educational structure perpetuates the values of the industrial age, modeling schools after factories, with an emphasis on productivity and obedience. Ted Clark argues that schools are a primary vehicle of repression by the state, designed to perpetuate existing power structures.<sup>15</sup> Hours of nightly homework complete the child's heteronomy and subjugation to adult agendas. Students are overscheduled, deprived opportunities for play, socialization, and pursuing their own projects. Even elementary school students I know are stressed about their academic success, short on time to relax and enjoy themselves.

A consequentialist requirement that children be educated does not directly entail that they should be forced to go to school regardless of whether they want to. Children are naturally curious and desire to learn. We can imagine an educational system more desirable for children, one that provides educational opportunities in which children want to participate, and do of their own will most of the time. In this system, when a 6-year-old doesn't feel up for school on a particular day, she may be allowed not to go; if the system works most of the time, the results wouldn't be disastrous. When I ask students to envision an educational system that they deem

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<sup>14</sup> 32.

<sup>15</sup> 61.

worthwhile, they imagine traveling overseas, apprenticeships, and other meaningful ways that people learn, grow, and explore.

Such an educational system could help children hold on to their natural sense of wonder and curiosity, which are so often stamped out by modern-day schooling. These themes are not new in philosophy or education. Dewey and Rousseau were both proponents of child-centered educational systems, which emphasize and accommodate children's natural inclinations. A kindergarten in Japan is built in a circle, with no walls between classrooms, and no barriers between indoors and outdoors. Imagine a one-story, donut-shaped building with no interior walls; the middle of the "donut" is open to the sky and reserved for running and playing. Children are free to leave their class whenever they wish; the result is that they come and go as they please, and are more engaged when present.<sup>16</sup> Teachers provide structured lessons and impart age-appropriate skills and information, but for these to be effective, students must actively, and of their own will, engage with them. Other schools lack attendance policies altogether so that students can come and go as they please.<sup>17</sup>

Another alternative to traditional schooling is free schooling. A.S. Neill's Summerhill, founded in the 1920s, was run democratically by teachers and students together. Students had an equal say in the school's curriculum development and behavioral codes, and were free to do what they wanted, as long as they didn't disrupt others. Lessons at Summerhill were optional, not compulsory. *Approaching the Elephant*, a 2014 documentary, tells the story of a more recent experiment in free schooling, as it documents the first year of the Teddy McArdle Free School,

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<sup>16</sup> Tezuka.

<sup>17</sup> Holt (1976).

inspired by the original philosophies of A.S. Neill. A Wikipedia page on free schools lists dozens of democratic schools around the world.<sup>18</sup>

On the kibbutz where I lived, even children approximately 6-18 months old were given significant freedom in a toddler house, where they stayed during their parents' work shifts. There was a toddler playground, where they could climb up a 4-foot ladder and jump from a platform onto a mattress below. And even children too young to walk navigated staircases without help, were expected to take their own seat at the table at mealtimes, and fed themselves. Toddlers would be shuttled in giant strollers to a new piece of land on the kibbutz, and then given freedom for up to an hour to explore. I was instructed not to interfere unless they had found glass or nails, which they never did. A similar emphasis on risk-taking and the benefits of free play has been taken up in adventure playgrounds, first created in the UK.<sup>19</sup> In these spaces, more like junk yards than traditional playgrounds, children play freely and take risks: they use hand saws and hammers to create new objects out of discarded materials, and they build fires, just for fun. Staff are trained to remain in the background and to interfere minimally with children's activities, there to provide support, not to control. Staff might introduce a new creative object into the space, and then sit back and wait while they watch children discover and interact with it in unexpected ways.

Intergenerational spaces provide an additional alternative to the age-segregation that is ubiquitous in traditional schools. Some cities have combined preschools with nursing homes, housing both in the same facility and allowing the very young and the very old to interact, cultivating intergenerational learning and sharing of each peer group's unique offerings. The arrangement is mutually beneficial, with studies suggesting that it may delay mental decline,

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<sup>18</sup> "List of Democratic Schools."

<sup>19</sup> Rosin.

lower blood pressure, and reduce death and disease rates among the elderly, while exposing the young children to different abilities and impairments, increasing their comfort levels with different types of people and challenging ageist stereotypes of the elderly. This model could inspire others. Why not babies in junior high schools, or high school students teaching young children to read? Better yet, bilingual children could teach high school students a second language, by reading to *them*. Older youth could participate in caring for infants and younger children, learning concrete parenting skills, perhaps as a component of sex education.

Recently, social scientists have looked directly at students' own perceptions and experiences of school, arguing that this perspective has been underrepresented in discussions about schooling. Neriman Osman speaks with children directly about their experiences of a government school in Sydney, Australia, and concludes that students experience school as oppressive. They feel they are disempowered, not taken seriously, and, as a result, detached from their schooling.<sup>20</sup> As I mentioned in Chapter 4, Holdsworth criticizes traditional schools for their lack of productive outcomes for student's activities. Taking children seriously, he thinks, requires an approach to education that provides "serious, valuable, purposeful and productive outcomes."<sup>21</sup> Holdsworth advocates involving young people in curriculum development, and thereby creating activities and themes organized around students' own questions and concerns. Students ought to be engaged in activities that have value in the present, are academically challenging, and impact the broader community.<sup>22</sup>

Holdsworth's ideas bring to my mind the Durham Bike Coop, which promotes cycling and helps members of my community acquire and maintain bicycles. I worked there with

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<sup>20</sup> 190.

<sup>21</sup> 139.

<sup>22</sup> 146.

volunteers of a variety of ages, probably 6-70. The bike coop remains one of the few age-inclusive public environments I have experienced. Newer volunteers learned from more experienced volunteers, even those as young as 12 or 13. The coop's board of directors included youth, who participated fully in decisions. Younger people were valued for the skills they developed, and those as young as 6 and 7 found ways to participate that were useful. The bike coop is a rare example of young people's meaningful participation and inclusion in the larger social world.

Throughout most of the 1970s, Youth Liberation of Ann Arbor published an underground newspaper, *FPS*, which gives great, student-centered insight into the distribution of power within the school system. The name *FPS* is rumored to stand for "fuck public schools," but the publication itself does not confirm this.<sup>23</sup> In its more than 8 years of existence, *FPS* documented attacks on students' freedoms and groundbreaking legal cases, such as *Tinker vs. Des Moines Independent School District*, which upheld students' rights to protest the war in Vietnam. They also wrote about gay student clubs (more than two decades before the first Gay-Straight Alliances), students' rights to sex education, and dozens of other pressing issues affecting young people.

If we are serious about reforming the education system, and about undoing young people's oppression and reshaping schools in ways that respect their agency and are responsive to their needs and interests, *FPS* is a great place to start. While the high school students who created *FPS* had to fight for their right to distribute the paper, and then actually print and mail it out, today the internet makes it much easier for youth to express their concerns and to organize, and to undertake to redesign social institutions, including schools, in order to meet their needs.

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<sup>23</sup> *FPS*.

But as Holdsworth points out, young people having a voice will depend largely on “whether anyone is listening seriously.”<sup>24</sup>

#### **IV. Sexuality**

Age of sexual consent laws are ubiquitously marshaled in defense of adult paternalism towards young people. Archard asks, “should a 1-year-old be free to...experiment sexually with an adult if she ‘wants’?”<sup>25</sup> The rhetorical question is taken to speak against the conception of young people as self-determining agents. The prohibition of sex between 1-year-olds and adults is seen as a justification for denying youth, specifically, the freedom to make autonomous decisions.

I think, on the contrary, that prohibiting sex between very young children and adults supports paternalistic restrictions on adults *and* children. These prohibitions are not a justification for existing power structures, which grant autonomy exclusively to adults. Instead, they show conclusively that in some circumstances, adults, like children, should not be free to make their own choices. And the restrictions rightly apply in a different way to adults than to children. If an adult and a child have sex, it is the adult who has broken the law, not the child. The law need not regulate the child’s behavior because it is hard to imagine that any benefit could be derived from punitive legal action or imprisonment toward a child who willfully participates in a sexual encounter with an adult or with another child. Sexually active children need mental health support and information, not punishment by law. The legitimacy of age of consent laws shows that adults, not children, should not always be granted the freedom to act autonomously.

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<sup>24</sup> 139.

<sup>25</sup> 76.

Age of consent laws are not formulated in a binary way; they are more nuanced. In North Carolina, the legal system classifies the severity of statutory rape crimes differently based on the ages of those involved, and there are many different classifications. The age of each person involved in the act matters, as does the number of years between them. I think this is probably as it should be. Some sexual acts are inevitably harmful due to the ages of the people involved (such as sexual experimentation between an adult and a 1-year-old), much as within some institutions, sexual relationships between adults in different roles are inevitably harmful.

For example, my university prohibits sexual relationships between faculty and the students they supervise, partly “because of the complex and subtle effects of that power differential.”<sup>26</sup> University policy states that due to differences in power, such relationships may be less consensual than they seem to the person in the position of power. Relationships that are inevitably and sufficiently harmful may be justifiably prohibited. Where age is a reliable indication of this harm, age may be a legitimate standard for designing laws to protect people from these harms. The prohibition of sex between adults and 1-year-olds is a prototypical case of a legitimate age-based legal restriction.

But between the 1-year-old and the adult there is an immense gray area. When we turn our attention to pre-teens, adolescents and teenagers, for example, age becomes much less clear an indication of the extent of the harm, if any, that would result from a sexual or amorous relationship. 15-year-olds have different emotional capacities and levels of self-awareness from one another, which means that a 15-year-old’s age might give no indication whatsoever of their ability to engage in a healthy and harmless amorous relationship with someone much older or younger. Perhaps the courts are not the most appropriate body for regulating cases within this gray area, where age gives only very limited insight into the risk of harm to the parties involved.

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<sup>26</sup> UNC Policies and Procedures.

Independently of which age-based laws regulating sexual conduct ought to be enacted, treating children as equals and respecting their agency requires radical changes in how we approach the topic of sex and sexuality with them. Children of all ages deserve access to reliable information about sex and sexuality. Children should know about their bodies and feelings. They should know about masturbation, since even fetuses have been observed masturbating.<sup>27</sup> Children who have clitorises, especially, but also those who don't, should know what these are and what they're called, since clitorises are a central part of the experience of one's own body and pleasure, at every age. 2-year-olds are not too young to know that a fetus grows in a uterus, not in a tummy. Access to reliable information has been shown to decrease instances of sexual abuse in children of all ages, partly by giving young people the language to identify the abuses they experience, and to identify types of touching and affection from others that don't feel okay.<sup>28</sup>

And respecting young people also means recognizing that children are sexual beings, in that they experience and express embodied pleasures, sensations, and attraction. Recognizing children's sexuality requires expanded conceptions of sex and sexuality. Sex ought not to be construed in heterosexist terms as "penis-in-vagina-sex." Including the broad range of humans' sexual feelings and activities in our conceptions of sex and sexuality is a way to validate younger people's embodied experiences.

Finally, young people of every age deserve access to birth control and abortion. Anyone who is, due to their present state of emotional development, incapable of engaging in a healthy sexual relationship, is even more certainly incapable of parenting. The right to an abortion without parental consent is necessary for ensuring that those who are incapable of parenting do not reproduce. Since parenting is such a significant, long-lasting and other-impacting endeavor,

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<sup>27</sup> Fernández.

<sup>28</sup> Robinson.



preventing children from becoming parents by granting them legal access to contraceptives and abortion should be a priority.

## **V. Conclusion**

We cannot look at youth liberation within particular systems without understanding how other group identities and factors relate. Race, socioeconomic class, sex, gender and sexuality, ability, citizenship status, and other factors impact both the role of youth in various systems, as well as the possibilities and efficacy of strategies for their liberation. Democratic schools will not work if students don't have basic nutrition and safety at home. And much like Farson suggests, it is impossible to devise alternative social structures that respect the rights of children "in a world which does not."<sup>29</sup> We have to think of entire systems together, making use of models such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, which I discussed in Chapter 3. These are all themes to be taken up in future writing.

I have looked at opportunities for overcoming adultism, pushing back against some of the assumptions and prescribed values of the status quo. None of these ideas will undo adultist structures on its own, but the different approaches to political participation, family, education, and sexuality I've discussed, some of which are already underway, represent a wide array of alternatives to the traditional hierarchal structure that is foisted on adults and children. Most importantly, we need to carry on in the spirit of trying new things and finding out which other novel social practices and institutions could promote the equality and wellbeing of people of all ages. And we need to undo the ubiquitous binary division of power, according to which we sort people based on age into dominants and subordinates, and instead promote intergenerational social arrangements that equally respect the agency and uniqueness of people at every age.

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<sup>29</sup> 53.

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