



The Moral and Political Status of Children

D. Archard and C. Macleod (eds.)

Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, 304pp.

ISBN: 0 19 924268 2.

Contemporary Political Theory (2003) **2**, 363–365. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300086

For those interested in theorizing around children's rights, a book co-edited by David Archard is essential reading. His seminal book *Children, Rights and Childhood* in 1993 deserves its frequent referencing, as a philosophical touchstone in the emerging inter-disciplinary areas of childhood studies (Archard, 1993). What then to make of the recent collaboration with Colin Macleod, in an edited collection?

As the editors point out, moral and political philosophy traditionally paid scant attention to children and their moral status. If children were considered, they tended to be used as tests to particular theories based around adult norms: an issue aptly put by one of the contributors, Arneil, as 'Ultimately, the individual child is largely a tool to illuminate the autonomous adult citizen by providing the perfect mirror within which to reflect the negative image of the positive adult form' (p. 74). This book sets out to reflect upon and challenge this tendency, by bringing together a range of contributions from academics located in North American and British universities.

The book is divided into three sections — children and rights, autonomy and education, and children, families and justice. The first section brings together four different stances on children's moral status, whether they have rights and, if children do, what kind of rights they have. Griffin, for example, argues against a human needs rationale for human rights and instead states that only beings capable of agency can be said to have human rights (a 'choice theory' of rights). Children, at least infants and young children, are thus excluded from human rights. In contrast to Griffin, Brighouse argues for an 'interest theory' of rights, which is thus inclusive of children's need for protection. Brennan disagrees with the dichotomization of interest and choice theories of rights and, instead, suggests a gradualist model where protecting children's interests gives way to rights to autonomy as children develop. Arneil ends the section by arguing that the rights discourse insufficiently establishes and supports caring relationships.

This chapter by Arneil justifies a particular reading for all those promoting children's rights. She perceives a fundamental limit to the usefulness of the concept of rights. She argues that the concept 'cannot escape its origins' (p. 86), which are based on individual status, a state committed to principles of both



non-interference and enforcement, and associational relationships of mutual self-interest. This critique is succinct but not new. What Arneil particularly contributes is a more worked-out alternative than is typically presented in the literature, on an 'ethic of care' as it might apply to children. The state would have a proactive and supporting role to parents, rather than a residual role as enforcer. Families and societies would be seen as communities rather than associations, recognizing and emphasizing connections and relations between people. It would require care-giving to be taken seriously in public and private spheres and autonomy to be reconceptualized.

Leading on from the first section's concern that children lack full capacity for autonomous self-direction, the second section considers the definition of autonomy, education for children to develop such autonomy, and the extent of parental authority. These chapters lead to such conclusions as: civic education should be more democratic and participation-oriented (Coleman), justification of parental authority to the extent it best assists children to acquire necessary capacities (Noggle), and how to balance diversity while providing children with a meaningful basis to make choices in the future (Callan and Archard). The final section considers different ways in which thinking about children impacts on theories of redistributive justice. Steniner and Vallentyne do so in relation to the responsibilities of parents/procreators to their offspring and others. Macleod looks at how the 'affective' family can be justified in a theory of liberal equality while Munoz-Dardé similarly considers how families effect justice principles. Taking a sociological-style critique, Burt queries the assumptions behind the 'new familists' promotion of the two-parent nuclear family. In their different ways, these last three chapters all argue for social policy and state institutions to provide essential resources for children (and their parents).

The book adds to the literature by moving certain debates forward, with more nuanced and often more challenging considerations of children's rights and autonomy. It can be frustrating, however, that the book at times loses the advantages of 'dialogue' between chapters or with seminal writings outwith the book. For example, a number of chapters conclude that infants and young children might have a very different moral status and thus rights than older children and adolescents. This is flagged in the editorial introduction, but the book lacks a concluding chapter to bring this common finding together and take forward its theoretical and practical implications. The different perspectives on children and rights in the initial section stand individually: it would be intellectually productive to know how each reader would respond to and critique the other's contribution. Given the influence of Doyal and Gough's *A Theory of Human Need* (Doyal and Gough, 1991), Griffin's arguments against their theory would add to his chapter. Noggle argues that children lack the moral agency of adults; his consideration of recent



sociological research on children's moral agency (e.g. see Mayall, 2002 for review) would be interesting.

In summary, this book provides a provocative philosophical contribution to the present theorization on children's rights. It is useful because, in a time when policy-wise children's rights are gaining increasing dominance (Franklin, 2002), it presents perspectives that suggest potential theoretical and practical deficits. The presentation of different arguments helps to refine the reader's own views, whatever his or her theoretical or policy position.

References

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Doyal, L. and Gough, I. (1991) *A Theory of Human Need*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Education.
Franklin, B. (ed.) (2002) *The New Handbook of Children's Rights*, London: Routledge.

E. Kay M. Tisdall
School of Social and Political Studies,
University of Edinburgh.