Learning to Act

Jan Bransen

Abstract: In this paper I argue that to understand minded agency – the capacity we typically find instantiated in instances of human behaviour that could sensibly be questioned by asking "What did you *do*?" – one needs to understand childhood, i.e. the trajectory of *learning* to act. I discuss two different types of trajectory, both of which seem to take place during childhood and both of which might be considered crucial to learning to act: a growth of bodily control (GBC) and a growth in taking responsibility (GTR). The discussion of GTR takes up about half of the entire paper. In the final two sections I argue that GTR is the most promising trajectory in terms of which to understand a child's process of learning to act.

Keywords: agency, childhood, normativity, responsibility, taking a stance, bodily control

1. Setting the Stage

Mary Midgley once wrote a fable about a creator who wanted to create free beings (Midgley 1984). Although the other creators thought the project was philosophically confused, the creator optimistically set down to work it out. The clue, Midgley made him argue, was to give his beings conflicting desires and the capacity to think about their desires. This is a by now familiar response to an old question about the enabling conditions for one of the most intriguing, precious and scientifically disturbing characteristics of human nature: minded agency (Frankfurt 1988, Watson 1975, Taylor 1976, Dennett 1984). I've always liked Midgley's fable. It somehow echoed the megalomanic projects I envisaged as a teenager. But if I would take up the challenge of Midgley's creator today, I would come up with another clue: if you want to create free beings, give them *childhood*. This answer isn't new either. It was crucial to Arnold Gehlen's interpretation of man as a *Mängelwesen* (Gehlen 1940), and it is very much *en vogue* today in certain attempts of developmental psychologists to finally provide the right answers to questions generations of philosophers discussed in vain (Gopnik et. al. 1999, Bloom 2005, Griffiths and Stotz 2000, Furth 1987, Clark 1997).

Given the generality of the claim, and the vastness of the phenomena it covers, I shall not be able in this paper to argue that childhood gives us the clue to understand minded agency. I shall merely explore some of the issues involved in developing such an argument, and provide some support for the kind of take on these issues I consider to be crucial. The main idea of the paper is that childhood is intrinsically a status concept, paired to adulthood, and that as a consequence the dynamics that is so conspicuous of childhood is substantially

normative. If this is plausible, it seems to me to support the idea that learning to act is an achievement that involves a growth in the capacity to take responsibility, rather than a growth in the capacity to control bodily movements.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First I discuss the notion of a trajectory-dependent property, suggesting that a good way to understand the relevance of childhood to minded agency is to argue that minded agency is a property that depends for its application on childhood's being a trajectory. I then discuss two different types of trajectory, both of which seem to take place during childhood: a growth of bodily control (GBC) and a growth in taking responsibility (GTR). The discussion of GTR takes up about half of the entire paper. In the final two sections I argue that GTR is the most promising trajectory in terms of which to understand a child's process of learning to act.

2. Minded Agency as a 'Trajectory-Dependent Property'

If the clue to creating free beings is to give them childhood, this means, for a start, that the property that enables an entity to be free is a "trajectory-dependent property." The phrase is Karen Jones's, and it is designed to identify concepts that apply to something in virtue of its being an "ordered, temporally extended sequence of states or events" (Jones 2008, 271). I should like to use the phrase here to be able to specify in more detail what I aim to be referring to in talking about a person's childhood.

If something is a trajectory, for example a visit to London, its properties, say its being exciting or exhausting, are trajectory-dependent properties if the visit instantiates these properties in virtue of it being an ordered, temporally extended sequence of events. Trajectory-dependent properties are not only instantiated by whole trajectories, though; concepts denoting such properties can also apply to parts of trajectories, parts that may almost seem to be temporally non-extended. Something can be a return flight, for instance, but only because it is part of a trip that also contains, at least, an outward flight, and a stay as other parts. 'Being a return flight' is a trajectory-dependent property, but it is not a property of the entire trajectory, but only of a part of it. When a trajectory-dependent property is instantiated by a relatively temporally non-extended event or state, as is the case for example with 'being a first impression,' it applies in virtue of the location of that event within a broader, structured, temporally extended whole. This is where the 'dependent' part of the concept becomes relevant and interesting. The property of "being a return flight" for instance is instantiated by a particular event, but only on the condition that there is a trajectory – a broader, structured, temporally extended sequence of events – one of which is this particular event, and two other (preceding) parts are the outward flight and the stay. This means that whether or not a trajectory-dependent property is instantiated by a state or event at time t, depends "on what happens else*when*," at earlier times t-n and/or at later times t+n (Jones 2008, 272).

The concept of a trajectory-dependent property helps to explain historical facts, the historicity of which is often just taken for granted. I have for example a scar on my leg, and its being a scar applies only under the assumption that something happened at an earlier time, in my case that I stumbled over a fence in my youth. And an article can be your first publication, but this only is the case, in the proper sense of the word, under the condition that you have published a second paper at a later time. This makes trajectory-dependent properties vulnerable to future contingency (Jones 2008, 271). Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, for instance, is part 1 of a larger project that never materialized.

In suggesting that human beings are capable of acting in virtue of their childhood, I am suggesting that minded agency is a trajectory-dependent property, a property human beings have *at a time* (e.g. when they are adults) because they are a proper part of an ordered, temporally extended sequence of states or events (of which their childhood is an earlier part). The idea is popular in many different quarters of the human, social, behavioural and life sciences. Fascinatingly, the idea is compatible with there being a variety of trajectories with different time-scales involved in spelling out the genesis of human agency. Evolutionary biologists study a trajectory of millions of years, whereas historians of philosophy study trajectories of thousands of years. Developmental psychologists will tend to limit their attention to trajectories that do not extend the life-span of individual agents. In what follows I shall be restricting myself too to the trajectory we ordinarily understand as a person's childhood, the trajectory that usually takes up the first twelve years or so of individual human beings. Although nature might have to, the creator of Midgley's fable need not rely on the time-scales of evolution to give a human being its crucial phase of childhood. So I'm just assuming, in order to tell the story about childhood being the clue to minded agency, that evolution succeeded as it did in producing a species whose nature is characterised by "a new stage of development: childhood" (Griffths and Stotz 2000).

Childhood is a very broad term we use to refer to a range of years that make up the first phase of a human being's life. Obviously, not everything that happens during these years plays a role in allowing the person to acquire the property of minded agency. Although it takes a childhood to learn to act, not every event that is part of your childhood belongs to the specific trajectory (the ordered, temporally extended sequence of events) that constitutes the acquisition of minded agency. This observation invites me to specify in more detail which particular kind of trajectory I have in mind in thinking that childhood is the clue to minded agency. I shall – in tune with some dominant trends in the literature – distinguish between two kinds of trajectories. I label them 'growth of bodily control' (GBC) and 'growth in taking responsibility' (GTR).

3. Growth of Bodily Control

Growth of Bodily Control (GBC) is under the heading of 'motor development' a major theme in the scientific study of human development (Thelen 2000). Newborn babies have very little control over their bodies, but most of them can sit and stand, reach and gesture, and feed themselves within a year. Toddlers of two years old can run and climb, clap their hands, scribble and talk simple sentences. Dramatic changes in motor skills continue to take place for a few more years, and it all happens out in the open, continuously observable. It is no surprise, then, that from the ordinary point of view of parents, or people in general, the development of human agency is closely related to, or can even be thought to consist in this growth of bodily control. Having learned how to sit or how to clap your hands might seem all you need for the production of a voluntary instance of such behaviour. This would explain why having control over your body has played a major role in the history of thinking about free agency (e.g. Chisholm 1964, Greenspan 1978, Fisher 1982, Dennett 1984).

Scientific research into the development of the mechanisms underlying bodily control is nowadays keen on avoiding the homunculus problem that looms large if you naïvely identify free agency with bodily control (Dennett 1991). The old Cartesian image of the mind controlling the body has long lost its plausibility and attraction. What is more, the very scheme of the image seems wrong. Replacing the mind as "controller" by a part of the body, e.g. the central nervous system, might turn out to be explanatorily empty, as you might need an homunculus in the brain if you want it to be an organ in possession of the kind of "controlling powers" we once attributed to the Cartesian mind. A new paradigm seems to be emerging: connectionism, dynamic systems theory and the idea of embodied cognition seem to support a picture of minded agency as an emergent feature of self-organising systems. In such a system bodily control is a macroscopic, distributed property produced over time by the development of perception-action couplings realised on a microscopic level due to multiple, dynamical, reciprocal interactions between a neural system, a sensory-motor system, and the environment (Keijzer 2001, 146).

The promises and problems of these new attempts to explain and understand minded agency in terms of GBC are high on the agenda of almost anyone sensitive to the impact of scientific approaches to themes that used to be preserved to the philosophy of mind and action (Clark 1997, 2001; Hurley 1998; Van Gelder 1994; Hendriks-Jansen 1996). On the side of the promises there are definitely the prospects of a unified, naturalistic account of human cognition and agency, and the prospects of empirical and theoretical support from the cognitive, behavioural and life sciences. On the side of the problems there is at least the need to close in an informative way the gap between on the one hand a convincing story about the sensorimotor organisation that allows simple animals to solve basic problems of interacting with their evironment and on the other hand a convincing story about human agency involving so-called higher

cognitive capacities (Keijzer 2006, Hurley 2003). Connected to this, but differing in important ways, is the concern that a dynamic systems account of human behaviour will lack the resources to acknowledge the difference between causal and reason explanations of actions (Clark 2001).

Despite these problems, looking for a story about GBC is definitely a sensible strategy to try to cash out the idea that childhood is the clue to understanding minded agency. It is, to be sure, a strategy that on the face of it seems rather insensitive to the suggestion that the phase of childhood marks a principled distinction between the growth that is enabled by childhood and the learning processes that take place in other developmental trajectories. Fans of GBC, however, might in all likelihood want to resist the suggestion of such a principled distinction, and might precisely want to stress that the clue to understanding minded agency is a matter of the presence of significant developmental trajectories that enable organisms to become self-organising systems.

Before allowing myself to take an evaluative stance to GBC and its prospects in contributing to our understanding of minded agency, I shall first introduce an alternative interpretation of the trajectory constituted by childhood, a trajectory labeled Growth in Taking Responsibility (GTR).

4. Growth in Taking Responsibility

There is an extensive body of literature on the relationship between agency and responsibility (Strawson 1962, Frankfurt 1988, Taylor 1976, Watson 1975, Wallace 1996, Fisher and Ravizza 1998, Wolf 1990, Kennett 2001). Most of this literature builds on the early work of Harry Frankfurt, who argued forcefully that the difference between what we do and what happens to us should be understood in terms of agential guidance, which itself should be understood in terms of a harmony between the ways in which we are moved and our reflexive attitudes to being so moved, the latter of which amounts basically to a story about our being responsible for what we do (Frankfurt 1988). Within this tradition there is a growing interest in the way in which the development of these reflexive attitudes takes place in the personal histories of agents, the worry being that certain trajectories (those implying manipulation) would yield attitudes that enable a kind of agential control that would fail to provide the agent with moral responsibility (Fischer and Ravizza 1994, Christman 1991, Zimmerman 2003, Haji and Cuypers 2004). Unfortunately, this literature is primarily concerned with the preconditions of moral responsibility, and not with real-life scenarios of childhood and its role in enabling minded agency. There is a lot of literature, though, on the relations of responsibility between adults and children (Schapiro 1999, 2003, Noggle 2002, Archard and Macleod 2002), and I'm going to make an effort here to connect some research traditions in an attempt to improve our understanding of the concept of minded agency.

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My starting-point is simple, and obvious once you start to combine the idea of childhood with the idea of responsibility; children don't have responsibility, yet, but adults have it both for themselves and as representatives in their children's guard. Stated differently: with respect to matters of responsibility, childhood is intrinsically a *status* concept, inconceivable without its counterpart, adulthood, and the challenge is to find a way to articulate the child's status as a temporary phase. The challenge, that is, is to integrate the idea of dynamics with the idea of status. I think this can be done by adapting, and appropriating, insights of Robert Brandom (Brandom 1994, 2000, Bransen 2002).

Let me start with an example. Suppose a child caught up in play follows a butterfly into the neighbour's garden and steps on a bed of beautiful violets. Suppose the neighbour finds his ruined plants, sees the child, gets upset and asks "What are you *doing*?" And suppose something similar happens, fifteen years later, involving the same persons. This time the neighbour finds himself aroused by a young woman who late at night loudly says goodbye to a friend under the neighbour's bedroom window, and again he asks "What are you *doing*?"

Here we have the typical kind of question a philosopher of action would want a plausible action theory to provide an answer to. And the relevant difference between the answers to the question in these two scenarios will, according to GTR, be a difference in responsibility. Let me elaborate.

The first thing to note about the situation the child finds itself in is that it includes an adult. For the child this is obvious: from its very first appearance on earth there were always adults around. This is so obvious, that it is only natural to overlook the tremendous significance of this fact for what the child's experience of her world will be like. There are just always adults around, and their authority in defining the situation is absolutely beyond any doubt, and this is so long before the child becomes aware of the fact that situations are defined, that they are defined by perspectives, and that different people have different perspectives.

The second thing to note is that the adult makes a move in a deontic game: he requires the child to define the situation, but it is clear from the outset that he is not going to accept just any definition the child will come up with. It should be a definition that has to meet standards, standards of the True and the Good as Susan Wolf has argued (Wolf 1990). The definition should be true to the facts, and it should provide the child with justifying reasons for what she did. It is clear too, I take it, that the adult's access to these standards is assumed to be much more reliable than the child's. The child's predicament is obvious (Schapiro 1999).

Let me hasten to add a third observation. Fortunately, children are not born in a world crowded with adults who care first and foremost for their beds of violets. Children are born to adults whose parental love ordinarily is beyond compare. In the normal case children grow accustomed to adults who, being

their parents, go to almost endless lengths to care for, support, and scaffold their children. Precisely because parents have their child's responsibility in their guard, their moves in the deontic game of giving and asking for reasons will differ from the moves adults in general make by displaying a specific scaffolding character. I'll return to that below.

But first I should like to note a couple of further things. It might seem as if I am bound to frame the situation in which a child can learn to take responsibility for what it does as intrinsically linguistic. The question seems to be about *defining* the situation, about providing an acceptable description, a sentence, a verbally expressed proposition that explains and justifies what happened as something done. This would bring me in good company, to be sure; many philosophers and scientists are inclined to defend the view that language is the clue to understanding human mindedness (Pinker 1994, McGeer and Pettit 2002, Tomasello and Rakoczy 2003). But in taking my suggestion that *childhood* is the clue to minded agency seriously, I should be willing to defend the claim that "childhood, not language" is the clue. The explanatory work, I should claim, is done by the status distinction between children and adults and its consequences for how the deontic game of defining the situation is played, and not by the linguistic means with which human beings typically play this game. That is, I must have something to say to those who would feel like arguing that the presence of language creates the very possibility to play the deontic game of defining the situation. One way to develop an argument against such contenders would be to follow an ethnomethodological line of reasoning, saying that people account for their understanding of the situation in the very way itself in which they behave (Harré 1979, Goffman 1959). That is, behaviour itself might display the perspective of the agent and the way in which he defines the situation by so behaving. Such a story would suggest that an agent, if challenged by an interlocutor, would just repeat what he did, so as to emphasize that his definition of the situation was already explicit in his action. Thus, I might change the example, and might make the neighbour ask his question by merely frowning, to suggest subsequently that the child's proper response would be to step once more on the neighbour's bed of violets, showing, not telling, what she did.

The example is meant to support the claim of section 2, namely that minded agency is a 'trajectory-dependent property.' The dialectic of the unfolding exchange between the child and the neighbour in response to the child's action and the neighbour's question is part of the trajectory in virtue of which the child's behaviour is the particular action it is. This does not mean that the child's action takes place much later, when finally, for example, the child comes to accept that 'ruining a bed of violets' is the right description of what she did, and that she feels very sorry for this action that she now takes responsibility for. This belated act of taking responsibility for ruining a bed of violets is another, further action of the child. The action we are talking about in my example is just the one that takes place at the time the child steps on the bed of violets in her

neighbour's garden. To be sure, the later act of taking responsibility, although another act in its own right, is part of the trajectory in virtue of which the child did what she did in her neighbour's garden, namely ruining a bed of violets, and not, for instance, following a butterfly. Remember that trajectory-dependent properties are vulnerable to future contingency. If the exchange between child and neighbour never comes to a satisfying end, but ends in a deadlock, or stops due to an intrusion from external forces, it remains unclear whether the behaviour was an action and if so which action precisely it was.[1]

The idea of the example is that in childhood most of our behaviour happens just like that, mindlessly, without sufficient awareness of the ways in which definitions of the situation can be contested and inform in a constitutive way the very nature of what we do. The young woman in the second part of the example is precisely supposed to have acquired the capacity of minded agency. She is supposed to be aware, or capable of being aware, of plausible descriptions of her voice as too loud for the night and as too close under her neighbour's bedroom window. Therefore, she is supposed to be capable of resisting her inclination to make this description of her behaviour come true. She should know better, we say. She could have anticipated her neighbour's question, and the dialectic it would generate, resulting in her having to accept a description of her behaviour she doesn't like to endorse. Assuming that this capacity to take responsibility is in place, we can trust that in the ordinary way of things this second scenario would never materialize. The young woman knows what she does, and does so knowingly. She's grown up, an adult, a minded agent.

In discussing the above example I have been using a number of technical notions taken from Robert Brandom's work in the philosophy of language. I have elsewhere tried to reconstruct Brandom's inferentialism so as to make his account of the game of giving and asking for reasons applicable to childhood as a phase in which human beings become minded agents (Bransen 2002). I should like to make these ideas a bit more precise here by distinguishing four different modes of taking responsibility. These modes are available to those engaged in the trajectory of learning to act, but they have to be acquired in succession. Each more advanced mode of taking responsibility builds upon the one(s) acquired before. Together they describe the trajectory of growth in taking responsibility (GTR). I shall describe the successive modes by referring to the above example, assuming for the sake of argument the availability of the linguistic resources used by the agents in this example.

Acknowledge the attribution of a description

The neighbour's question invites the child to make a move in the deontic game of giving and asking for reasons. She's asked to define the situation. She's asked to

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[1] For Karen Jones this is a way in which trajectory-dependent properties allow us to understand a way in which we might be said to be able to change the past. (Jones 2008).

acknowledge that a certain description is attributed to her behaviour. She might have no idea, but if she's capable of making a first move on the trajectory of taking responsibility, if she can take responsibility in the first mode, she will have to be aware of at least one attributed description. The emotional state of the neighbour, and the tone of his voice, provide obvious clues that whatever the description, she did something wrong, something she wasn't entitled to. The neighbour's move that draws both in the game expresses the neighbour's reactive attitude, and in this case it urges the child to look for descriptions that would make explicit that the action was a mistake. On the assumption that the child wasn't deliberately making a misdemeanor, the neighbour's question will produce a motivational embarrassment in the child that will evoke an array of possibly explanatory, excusing, justifying or blaming descriptions. Acknowledging the fact that these descriptions possibly are attributed to her behaviour is, on my account, the first phase in the trajectory I've labeled GTR. To take responsibility in this initial, minimal sense is to acknowledge that the situation one is in is described in a way that portrays oneself as somehow involved in a piece of behaviour that invites reactive attitudes.

Let me add two comments. Firstly, the fact that in the example the neighbour is moved by his disapproval is of course merely a contingent feature of how I chose to set up the case. Lots of other responses are available to the neighbour that would make sense to us as audience as well as to the child as addressee. Note, by the way, that some constraints of intelligibility apply in order for the exchange to be a meeting of minds. The neighbour's response should make sense. To make it a scenario for taking responsibility a further constraint applies. For such a scenario the neighbour should express a reactive attitude, to use Strawson's notion (Strawson 1962). Approval would do as well as disapproval, but noncommital responses such as "Oh, what a nice butterfly!" would not invite the child to take a stance towards her behaviour. And that seems to be required for entering the game of taking responsibility.

Secondly, we should resist a strong reading of "her behavior." I am discussing here what I take to be the first step in a trajectory I suggest an agent should have traversed in order to be a responsible and therefore minded agent. Acknowledging that a description might be attributed to *her* behaviour should therefore not be interpreted as implying a relation of responsible ownership between the agent and the behaviour. The young woman who is speaking too loud late at night might have such a relation, because we assume her to have acquired the capacity of minded agency. She can take full responsibility, we presume. She will own her behaviour, in the relevant sense, and she might be capable of resisting the attribution of a description she considers her neighbour not to be entitled to. But I don't want to ascribe all this to the child that's following a butterfly into her neighbour's garden. To be sure, some form of self-awareness should be available to this child. She must be an addressee; she must be able to enter the deontic game, she must be aware of the fact that she figures

in social scenarios. But "her behaviour" should be read in a rather weak sense as referring to a series of events that involve her in certain ways. Compare this with what happens to you when, for instance, you stumble and fall off a platform. That's a series of events involving you, a series some might wish to describe in ways that made you *do* it, even if you don't and just watch it happen.[2]

This first mode of taking responsibility does not require sophisticated capacities. It entails merely that the agent should be inclined to respond as an addressee. She is to take it that an interlocutor's move is meant to be an invitation to enter a deontic game. She's assumed to be aware of the fact that her behaviour is described in a certain way. Being addressed by her interlocutor, she's assumed to have a stance towards the sequence of events her behaviour is part of. Whether or not she will live up to this expectation depends on whether or not she will move to the second mode of taking responsibility, by making explicit her stance towards the events that involve her. Being an addressee, she's unlikely not to make this second step. The situation requires a definition, and she's invited to provide it.

The developmental story I try to tell here combines causal and conceptual connections, and suggests that the understanding of conceptual implications fuels the growth in taking responsibility (Taylor 1979). That is, it is a matter of conceptual connections that a less advanced mode of responsibility is presupposed by a more advanced mode, and that one cannot acquire the more advanced capacity unless one first acquires the less advanced capacity. Yet, it is a matter of causal connections whether or not a particular agent actually develops the full capacity to take responsibility. This requires such an agent to understand the mode she is in as a less advanced mode, a mode that elicits her to move to the next stage of development.

Endorse a description

Suppose the child in our example responds to her neighbour by saying: "Oh, I'm sorry, I was merely following that butterfly". This response shows she has made it through the first phase; it displays her capacity to take responsibility in the first minimal sense of acknowledging the attribution of a description to her behaviour. The first part of her response expresses the fact that she acknowledges that her neighbour attributes a certain, unfavourable description to her behaviour, a description she's inclined to distance herself from. Again, nothing strong should be meant to be implied by using the possessive pronoun "her." There is a description of the events involving her and she acknowledges that this description is attributed to these events. In the second part of the response the child goes beyond the first mode of taking responsibility. She comes up with a description she attributes herself to the behaviour, thus taking

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[2] Cf. Frankfurt's example of the man whose trembling hand makes his glass spill (Frankfurt 1988, 70).

responsibility in a more advanced way. Her response makes explicit that she endorses now in what she says what she already endorsed, presumably if implicitly, in what she did (Brandom 2000, 153).

The assumption behind this observation is that the child satisfies the sincerity condition. We should be careful here, however. In the adult case it seems ordinarily appropriate to understand the sincerity condition as referring to the requirement that someone should say what he thinks. But in the case of a child that is learning to take responsibility it need not be clear whether there is something determinate enough in her mind that, satisfying the sincerity condition, she might be taken to express in what she says. The idea, however, is clear enough. Attributing herself a description to her behaviour amounts to making explicit her reasons for what she did. In saying that she was merely following a butterfly she gives her neighbour a consideration she takes to be counting in favour of her behaviour (Scanlon 1998). In making explicit this consideration she need not be expressing what she was already thinking, but she *is* expressing what she was doing. The idea here is, after all, that she wasn't been *doing* anything until she came up with a description of her behaviour she endorsed. Remember that on my account minded agency is a trajectory-dependent property, and that part of the trajectory might, and in the case of a child who is learning to take responsibility *does* take place at a time after the behaviour did take place. Something was driving the child in her performing the behaviour that happened. She was onto something, as we say; and by arriving at the description she feels like endorsing, she makes explicit to herself, by making explicit to her interlocutor, what it was she was endorsing in what she did. Someone who is capable of this kind of identification is on my account capable of taking responsibility in two different ways: firstly by merely acknowledging that certain descriptions are attributed to her behaviour, and secondly by self-attributing descriptions to her behaviour.

I should like to emphasise two concerns. First, in the example the child's interlocutor is a non-relative adult who disapproves of her behaviour. That's a very anxious situation, unlikely to allow for descriptions that wouldn't satisfy the neighbour but that would nevertheless be endorsed by the child. Power relations easily interfere with making explicit one's endorsements. The young woman in the other example would make sense as an adolescent who freed herself from being vulnerable to power relations. She knows what she does – at least we might sympathetically but also a little bit patronizingly assume – and according to her the neighbour has no entitlement at all to doubt her entitlement to speaking as loud as she does, for she just spoke as loud as was appropriate on the occasion. Young children will ordinarily learn to take this second step of

endorsement primarily in supportive, scaffolding situations involving a parent who approves of the child's behaviour.[3]

Second, the more descriptions of her behaviour available to the child, the higher the chance that she will come up with a description she feels like endorsing. Particularly in endorsing a description an agent will profit from her capacities to discern differences in propositional content. Here, the acquisition of linguistic competence will of course provide a tremendous support to take the second step in GTR.

To summarize: this second mode of taking responsibility consists in the agent's articulating the tenor of her behaviour in response to an interlocutor's request to do so. The agent accounts for her behaviour, because she's asked; she makes explicit in some kind of vocabulary the semantic content she takes her behaviour to have.

Commit oneself to a description

The child's response that she was merely following the butterfly – or whatever other response we image her to give in endorsing a description – is likely to elicit a further response by the neighbour. The deontic game of giving and asking for reasons is well on its way. Suppose the neighbour responds with a frown, expressing doubt about the appropriateness of the child's description. Such a response is effectively a request to provide a reason for the description. If the child is capable of moving to a third, again more advanced, mode of taking responsibility, she will at this stage be able to accept this request, which means to accept that endorsing a description entails a commitment to defend the description. Here, I take it, the standards of the True and the Good appear on the scene. To commit onself to a description means to take up the responsibility to show the description to be true to the facts and to be right in the circumstances. I am not assuming, of course, that there are always single, determinate and definitive answers to questions about the True and the Good. But taking up the commitment to defend a description means taking pains to get possible interlocutors to take over the description, and that is just a matter of informing these interlocutors about the standards one takes the formation of beliefs ("Be sure to form true beliefs!") and desires ("Be sure to form right desires!") to meet (Pettit and Smith 1996). The commitment in question is a commitment to a description of a series of events involving the child. Taking up the commitment implies triangulation (Davidson 1982). Three relata are in play: the child, the neighbour, and the events. The child will try to find the neighbour's recognition for her description as adequately being about this series of events. If the child in our example is capable of taking responsibility in this third mode, she will not

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[3] I have touched upon these issues before (Bransen 2002, 2004). However, besides such a normative account of what Schapiro (1999, 734) calls 'an obligation to raise,' it would be worthwhile to survey empirical research on this type of parent-child interaction.

merely have to be able to understand her description as making explicit what she were after in what she did, but she should also be able to understand that the situation might seem to be different from the neighbour's perspective, and that she should try to make explicit what she did in a shared language.

One might wonder how much is implied by this need for a shared language. I think we would need more than a language that's merely shared by these particular two people on this particular occasion, but we will need less than the objective language of science. Of course, these are two radical extremes, but they serve to explain what is involved in the third mode of taking responsibility. Triangulation involves another perspective on the same object. The fact that it is a perspective makes the neighbour in our example in principle replaceable by any other person capable of having a perspective on the series of events in question. The child's mother might come by, or the neighbour's wife, or an accidental bystander, or an impartial policeman, etc. If the child has taken up the commitment to defend her description of what she did, she should accept the task of finding the recognition for her view from any of these and all other possible interlocutors. She need not anticipate, though, on the availability of the absolute, perspectiveless language of science. Triangulation does rule out such a language as inconceivable.

One more thing about the need for a language. What the child does need to be able to take responsibility in this third mode is a shared definition of the situation, shared in the sense that all the interlocutors involved understand the inferences that would follow. Such a piece of meaning might be available, though, without substantial linguistic resources. Ethnomethodological examples show this. One of my favourite examples is about two pedestrians approaching one another on too small a footway to pass without making some accomodations. You will have noticed this all too often yourself: just about the same moment you're ready to make room by going left, the other person does the same... by going right. Frustratingly enough, both of you recognize the other's gesture, try to adapt, just to note once more that the obstruction continues. Here the description one should commit oneself to is given in the accounting attitude that shows itself as an integral part of the behaviour.

By way of summary I should like to note that the third step in GTR entails that the agent has acquired the capacity to understand the inferences interlocutors are allowed to make on the basis of the agent's description of her behaviour, and has accepted to take on the task of providing the reasons needed to justify these inferences.

Being entitled to a description

Suppose the dialogue between the child and the neighbour went on for a few rounds to end up with the neighbour recognizing that agreement would be reached if the child would commit herself to saying something like "I'm sorry I stepped on your bed of violets. I wasn't even aware of the fact that I entered your

garden. All I did was following that nice butterfly." The neighbour's recognition that agreement is within reach is itself a commitment to this description. It is this commitment of the child's interlocutor that gives the child an entitlement to a description. The child can now take full responsibility for her behaviour as an action under the description she is entitled to. Her entitlement makes her responsibility bearable. That is, the agreed upon description of her behaviour provides her with the normative reasons she needs to carry (or one might even say: to "discharge") her responsibility. A couple of things follow.

Something strikingly significant shows up here first. All along the game the child *was* entitled to descriptions. She could have taken on responsibility for her action in the full sense of the word right from the beginning. She could have, because she could have accepted her neighbour's very first description of her behaviour head on. Of course, that would have implied that she would accept having done something wrong – a moral burden we are unlikely to accept just like that. The child's initial inclination not to accept this burden, on whatever grounds (her innocence, her self-esteem, her delight in moving around, the economy of her psyche), started off the deontic game. We might take this as suggesting that somehow the child considered herself to be entitled to a more satisfying description of her behaviour, as if she would have been willing to take responsibility for something more comfortable, her life and its promise of well-being.

A second consequence to note is that entitlements are the reverse side on your score of your interlocutor's commitments. Reasons are articulated in an exchange between people who make explicit their commitments to specific descriptions of sequences of events. The third step of the child, her taking responsibility in the third mode by committing herself to a description, provided the neighbour with his first entitlement, at least within the confines of their specific game of giving and asking for reasons. Of course, in endorsing his description of what he considered to be the child's misdemeanor he may have been assuming that he was entitled to this description. That assumed entitlement was not authorized by the child, to be sure, but allegedly by the neighbour's confidence that his exchanges with his neighbours (a.o. the child's parents), as well as with numerous generalized others (Mead 1934), have given him reason to believe that he is entitled to such a description of people trespassing the bounds of his garden and stepping on his flowers. The neighbour's familiarity with the rules governing such behaviour, as well as the neighbour's understanding of the many reciprocal normative expectations in play, will have given him many entitlements on his score. He is an adult; he is well-informed, and well-equipped to cite reasons to support his attitudes towards his own and others' behaviour. He has acquired the full capacity to take responsibility, which means that on my account he is a minded agent: he knows what he does, and does so knowingly (Frankfurt 1988, Velleman 1989, Mele 1995, Wolf 1990).

A third consequence is that the distinction in authoritative status between child and neighbour is a function of the number of entitlements persons have on their score. People acquire entitlements in a variety of ways from their exchanges with others.[4] Entitlements enable persons to take the appropriateness of their behaviour for granted. That is, entitlements enable persons to act, to behave responsibly. This is the basis for the claim that GTR is the trajectory in virtue of which agents can be said to be *minded*. To be a minded agent, one should be able to take full responsibility for one's behaviour, and one can do so if one has played the deontic game of giving and asking for reasons well enough, and has acquired the appropriate entitlements.

Before turning to a discussion of the problems and promises of GTR in contrast to GBC with respect to their contributions to understanding minded agency, however, I should like to make two more comments about the distinction in authoritative status between children and adults. The fact that the number of entitlements is distributed among adults and children in a thoroughly unequal way makes adults and children play the game of giving and asking for reasons in very different ways. I have elsewhere described the game as open-ended and non-competitive, and as having three different purposes: to gain entitlements, to discern commitments, and to undertake endorsements (Bransen 2002). These purposes differ in importance relative to the deontic statuses on each player's score. For a child the joy of playing is mainly in the acquisition of entitlements, for an adult the joy of playing the game well is primarily a matter of discerning commitments and undertaking endorsements. These differences in how they play the game, i.e. the differences in the kind of moves they are capable of performing, are important determinants of the differences in status determinative of what it means to be a child or an adult if one take these to be status concepts (Schapiro 1999, 717).

There is, however, an obvious difference between adults who, so to say, are under the spell of the commands of parental love[5], and those who can afford to be indifferent (or perhaps even hostile) to the predicament of children. In my example the neighbour is obviously of the second kind. But we all know parents tend to behave very differently. They tend to be supportive and affirmative to the child's behaviour, come what may. In terms of the deontic game I have been discussing this means that parents tend to start off with a serious commitment to approve of the child's behaviour, and to provide descriptions of it that present the child as a lovely, skilled, intelligible, rational and moral (in short: minded) agent. Parents tend to boost their children's self-esteem. And from the point of view of GTR this is rightly so. Acting on this commitment parents provide their

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[4] See Brandom 2000 for an overview. See below for a few words on what this means for a scaffolding type of parent-child interaction.

[5] The phrase intentionally echoes Frankfurt's views of love as entailing volitional necessity (Frankfurt 1999). There is massive empirical evidence that love's commands cast a very wide net when it comes to babies' and infants' appeal to adults' care-giving attitudes.

children with the best resources to acquire entitlements.[6] In virtue of their parents' loving attitude children begin with an almost infinite set of entitlements – indeterminate ones, to be sure, details to be filled in on the spot in response to whatever incoordinate gesture the child happens to make. And every description provided online by parents (i.e. adults that are naturally trustworthy and authoritative) informs the child's self-awareness as a minded agent.

This fourth step concludes my discussion of the steps involved in GTR. An agent who is entitled to a particular description of his behaviour can be said to be capable of taking full responsibility for it as an action under this description (Fischer and Ravizza 1998).

I have drawn a picture in this section of four different modes of taking responsibility children have to acquire to become minded agents. These modes differ in their level of sophistication. A child should first acquire a less advanced mode before it is capable of acquiring a more advanced mode of taking responsibility. I have focussed on the asymmetric deontic statuses of adults and children that play a crucial role both in distinguishing these four modes of taking responsibility and in driving the developmental dynamics that invites, allows and forces children to take steps in the process of GTR. In the next section I shall argue (1) that it seems unlikely that we could improve our understanding of GTR in terms of GBC, and (2) that it makes more sense to think that minded agency is a GTR-dependent property, than to think it is a GBC-dependent property.

5. Responsibility versus Control

The suggestion of the paper so far is that there seem to be at least two different types of trajectories that might play a crucial role in support of the claim that minded agency is a trajectory-dependent property. As the reader will have noticed I spent a much longer section on GTR than on GBC, and my reason is that GTR is in the philosophy of mind and action not as such recognized as a phenomenon relevant to the analysis and explanation of minded agency. Many readers might, however, feel uncomfortable by all this attention to GTR, and might claim that an important role for GTR in analyses of minded agency would be very bad news indeed for anyone interested in a naturalistic account of human agency. Given that naturalism is very much the current orthodoxy in philosophy, I should feel uncomfortable with my sympathy for such a minority view. From a naturalistic point of view there are two notable reasons against an account of action based on GTR. Firstly, such an account seems to imply a serious, principled distinction between human and animal action, a distinction that is problematic in the face of the dominant and convincing evolutionary picture of human nature. And secondly, such an account seems to require normative

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[6] Cf. My way of telling this story in Bransen 2004 does differ in a number of ways from stories that emphasize a parent's duty to raise the child, such as Noggle (2002) and Schapiro (1999, 2003).

features (deontic statuses) as preconditions rather than as products of human agency and that does not seem to fit in a naturalistic conception of agency.

I will in this section review two ways out, available to a naturalist willing to grant me my story about the importance of GTR for understanding minded agency. Both strategies build on the promise of GBC as a naturalistic account. The first option would be to reduce GTR to GBC; the second would be to show that GTR depends on GBC. Both strategies, I argue, are implausible.

Apart from the fact that reduction is a multiply ambiguous notion, it does not seem to be very clear what we could make of a reduction of GTR to GBC. One could try to decompose the process of taking responsibility in an attempt to show it is composed of parts that could successfully be described in terms of controlled bodily movements. It might, however, be far too difficult to tell a convincing and informative story about how the composition of these parts could be understood to generate the specific features characteristic of GTR. Note that the reduction in question here is not the general issue of how to understand minded agency in terms of GBC. We have seen that issue before in section 3 as one of the problems of the project that starts from the assumption that GBC is the relevant trajectory on which minded agency depends. Here the issue is about the relation between GBC and GTR, on the assumption that GTR is the relevant trajectory on which minded agency depends.

An example might work. Learning to speak *in public* is a process we could describe informatively with GTR. It makes sense to maintain that learning to speak in public involves the acquisition of the four modes of taking responsibility I have discussed in the previous section. Learning to speak in public requires someone (1) to acknowledge being an addressee, (2) to take a stance and reflect on how to say what you want to say, (3) to find the means to support your views in the light of possible disagreements, and (4) to gain the entitlement to stand for what you say in public. Obviously, learning to speak in public is a process that also involves bodily control. Someone unable to control their speech organ will be unable to learn to speak in public. But it is very difficult, if not impossible, to imagine what it would look like to build up the process of acquiring the capacity to speak in public merely out of sequences of learning to control your speech organ. Note that the example involves linguistic competence even though its point does not depend on it. For imagine a man who has learned to open doors for women as an instance of taking responsibility. Could we reduce his learning trajectory to a trajectory that merely involves his growth in bodily control? It seems we won't have a chance to do this satisfactorily, i.e. in explanatorily fruitful ways, ways that would not require us to presuppose acquaintance with GTR, and would yet make us understand the patterns of the man's courtly behaviour in scenarios involving doors and women merely in terms of his capacity to control his bodily movements. I conclude, therefore, that an attempt to reduce GTR to GBC is very unpromising.

The examples discussed, however, might seem to suggest another way out. Perhaps reducing GTR to GBC might be impossible. But it might be the case that GTR depends for its success in analysing the trajectory dependency of minded agency on the availability of GBC. That is, there might be a dependency relation between GBC and GTR. Infants might first learn to control their body before they can begin to learn to take responsibility. This is a familiar picture. It seems plausible to assume children should first learn to control their speech organ before they can begin to learn to speak in public (i.e. take responsibility for what they say). A number of strategies is available to those who wish to argue for such a dependency relation between GTR and GBC. One might accept that GTR is needed to account for minded agency as a trajectory-dependent property, but claim that GTR is itself a trajectory-dependent property that depends on GBC. Call that a friendly strategy. A more hostile strategy would be to claim that GTR is not needed to account for the trajectory dependency of minded agency, because GBC can itself take care of that. On such a strategy GTR would be an optional extra that human beings need not (or even do not) pass through to develop full-blooded minded agency. In terms of the example the claim would be that a child might learn to speak without ever learning to speak in public.

The hostile strategy might well be worth pursuing in the present intellectual climate. It is in fact just the strategy discussed in section 3, a strategy many would think offers the best chance in times one feels obliged to downgrade the distinction between human and other kinds of agency. It is a strategy that just tries to leave issues of taking responsibility out of theories of minded agency. But even if one would feel uncomfortable, as I sometimes do, with descriptions of minded agency that seem to involve a serious, almost principled distinction between human and other forms of agency, there is no need to accept a hostile strategy. Even if one does not favour a special status for human agency a friendly strategy might be most promising, or so I should like to argue.

We should distinguish between two interpretations of the main claim of the friendly strategy. Remember that trajectory-dependent properties are vulnerable to future contingency. That is, a trajectory-dependent property may be applied to a temporally relatively non-extended part of the trajectory in virtue of the part's location in the trajectory. This trajectory, the broader, structured, temporally extended sequence of events, might consist of events some of which may happen *after* the time at which the property is instantiated. This implies that GTR may depend on GBC without it being the case that GBC is completed in time *prior to* GTR's appearance on the scene. Taking responsibility for one's behaviour might depend on bodily control even if the growth of bodily control is not yet completed at the time one takes responsibility. Here is an example: a toddler needs some bodily control to say "ca," but she may begin to take responsibility by happily nodding when you ask her "Do you mean 'cat'?" thereby anticipating her further growth of bodily control that would eventually allow her to say just what she means: "cat." Interestingly the example shows that there

seem to be two equally correct, but different descriptions of the toddler's speech act. It was an act of saying 'cat,' and also an act of saying 'ca.' The fact that a typical toddler in appropriate circumstances should like to endorse the first and not the second, if challenged, shows how GTR can play a role in GBC. It is precisely with respect to the speech act's being an event in GTR (and not in GBC) that GTR, *but also* GBC, shows itself to be what Jones calls an "interpretation-sensitive trajectory" (Jones 2008, 274). Endorsing the first description as correct, and rejecting the second as incorrect, requires that the toddler takes the responsibility to support a specific further development of the trajectory that allows her speech act to be indeed, retrospectively, an event of saying 'cat.' The direction within which the trajectory unfolds is in this way sensitive to how parts of the trajectory are interpreted by those who play a role in the trajectory (the child and its interlocutors). The apparent plausibility of the mistaken interpretation of the toddler's speech act as an event of saying 'ca' challenges her to improve the control of her speech organ so as to really say 'cat' and not 'ca' on further occasions. Rightly describing the speech act as an event of saying 'cat' is again a matter of the vulnerability to future contingency of trajectory-dependent properties. Of course no one could rely on the correctness of the first description as evidence for the claim that this person was once able to say 'cat' when it would for instance turn out to be the case that due to a deficiency of this person's speech organ she is unable to pronounce the letter 't' so could never have said 'cat.' Note that the second description, that the toddler said 'ca,' is correct, but not *simpliciter*. It is a correct description of the toddler's speech act, i.e. a description we are entitled to, only within contexts in which it is appropriate to take what Dennett called 'the physical stance' to the toddler's behaviour. In ordinary circumstances we need reasons to take such a stance; i.e. taking up this stance is itself a move in the deontic game of giving and asking for reasons.

Interpreting the dependency relation between GBC and GTR shows that it is not a strictly serial relation. GBC and GTR now appear to be parallel processes, the claim being that a certain level of GBC should be guaranteed for steps in GTR to be possible, *and vice versa*. Call this the parallel claim that could be distinguished from the now apparently not-so-friendly *serial* claim. According to the serial claim GTR is a trajectory an agent can begin to traverse only after having first completed GBC. The serial claim accepts that human agency differs from other types of agency because to appreciate its defining characteristics one needs a story involving GTR. But even if this is so, human agency is, according to this claim, nevertheless in the same ballroom as other types of agency, because it is a further development of a capacity we share with other agents, namely the capacity to control our body.

Whether the parallel or the serial claim applies to human agency will basically be an empirical matter. But once we have distinguished them, the serial claim does not appear to be very plausible. This is clear from the example above. Toddlers begin to take responsibility for what they say long before they control

their speech organ well enough to be entitled to correct descriptions of what they say. They acknowledge the attribution of descriptions of what they say (smiling happily when you ask them whether they meant 'cat'), endorse or reject your descriptions ("Spaghetti?" "Yah, pusdetty!"), and even commit themselves to descriptions they can't bring about (getting very upset because they want 'dam' ('jam') on their bread). An entirely different type of compelling evidence against the serial claim comes from people who need a highly developed mode of bodily control, such as surgeons, dentists, ballet dancers and sportsmen. The refinement of the bodily control sportsmen need to excel in their sports, would simply be impossible without their capacity to take responsibility for all those hours of training.

But if the parallel claim turns out to be the most plausible, something interesting follows, something that might appear to disturb the friend of neo-Humean naturalism (McDowell 1996). If GBC and GTR are parallel trajectories together making up a person's childhood, it does not seem to make much sense to claim that GTR depends on GBC without at the same time claiming that GBC depends on GTR. If this is right, it might help us make sense of the observation that many kinds of bodily control (such as those of sportsmen) would simply be impossible without GTR.[7] This would provide grounds to argue that although there are lots of fascinating questions about agents' control of their body (How do they do that? – Lee 2005), asking questions about *minded* agency would be primarily a matter of asking questions about GTR as the trajectory on which minded agency depends. Stated differently the claim would be that characteristic minded actions, i.e. actions we would pick out as paradigms to show the distinction between what we *do* and what happens to us, would be actions we could not describe correctly without implying GTR.

6. Coda

This concludes my argument against the attempt to look for an account of minded agency as a trajectory dependent property without accepting that GTR would be the trajectory on which it depends. Of course, this is much less than a positive argument for, let alone a convincing account of minded agency as a GTR-dependent property. But let me summarize the steps I have taken by sketching the kind of story I should like to favour about what it means to learn to act, stressing that it requires selfhood and a normative framework.

My first step has been to suggest to Midgley's creator that if he really should like to create free beings capable of full-blown action, he should begin with children (*and adults[8]*), creatures that need *and have* a care-giving

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[7] I leave the issue undiscussed here, but the kind of effortless action that interests psychologists interested in *flow*, seems to be a paradigm. Cf. Velleman 2007.
[8] The need for adults in my story might be considered an argument for the fellow creators' claim that the project is philosophically confused. I obviously need a further story about the

environment populated by adults. The idea has been that the vast difference between the deontic statuses of children and adults allow and force a child *to take a stance*. Unpacking this idea of taking a stance requires the concepts of selfhood and normativity. During childhood human beings are allowed and forced to locate themselves in a normative framework. In certain ways the idea derives from Taylor: being an agent means being oriented in moral space (Taylor 1989). It requires selfhood as well as normativity: a perspective on one's own behaviour as (in)appropriate.

My second step has been to propose that minded agency should be understood as a trajectory-dependent property. This led me to consider two trajectories of which it would make sense to claim that they mainly take place during childhood: GBC, or the growth of bodily control, and GTR, or the growth in taking responsibility. The point of this step has been to exploit the two fascinating features of childhood, both the difference in deontic status, and the dynamics of development.

The bulk of the paper, then, consisted of a description of GTR as consisting of a succession of four progressive, ever more advanced modes of taking responsibility. This description was needed to provide us with the means to begin to think of full responsibility as a sophisticated capacity that develops over time.

My final step has been to argue that the prospects of understanding GTR in terms of GBC are not very promising. This means that if minded agency is a trajectory-dependent property it will depend at least as much on GTR as on GBC. One consequence of this is that it should be possible, and that I claim it to make explanatory sense, to describe certain early developments in childhood in terms of GTR rather than in terms of GBC. And indeed that is what I claim: learning to act has often more to do with matters of selfhood and normativity than with matters of bodily control, even where it is easy to overlook this. The example I discussed can be used to support this claim.

It makes explanatory sense to think of the toddler's acquisition of the capacity to speak as primarily – both in the sense of what comes first as in the sense of what is essential – a matter of learning to speak *in public*. The child who says 'ca' is not just training her speech organ in order to acquire control over her body, but she's primarily engaged in communication, locating herself in a normative framework of people who mean something by what they say. Of course infants and toddlers babble a lot, just uttering sounds and noises using all the muscles involved in speech. I'm not claiming that there is no long and important story to tell about the low-level development of gaining control over one's body. But learning to say 'cat' and 'car,' and learning to say them appropriately on different (i.e. on the *right*) occasions, is a matter of

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evolution of a species characterised by childhood to escape from a vicious circularity. Cf. Griffith and Stotz 2000. Bell 2010 does a great job in exploring an evolutionary and biological story of adulthood.

communication, of exchanging sounds in an attempt to take a stance. Just try it out. Here is a simple experiment. Look together with your toddler at a very smart-looking smashingly red car in which a cat is very dimly visible behind the window. Respond with "Oh, yes, a cat!" when your toddler says 'ca.' Her nods show enough! The child is taking position, she is taking a stance, she is speaking *in public*, right from the start, long before she's capable of controlling her speech organ well enough to speak correctly in the sense of making the appropriate pronounciations. So what she tries to do, what she's engaged to learn, is to perform behaviour we need to analyse in terms of GTR. Her performances are proto-actions, not because they are early attempts to display controlled bodily movements, but because they are early attempts to take responsibility for her stance in the normative framework of human society.

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