Thinking about Childhood: Being and Becoming in the World

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Sixteen-year-old climate change activist Greta Thunberg is currently a conspicuous presence in news bulletins. She is conspicuous less because she is vocal about global climate change than because she is a teenager. Although welcomed to speak to the United Nations, many in power have vilified her because she is young. While she does not profess to be an authority and suggests that we pay attention to scientific experts, she has been criticized for not being an expert, for being "melodramatic," and for being too young to be taken seriously. *National Review* editor Rich Lowry writes:

> There's a reason that we don't look to teenagers for guidance on fraught issues of public policy. With very rare exceptions — think, say, the philosopher John Stuart Mill, who was a child prodigy — kids have nothing interesting to say to us. They just repeat back what they've been told by adults, with less nuance and maturity.

Thunberg's experience illustrates clearly the traditional view of children as lacking knowledge, authority, power, and, indeed, status. As Lone (2012) notes, childhood and adolescence is often acknowledged as being significant in our lives, but "this does not seem to lead adults to take young people's experiences very seriously" (p.3). Lone (2018) draws our attention to the fact that it is not what children say that is considered to be unworthy of attention, but the fact that they are children. Many people articulate the concerns expressed by Thunberg, and if they are not children, what they have to say tends to be met with far greater receptivity. This is a simple example of the epistemic injustice children experience (Fricker, 2007; Murris, 2013; Lone, 2018) and the epistemic privilege adults possess (Kennedy, 2010), and points sharply to children's subordinate social status.

Doing philosophy with children aims to address the epistemic injustices that children encounter, in part by cultivating philosophical spaces within which children's voices are dominant. In philosophical dialogues with children, it is the children's ideas and questions that shape the progress of the inquiry, opening up new areas of philosophical investigation. Children are acknowledged as independent thinkers, capable of seeing clearly and contributing in valuable ways to our understanding of our shared world. Yet despite the growth of philosophical inquiry with children around the world, for the most part philosophy continues to be viewed within the discipline as an adult-only endeavor, based in large part on acceptance of an adult/child binary that understands children as insufficiently developed for engagement in philosophy (see, for example, Murris, 2000; Cassidy, 2007; Lone, 2018). As philosophers begin to interrogate this binary more closely, exploring the meaning of "child" and "adult," there is a growing interest in fostering philosophical dialogue with children about the nature of childhood and the adult/child distinction.

Beings and Becomings

Traditionally, children have been understood as "human becomings." That is, they are seen as in the process of *becoming* fully human, as opposed to adults, who are understood as stable and complete human beings. The notion that children are always in a state of preparation for their pending adulthood is a well-trodden argument in the field of sociology (Jenks, 1996; Hallett & Prout, 2003; James & James, 2004; Cook, 2009; Rysst, 2010; Prout, 2011; Alderson, 2013), and was generally accepted until relatively recently. This view has not been limited to those writing in relation to child/childhood as a social construction. Stables (2008), for example, drawing on Aristotle, explores the way in which children's potential has been a primary factor in determining how they are perceived and treated in society. This view is more firmly entrenched due to the influence of developmental psychology, which emphasizes children's development through stages (Matthews, 1994; Cassidy, 2012; Murris, 2016). This developmental stage theory supports what Matthews calls a 'deficit model' of childhood (Matthews, 2008). That is, we think of children as possessing underdeveloped cognitive, emotional, and social faculties, able only to become full human beings when they reach adulthood.

With increasing attention to the philosophy of child and childhood, complementary considerations and questions arise in relation to what children are, what their place is in society, and the relationships they hold within and with society (see, for example: Kennedy, 1992, 2006; Cassidy, 2007, 2012; Kohan, 2014; Murris, 2016, 2017; Gheaus, Calder & De Wispelaere, 2018). Arguments pertaining to children's status have largely focused on the extent to which childhood is a state in its own right or is just a transitional phase, requiring special treatment. Often this special treatment is determined by adults on the basis of who and what the child might become (Betzler & Bleisch, 2015; Giesinger, 2017), and is designed both to protect them and to prepare them for reaching full adult status (Cassidy, Conrad, Daniel, Figueiroa-Rego, Kohan, Murris, Wu & Zhelyazkova, 2017). This binary view of the adult/child distinction creates and perpetuates limits on children's agency and participation.

The binary view of the distinction between adults and children is being challenged in diverse ways. As some researchers have noted, changes in the past century or so have called into question the conception of adults as stable and complete, and of childhood as "a journey toward a clear and *knowable* destination," because adult life no longer predictably involves permanent jobs and relationships and so is far less stable than it was in the past (Lee 2001, pp. 7-8). Moreover, an ongoing discussion examines the relative merits of conceptions of childhood that rest on: (1) an understanding of the child as "being," where the child is an independent social actor engaged in constructing his or her own childhood; (2) an approach that sees the child as "becoming," where child is understood primarily as an adult in the making; and (3) a construction of the child as both "being and becoming," where the child is both an active social agent and developing into a future adult (Qvortrup, 1994; Prout, 2005; Uprichard, 2008), and examines whether our conceptions of children might apply equally to adults.

The sense that we are all in a state of becoming (see, for example, Lee, 2002; Kennedy, 2006) has growing traction, with the result of a 'weakening of the boundaries between childhood and adulthood' (Prout, 2011, p.5). Increasingly, we are urged to consider children in relation to others, to stop thinking about the essence of child/childhood to reflect instead upon "children's relational encounters with the world" (Spyrou, Rosen & Cook, 2019, p.7). This ontologizing, notes Spyrou et al. (2019), allows us to shift away from seeing children as bounded individuals, beings who can be

examined independently from the world. In viewing them as both being and becoming, like adults, we can consider the diversity of children's relations, actions, and interactions in the world in which they find themselves. Such a perspective enables us to focus not on what child is, but on "how childhood is done" (Ibid., p.8). This shift is indeed laudable, though it still seems to position child as other to adult. It could be argued that, regardless of the understanding of childhood employed, only children can "do" childhood, and that childhood can only be enacted under the systems, structures, and strictures imposed by the dominant adult society. The notion of children in relation is not novel, since positioning one group as other necessitates a relational positioning of some kind. However, it could be suggested that the child in relation repositions her, not as "vulnerable victim" (ibid., p.10), but as one with social and moral agency, and understands that there is not one "childhood," but a diversity of childhoods, with children as active agents from the beginning of their lives.

In order to adopt this stance, it requires that childhood is seen as networked and that children do not simply interact but intra-act with others (Spyrou, 2019). Barad's (2003, 2007) notion of intra-action recognizes the connectedness of individuals and understands agency as emerging through a network of relationships, rather than seeing agency as the possession of individuals. Instead of a linear consideration of child and childhood, with children directed towards adulthood and as separate from adults, the idea of a network suggests that all – children and adults – are "a multiplicity of becomings in which all are incomplete and dependent" (Prout, 2011, p.8). This sense of children-in-relation supports a drive towards recognizing them as central to global, economic, and political understanding, where they are actors in and with the world they inhabit. While empowering children, it has the potential "to transform adulthood as well" (Kennedy, 2010, p.69).

In order to facilitate this transformation, the view of children as irrational, uncritical, under-socialised, and lacking in competence needs to be addressed (Cassidy, 2007, 2012; Kennedy, 2010; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). Children, says Kennedy (2010), are marginalized as a result of our not hearing what they have to say or in dismissing their judgement. Lone (2012) echoes this with her proposition that children's questions are not taken seriously. Indeed, Spyrou et al. (2019) draw attention to any hesitancy or reluctance to "let go of the foundational distinction from developmental psychology and the individualized, monadic child which carries or holds agency unto itself" (p.7) by resisting the sense of children in a state of becoming. Seeing both children and adults in the state of both being and becoming allows for a difference of degree rather than a difference of kind, and understanding that we are all active social agents *and* are constantly developing and changing. In acknowledging adult becoming, we might see children as "hybrid actants," where childhood is formulated by recognizing that "people and things… flow in and between different settings and that all may play a part" (Prout, 2011, p.11). While Prout may be correct that this allows us to garner a better understanding of childhood, it may also, as Kennedy (2010) suggests, allow us to understand ourselves better. It may even help us better understand one another and in-relation to others.

Epistemic Injustice and Philosophical Dialogue

Much of the distinction made between children and adults is situated within the status of "knower" (Lone & Burroughs, 2016). Those who are "epistemically privileged," as Lone and Burroughs (2016, p.10) describe them, are afforded credibility as "knowers," and their voices are heard. Traditionally, children have been epistemically undervalued and silenced, and, of course, some children are more epistemically privileged than others. For example, children of color, children from

low-income backgrounds, immigrant and refugee children, and girls from all races and backgrounds face greater obstacles than other children in being acknowledged as knowers.

Lone (2018) calls the inability or unwillingness to listen to children, based purely on the basis of their age, "a form of epistemic injustice" (p.53). Lone (2018) and others (see, for example: Cassidy, 2007, 2017; Biesta, Lawy & Kelly, 2009; Kohan, 2014; Bartels, Onstenk & Veugelers, 2016; Lone and Burroughs 2016) note the scope of issues affecting children and their lives, about which children have much to say. Kennedy (2010) describes the adult as a "hermeneutic being," one who is "a 'reader' of life and the other, and the reader is by definition an interpreter. The interpreter must interpret because he is removed from the situation" (pp.14-15). The "reader" appears to be different from the "knower." In addition to being rejected as a knower, the child is also often denied status as a "reader," despite being at a remove from the world of action. Through intra-action, both children and adults can come to know and to read. The reading, though, may not arise as a consequence of being wholly "removed from the situation," but from being in-relation with others through dialogue. These dialogues, one might propose, are shared encounters with and amongst oneself and others.

It is through communal dialogue, notably philosophical dialogue, that Kennedy (2010) asserts as "an ideal location for adults to make good on the child's epistemic privilege, to recognise a speech other than their own, to face a culture that 'represents our other selves,' to live the other side" (p.21). Through philosophical dialogue, it may be possible to engender a "philosophical being-in-the-world-with others" (Murris, 2017, p.187). In order to move to this state, we need to let go of some of the ideas and assumptions we hold dear, something, says Murris (2017), which tends to be more of a challenge to those who are older because they may be more fixed in their ideas. Current research suggests that children's openness to the world and minimal expectations about the way things should be leads them in some settings to be more flexible thinkers and better problem solvers (Land, 2011).

Kennedy (2010) recognises the power of critical thinking, or philosophical dialogue with children, as important in "redefining the child as knowing subject" (p.20). This, he says, facilitates a positive adult-child relationship with dialogue at its core. He urges that in authentically engaging with children in dialogue "we listen for an excluded knowledge" (p.75). Acknowledging what children have to say supports the sense that they are important members of the world and that enabling such dialogue provides opportunities for "conversations that matter" (Applebee, 1996, p.20). These conversations allow us to make sense of the world in which, and of which, we are a part. Dispositions to engage in conversations that matter must be cultivated, in both children and adults. If this process begins early in our lives through philosophical inquiry with children (see, for example: Lipman, 2003; Lone, 2012; Kohan, 2014; Cassidy, 2017) then this "can lead to reflective deliberation about meaningful and important questions" (Lone and Burroughs, 2016, p.16).

Cassidy (2016) asserts that deliberation is necessary if a healthy democracy is to be supported, where the "plurality of ideas and beliefs, where values and assumptions can be challenged" (Cassidy, 2016, p.511). Disagreement is welcome in philosophical dialogue because it helps us to understand ourselves and others. Learning to disagree and being open to being disagreed with is an element of philosophical dialogue that pushes us to see ourselves in-relation. Indeed, Lone and Burroughs (2016) hold that engaging in such dialogues supports the formation of identity. In considering Murris' (2017) philosophical being-in-the-world-with-others, the formation of identity reaches beyond the child, beyond the individual, and into the wider realm where we find ourselves in-relation. Certainly, one's individual identity is important, but we do not exist in isolation, our identity is shaped by being in-relation, and philosophical encounters may be significant intra-actions in shaping those relations.

Through developing philosophical sensitivity (Lone, 2012), we come to reflect on how things are, as well as how they might be. An approach that enables us to question and challenge what is presented, that encourages us to consider alternative ways of being-in-relation-in the-world through a philosophical imagining may also allow us to realise new relations and systems to enable their growth. So, rather than the child being treated as other or as less than a knower, it may be possible to be and become together through philosophical dialogue, where all are potentially "knowers."

Inviting children into a philosophical way of life requires the development of a "reflective habit of mind" (Gazzard, 1996, p.14), which considers the kind of world in which we live and would like to live (Cassidy, 2016). Spyrou et al., (2019) urge us to reflect on our scholarship, asking us, "Which child, children, and childhood do we bring into being… and which do we preclude?" (p.5). These are important considerations, particularly if adults largely control children and their childhoods. Indeed, it is not only their "doing" of childhood that seems to be constrained by the world in which children find themselves. We might suggest that it is also their very imagining of childhood, their being and becoming in-relation to others that can be limited by dominant adult voices that shape not only what children do but what they think about childhood and/or ways of being in the world.

Childhood and the Adult/Child Distinction

When children are asked about their childhood or being a child, this tends to be focused on their experiences and these are presented as a narrative (Cassidy, Conrad & Figueiroa-Rego, 2019). In Cassidy et al.'s (2017) study, the children saw themselves in-relation to others, but mainly in terms of their own becoming and as individuals interacting with others – adults. They also seemed to see themselves as individuals on their own paths. Often what we know or hear of children's views is filtered or mediated by the adult "knower" (Roberts 2000: Bucknall 2014). Philosophical dialogue with children allows us to engage with children and come to some understanding of their thinking, their reasoning and potentially also their way of being in-relation to others. These dialogues allow for an exploration of children's ideas, assumptions, understanding, and the connections they make between ideas (Cassidy et al., 2019).

Rysst (2010) and others argue that adults tend to see children from an adultist perspective, particularly in relation to physical development or maturation and sexuality. Adults think about children through a lens that comes with the baggage, or, some might say, knowledge, gleaned from their being in the world. Children, as Rysst demonstrates, do not necessarily think of themselves as adults often do. It may, therefore, be helpful to engage with children philosophically about their ideas, their views, and their being in the world. Indeed, we may usefully engage philosophically with children about what they think it means to be a child. In doing so, we may learn that they see the adult/child relationship very differently from what we might expect, or have already asserted the sense that we are all in a state of becoming in the world and in-relation with the world. Having some sense of this may help us to engage with one another to reflect upon "the dialectical reconstruction of the adult-child relation" (Kennedy, 2010, p.22), should such a reconstruction prove necessary.

Kayla: What is a child? When do you become an adult?
Crystal: At 18.
Max: I don't know. I mean, you are always someone's child, right? And if you're a parent, you are always going to love your child and think of them as your child, no matter how old they are.

Tyler: I think that childhood never stops. I mean, we are always in childhood. We become who we are in childhood. When you're an adult, you're just an older child.

Nathan: I agree. We are always the same people we were when we were born. Baby to death, still the same person.

Madison: When you think about it, childhood and adulthood are just ideas people thought of and then they put boundaries around these names to create something that isn't actually real. There really is no such thing as "being a child" or "being an adult." They're just labels. We're all people.

In this conversation with ten-year-old children in Seattle, Washington, the children articulate their sense that there is no bright line between being an adult and being a child. Tyler concludes that "childhood never stops," because "we become who we are in childhood." And the adult we become is still that child, both being and becoming. The children point out that the characterization of various stages in life in general, not just in childhood, involves social construction. As Madison says, "When you think about it, childhood and adulthood are just ideas people thought of and then they put boundaries around these names to create something that isn't actually real." The children question the adult/child binary, recognizing that it does not accurately reflect their experiences and ways of being in the world.

Although Kohan (2018), when discussing with children what they thought about childhood and child, makes clear that he was not seeking "to analyse children's concepts of childhood or philosophy" (p.96), he begins his dialogues with the children by asking them to 'think about themselves; in short: to define and understand themselves' (Kohan, 2018, p.98). Whether articulated or not, thinking about and understanding oneself is likely to be in-relation to others. The eight-year-old children respond to the question. Though not always stated explicitly, they seem to see themselves as being in-relation to others. They describe playing with friends and having teachers, features that easily suggest the child in-relation. They also identify as important various elements of their lives such as "being obedient," a clear relational behaviour, though one that situates the child as having a lesser status. They note that they do not have responsibilities or concerns such as money, like their parents, and their sense of childhood as being a preparation for life – adult life – is evident. They speak about having to "go through childhood" (p.106), "learning to face life… learning to face life also means learning how to become adult" (p.111). The notion of becoming is clear through the children's responses, although there does not seem to be a sense here that adults and children may be in the act of mutual becoming. It is also possible, of course, that further interrogation of the meaning of "adult" and "child" might have led the children to question the adult/child binary.

The adult/child binary is particularly pronounced in part of Kohan's dialogue with the group when the children say, "Being a child means having more energy than adults, having more imagination than adults and thinking about the essentials that adults cannot think about" (p.112). It may be that older people do have less energy or that they do not exercise their imaginations in the manner in which children do, but the suggestion that adults cannot think about certain "essentials" because they are adults is noteworthy. It is unclear whether the children mean that adults do not have the time for this, or that they have simply become unable to think about "essentials." Kohan prompts the children to say more about what these essentials are, to which they respond: "Love, fantasy, play and many other things. They are the most important things" (p.112). They extend the notion of "taking an interest in the essential" to include "wonder." They also suggest that children love more strongly, but that both adults and children love, particularly one's parents. Part of the loving of a parent is that "they help you, you then learn how to do adult things" (p.114) and when mothers are old women, the "essential" of love is still there. Being in-relation to one's mother is not

unexpected, nor is the role that some adults play in preparing or supporting children in their becoming, but that maternal love – and the child's love for the mother – remains essential over time may suggest a more nuanced understanding of being in-relation, one in which both parties continue to become because the relation evolves. One of the children in Seattle observes,

> If you're a kid, you're not just preparing to be an adult. As an adult you will be really busy and not have much time to pay attention to the good things. But when you're a kid, you have a lot of time to talk to friends, play, be in nature, and other things like that.

In a 2017 study, children ages four to ten from seven countries (Brazil; Bulgaria; Canada; China; Portugal; Scotland; and Switzerland) participated in philosophical dialogues about their understanding of children and childhood (Cassidy, et al., 2017). There is much that the dialogues have in common with one another, with the main themes being that the participants see children as different from adults. Adults, they claim, have more responsibility, have to work and provide for children, and have the power and opportunities to buy what they want or to mete out punishment to those considered weaker, such as children. Children, on the other hand, have fun and play, while adults do not. The children state that adults have greater freedoms in terms of doing and being where they want. They highlight that children's freedoms are curtailed somewhat by adults, but some of the children recognize that adults may similarly have limited freedom due either to responsibilities or work superiors. Family is perhaps the most obvious example of the children seeing themselves in-relation. Some children mention their relative lack of power in terms of having to do as their parents say or in being punished. They reference their relationships with their parents in terms of interactions such as being offered support for the completion of their homework or parents setting chores for children. In all of the examples of relationships that the children offer, even the positive ones, adults seem to set the agenda. Indeed, they tended not to see themselves in-relation beyond with family and teachers.

Similar remarks were made in conversations about childhood with eight to eleven-year-old children in Seattle, Washington, where the children all begin with the assumption that there are substantial differences between being an adult and being a child. Children, they contend, "learn things more easily," are "more dependent on other people," can "see more possibilities," are "less disappointed by life," and have "more free time," "bigger imaginations," "less freedom," and "less worries and responsibilities." Adults, on the other hand, they maintain, "have to take care of other people," are "more independent," "more realistic," and "less imaginative," and have "more choices," "superior knowledge about some things," "more responsibilities," and "more freedom."

All of the children talk about "growing up." Many of them characterize the period of childhood as being a special time in one's life, with others acknowledging that, though important, childhood is not always enjoyable. The children clearly consider childhood to be transient, with the dominant view being one that understands childhood as a time of preparation for adulthood, a time of development. In the Seattle conversations, when the children are asked if they would rather be an adult or a child, many say that they prefer being children. They note that they have time to spend with family and friends and to get to know many people, time to play and be in nature, and time to pretend. Other children respond that they would prefer to be adults. "When you're a child, and something bad happens, or if life is really hard for you, it's harder than it is for adults. An adult has lived for a while and has had lots of experiences, and knows people who've gone through a lot of things. But when you're a child and something bad happens to you, it's much harder." "I would want

to be an adult because I wouldn't have to live with people who don't love me." "I would want to become an adult because I could take care of myself and not have to rely on adults who make bad decisions." These responses focus on the relative lack of power the children experience, and the enhanced control over their lives that they anticipate having as adults.

Future Questions

When we ask children to think about what it means to be a child and their experience of childhood, to some extent even these questions might be understood as positing some form of adult/child binary. The adult/child distinction is, of course, a lived one for children – in school, at home, and in their communities, children's experiences of the adult/child divide is such that it can be difficult to step outside of it in order to assess it critically. Children are labelled as "becomings" in a multitude of ways; adults frequently instructed them that they must "grow up" and need to learn certain things in order to succeed as adults. Despite the intent that philosophical dialogues be open, the questions asked and/or their current relations with adults and one another may limit children's philosophical imagining. Of course, this is true for everyone, in every philosophical space, but there are particular forces at work in the unequal social positioning of adults and children that can serve to inhibit philosophical dialogues with children that are led by adults. It is important that these dialogues work to cross the adult/child divide, in order to address the inequitable power dynamics and relations between children and adults.

Kennedy (2010) asks, "If children will inhabit a world that their parents can only imagine, how can adults prepare them for it?" (p.72). The simple answer may lie in philosophy, where children can engage imaginatively, as a community, with questions that are important to them and their lives, facilitating insight into their own and others' thinking, and thereby enlarging the range of accessible perspectives (Lone, 2012). In acknowledging children as serious participants in the world, where dialogue between adults and children becomes the norm, we may come to "live with our children in mutuality" (Kennedy, 2010, p.79), and to move beyond socially constructed barriers that limit our thinking and our relationships. Ten-year-old Madison notes, "There really is no such thing as being a child or being an adult. They're just labels." Rejecting boundaries fashioned by others, we may deconstruct "unduly fixed and static…unhelpful dichotomies" (Tisdall & Punch, 2012). In so doing, our relationships, formed through meaningful intra-actions that may include philosophizing together about shared concerns, can evoke alternative ways of being. In fact, one such alternative way of being may be recognition of the continually reflecting, evolving, and becoming we all, adults and children, experience.

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