



The Value of Being a Child: An Intuitive Case for a Development View

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Accepted: 22 January 2021

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1 Introduction

1.1 Is Childhood Valuable?

Is it a regrettable fact that we spend a non-trivial part of our lives as children? Since Aristotle, a longstanding position in the history of philosophy—a position that is still held today by some philosophers—contends that childhood is a predicament or, at least, a significantly worse condition than adulthood. In this tradition, children are viewed primarily as incomplete or unfinished adults, and the only value attributed to childhood is instrumental to achieving a state of adulthood.¹ Consequently, childhood is understood as essentially inferior to adulthood.² We will refer to this as the Aristotelean View, although support for it is not limited to Aristotelians.³ Kantians, who argue that the value of human beings is grounded in their autonomy and in having an authoritative ‘voice’ of one’s own, will also tend to regard children as unfinished adults.⁴ In what follows, we attempt to develop an intuitive case for an

¹ Macleod refers to this instrumental view as “the mature project achievement view.” See Colin M. Macleod, “Just Schools and Good Childhoods: Non-preparatory Dimensions of Educational Justice,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 35 (2016), p. 77.

² For contemporary articulations of this view, see Sarah Hannan, “Why Childhood Is Bad for Children,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 35 (2018), pp. 11–28; Sarah Hannan and R. J. Leland, “Childhood Bads, Parenting Goods, and the Right to Procreate,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 21 (2018), pp. 366–84; Tamar Schapiro, “What Is a Child?” *Ethics* 109 (1999), pp. 715–38; Michael Slote, *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983). For a sympathetic but more ambivalent position, see Patrick Tomlin, “Saplings or Caterpillars? Trying to Understand Children’s Wellbeing,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 35 (2018), pp. 29–46.

³ The terminology follows Gareth Matthews and Amy Mullin, “The Philosophy of Childhood,” in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition. URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/childhood/>>.

⁴ See Schapiro, op. cit.

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alternative position, which we will refer to as the Development View. According to this view, it is good for a human being to be both a child and an adult, because both figure into a non-instrumentally valuable process of development from childhood to adulthood. In the context of this valuable process, neither childhood nor adulthood should be regarded as predicaments.⁵

Why bother with evaluating aspects of our lives that we cannot change, such as the fact that humans spend some years as children before they become adults? In fact, we do evaluate states of affairs we cannot change or control. For example, we evaluate the past, and we might resent the fact that we will die someday. Furthermore, while it may prove impossible to eliminate childhood, we may eventually be able to tweak its length.⁶ It is conceivable that a combination of certain environmental factors that we can control together with medical treatment and education will be able to expedite the process of maturing into healthy adults without loss in well-being among the resulting adults. If childhood is a predicament, then we have reason to develop the relevant technology and knowledge.

The evaluative stance we take toward childhood can also determine the way we construe the role of primary education. If the value of childhood is conceived primarily in terms of its instrumental value to adulthood, it is tempting to think of the *telos* of primary education as being about the creation of future adults. Often, disagreements about the role of education tend to focus on whether education should be mainly ‘vocational’ or ‘liberal’. Vocational education, broadly construed, attempts to create adults that can participate successfully in the ever-changing economy. Liberal education has other aims, such as creating future citizens that are reflective, civically engaged and tolerant of different views. But both of these approaches to education are instrumental: they judge schools by the kind of adults they produce. But if childhood is intrinsically valuable, and children spend a significant amount of time in school, then we should focus more on what Macleod refers to as the non-preparatory dimensions of education.⁷ We need to insist on a primary education system that provides opportunities for children to flourish *qua* children, even if that does not prove to be the most effective way to produce desirable adults. Similarly, our understanding of the ethics of parenting should be informed by the value we attribute to childhood. Parents sometimes need to decide whether to take an action that will negatively affect the wellbeing of a child but will be advantageous for the future adult he will become. The view that childhood is only instrumentally good will tend to prefer the good of the future adult, but if childhood is (also) non-instrumentally valuable, then decisions of this kind present a genuine dilemma.

Finally, the question of whether childhood has value has broader philosophical significance. Aristotle’s view that childhood is a predicament is part of his theory of value. In Aristotle’s teleological theory, the healthy adults of every species are the

⁵ The view we defend is similar to Daniel Weinstock “complementarity view,” although we put greater emphasis on the order and pace of development. See Daniel Weinstock, “On the Complementarity of the Ages of Life,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 35 (2018), pp. 47–59.

⁶ See Hannan, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁷ See Macleod, *op. cit.*

axiological standards for members of that species.⁸ Children, by definition, fall short of that standard. If childhood is not a predicament, then Aristotle's theory of natural goodness should be rejected or modified. More generally, there is a certain *ethos* that has been prevalent in Western philosophy and which attributes a special and elevated status to capacities, such as reason and agency, which are identified with neurotypical adults. This ethos, sometimes referred to as *logocentrism*, has come under attack in recent decades by feminists, disability activists and animal rights advocates. The claim that childhood is not a predicament furthers the case against logocentrism. The value of childhood is therefore an interesting case study in this context.

1.2 The Method

There are various methods for approaching the problem of the value of childhood. One is to start with a general theory of value and accept what it implies about the value of childhood. However, this method requires taking a side in controversies over comprehensive theories of the good, and one might prefer a method that comes with fewer initial theoretical commitments.⁹ Furthermore, the implications of a comprehensive theory of the good for the value of childhood might themselves give us reason to reject or modify the theory. For example, if we have some independent reason to believe that childhood is *not* a predicament, we will hesitate to endorse a theory that implies otherwise. Among the reasons one might have for rejecting a theory that places a particular value on childhood is a strong intuitive judgment that childhood does not indeed have the value assigned to it by the theory. One way of clarifying our intuitive value judgments and of approaching the topic without burdensome theoretical commitments is to examine our reactions to thought experiments, which is the method adopted here.¹⁰

There are disadvantages to this method, and we do not pretend that the argument in what follows settles the matter in favor of the view we espouse. One concern is the fallibility of intuitive judgments, and the various biases they may be subject to and which are particularly relevant in judging the value of childhood.¹¹ This difficulty may be further exacerbated when our intuitive judgments are in response to thought experiments of the fantastic type, namely those which call for value judgments about cases that are out of the ordinary. Indeed, the several cases we present below are of this type. Finally, some readers might simply not share our intuitive value judgments, such that the dialectical force of the intuitions we present will be significantly diminished.

⁸ For a contemporary articulation, see Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁹ See Weinstock, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁰ Our method resembles that of Francis Kamm, *Morality, Mortality Volume I: Death and Whom to Save From It* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 7–9.

¹¹ See Tomlin, *op. cit.*

We will attempt to offer a variety of cases, wherever possible, in support of each claim that is made, in the hope that the reader will share the intuitions behind at least some of the cases. We will also try to address the possible influence of biases. That said, conclusions reached using this method should be ultimately confirmed by a plausible value theory, and their persuasive power will be increased if they can be arrived at from other theoretical perspectives. Perhaps the best way to think of the current inquiry is as an exercise in ‘data-mining’, where the data consists of various intuitive responses. In an attempt to find a theory that allows these intuitive responses to cohere, we generate a hypothesis about the value of childhood for future research, both theoretical (about the value of childhood) and practical (for example, about the *telos* of primary education).

The duration of childhood differs across cultures as does the value attributed to it.¹² The examples of children discussed in this paper are limited to individuals who are within an age range that most cultures would likely recognize as belonging to childhood. In the context of adults, we have in mind individuals who are above the age of 18. That said, we suspect that different cultures will have different intuitive judgments regarding the cases presented here, which will unavoidably qualify the conclusions that can be drawn. Nonetheless, the inquiry has value, since it helps to uncover our axiological commitments regarding childhood and adulthood and thus offers a useful starting point in discussing the value of childhood.

Finally, it could be argued that childhood and adulthood are categories that are too crude to allow for meaningful comparisons. What we call ‘childhood’ and ‘adulthood’ are phases consisting of various sub-phases. It can plausibly be argued that any inquiry into the value of the various stages of human life ought to focus on these more fine-grained categories. We are sympathetic to this concern, and we will argue below that the view we end up espousing steers clear of it. However, for most of the discussion we follow the existing literature and treat childhood and adulthood as the relevant units of comparison.

2 Peter Pan and Aristotle

We begin our inquiry with two rival views. Consider the following cases:

Left as a Child: Erin is given pills to prevent her from becoming an adult. At the age of 55, she continues to be a child, both physically and mentally. She is well cared for.

¹² One issue that we do not discuss in this paper is whether adults in contemporary Western societies are more ‘child-like’ than adults who lived in past eras or those who live in other cultures. What can be said is that in affluent societies, activities that are often associated with childhood, such as play and exercise of the imagination, are available also to adults, and adults often engage in them. This suggests that Western culture attributes intrinsic value to such activities, and that many adults miss these aspects of childhood. If we frown upon adults who engage excessively in such activities, it is not because we do not attribute intrinsic value to childhood, but because we do not find it appropriate for adults to behave like children.

Deprived of Childhood: Dane is given pills to speed up his development. He is 6 years old, but he is physically and mentally a fully grown man. He is healthy and happy.¹³

In evaluating these cases, suppose that Erin is part of a group of friends who are given the same pill, so that she does not witness her close friends growing up before she does and leaving her for new, more mature friends; that her parents are alive and well and energetic; that Dane is part of a group of friends who go through the process together; and that Dane has a satisfying job, forms enriching romantic relationships and is an active citizen. These cases are presented by Patrick Tomlin whose intuition is that both Erin and Dane are harmed by the actions described, and this would appear to be in line with how most people would view the cases.¹⁴ However, believing that both Erin and Dane are being harmed implies two incompatible evaluative positions. If Erin is being harmed, it is presumably because we are depriving her of a desirable condition (adulthood) and imposing on her an undesirable one (childhood). If Dane is being harmed, it is presumably because we are reducing the time he spends in a desirable condition (childhood) and increasing the time he spends in an undesirable one (adulthood). Obviously, both of these positions cannot be held simultaneously. Even if we express the argument in comparative rather than absolute terms, we still reach inconsistent positions. If Erin is being harmed, then it is presumably because we have deprived her of a *better* condition (adulthood), even if her condition is not bad in absolute terms. If Dane is being harmed, then it is presumably because he is being forced to remain for a shorter time in a better condition (childhood) and to remain a longer time in a worse one (adulthood).

We denote these positions as follows:

The Peter Pan View.¹⁵ Being a child is good, but not being an adult. Or: being a child is better than being an adult.

The Aristotelean View. Being an adult is good, but not being a child. Or: being an adult is better than being a child.

Each of our intuitive responses to the aforementioned cases appears to correspond to one of these theories. Together, however, they appear to reflect both views, which is puzzling.

There may be a concern that these cases are not reliable indicators of our value judgments about childhood and adulthood in particular. Rather, our intuitive judgments might reflect a general tendency to approve of what is familiar to us and which we consider to be normal.¹⁶ This is a powerful objection, and it applies to

¹³ See Tomlin, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

¹⁴ One indication that these intuitions are robust is that Tomlin, who is skeptical regarding the value of childhood, nonetheless shares the view that it would be bad to be deprived of large chunks of one's childhood. The intuition that Erin is being wronged would be less controversial, as the value of adulthood is not generally in need of validation.

¹⁵ See Weinstock, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹⁶ Some cognitive biases can explain this tendency, such as, for example, the "mere exposure effect," according to which people tend to prefer things they are familiar with and stimuli that they have encountered repeatedly. See Robert B. Zajonc, "Attitudinal Effects of Mere Exposure," *Journal of Personality*

many of the cases we discuss in this paper, since they involve a deviation from the normal processes of development.

In response to this objection, there are some cases in which an analogous deviation from the normal course of events does not evoke any intuitive disapproval in us. For example, suppose we could expedite development from birth to childhood, such that at birth (or shortly thereafter) the baby becomes physically and mentally comparable to a three-year-old. We do not judge such intervention to be bad for the child, even though it involves a similar intervention to those in the Left as a Child and Deprived of Childhood cases.¹⁷

Secondly, people seem able to appreciate departures from the normal course of events when that deviation is beneficial to someone. For example, it would be a deviation from the normal course of events for someone to learn twelve new languages overnight while asleep, but we would not object if we also could do so. It would also be a deviation from the normal course of events if we lived longer than normal, say until the age of 140. But most people would judge this to be a good thing, assuming one can remain healthy, independent and (why not) looking young. Nor would one object to never having any illness or to spending one's days in continual bliss, neither of which are normal.¹⁸ If adulthood is better than childhood, then to be deprived of childhood would be a benefit. If childhood is better than adulthood, then to remain a child would be a benefit. The fact that we appear to view neither of these as a benefit calls for an explanation that goes beyond our tendency to affirm the normal.

It is still possible to offer an explanation of our intuitive responses as not reflecting the value we place on childhood and adulthood, by focusing on the role of *interference* in these cases. Thus, one might object to someone *causing* us to be in a certain condition without judging that condition to be negative. Similarly, we might have an objection to someone *preventing* us from transitioning to a different condition, without viewing our present condition as negative.¹⁹ Being gay is just as valuable as being straight, but we would be averse to a genetic intervention that would cause a fetus to develop into an adult with a different sexual orientation than they would have otherwise had.²⁰ Our aversion to Left as a Child and Deprived of

Footnote 16 (continued)

and *Social Psychology* 9 (1968), pp. 1–27. Another relevant bias is the “mere existence bias,” according to which “[p]eople tend to like things the way they are.” See Scott Eidelman and Chris Crandall, “The Intuitive Traditionalist: How Biases for Existence and Longevity Promote the Status Quo,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 50 (2014), pp. 53–104.

¹⁷ See also Weinstock, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

¹⁸ As long as the bliss is not in Nozick's experience machine, perhaps.

¹⁹ For similar claims about disabilities, see Elizabeth Barnes, “Valuing Disability, Causing Disability,” *Ethics* 125 (2014), pp. 88–113.

²⁰ If one does not share the intuition that this intervention would be wrong, perhaps one would not think that interference, which has major implications for personal identity, is, as such, morally problematic. If that is the case, there would be no inclination to interpret the problem in Left as a Child and Deprived of Childhood as merely interference, and there would be no objection to our initial interpretation of these cases.

Childhood might be explained by a principle of non-interference rather than by the inferior value we place on either childhood or adulthood.

It is not clear, however, to what extent this concern is applicable in the case of childhood and adulthood. We *do* cause children to become adults simply by raising them.²¹ In *Deprived of Childhood*, we merely *expedite* a process that would occur regardless of the prescribed pills, and it needs to be explained why that is wrong. Furthermore, as just mentioned, if the Peter Pan View is correct, it would be a benefit to have one's development into adulthood arrested. If the Aristotelean View is correct, it would be a benefit for the development into adulthood to be expedited. It is less obvious that causing someone to stay in a *superior* condition or to transition into one would be wrong. And finally, it is possible to imagine that Erin and Dane have rare genetic mutations that cause the conditions mentioned in *Left as a Child* and *Deprived of Childhood*, in which case there is no agential interference. Would we consider Erin and Dane to be *lucky* for having these mutations? If switching from interference to natural mutation does not change the intuitive judgment that Erin and Dane are in undesirable states, then it is reasonable to interpret our intuitive responses as reflecting the value we place on childhood and adulthood.

As a further reply to the interference worry, consider the following case that challenges primarily the Aristotelean View:

Instant Adult. Mike arrives in this world with the body and cognitive abilities of an adult human being, thus completely skipping childhood. Mike has a good life as an adult: he is happy, satisfied at work, is part of loving relationships, and so on. Finally, Mike has a normal life expectancy.²²

Would one want to be in Mike's situation? Do we view Mike's life as preferable to one that includes both childhood and adulthood? We do not. We would prefer a life with at least some childhood.²³ But in this case there was no interference. Being an adult is what Mike always was. This case cannot be explained away by the wrong of making someone who is not an adult to become one.

In summary, our intuitive responses to *Left as a Child* and *Deprived of Childhood* are best explained by the value we place on childhood and adulthood. But the two views that these responses appear to imply cannot both be true. Perhaps we indeed hold inconsistent views about childhood or we are genuinely conflicted about the value of childhood. Alternatively, it is possible that the value we place on childhood and adulthood is captured neither by the Peter Pan View nor the Aristotelean View. In the next section, we consider two alternatives.

²¹ While not all factors that cause a child to grow up are related to their caretakers, *some* are.

²² This case is similar to that discussed in Weinstock, *op. cit.*

²³ We do not wish to overly emphasize the intuitive response here. It is presented in addition to the other cases in this section as further corroboration of our intuitive aversion to the Aristotelean View. It is important to note that there is a more systematic case to be made against the creation of instant adults that does not rely on mere intuition. See Weinstock, "On the Complementarity of the Ages of Life," and Ram-Tiktin and Lipshitz, "Why Adults have to be Children First," *Journal of Value Inquiry* (forthcoming), available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10790-020-09771-0>.

3 Equality and Incommensurability

Consider the following alternatives to the Peter-Pan and the Aristotelean View:

The Equality View: It is equally good to be a child as it is to be an adult.

The Incommensurability View: The value of childhood is incommensurable with the value of adulthood.²⁴

These views appear to be natural alternatives to the Peter Pan and Aristotelean views. Curiously, however, they can explain neither Left as a Child nor Deprived of Childhood, and therefore, in a sense, they fare worse than the Peter Pan View and the Aristotelean View. If it is equally good to be a child as it is to be an adult, why does it matter if one spends one's entire life in either state or how long one spends in each of them? Similarly, if the value of childhood and adulthood is incommensurable, why would one be *worse off* staying a child for longer or becoming an adult earlier?

We appear to have exhausted our possibilities: either adulthood is better than childhood or childhood is better than adulthood or they are equally good or their value is incommensurable. How should we proceed? There is another option, namely that what we are judging is not the value of adulthood and the value of childhood, but rather the value of an entire human life. We are judging whether it is good for a human being to be a child and to be an adult, and what emerges is that it is good for a human being to be both. Within the context of a full human life, neither adulthood nor childhood are predicaments and both appear necessary for a positive evaluation of a human life. Attempting to compare the value of childhood to the value of adulthood conceals this possibility.

Childhood and adulthood might both be equally good, but a life that contains both is better than a life that includes only one. Indeed, childhood might be better than adulthood or adulthood better than childhood, and yet a life that includes both would be better than a life that includes only one. A complete human life might be what G.E. Moore refers to as an organic unity, in which the value of the whole can be greater than the value of its parts.²⁵ Indeed, it is possible that either childhood or adulthood is a predicament when considered alone, but also that they contribute to a good life in virtue of the fact that it includes both of them. Either childhood or adulthood can be conceived of as a *defeated* evil within an organic unity.²⁶

Another possibility is that there is something misleading in comparing the value of childhood and adulthood, not because their value is incommensurable, but because they are not sufficiently discrete to be compared. They cannot be separated and put on two sides of a value scale, to echo a point made by Daniel Weinstock.²⁷ While we are inclined to accept this proposal, the important point to emerge from

²⁴ Tomlin dubs the latter "the Caterpillar View." See Tomlin, *op. cit.*, pp. 40–3.

²⁵ See G. A. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), §18.

²⁶ See Roderick M. Chisholm, "The Defeat of Good and Evil," in M. M. Adams and R. M. Adams (eds.), *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 53–68.

²⁷ Weinstock, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

the cases considered is that a good human life should include both childhood and adulthood.

But what theory can encapsulate this idea? Little help can be found in the existing literature on the value of childhood and adulthood. Philosophers who ponder the value of childhood and adulthood often view their task to be the identification of the advantages and disadvantages of childhood and adulthood. It is claimed that childhood includes the intrinsic goods of cheerfulness, carefreeness, imaginative-ness, playfulness, openness to experience, and sexual innocence.²⁸ Children suffer the ills of being dominated and vulnerable, of being irrational, of caring about what really doesn't matter, and of lacking a 'voice' that is truly their own.²⁹ Adults enjoy the goods of having an authoritative voice, being accountable for their actions, being able to lead a life with fewer vulnerabilities than children, enjoying the right to resist paternalism, a lack of sexual innocence, and so on. They suffer the ills associated with lacking easy access to the aforementioned goods of childhood, as well as the burdens that come with having full moral responsibility. Depending on how one weighs these advantages and disadvantages and the extent to which they are commensurable, judgments such as 'childhood is good,' 'adulthood is good,' 'childhood is just as good as adulthood,' 'one cannot really compare the value of childhood and adulthood,' 'childhood is better than adulthood,' and 'adulthood is better than childhood' can emerge. But these claims do not help us think beyond the familiar Peter Pan, Aristotelean, Equality and Incommensurability views. For example, if childhood has many intrinsic goods, why is it bad to spend one's entire life as a child? And if adulthood includes more intrinsic goods than childhood, why wouldn't it be good to skip childhood? We therefore need a better grasp of how the various goods 'hang together' in the context of a full human life, a problem that has not been given sufficient attention in the literature. In the next section we consider one possible framework in which childhood and adulthood can jointly contribute to a life that is better by virtue of including both of them.

²⁸ For example, Samantha Brennan, "The Goods of Childhood and Children's Rights," in F. Baylis and C. MacLeod (eds.), *Family Making: Contemporary Ethical Challenges* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 29–48; Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, *Family Values: The Ethics of Parent-Child Relationships* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Anca Gheaus, "The 'Intrinsic Goods of Childhood' and the Just Society," in A. Bagattini and C. Macleod (eds.), *The Nature of Children's Well-Being* (New York: Springer, 2015), pp. 35–52.; Anca Gheaus, "Unfinished Adults and Defective Children: On the Nature and Value of Childhood," *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* 9 (2015), pp. 1–21. Alison Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us About Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009); Colin Macleod, "Agency, Authority, and the Vulnerability of Children," in A. Bagattini and C. Macleod (eds.), *The Nature of Children's Well-Being* (New York: Springer, 2015), pp. 53–64.

²⁹ For example, Hannan, op. cit.; Hannan and Leland, op. cit.; Schapiro, op. cit.; Tomlin, op. cit.

4 The Diversity View

4.1 The Notion of Diversity and Some Intuitive Concerns

Perhaps the simplest way to accommodate our various intuitions is to argue that a *diversity* of goods is itself good. Chocolate ice cream might be just as good as vanilla ice cream, but having a scoop of each might be better than having two scoops of either. In fact, even if chocolate ice cream is better than vanilla ice cream, a scoop of each could be better than two scoops of either. Applied to the case under discussion, this common observation suggests the following view:

The Diversity View. A variety of goods is itself good. Since the goods of childhood differ from the goods of adulthood, it is good for a human life to include both childhood and adulthood.

The Diversity View has several merits. It appears to rely on a plausible claim about value and can explain some of the cases described so far. Thus, the problem with Left as a Child and Instant Adult can be explained by a lack of diversity. The Diversity View is also quite parsimonious in its theoretical commitments. It is therefore an attractive theory, at least initially. We believe, nonetheless, that the Diversity View has significant shortcomings.

First, we should note that the Diversity View struggles to explain what goes wrong in cases like Deprived of Childhood, in view of the fact that Dane does spend some time as a child and therefore his life as a whole does have diversity. The Diversity View also struggles to explain the following case:

Delayed Onset. Jessica is given a pill that keeps her a child until the age of 40, when she becomes a healthy and happy adult. After the age of 40, she will live as an adult for the rest of her life and will have the average life expectancy for a woman in our society.

It appears that we are harming Jessica in giving her the pill, even though we are not depriving her of diversity of goods. She experiences both the goods of childhood and the goods of adulthood. An advocate of the Diversity View might reply that there is an *ideal* level of diversity which involves having at least the normal number of years usually spent as an adult because some adult goods require time to mature. This is a sensible point. Consider such examples as forming a satisfying romantic relationship, achieving success in a career or making a contribution in science. It takes time for their value to come to fruition. Perhaps, in order to reap the full benefit of a diversity of goods, one should ideally spend as much time in adulthood as adults typically do. Consider, however, the following case:

Living Longer. Suppose it were possible to increase longevity to 130 years while remaining in good health and having loving relationships. You are then offered the following choice: either to spend the first 40 years of your life as a child and the remaining years as an adult or to have a childhood of normal length and to spend the rest of your life as an adult.

We suspect that most people would choose the second option. There is nothing desirable about spending 40 years as a child, even if there will be more years added on at the other end as an adult and therefore adulthood would be the typical length. The problem with being a child until the age of 40 is not in being deprived of an adulthood of typical length.

Other cases intuitively challenge the Diversity View. Consider the following case:

A Short Childhood. Suppose you are told that a particular child who is now 5-year-old will die when he is 11. You can give the child a pill that will hasten the child's development, so that he will live his last six years as a happy adult or you can allow him to remain in a state of happy childhood for six more years.

The Diversity View implies that it would be best to use the pill in order for the child to enjoy diversity. We believe that most people would, however, wish to leave him as a child for the rest of his life, implying that the *diversity* of having both a childhood and an adulthood does not contribute much to the value of one's life. This judgment remains unchanged even if we assume that the pill turns the child into an adult immediately, so that no time is 'wasted' on developing the relevant adult goods: they become immediately available to the individual. An advocate of the Diversity View might respond that even when immediately available, adult goods require more than six years to add significant value to one's life. But now consider the following case:

A Short Adulthood. Suppose that instead of the child dying at the age of 11, he will die at the age of 23. We can give the child a pill to keep her in a happy state of childhood until the age of 23 or allow her to continue in her normal course of development, which will include a few years of adulthood.

In this case—and assuming that adulthood starts somewhere around the age of 18—most people would not hesitate to allow the child to develop at the normal pace and would feel that we would be doing harm if we kept him in a state of childhood up to the age of 23. However, if spending only a few years as an adult is not enough for the goods of adulthood to have much value, it is unclear why allowing someone to become an adult for a few years is preferable to keeping them in a state of happy childhood.

One final case:

Reverse Living. Benjamin is born with an adult's body and mind. As he grows up, his body and mind transition into those of a child. The relative time he spends as a child and as an adult is similar to that of an individual with a normal life trajectory.

Is Benjamin's life as good as the life of someone who develops in the typical order? Would we be neutral between our lives and Benjamin's? It appears likely that

most people would prefer a normal lifespan to that of Benjamin.³⁰ Since Reverse Living includes the same *diversity* found in a regular life, it appears that more than mere diversity is needed to explain our judgments about the value of being both a child and an adult. To sum up this section, several cases suggest that it is not diversity per se that we value when we evaluate positively a human life that includes both childhood and adulthood.

4.2 Does Diversity have Value?

A more fundamental objection to the Diversity View is that it is not at all clear that diversity is particularly valuable. Is it generally true that value is added to a bundle of goods just because they are different from one another? Is it generally true that a bundle of goods is less valuable just because they are all the same? It is doubtful that most people, upon reflection, would answer these questions in the positive. The ice-cream example, which was used to offer some initial motivation for the Diversity View, might not be easily generalizable.

The Diversity View should not be confused with a well-documented psychological phenomenon known as ‘hedonic adaptation,’ according to which we tend to quickly adapt to things that give us pleasure, and as a result they tend to give us less pleasure over time.³¹ We therefore are constantly seeking out novelty. In hedonic contexts—that is, in contexts in which pleasure is the only value we care about—there is something to be said for diversity. We can maximize pleasure with a diversity of pleasures, which is why it’s a good idea not to eat the same ice cream flavor every time and not to go to the same restaurant every time. But hedonic adaptation is also a curse, because pleasure does not always track value. Some activities are worth sticking with even if they provide less pleasure over time. Having multiple romantic partners might be more pleasurable, but they do not necessarily have more value than a single long-term relationship, even if the latter gives less pleasure over time.

Here is another example. Suppose that we employ some numerical measure to represent value and that a year in a good romantic relationship has the value of 1. If we simply aggregate values, then the value of a nine-year relationship appears to be greater than that of four two-year relationships. But if diversity is itself valuable, then having four shorter relationships might prove to be equal in value to that of the long relationship. However, this conclusion seems to be counterintuitive.

There might be non-hedonic contexts in which diversity matters for value. Aesthetic contexts come to mind here. If you visit a museum, your experience might be lacking in value if you stare at one painting for your entire visit, even if you get immense pleasure out of it. The museum offers so much more, and there is something to be said for seeing many art works during your visit. Even if you love impressionism, we feel inclined to tell you ‘Don’t see just the impressionists! The

³⁰ Benjamin’s case resembles dementia, a loss of something valuable. We think most people would object to such a trajectory of development even if others went through a similar trajectory and they were not alone.

³¹ See Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The Myths of Happiness* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013).

Renaissance collection might not be as good, but it's worth seeing too!' We feel that more value will be added by you seeing a greater variety of art. We might say something similar to someone who reads the same book repeatedly and never ventures to read anything else, even if they get immense pleasure out of reading this one particular book.

Except in aesthetic and hedonic contexts, however, it is doubtful that diversity of goods is itself of much value. When judging the intrinsic value of childhood and adulthood, we are not limited to hedonic and aesthetic values. It might get boring (and so less pleasurable) to remain as a child for too long, and one might enjoy spicing things up with some adult goods. But the shift to adulthood appears to have greater significance than only that. Perhaps there is *some* value to diversity even outside of hedonic and aesthetic contexts. But it is doubtful whether there is any *significant* value to diversity, such that diversity by itself could adequately explain the cases we have been discussing. We now turn to what is hopefully a more promising approach.

5 The Development View

The various cases mentioned above appear to point in the following direction:

The Development View. It is intrinsically good for humans to develop from children into adults at a certain pace.

The Development View makes three assertions:

- 1) It is good for a human to be both a child and an adult.
- 2) *Order matters*: It is good for a human to first be a child and then be an adult.
- 3) *Pace matters*: It is harmful to the individual if the process of becoming an adult is significantly expedited or significantly delayed.

Regarding the third assertion, note that the Development View does not rule out *any* attempt to expedite or delay the process of becoming an adult, but rather only attempts to *significantly* expedite or delay the process of progressing from childhood to adulthood. Neither is the assertion committed to any particular and uniform pace. Indeed, there can be interpersonal as well as intercultural variation. But it does imply that outside of a certain reasonable range, further tweaking of the boundaries of childhood would be harmful rather than beneficial.

With respect to adulthood, the Development View does not imply any ideal length. It is consistent with a view of 'longer is better,' as long as it is not at the expense of childhood.³² Longevity does not detract from the process of developing from a child into an adult.

³² Perhaps with certain qualifications, for example, that one remains healthy and satisfied, and does not live forever (if we accept the idea that reasonable longevity is desirable but immortality is not). See Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 82–100.

The Development View has the virtue of offering a coherent explanation of all of our intuitive evaluative judgments above:

Left as a Child. There is harm done to Erin because she is deprived of being an adult, and it is desirable to develop from childhood to adulthood.

Deprived of Childhood. There is harm done to Dane in that he starts the process of becoming an adult too early.

Instant Adult. What is undesirable about Mike's life is that he is deprived of a childhood, and therefore does not develop from childhood to adulthood.

Delayed Onset. There is harm done to Jessica in that she starts the process of becoming an adult too late.

Living Longer. Even if one would get to spend 'enough' time as an adult, there is no benefit in staying a child for 40 years. It is in fact undesirable because the process of turning into an adult starts too late.

A Short Childhood. Turning into an adult at the age of 5 would not allow for sufficient years in childhood and would overly expedite the developmental process.

A Short Adulthood. We would be doing harm to a person by keeping him in a state of childhood until his death at the age of 23, since we are depriving him of becoming an adult at the right pace, which has value (even if he doesn't get to spend enough time as an adult).

Reverse Living. What is undesirable about Benjamin's life is that the order of his development is the opposite of the one which has value.

The Development View does a better job than the alternatives at systemizing our value judgments. The question then arises as to whether it is a plausible view in its own right or whether it is just an *ad hoc* accommodation of our various intuitive judgments. There is also the question of whether our value judgments push us in an *implausible* direction when they suggest the Development View.

One concern is that the Development View expresses the idea that human development is as it should be, but this preference, as already mentioned, may simply reflect a variety of cognitive biases. A related concern is why nature, which is blind to value, would create us in an optimal way, such that childhood comes before adulthood and has optimal length. Should we count ourselves *lucky* that evolution created us in the way it did?

These are forceful objections. The considerations in what follows should blunt some of their force.

First, note that while the Development View considers a particular *aspect* of nature to be good, it does not imply that all that is natural is good. It does not consider a quick transition from birth to childhood or a longer than normal longevity to be bad. That we do not judge all aspects of the natural arc of human life to be good provides some encouragement that judging the natural transition from childhood to adulthood to be good does not merely reflect a bias to the normal. Note that the Development View is consistent with the idea that we are *unlucky* to be born as infants rather than children and that we are unlucky to die at the age that we typically do rather than at a later age. It does not judge all of evolution's outcomes to be good.

Second, the view that nature (rather than merely the *status quo*) can be normatively significant is not objectionable from all theoretical perspectives. Aristotle's view is that the healthy adult is the standard of good for any member of a species. Many modern philosophers reject Aristotle's teleological worldview, and more specifically the Development View rejects Aristotle's view of childhood. However, the Aristotelean notion of natural goodness can still be viewed as useful in our context, in the sense that what is good for humans is not independent of what is normal for the human species. This idea does not necessarily imply that adulthood is to be preferred over other stages of human development. In contemporary medicine and psychology, for example, a child is not judged to have a pathology if she does not function like an adult, but rather if she does not function like a child of her age. We can similarly retain some idea of natural goodness but nonetheless regard the human development from birth to adulthood as what is normal for humans, and so as the standard for the good for humans. This view is somewhat stronger than what we find intuitively compelling—since, as already mentioned, the natural process of development from birth to childhood would not appear to have any non-instrumental value—but nonetheless it is worthy of further consideration as possible support for the Development View.

Surprisingly, another view that can support the Development View is the Kantian view, if complemented with a particular distinction to be made concerning instrumental value. Elsewhere we argue that we should distinguish between two kinds of instrumental processes, which we refer to as “causal instrumental processes” and “essential instrumental processes.”³³ In the former, the end-state is defined independently of the process itself. For example, in the process of building a house all we likely care about is the house. We would value the house just as much if it was created by a different process. In the case of causal instrumental processes, intrinsic value is attributed only to the end result, and the process leading to it has only derivative value. In contrast, an essential instrumental process “aims at an end-state defined by the process itself.”³⁴ Examples include winning a baseball game, obtaining a PhD, and having a friend.³⁵ In the case of essential instrumental processes, it seems plausible to say that both the end result and the process leading to it have intrinsic value. In other words, one cannot attribute intrinsic value to the end result without also attributing it to the process by which that end result is defined.

Suppose that we concede the Kantian claim that the value of adulthood lies in having an “authoritative voice.”³⁶ Childhood, we might further concede, is instrumental in the development of such a voice. But what kind of instrumental contribution does childhood make to the authoritative voice one later possesses as an adult?

³³ Ram-Tiktin and Lipshitz, op. cit. The distinction is similar to the distinction Oded Na'aman draws between instrumental and non-instrumental processes. See Oded Na'aman, “The Rationality of Emotional Change: Toward a Process View,” *Noûs* (2019), pp. 18–19. We prefer our terminology because both processes are in an important sense instrumental.

³⁴ Na'aman, op. cit., p. 18.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Following Schapiro, op. cit.

We have argued that it is an ‘essential’ instrumental relation.³⁷ We cannot conceive of an instant adult (such as Mike in the example above) as having an authoritative voice when he has just started life, nor would we value his voice to the same extent as that of a typical adult.³⁸ The reason we value adulthood is due to the capacity to act autonomously, authentically and authoritatively. These abilities presuppose a process of developing self-conception during childhood—a period of life when one is given the freedom to try on different identities without penalty, before committing to one (evolving) identity. If we are correct and the development from childhood to adulthood is indeed an essential instrumental process, it is itself intrinsically valuable. Such considerations offer further independent support for the Development View.

We have objected to the Diversity View partly because it appears to be implausible to attribute much value to mere diversity. But it is not implausible to attribute significant non-instrumental value to certain processes. For example, we value achievements that require a great deal of effort (and would value the achievement less otherwise). One takes pride in a novel he had written with great effort (as opposed to if it just suddenly appeared on one’s desk, created *ex nihilo* by God). We also value the process in which romantic love develops (and would value the resulting emotional state less if it was not preceded by a process of growing intimacy). We value certain decisions that are the result of sound deliberation (and would value them less otherwise). In claiming that the process of development from childhood to adulthood is intrinsically valuable, the Development View is not making an implausible claim about what can be a receptacle of value.

There is no view of the value of childhood and adulthood which holds that a life can be good regardless of the goods it includes. For example, a supporter of the Aristotelean view, who attributes a high value to adult capacities, can still judge an adult life of misery, loneliness and failure as bad. According to such a view, the evils of an unfortunate adult life do not presumably *cancel out* the value of having agency and autonomy, but rather they overshadow it in the overall evaluation of life. Similarly, the Development View does not argue that when an individual develops at a normal pace from childhood to adulthood, her life will be good regardless of other familiar constituents of wellbeing, such as happiness, satisfying interpersonal relationships, health, and success in one’s endeavors. Misfortune does not cancel out the value of development, but may nonetheless overshadow it.

There may still remain a concern that the Development View is neutral toward the distribution of wellbeing over the course of a life. Suppose that Ron and Rita live equally long lives and develop from childhood to adulthood at the normal pace. Suppose further that their lives provide equal overall levels of wellbeing, but Ron has a happy childhood and a miserable adulthood while Rita has a miserable childhood and a happy adulthood. It appears that the Development View would attribute equal value to both lives, because both Ron and Rita get to develop from childhood to adulthood at the normal pace, and otherwise their lives include equal

³⁷ Ram-Tiktin and Lipshitz, op. cit.

³⁸ *Ibid.* For a different argument along similar lines, see Weinstock, op. cit.

amounts of wellbeing. But that may be counterintuitive: we might prefer a trajectory of improvement to a trajectory of decline, and therefore would prefer Rita's life to Ron's. Indeed, we might even evaluate Ron's life as *bad* overall. Furthermore, the preference for Rita's life might indicate greater concern for the wellbeing of adults than for the wellbeing of children, unlike the uniform concern for the various life stages that the Development View advocates.

We would respond that this only shows the Development View to be incomplete rather than false. The view needs to be supplemented with further axiological claims that explain why Rita's life has more value. For example:

- 1) Improving over time is preferable to declining over time (even when the absolute amount of good is equal in both). In other words, 'All's well that ends well.'
- 2) The latter part of life has greater significance in the overall evaluation of life than the former part.³⁹

If these claims are correct, then it may be more important to ensure that one has a good adulthood rather than a good childhood, since adulthood is subsequent to childhood and in a typical human life it is the phase when life ends. And indeed this kind of value is not captured by the Development View, and a full theory of the value of life may need to account for it. In the case of Ron, there may be value in developing from a child to an adult (since we would not want him to skip development into an adult), yet the decline in his life quality as he matures overshadows this otherwise positive advancement.

Consider the aforementioned case of Benjamin, who starts life in an adult body and mind and ends life in the body and mind of a child. Arguably, we would also like Benjamin's life to improve rather than to decline. If we had to choose between a good beginning and a good ending for Benjamin, we might prefer a good ending. In Benjamin's life, childhood has the value that adulthood has in a typical human life. This suggests that what is of special significance in our evaluation of Ron's and Rita's lives is not *adulthood* per se, but rather whichever stage comes last. In a typical human life, this happens to be adulthood. But it is not adult capacities, having a 'voice' or any special good that endows adulthood with value. Rather it is the *location* of adulthood in the order of stages in a typical human life.

It is worth noting that the aforementioned axiological claims are required only if one accepts the claim that Rita's life is preferable to Ron's. But this claim does not have to be accepted. In the evaluation of a full human life, a rotten childhood may tip the scales no matter how good one's adulthood is. We might therefore be more neutral in comparing their lives than the objection allows for. It is not our intention to take sides on this difficult issue, but only to point out that the Development View is consistent with several alternative positions.

Finally, we have already mentioned that existing debates tend to focus on the relatively crude categories of childhood and adulthood, while ignoring their sub-phases.

³⁹ See Ronald M. Dworkin, *Life's Dominion*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. 27.

However, it is worth noting that the Development View does not have to rely on a binary distinction between childhood and adulthood. It attributes intrinsic value to *all* the phases of the developmental process, whatever they may be. It is thus not committed to any particular way of dividing life into phases. This, we believe, is a further merit of the approach.

6 Conclusion

Various thought experiments have been adduced in order to support the claim that what we ultimately value is not a particular stage of life, but rather a particular process, one in which an individual develops from a child into an adult. In the context of a complete human life, neither childhood nor adulthood is a predicament. Philosophers who debate the comparative value of childhood and adulthood tend to overlook an important question: how do childhood and adulthood fit into the evaluation of a full human life? Grappling with this question should provide insight into the value of childhood and adulthood. It remains to be seen whether the view implied by the cases presented here can be justified based on other normative frameworks.

Let us end with two implications of the Development View. First, the view offers a *pro tanto* reason to not employ a technology that could significantly expedite (or halt) the development from childhood to adulthood. We could imagine—if such technology existed—that some parents would like to use it and ‘get on’ with the development of their children. If the Development View is correct, such a decision harms the child. It deprives their life from a constitutive aspect of its goodness.

Second, if the Development View is correct, then the way we think about the ethics of parenting and primary education should be consistent with it. For example, when asking what school to send our child to, that the graduates of one school go to Harvard more than the graduates of another school cannot be the decisive factor. It might appear that the Development View and the Aristotelean View would regard primary education in a similar fashion. Both, after all, value the developmental trajectory from childhood to adulthood. The Development View attributes intrinsic value to this trajectory, while the Aristotelean View attributes only an instrumental value to it, but is this an important distinction in relation to education? We think that it is, because it implies two different standards for evaluating the success of an education system. The Aristotelean View would judge an education system by its ability to contribute to the creation of flourishing adults. The Development View would judge an education system by its ability to contribute to the creation of flourishing human lives, with childhood as one of the phases which count toward the assessment of such lives. Granted, that would require helping children become adults, but it calls for a wider lens than that. If the entire trajectory from childhood to adulthood is intrinsically good, let us make sure our schools respect the intrinsic goodness of all its phases.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ See Macleod, *op. cit.*

Acknowledgements This research was supported by The Israel Science Foundation (Grant no. 394/18). We thank the anonymous reviewers of The Journal of Value Inquiry for their insightful comments and suggestions.

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