



Philosophy and Children

## **Notes on the Philosophy of Childhood and the Politics of Subjectivity**

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**ABSTRACT:** The Western onto-theological tradition has long been preoccupied with two symbolizations of childhood. One conceives of it as an original unity of being and knowing, an exemplar of completed identity. The other conceives of childhood as deficit and danger, an exemplar of the untamed appetite and the uncontrolled will. In the economy of Plato and Aristotle's tripartite self, the child is ontogenetically out of balance. She is incapable of bringing the three parts of the self into a right hierarchal relation based on the domination of reason. In other words, attaining adulthood means eradicating the child. Freud's reformulation of the Platonic community of self combines the two symbolizations. His model creates an opening for shifting power relations between the elements of the self. He opens the way toward what Kristeva calls the "subject-in-process," a pluralism of relationships rather than an organization constituted by exclusions and hierarchies. After Freud, the child comes to stand for the inexpugnable demands of desire. Through dialogue with this child, the postmodern adult undergoes the dismantling of the notion of subjectivity based on domination, and moves toward the continuous reconstruction of the subject-in-process.

### **The Child and the Second Harmony**

The child first appears in the known ancient texts, not as a beginning, but as an end. She represents the idea of the fulfillment of spiritual growth as a reversal of the life cycle. In the 6th century B.C. Lao Tzu says, "He who is in harmony with the Tao is like a newborn child. It's bones are soft, its muscles are weak, but its grip is powerful. . . The Master's power is like this. He lets all things come and go effortlessly, without desire." (1) Jesus speaks of the attainment of spiritual maturity as "becoming like little children." (2) Plotinus contrasts children with adults, "whose faculty and mental activity are busied upon a multitude of subjects passed quickly over all, lingering on none." Among children, on the other hand, objects "achieve presence," because the child's attention is not "scattered," dispersed in the world of multiplicity. (3)

In this grand perennial Western mythos, the child represents an original ontological unity of being and knowing, thought and experience — identity realized. The child is premoral, the realized adult postmoral. The story of the journey from one to the other begins with a Fall into division. It is, as the story goes, a necessary fall, for it inaugurates a psychological and spiritual journey which — if you don't die in the desert of adulthood — promises self-

reintegration on a higher level. Hegel's logic of history replicates this universal myth of the individual life cycle. So he can say, "The harmoniousness of childhood is a gift of the hand of nature: the second harmony must spring from the labor and culture of the spirit." (4)

Not just in Hegel, but in his Romantic contemporaries, the mythos of the arduous psychological journey of regained unity leaves its religious, otherworldly moorings and enters time. Schiller articulated the Romantic ideal in 1795 in reference to children:

They are what we were; they are what we should once again become. We were nature just as they, and our culture, by means of reason and freedom, should lead us back to nature. They are, therefore, not only the representation of our lost childhood, . . . but they are also representations of our highest fulfillment in the ideal. (5)

Original unity, self and nature given as one, the concrete universal. Romanticism rediscovers the archetypal, "divine" child of mythology (6) right here on earth as a prophet, a mute seer, an enigmatic sign of life without division, without difference. The language of this prophet is play. Heraclitus says, "Time is a child moving counters in a game. The royal power is a child's." (7) Augustine in crisis, pacing in frantic agony in the garden, hears the "singsong voice of a child in a nearby house," chanting "take it and read, take it and read." Augustine opens the Bible in his hand to the passage which changes his understanding of his life forever. (8) In 1933, Cartier-Bresson photographs a band of 12 school-aged children playing in the ruins of a house Naples. Framed by a gaping hole in a plaster wall, their ecstatic revel has the appearance both of a celebratory dance and a war-skirmish, as they grab, flee, laugh, scream, threaten, giggle, run, gaze, cry. In Leonardo's *Madonna and Child with St. Anne* (c. 1508, Louvre), the naked Christ Child frolics with the lamb which represents his sacrificial murder. In Stefan Lochner's *Madonna in the Rose Garden* (c. 1450, Cologne), the tiny naked Child holds in his hand a golden ball, proffered him by an angel.

Play, says Melanie Klein, is "the child's most important medium of expression." In that his "conscious is as yet in close contact with its unconscious," the language of play is the same language "that we are familiar with in dreams." (9) For the Romantic imagination, play expresses an ontological principle. It is the activity in which converge the universal and the particular, the possible and the given, the random and the determined, chance and destiny, accident and purpose, is and ought, time and eternity. The world of nature plays, and human play represents this play and becomes it, thereby overcoming our separation from the world. In play the tyranny of means and ends is broken, and causality gives way to synchronicity. Play implies a different subject-object, self-world, inner-outer relationship. "The players," Gadamer says, "are not the subjects of play: instead play merely reaches presentation through the players." (10) Play is located in what Winnicott, describing young children, called "transitional space," which is also the space of art, fantasy, and profound emotion, in which ego-boundaries become permeable, and the wall which we have built between reality and imagination is temporarily overcome. Because play is not "inside", nor is it "outside," (11) it is experienced as the (play-) marriage of the pleasure principle and the reality principle. N.O. Brown calls this the "psychoanalytic meaning of history": "Our indestructible unconscious desire for a return to childhood, our deep childhood-fixation, is a desire for a return to the pleasure-principle, for a recovery of the body from which culture alienates us, and for play instead of work." (12) Play is pure presence, access to a life without difference. Schiller puts it bluntly: "The play impulse would aim at the extinction of time in time and the reconciliation of becoming with absolute being, of variation with identity." (13)

## The Child and the Divided Self

Plato and Aristotle bring the child into a time permanently resistant to extinction in time. In so doing, they place the child as original unity and symbol of the second harmony under erasure.

The child first enters Western time in the Platonic-Aristotelian theory of the tripartite self and its vicissitudes. In the child, the balance between the three dimensions of self — appetite, will or "the spirited element," and reason—is ontogenetically out of balance. The child lacks reason. So Plato considered children to be exemplars of the untamed appetite and the uncontrolled will. They are liable — along with women, slaves, and the "inferior multitude" — to the "great mass of multifarious appetites and pleasures and pains" of the naturally immoderate. <sup>(14)</sup> "They are full of passionate feelings from their very birth." <sup>(15)</sup> The "boy, . . . just because he more than any other has a fount of intelligence in him which has not yet 'run clear', . . . is the craftiest, most mischievous, and unruliest of brutes. So the creature must be held in check . . ." <sup>(16)</sup> Children's only virtue appears to be that they are "easily molded," i.e. they are capable of being made into adults. This calls for a certain form of education as a personal and social necessity — so the Republic is the first Western educational tract.

Aristotle develops Plato's argument by showing just how the community of self is skewed in children. The preponderance of their appetitive nature either leads to or is a result of the lack of the capacity for choice, or "moral agency," i.e. the ability to deliberately engage in an action toward a final end. <sup>(17)</sup> For this reason the child cannot be called "happy," because happiness is a result of "activity in accordance with virtue," which is a state in which the executive function of reason controls instinct and will. Happiness requires full grownup goodness and a complete life. Children do not fulfill the requirements of a "complete life." If we do call a child happy, "we do so by reason of the hopes we have for his future." <sup>(18)</sup> Nor, though we can love her, can we call a child "friend": "It would be absurd for a man to be the friend of a child." <sup>(19)</sup>

Aristotle's and Plato's formulations are first statements of a perennial symbolization of the child as both deficit and danger. Aristotle's might even be read as an implicit theory of monsters, in the sense that children are "like" humans — "human" understood as adult, male, free-born, and governed by reason — but are not. They combine the same elements in a different — and deficient — mixture. It is true that the child, if not born a slave or a female, has the chance of becoming an adult — i.e. reason in right relation to will and appetite — whereas the woman and the slave never will. But the transition becomes problematic. Indeed, says Plato, some children never become "adults" in the sense of a harmony of the tripartite self: "Some, I should say, never become rational, and most of them only late in life." <sup>(20)</sup> A technology becomes necessary in order to accomplish adulthood, namely education, which Aristotle, following Plato, defines as being "brought up from childhood to feel pleasure and pain at the proper things; for this is correct education." <sup>(21)</sup> Education-as-training then presents itself as a ritual of force and an absolute cultural necessity.

Plato's and Aristotle's tripartite self is not so much a plural self as a structural community of functions, in which the attainment of adulthood represents the parts coming into a normative balance, of bringing the "elements into tune with one another by adjusting the tension of each to the right pitch." <sup>(22)</sup> The metaphor travels down through Western philosophy of self into 20<sup>th</sup> century formulations such as Freud's and Erikson's. The child of Western patriarchal rationalism represents the ambiguity of what's given as the human at the beginning of the life cycle, and the possibility of the construction of an ideal self in which "each part of his nature is exercising its proper function, of ruling or of being ruled." <sup>(23)</sup> This construction is carried on into adult life in what Foucault has called "the technologies of the self." <sup>(24)</sup> Unity of self is accomplished only through the eternal

vigilance of reason over appetite and will, a product of constant self-examination and readjustment through self-discipline. This system of internal domination is replicated macrocosmically, not just in Plato's Republic, but in the Indo-European social political system as a whole, where kings (reason) control warriors (spirited will) who in turn rule over the agricultural classes (appetite). (25)

### **The Child and the Politics of Subjectivity**

It is not coincidental that the philosophy of childhood should share location with the philosophy of self and of the construction of subjectivity. The child has always found symbolic use as a proof text for views of human "nature" — whether in the original depravity of the Puritan's child, the primary wholeness of the child of the Romantics, or the stage-bound developmentalism of biologicistic psychology's version of childhood. But each "child" also represents a corresponding "adult." Given the inseparability of the two concepts, to say what a child is, is in the same breath to say what an adult is, if only through saying what it is not. To say what a child is is also to say how one becomes an adult; and to say what an adult is is to say what relationship one is in to one's childhood.

I would like to suggest that the narrative which has informed the relationships between this contrastive pair at least since Aristotle and Plato is the story of the uneasy relationship among adults between desire and reason. The child is ambivalent in the adult imagination because she represents a limit condition of the human. Like the mad, the divine, the animal — or, in patriarchy, woman — all of which are representations of desire in some "pure" form, the liminality of the child both excludes and privileges her. So it was a child who went before the worshipers in the secret Eleusinian mysteries to meet the god. (26)

In our time, Freud took up this familiar narrative and described it as the relation between instinct and repression. He continued the Platonic construal of development as the struggle to integrate a subjectivity divided by a fundamental quarrel. His importance to the philosophy of childhood lies in the fact that he inaugurates a philosophy of self the result of which is to combine the two symbolizations of childhood — the original ontological unity and the dangerous deficit — and to show their interrelationship.

The original unity which the child represents for Freud is described in what he calls "infantile narcissism," the paradise of desire in which the boundaries of the self are the boundaries of the world. In infancy, thought and act are one, self and (m)other are one. The snake in this Garden is the twofold, contradictory nature of desire — Eros and Thanatos. Eros cannot complete its drive for unity in time and multiplicity. It is only Death and its agent, Aggression, which can achieve the final homeostasis which is Love's goal.

In Freud's mythic story, the child's Fall into division is inscribed on the body. First, the dismemberment of pleasure in the ontogenetic separation of the zones — mouth, anus, genitals. The Oedipal crisis cements the fixation of pleasure in the genitals and establishes the prohibition of desire as a principle of property. The child falls slowly but surely out of the grace-state of polymorphic sexuality, out of existence as spontaneous erotic play, out of the magic symbiosis of subject and object, self and world, inside and outside.

For Plato, Aristotle, and Freud, childhood disappears when reason or Ego assumes its executive function, except that for Freud, Ego is not completely reason; it is part conscious and part unconscious. Nor is it dominant, but a mediator, a fourth function which grows up as a result of the interplay between the others and attempts to integrate them. Furthermore, to the extent that neurosis — i.e. chronic non-integration of the functions of self—is the human condition, the experience of infantile narcissism remains as an existential surd. Lyotard speaks of this surd as *infantia*, or "that which resists, after all." He says, "But something will never be defeated, at least as long as humans will be born infants, *infantes*."

Infantia is the guarantee that there remains an enigma in us, a not easily communicable opacity — that something is left that remains, and that we must bear witness to it." (27) The "miserable and admirable indetermination" of infancy is for Lyotard all that can resist the Enlightenment ideal of "emancipation," the "inhuman" of systematization and complexification disguised as "development." The goal of emancipation is to "secure full possession of knowledge, will and feeling; so as to give oneself the authority of knowledge, the law of the will, and control over one's affections." (28)

The achieved "emancipated" adult of Enlightenment is inaugurated in the West by Plato and Aristotle. He (sic) dominates appetite through reason, which uses will as the Indo-European rulers use the military to control the masses. To achieve control, the child and the "native," both of whom represent instinctual life, appetite, pleasure, the body — i.e. the transgressive — must be excluded and subjugated. Ashis Nandy analyses the relationship between what he calls "the ideology of adulthood" and colonialism:

To the extent adulthood itself is valued as a symbol of completeness and as an end-product of growth or development, childhood is seen as an imperfect transitional state on the way to adulthood, normality, full socialization and humanness. This is the theory of progress as applied to the individual life-cycle. The result is the frequent use of childhood as a design of cultural and political immaturity or, it comes to the same thing, inferiority. Much of the pull of the ideology of colonialism and much of the power of the idea of modernity can be traced to the evolutionary implications of the concept of the child in the Western worldview. (29)

Freud presages a break in this picture of internal and external colonization. In his formulation, the politics of the self shift, and the child and the instinctual life she represents get repositioned. The child is no longer dominated, expunged, under erasure in the adult personality, but comes to represent the ever-present voice of the demands of the id. These demands are experienced both on the inside and the outside: as the haunting memory of the experience of the hallucinatory omnipotence of primary process in one's own infancy; and as the adult's relationship with the real child — the desire-self in conflict and dialogue with "reason" — in parenting and education. The politics of subjectivity are also the politics of child-rearing and the politics of difference.

The picture is complicated by a deep-seated ambivalence. For the "civilized" Freud, the child is the voice of neurosis. The neurotic is unwilling to give up the demands of childhood, the possibility of a world undivided. The adult who privileges her "child" becomes childish, i.e. uncivilized. The possibility of civilization itself is predicated on repression. At one point, Freud defined psychoanalysis as "a prolongation of education for the purposes of overcoming the residues of childhood." (30) For this Freud, the child is still the dangerous deficit.

For the "savage" Freud and his interpreters, those very residues are our only hope of being delivered from the inhuman of "progress," or systematization and complexification. Radical Freudians like Brown (31) unearth Freud's Romanticism and honor the child as the voice of desire which will not be quelled or expunged by a rationalism infected by what it represses. For modernism disintegrating into the post-modern, the child is one more excluded other — with women, the mad, the "deviant," the "native" — one more voice from the margins of Platonic, patriarchal subjectivity. She takes her place with the other "privileged strangers" of feminist epistemology, (32) who represent, by their very liminality, our only hope for the dismantling of a notion of subjectivity based on domination.

In Freud the politics of subjectivity take a turn toward dismantling hierarchy. His model creates an opening for shifting power relations, for intrigue, for transgression, for dialogue between the elements of the self. In this sense he is not so much departing from Plato and Aristotle, as adumbrating the relations within the community of self in their complexity and

paradox. He opens the way towards what Kristeva calls the "subject-in-process," or self as a pluralism of relationships rather than an "organization constituted by exclusions and hierarchies." (33) Childhood stands for "jouissance," the experience of pre-Oedipal "forgotten time," ecstatic moments in which the socially constructed form of the boundary line between self and external world is deconstructed in the interests of ongoing self-reconstruction. (34) If Plato is right that the state is the self writ large, what are the implications of this new model of subjectivity for the political systems of the world? As repression and domination within the community of the self are problematized and critiqued, does it lead to the same for economic and political domination and repression?

The critical link between inner and outer politics could be child rearing. As the subject-in-process dialogues with infantia, he does so with the real child as well. In the ideology of post-modern child-rearing, Eros overcomes Thanatos through dialogue and integration. The adult subject-in-process recognize the voice of difference, of the Other, which the real child represents. Like the artist and the genius, the child through his very imbalance suggests to us new ways to balance. The child is the naive/native genius of the species. To return to Schiller:

The naive mode of thought can . . . be attributed only to children and to those of a childlike temperament. . . . Every true genius must be native, or it is not genius. Only its naivety makes for its genius, and what it is intellectually and aesthetically it cannot disavow morally. . . . Only to genius is it given to be at home beyond the accustomed and to extend nature without going beyond her. (35)

The child — inside and outside — is the prophet of futurity, the experimental being, who offers us intimations of how to "extend nature without going beyond her." This sounds like what Merleau-Ponty described as "the task of our century. . . . The attempt to explore the irrational and integrate it into an expanded reason." (36) Others might speak of it as the recovery of the body, or nonrepressive sublimation, or overcoming patriarchy, domination, colonization from both within and without. "Our most liberating bonds," says Nandy, "can be with our undersocialized children. And the final test of our skill to live a bicultural or multicultural existence may still be our ability to live with our children in mutuality." (37) Meanwhile, the children play.

## Notes

(1) Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Stephen Mitchell, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988) par. 55.

(2) Mark 10:13.

(3) Eugene F. Bales, "Memory, Forgetfulness, and the Disclosure of Being in Heidegger and Plotinus," *Philosophy Today* 34, 2 (Summer) 1990:142.

(4) Quoted in M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971), p. 380.

(5) Friedrich von Schiller, *Naive and Sentimental Poetry and On the Sublime* (New York: Frederick unger, 1966), p. 85.

(6) For the divine child in myth and psychoanalysis, see C.G. Jung & C. Kerenyi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis* (Princeton, NJ: Bollingen, 1963).

- (7) Philip Wheelwright, Ed., *The Presocratics* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), p. 71.
- (8) Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, R.S. Pine-Coffin, trans. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 177.
- (9) Melanie Klein, *The Psycho-analysis of Children* (London: Hogarth Press, 1980), pp. 7, 9.
- (10) Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975), p. 92.
- (11) D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), p. 41.
- (12) N.O. Brown, *Life Against Death* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), p. 38.
- (13) Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (New York: Frederick Unger, 1965), p. 74.
- (14) *The Republic of Plato*, trans. F.M. Cornford (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 125.
- (15) *Republic*, pp. 125, 138.
- (16) Plato, *Laws*, in *Collected Dialogues*, E. Hamilton & H. Cairns, eds. (Princeton NJ: Bollingen, 1961), p. 1379.
- (17) Aristotle, *Physics*, in J.L. Ackrill, ed., *A New Aristotle Reader* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 197b:7-10, p. 104. And see, in the same volume, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1224a: 27-29, pp. 492-493.
- (18) Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, M. Ostwald, trans. (Indianapolis IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), 1099b:25-1100a:5, pp.22-23.
- (19) *Eudemian Ethics* 1239a:1-6.
- (20) *Republic*, p. 138.
- (21) *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1104b, p.37.
- (22) *Republic*, p. 102.
- (23) *Republic*, p. 141.
- (24) L. Martin, H. Gutman, & P.H. Hutton, eds., *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michael Foucault* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).
- (25) Georges Dumezil, *The Destiny of the Warrior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
- (26) Mark Golden, *Children and Childhood in Classical Athens* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 44.
- (27) J-F Lyotard & G. Laroche, "That Which Resists, After All," *Philosophy Today* 36, 4 (Winter) 1992: 416.

(28) J-F Lyotard, "Mainmise," *Philosophy Today* 36, 4 (Winter) 1992: 421. And see, in the same issue, Cecile Lindsay, "Corporality, Ethics, Experimentation: Lyotard in the Eighties," pp. 389-401. See also Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, trans. G. Bennington & R. Bowlby (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

(29) Ashis Nandy, "Reconstructing Childhood: A Critique of the Ideology of Adulthood," in *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopias: Essays in the Politics of Awareness* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 57.

(30) S. Freud, *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, in J. Strachey, ed., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), Vol. 11, p. 48.

(31) N.O. Brown, *Life Against Death*, and *Love's Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

(32) Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 124, 131.

(33) Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 65.

(34) Catherine Marchak, "The Joy of Transgression: Bataille and Kristeva," in *Philosophy Today* 34, 4 (Winter) 1990: 354-363.

(35) Schiller, *Naive and Sentimental Poetry*, p. 85.

(36) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Nonsense* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 63.

(37) Nandy, p. 75.