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Saplings or Caterpillars? Trying to Understand Children's Wellbeing

PATRICK TOMLIN

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ABSTRACT *Is childhood valuable? And is childhood as, less, or more, valuable than adulthood? In this essay I first delineate several different questions that we might be asking when we think about the 'value of childhood', and I explore some difficulties of doing so. I then focus on the question of whether childhood is good for the person who experiences it. I argue for two key claims. First, if childhood wellbeing is measured by the same standards as adulthood, then children are worse off than adults. Second, if childhood and adulthood wellbeing are measured by different standards, then we cannot compare them, and children are neither better off nor worse off than adults. This has some counter-intuitive implications, such as we do not harm persons by depriving them of a childhood, nor by keeping them as children for elongated periods.*

I

What makes children's lives go well? And are their lives as good, better, or worse than the lives of the adults they will become? These are the questions I seek to address in this essay. But I will spend quite a bit of the essay reflecting on these questions indirectly. That is because I want to first lay out several different questions we might ask in trying to make comparative assessments of the value or goodness of children's and adults' lives, before focusing in on one in particular. It is also because I will spend some time reflecting on why it is difficult to make progress on these issues. Ordinarily, it is not worth flagging up that moral and political philosophy is a discipline in which it is hard to make progress – as philosophers our daily lives are struggles with that fact. But in this case I think it is worth highlighting because I think that there are some particular difficulties in this area that may be hidden from view.

There is an oversimplification in this paper which I should note at the outset. In this paper I talk of 'children' and 'adults'. This oversimplifies for three reasons. First, the average five year old is very different from the average six month old. In other words, there are important variations within a childhood (and, indeed, adulthood). Second, it is not clear where exactly 'childhood' ends and 'adulthood' begins. For now, for 'child' imagine a young child – under four, say. For 'adult', imagine someone who is over thirty. The bits in between can wait. Third, all this talk of 'the average' masks huge variances in the capabilities and wellbeing of both children and adults. There is perhaps no sensible answer to many of the comparisons we might want to make between 'childhood' and 'adulthood', generically conceived – it depends on the individuals in question. But there are specific features of childhood and adulthood, and I will try to focus on those. Imagine reasonably good childhoods and adulthoods. We'll start our comparisons from there.

II

Some recent work on the philosophy of childhood encourages us to think about 'the value of childhood', and in particular whether childhood is intrinsically good, or whether it is valuable merely insofar as it leads to adulthood. But I think that this 'simple' question can fairly quickly deteriorate into several distinct questions as soon as we start to ask 'good for who?' and 'good in what way?'

I will outline here six different groups of questions we might ask about the comparative value of childhood and adulthood. To start, consider this question:

1. Is being a child good *for the child*, or would the child be better off being an adult? We can call this the question of *internal value.*

But alongside this question about how well a life is going 'from the inside' so to speak, we can also ask a series of questions about the value, importance, or status of a life from the outside. Such as:

2. i. Are children as inherently valuable as adults? ii. Do they have the same kind of moral status?

Even if a child's life is going badly, its life may make the world go better than if it were an adult, or it may be more worthy of respect than an adult. We can call these questions of *external value*.

Here's one way to see the difference between question 1 and those outlined at 2. Imagine two adults: Jimmy and Jen. Jimmy's life is going well, but Jen's is not. Jimmy is happy, wealthy and healthy.[1] Jen is none of these things. Jimmy's life is *going better from the inside*, he has more individual wellbeing. But that need not necessarily affect our judgment that Jimmy and Jen's lives are of equal value, or that they retain equal moral standing.

The distinction between questions 1 and 2, and between internal and external value is, I think, really important when we try to compare the lives of adults and children. That is because when people present children as 'imperfect adults' who need to be helped to overcome the experience of being a child, the kinds of things they point toward children lacking – rationality, capacity for moral responsibility, and so on – are things that are often thought to contribute toward making adults' lives *important or valuable or of a certain kind of status*, and *not* (necessarily) the sorts of thing that we often think are what make adults' lives *go well* (such as happiness, health, and so on). It may be that children's lives are better than those of adults from the inside, but adults have more (intrinsic) external value or importance.[2] It may also be that, because of that fact, we have duties to turn children into adults.

I worry that the nascent debate on the value of childhood is insufficiently attentive to the potential distinctiveness of these two questions. For example, Samantha Brennan criticizes Tamir Schapiro's view of children as being in a 'predicament'. Brennan appears to interpret this as being a thesis about how well children's lives are going, and criticizes the claim that children's lives are to be understood purely as 'unfinished adults'. But we need to keep the two questions separate in our minds here. Adults might be more valuable or have a different standing than children (external value), without their lives necessarily going better (internal value). Indeed, I read Schapiro's

claim as being about what we are *owed* qua adults and children, especially in terms of respect and control over our own lives – *not* a claim about how well or badly children's lives are going.[3] Indeed, Shapiro notes that the (parallel) Kantian argument from state of nature to political society *does not* rely on the claim that political society is intrinsically *better*. Similarly, I don't think she (necessarily) thinks childhood is intrinsically inferior to adulthood from the inside, simply that there is an internal pressure from childhood to ascend to adulthood (which is a higher moral status).[4]

That said, our answers to questions of internal value and external value need not be fully distinct. One way to collapse the distinction is to claim that part of what it is for your life to go well is to be a certain kind of moral being with a certain kind of moral status.[5] Then we might say: these are the things that make an adult life go well, but it is also better for you (in and of itself) to be an adult. Another way would be to claim that what makes your life go well is also what gives you external value. For example, some utilitarians think that happiness makes lives go well, and also that lives with more happiness in them are more (externally) valuable – they make the world go better.

Here is a third way that we might contrast the value of the lives of children and the lives of adults:

3. Are children instrumentally valuable for other people? Do they have the same, more, or less, instrumental value as adults? Call this the question of *external instrumental value*.

Again, when thinking about children, I think it is very important to consider this kind of value. Children, qua children, make the lives of (at least many) adults better. And they make the lives of other children better, and children having better lives leads to still more adults having better lives.

This is important because when we ask, as I will later, whether we'd be better off skipping our childhoods, this isn't the end of the 'value of childhood' question. I might consistently believe that *I'd* be better off having never been a child, and instead living my whole life as an adult (keeping length constant), but that I'd be worse off if there

were no children. I might therefore judge 'a life in which I was a child and there are other children' better than 'a life in which I wasn't a child and there are no children', *even if* I think childhood a regrettable state for the individual who experiences it.

A further question concerns *internal instrumental value*. This concerns the way in which childhood and adulthood may affect one another. Consider an adult who arrives into the world as an adult, and one who becomes an adult through the normal route of childhood. We might think the second adult's life *qua adult* is enhanced by her previous experience of childhood – it might be better to be an adult who was a child than an adult who was not. More controversially, it may be better *qua child* to be a child who is going to be an adult than one who is not.

4. Is adulthood better for having been a child? And is childhood better when followed (or presumed to be followed) by adulthood? Call this the question of *internal instrumental value*.

Another question concerns the propriety of the kinds of comparisons we are considering – especially those of internal value (i.e., question 1). We might decide that we *cannot* compare children's and adults' lives. (This would be a sort of an answer to question 1, and one to which I will return). But alternatively we might think that while we *can* compare these lives, there is a sense in which we *should not*. For example, Jeff McMahan thinks it obvious that a chimpanzee's life is going worse than ours. However, he also denies that the chimp suffers any misfortune.[6] This is not because the chimp is not worse off than us (he is), but because he isn't an appropriate kind of being to compare with us. The chimp is not in the same comparison class. 'Misfortune' is a quasi-technical term that McMahan reserves for those who are worse off *compared with those to whom they are properly compared.* This raises the question of whether children and adults are properly considered to be part of the same comparison class.

5. Even if they *can* be compared, *should* the lives of children and adults be compared, such that one or the other can be thought to suffer a comparative *misfortune*? Call this the *comparison class* question.

Finally, and relatedly, there are different purposes for which we can compare how well individual lives are going, and these may demand different answers. To see this, consider the 'resourcist' answer to the 'equality of what?' question.[7] Resourcists seek to compare how well people's lives are going in terms of their (internal and external) resources. But this does not mean that they think a good life is (simply) one that is full of resources – resource holdings are not proposed as an answer to question 1. Rather, resources are generally useful in pursuing our own conception of the good, and so are considered to be the metric or currency of justice. In other words, resourcists are seeking to answer the question of how well a life is going *for the purposes of justice*, and they are *not* seeking to answer the question of how well a life is actually going.

This gives us our final question, to be held to be distinct from question 1:

6. How do we measure how well lives (including, perhaps, children's lives) are going *for the purposes of justice*? Call this the *metric of justice* question.

In my view, it is important to keep the distinctness of these six questions (or at least the possibility of their distinctness) in mind when thinking about the value or goodness of childhood. I think we will be able to provide a more careful and nuanced account of childhood's goodness (or comparative lack thereof) by keeping these distinct questions (and the conceptual distinctions which they feed off) in mind. Since debates about the goods of childhood are gathering increasing attention (as this special issue attests), we will do well, collectively, to be precise about which question(s) we are seeking to answer.

III

In the remainder of this paper, I want to focus on the first question – the question of internal value. Before I proceed to offer some reflections on that question, I would first like to say something about why reflecting on, and answering, it is a lot more difficult than we might be tempted to think.

If I were to ask you what it is like to be a fly, or a horse, I'd wager you'd say you had little or no idea. But I think many of us think we have a pretty good idea of what it is like to be a child. After all, *we used to be children*. I think this fact – that we used to be children – is both a useful resource and a potential pitfall in thinking about childhood, and the values of childhood. In order to know what is good for children, I think we need a sense of what kinds of things children are, and what their lives are like, and can be like, *from the inside.* It's tempting to think we already know this, for not only have we been round kids, we used to *be* kids, and we have memories of being children.

There is a general problem of trying to imagine what it is like to be other kinds of being. This is exposed in Thomas Nagel's famous essay 'What is it like to be a Bat?':

> Our own experience provides the basic material for our imagination, whose range is therefore limited. It will not help to try to imagine that one has webbing on one's arms, which enables one to fly around at dusk and dawn catching insects in one's mouth; that one has very poor vision, and perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals; and that one spends he day hanging upside down by one's feet in an attic. In so far as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for me to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task. I cannot perform it either by imagining additions to my present experience, or by imagining segments gradually subtracted from it, or by imagining some combination of additions, subtractions, and modifications.[8]

Nagel's point is that I can put myself in other *people*'s shoes – we are similar enough that I can imagine what it would be like to me, but in their circumstances. But I can't imagine what it is like to be a bat – I could imagine being a person with bat-like qualities, but the fundamental *batness* of a bat would remain mysterious to me.

I think something similar is true of trying to imagine what it is like to be a child, especially a very young child. However, this is not quite for the reasons that Nagel gives here. That is because I have *experiences* and *memories* of being a child, so it isn't my lack of experience that restricts epistemic access. However, when I, here and now, try to access those experiences and memories, or to consider them, I immediately employ cognitive resources and concepts that are completely alien to children. For

example, I have a strong memory of being frightened by my father shaving off his beard when I was four. Yet when I try to consider how I felt, what it was like to be that frightened little boy, I immediately begin to think *like an adult.* I will use concepts and nuances and language that were unavailable to that four year old boy. Perhaps I am unusual here, but I genuinely believe that I don't know what it was like to be a small child, even though I have memories of childhood. And when I try to think about it in order to try to find out, I find myself confirming that suspicion, because the very act of thinking involves using faculties that small children do not have. There is a danger that the fact that we were children leads us to be overconfident about our abilities to see childhood from the inside. This is not to say that children are as mysterious to us as bats – but they may be more like bats than we tend to think.

A further complication in trying to figure out what childhood is like, and what kinds of value it might have, stems from the fact that childhood is a combination of two things: being a certain kind of being, intellectually and physically; and being comparatively new to the world.[9] When we think of what childhood is like, or when we try to think of what may or may not be valuable about childhood, is it possible or desirable to separate these two things? For example, a seemingly useful way to think about whether childhood is good for us is to imagine (as I will in the next section) two lives of equal length, but with one lived entirely as an adult, and the other a normal life, lived as child and adult. But when we imagine this childhood-less life, are we to imagine that the permanent adult is plonked on earth as an adult (in terms of physical and intellectual capacity) but as new to the world, like Mork from *Mork & Mindy*? This comparison would test whether *being a child* (physically and intellectually) is of value, but much of what the new-to-the-world adult would experience would be *like* what childhood is like. She would still need to find out about herself, her likes and dislikes, to come to understand what is in the world, and her place in it. Childhood is in part exciting because of *discovery*, but discovery is about being new to the world, not about physically and intellectually being a child. Relatedly, from a negative perspective, small children spend quite a lot of time being ill. This is because their immune systems haven't yet come across many viruses, and so each new virus will make them ill. But this, again, is to do with being new to the world, not being a child. It is hard to

know whether we should view being new to the world as something that happens to children, and something that we should seek to strip out of, or control for in, our thinking about being a child, or whether it is internal to what being a child is. It is also hard to know whether we can separate the two, even if we want to.

Finally, we should bear in mind that not only are we used to people being children before they are adults, many of us are deeply emotionally invested in the idea that our children are having good lives. We love our children *as children*, and we love being parents *to children*, and so the thought that it might be better for them to skip childhood seems deeply inhumane and sad. We want to believe *both* that we can have children (and keep them as children for a decent length of time) *and* that this is in their best interests – that they are having good lives right now. As ever, we should be wary of (though not averse to) arriving at the moral conclusions we happen to want.

IV

In order to begin to focus on our comparative question about the *internal* value of childhood and adulthood, I want to briefly present two cases that (for me at least) generate conflicting intuitions:

> *Left as a Child*: Erin is given pills to prevent her from becoming an adult. Aged 55, she continues to be a child, both physically and mentally. She is well cared for.
>
> *Deprived of Childhood*: Dane is given pills to speed up his development. Aged 6, he is physically and mentally a fully-grown man.[10]

If, like me, you think Erin has been harmed, this would seem to suggest that childhood is inferior to adulthood – our judgment is that Erin would be better off being an adult. This is the sort of view put forward by Loren Lomasky, who claims that 'were one condemned…to remain a child throughout one's existence…it would be a personal misfortune of the utmost gravity.'[11]

Erin's case and Lomasky's view seem to point toward what has been called the Aristotelian view of childhood.[12] Under this view, children are 'defective adults', and it is our job as parents (and perhaps more widely as adult members of society) to turn them into adults. Childhood is a (comparatively) regrettable but ordinarily necessary stage on the way to personhood. I'm going to call this the *Sapling View*. Saplings are just smaller, weedier versions of trees.[13] They are (I will stipulate) in some sense inferior to trees, but they will become trees. Note that Lomasky argues that it is a *personal* tragedy – i.e., it is a tragedy *for Erin* that she remains a child. That is, he sees this as a question of internal value.

However, if, like me, you think Dane has also been harmed, then this would seem to suggest that a life with a full childhood is preferable to a life of equal length of adulthood only. Many of us feel that children 'grow up too fast' and try to keep a time in our children's lives when they can just 'be children'.[14] This may be taken to suggest that childhood is *better than* adulthood. If Dane is harmed by being made an adult, this suggests that he would be better off being left a child. I will call this the *Fruit View*. Fruit gets worse with age. According to this view, so do human beings – we rot as we age.

There is another view, which can account for both of these intuitions. We can call it the *Diversity View*. Under the Diversity View, a life in which we are both children and adults is better than one in which we are just one or the other. Plus, it is better when we are children and adults for certain time periods – and the period for which we usually think people should be children is (in my own experience) roughly the period for which we are children (i.e., five years is too short, twenty five years too long). Whilst I find this view attractive, I am suspicious of it. That is because it seems to trade on our implicit bias toward the normal.[15] It would be fantastically fortuitous if nature had selected the *very best* outcome for us. There are all sorts of ways that nature fails us – disease, pain, and so on – so why think She has smiled on us especially kindly here?

Our fondness for the normal can also help explain our intuitions in the Erin and Dane cases. Erin and Dane would both be deeply abnormal if we chose to give them their

respective pills. In addition, this abnormality would make their lives worse in ways that have nothing to do with childhood or adulthood per se: Dane would have a hard time associating with and connecting with people who had had full childhoods, whilst Erin's friends would forever be leaving her behind, as they grew up and moved on. But what if the decision were about a whole generation? – we could make a whole generation grow up faster, or retard the development of a whole generation. When we consider things from this perspective, my sympathy for Dane decreases somewhat. I think it would be a crying shame if children were only children for a very short time, but I wonder if it would be a crying shame for parents more than anything else.

My sympathy for Dane slides further when I try to overcome the potential 'status quo' bias, by applying Nick Bostrom and Toby Ord's 'Reversal Test':

> *The Reversal Test:* When a proposal to change a certain parameter is thought to have bad overall consequences, consider a change to the same parameter in the opposite direction. If this is also thought to have bad overall consequences, then the onus is on those who reach these conclusions to explain why our position cannot be improved through changes to this parameter. If they are unable to do so, then we have reason to suspect that they suffer from status quo bias.[16]

In this case, we can imagine that humans ordinarily live their whole lives as adults. Would we have reason to give them a period where they become like children? For example, imagine, at the ends of such lives, we could give people a pill which ensured that they had a period of ten years or more where their mental and physical capacities deteriorated into those of children.[17] Would we give people that pill? It seems doubtful, to say the least. We spend billions of pounds trying to combat 'illnesses' in which something like this happens. Why imagine that inferior intellectual and physical ability is a personal tragedy at the end of a life, but a boon at its beginning?

V

So far we have tried to consider the comparative internal value of childhood and adulthood. We (or at least I) seem to have conflicting intuitions. In order to try to make progress, we need to consider what the goods of being a child are. Believing

there to be goods of being a child does not imply any particular answer to the comparative question. Even if we conclude that childhood has less internal value than adulthood, unless we conclude that children (qua children) have lives not worth living, their lives must have *some* internal value (and even if children's lives are not worth living, their lives may contain some – outweighed – internal value).

At this point, it will be useful to distinguish between some different (general) positions we might take on the goods of childhood and the goods of adulthood, and the relationships between them. In her 'The Goods of Childhood', Samantha Brennan states that the first question of such an enquiry is whether there are 'childhood specific' goods. On this question, we can outline three broad positions:

A. There are no distinctive childhood goods – what is good for adults is good for children.

B. What makes childhood and adult lives go well differs.[18] There are four possible sub-views here:
    i. Childhood goods are a sub-set of adult goods
    ii. Adult goods are a sub-set of childhood goods
    iii. Adult and childhood goods overlap
    iv. Childhood and adult goods are completely different

C. There are distinctive childhood goods, in that there are certain goods that only children are able to access, or children are better at accessing. These things *would* be good for adults, but adults are in general poor at accessing them.[19]

Brennan's case for 'the goods of childhood' is neutral across all three of these positions. Childhood specific goods, for Brennan, seems to mean just 'goods enjoyed in childhood' – goods which mean that children have lives that are good, and are not just valuable as potential adults.[20] Brennan does, however, note the distinction between A on the one hand, and B and C on the other, and she speculates that 'There is a certain kind of play that seems unique to childhood and which it's hard to make up later in life if missed out on.' But this claim is ambiguous between B and C. Play might be a

good ‘unique to childhood’ in that it is something that only children can access, but which *would* be good for adults if they were able to play in that way, or it might only be good for children.

In addition to these positions, there is a variant on A. That is a position in which the *ultimate* goods for children and adults are the same, but the intermediate goods which will help them access those ultimate goods are different. For example, both children and adults’ ultimate good may be happiness. But they may need different things to be happy – adults need freedom, whilst children need to be controlled. Following G.A. Cohen, we may call this level of intermediate goods ‘midfare’[21]:

D. There are no distinctive ultimate childhood goods – what is ultimately good for adults is ultimately good for children. But children and adults have different midfare goods.

In this list of possible positions, A, C and D all accept that what makes adults’ lives go well is (ultimately) also what makes children’s lives go well. Only B envisages the possibility that there ought to be a *fundamental* distinction between our accounts of childhood and adult wellbeing.

VI

If A, C, or D of the above positions is adopted, then children’s lives should ultimately be judged by the same standards as adult lives. Some recent work has tried to get us to see that children’s lives as not *merely* bad adult lives – for example, there may be goods that are good for adults but that children are especially adept at accessing. This may well be true. Nevertheless, we must be careful not to romanticize childhood. In order to compare children’s lives and adult’s lives we need to not only consider in what ways children’s lives go well, but in what ways they go badly. Once we think of those, I find it very difficult to believe that children’s lives are not going badly in comparison with adults’ lives if, as we are imagining here, what makes children’s lives and adults’ lives go well are the same. If children’s lives are to be judged by adult standards, then Dane is made better off by being given his pill. In other words, if we

judge children's and adults' lives by the same standards, children are *Saplings*. That is because the following conditions characterise children's lives.

1. Children are utterly dominated. If we concede that being dominated is bad for people, then children's lives are going badly in one important respect: children are extensively dominated. I think it is a (very weighty) personal good to be free from domination. The happy and playful slave has a bad life. I therefore think that if we are to judge children's lives by the same standards as those by which we judge adults', the distinctive goods of childhood are unlikely to outweigh the badness of being dominated.

It may be argued that I've missed the point here. Non-domination is only good for those capable of using their freedom in certain ways, or who need it in certain ways. That is what I think, too, but then I think we're saying that children and adults are different kinds of beings and we need to evaluate their lives differently. That is response B (from the A-D list above), which I consider in the next section.

Something else that might be said is that interference is only domination, and therefore only bad for us, when it is arbitrary, and the interference children experience is non-arbitrary.[22] There are two things to say to this. First, it does not follow from the fact that interference is only *justified* when it is not non-arbitrary that it is good, or not bad, for us when it is non-arbitrary. It may be good for us all things considered, but it might still be bad for us qua interference. Children need to be interfered with and controlled in order to access all kinds of goods. For example, children have little say in what and when they eat, and this is because we know that certain foods are good for them, and that they need to eat. It is in their interests, all-things-considered, to be controlled in this way. But I can get the same benefits *and* remain free from control. Isn't that better? Wouldn't *my* life be going worse if I needed to be interfered with in order to receive these goods?

Second, it is not obvious that the interference children experience is non-arbitrary. It may be in their interests, but that is not sufficient to make interference non-arbitrary. For Philip Pettit, in order for power to be non-arbitrary, it must be forced to track the perceived interests of those on whom it is imposed.[23] Are the powers we have over our

children limited in this way? They are subject to legal restraint, which is in turn under democratic control. But children are not represented in that process. If the UK were to run France, and track the interests of the French, and subject its policy to democratic control (in the UK Parliament), we would still think the French were dominated. If children *can* be dominated, I think they are. If domination is bad for adults, and if children's lives are to be judged by the same standards, then I think this is a way in which children's lives are going badly.[24]

2. Children spend a lot of time being unhappy. Happiness may not be the only good, as utilitarians believe, but it is surely part of what makes a life go well. Happiness has recently been claimed to be a special good of childhood, in that children are alleged to be especially good at accessing happiness, and we do of course like to think of children as care-free and happy little souls, untroubled by life's pressures and constraints. Of course, it is undeniable that children are often deliriously happy. According to Anca Gheaus, children

> have a remarkable ability to enjoy life. They can take more pleasure than adults in their sensations, ideas, bodies, people and places; they are more capable than adults of wholehearted fun and laughter. Also, most children seem less susceptible to some kinds of misery: They rarely, if ever, feel tired with life.[25]

Gheaus cites the psychologist Alison Gopnik as saying that to perceive the world like a baby is like 'being in love in Paris for the first time after you've ever had three double espressos.'[26] But as anyone who has been young and in love and in Paris, or has been around a deliriously happy child, knows: both are likely to end in tears. The point is, while children are often happy little souls, they also spend a lot of their time deeply upset – much more time, I think, than most adults do. When was the last time you found yourself uncontrollably sobbing? For most adults, this is a relatively rare occurrence. For young children, it is part of everyday life. So, while children may be excellent at accessing happy moments, the flip side of that is that they are often upset.

You may be tempted to discount the fact that children cry so much. You might be tempted to do so on one (or both) of two bases. The first is that children may simply cry more easily than adults – the link between their being upset and crying is on more

of a hair trigger than for adults. So, their crying is not evidence of their being *more upset*, just evidence of them *outwardly showing their emotions more readily*.[27] But if that is the case, why think children especially happy? – perhaps the same is true for those moments of unbridled joy we all love to witness in our kids, perhaps they just *seem* especially happy. Anca Gheaus claims that we adults have been socialized into displaying our happy moments but not our despair.[28] There is probably some truth to this, and I am straying outside the philosopher's comfort zone here, but I don't think it captures the whole difference between children and adults – children are, I think, simply more emotionally volatile. They seem genuinely deeply upset by many things in ways that I think most adults (whose lives are not scarred by depression) are not.

The second reason we might discount children being so upset is that the things they get upset about often don't really matter. The blog 'Reasons my son is crying' offers excellent examples of this.[29] It features pictures of children in floods of tears with explanations as to what has made them so upset. Here are some examples:

- "I told him he could not take his unwrapped tampon out to run errands."
- "We told him that his dinosaur is blue." (His dinosaur is blue).
- "He cried because his Nutella waffle was folded in half. Then he ate it and cried again because it was gone."
- "I let him play on the grass"
- "The postman didn't have any mail for us today."
- "I told her she couldn't stab her twin sister with a pair of scissors."
- "The polka-dot shirt she asked to wear has polka-dots on it."
- "Jim Morrison was a boy (and not a girl like she thought)."

We may be tempted to think this is a good feature of children's lives. We put ourselves in their shoes and think 'imagine the most upsetting thing in my life was that I discovered that Jim Morrison was a boy – wow, things would be going pretty well for me!' But the fact that children get (or at least seem) deeply upset about things that don't really matter is not necessarily a reason to doubt that their being (or at least seeming) deeply upset is not evidence of their lives not going well. Rather, it seems to be *a further way* in which their lives are not going well:

3. Children care deeply about things that really don't matter. Remember, we are imagining here that what makes a child's life go well is the same as what makes an adult's life go well. Imagine an adult uncontrollably crying over any of these things, or about whether her cutlery was orange or red. You'd think them unbalanced, and that, in a certain respect, their life was not going well. So, not only do I think that, *judged by adult standards*, children's lives are going less well on account of how much they cry and are upset, what *makes* them upset also makes me think that their lives are going less well.

VII

Let us now turn to the second of the four views outlined above, the view that says that children and adults lives go well in different ways – what makes a child's life go well is not co-extensive with what makes an adult's life go well. I am inclined toward this view. This is in part because I place a very high value on personal freedom and non-domination in thinking about what makes an adult life go well. These kinds of values matter so much, I think, because of certain capacities that adults have. Paternalism, whilst sometimes justifiable toward adults, is always pro tanto bad for those who have certain kinds of capacities. It is not bad for children, who lack these capacities, or do not possess them to the same degree. We may hope to give children some degree of personal freedom, but not all interference is bad when it comes to children. Further, it just seems implausible to impose the same standards in measuring how well my life is going and how well a two year old's life is going – we are such different creatures. And finally the leading theories of adult wellbeing seem to do a poor job of capturing our intuitions when applied to children.[30]

My aim here is not to argue for this view. Rather, in this section, I want to argue that if we take this view, then we shouldn't think that being turned from a child into an adult *makes an individual's life go better or worse*, rather it involves *turning them from one kind of thing into another*. I will label this view the C*aterpillar View*, since caterpillars become butterflies which (I will stipulate) are fundamentally different kinds of things, with different lives and different goods. Unlike the *Sapling View*, on which childhood

is an inferior version of adulthood, the *Caterpillar View* says that children and adults are just different kinds of things. The *Caterpillar View* leads us to a rather strange conclusion: neither Erin nor Dane are (necessarily) harmed, since being turned from one thing into another is not the sort of thing that can benefit or harm a person.

To argue this is to deny John Stuart Mill's famous claim that 'It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.'[31] To challenge Mill's claim, first consider Roger Crisp's version of the human/pig comparison, in his 'Haydn and the Oyster' example:

> Imagine you are a soul in heaven, waiting for a life on Earth. By the time your turn comes around, the angel only has two lives left – the life of the composer Joseph Haydn and that of an oyster. Besides composing some wonderful music and influencing the evolution of the symphony, Haydn will meet with success and honour in his own lifetime, be cheerful and popular, travel and gain much enjoyment from field sports. The oyster's life is far less exciting. Though this is a rather sophisticated oyster, its life will only consist of mild sensual pleasure, rather like that experienced by humans floating very drunk in a warm bath.[32]

Notice that Crisp makes explicit what Mill leaves implicit – that in order for experience *a* (being Haydn/human) to be better than experience *b* (being an oyster, or a pig) *for some being* there has to be *some being* which is theoretically capable of experiencing *a* and *b* (e.g., some being who could be a human *or* an oyster). In Crisp's example, it is a soul. You may think that the 'soul in heaven' element of this example is superfluous, it just makes the comparison between an oyster's life and Haydn's especially vivid. But I think it is absolutely central to the example, and stripped of the religious background, the example (and the comparison) makes no sense. Is it better *for me* to remain a person or become an oyster? That question doesn't make sense unless we assume the following: that the oyster will *also* be me. This is because of the following principle:

> The Survival Condition: In order to judge whether some 'new life' will be a better *for me*, *I* must be able to live the new life: I must be able to survive the change. If I cannot, bringing about the 'new life' is bringing about the equivalent of my death.[33]

If, like me, you don't believe in souls, then it is questionable whether there is any such thing that could be a human being (let alone Haydn specifically) *or* an oyster. There are people and there are oysters. Being a human being or an oyster is so central to identity that identity cannot survive the change from person to oyster (or person to frog, for any fairy-tale witches considering that punishment). Indeed, even staying within the same kind of being, I don't think identity can survive some changes. For example, it doesn't seem to make sense to think that it would be better *for me* if I were, say, David Beckham. Beckham's life may be better than mine, but in order for it to be better *for me* to be him, it must be possible for me to become him and still be me.

What relevance does this have for our discussion of changing from childhood to adulthood? Well, you might believe that identity can't survive the change from childhood to adulthood – being a child and being an adult are such fundamentally different things that it doesn't make sense to say that I am the same being who had the childhood I tend to think of as 'mine'. However, neither psychological nor physical approaches to identity seem to support such a conclusion. I was a child. The butterfly was a caterpillar.[34]

So, I want to argue for an additional principle:

> The Type of Being Condition: In order for some change to be better or worse *for me* then the change must not render me such that a fundamentally different account of wellbeing applies to me. And in order for possible future *a* to be better *for me* than possible future *b,* the same account of wellbeing must apply to the being that I will be in *a* and the being that I will be in *b.*

The claim here is that even when identity survives some change, if that change renders one an altogether different kind of being, with a different account of wellbeing attached to it, then it isn't better *for you* to become that new kind of being, you have simply become another kind of being. (Or, if you are choosing between future *a* and future *b*, future *b* can only be better *for you* than future *a* if you'll be the same kind of being in future *a* and future *b*.)

I keep talking of a 'kind of being'. What do I mean by this? For our purposes, beings are of the same kind when the same (fundamental) account of wellbeing applies to them. They differ when different (fundamental) accounts of wellbeing apply to them.[35] You might believe that we should measure all beings' wellbeing in the same way – for example, by measuring their happiness according to some physical measure (e.g., measures of serotonin). In that case, all beings are the same kinds of being. The issue of whether you'd be better off being an oyster would make sense (as long as identity would also survive), and would come down to whether oysters or people do better on the physical measure. The position this section explores (that what makes children's and adults' lives go well differs, at the fundamental level) explicitly denies that all beings share the same account of wellbeing. It claims that children and adults are different kinds of being (in the relevant sense).[36]

My claim here is that if children and adults are different kinds of being, since they have fundamentally different accounts of wellbeing, then there is no more ultimate account of wellbeing to which we could appeal in assessing whether children or adults have better lives. This is why I believe that once we accept that there are childhood-specific goods, we are required to say that neither Dane nor Erin are harmed (or benefitted) by the pills they are given. That is, we are not harmed, or benefitted, just by being made to continue to be, or turned into, a certain kind of being (unless it were against our wishes, and preference-satisfaction were a kind of wellbeing for that kind of being), since our wellbeing is to be settled by reference to an account of wellbeing tailored to the kind of thing we are.

It is important to note that I do not posit here the claim that children and adults are different kinds of being and *therefore* differing accounts of wellbeing apply. Rather, they are different kinds of being (if indeed they are) *because* differing accounts of wellbeing apply. Clearly to make good on this account, a further argument is needed that would show when the same, and when different, accounts of wellbeing apply. I will not try to supply that here. I simply premise my arguments on the (increasingly popular) claim that there are specific childhood goods, such that the accounts of wellbeing differ for adults and children. I wanted to make this point especially clear because several people have pointed to some potential implications of the account[37]:

in particular, it may be taken to suggest that certain kinds of deterioration as a result of ageing and disease are not bad for the adults that experience them, since they will become different kinds of being, and thus the transition cannot be bad for them. Does this mean that we are foolish to combat these kinds of deterioration? The first thing to note is that certain extreme kinds of deterioration can, in my view, mean that the adult does not survive, and so the change is bad for the adult in that she ceases to exist. The second thing to note is that we may have reasons *other than it being bad for the person* to combat such deterioration. Finally, and most importantly, this implication does *not* strictly follow from my claim here. There may be a way of dividing up accounts of wellbeing (and thus types of being) in which children and adults differ, but healthy and aged/deteriorated adults are the same. I have not taken a stand on how to differentiate which account applies to who, though it seems a significant possibility that any proposal may lead to us separating out adults and aged/deteriorated adults. If that follows, we can either abandon the account, or accept the seemingly counter-intuitive implication.

Could it be that even if our accounts of wellbeing for two different entities differs we are still able to say that being one kind of being is better for me than being another? Some have certainly suggested as much to me.[38] But in order for this to be the case, there would have to be something *other than* wellbeing on the basis of which we can determine whether x or y is *better for me*. Perhaps this is terminological, but I take the question of wellbeing to be, precisely, the question of what is better and worse *for* someone/thing. Therefore there is no conceptual space for being turned from one being from another to be beneficial or harmful to someone/thing. However, even if we allow that wellbeing is not all there is to how well our lives are going, if it is a (non-hierarchical) element of the answer to that question, we will face the same problems. Imagine that how well our lives go is determined by both our wellbeing and our moral status. You change me from a being with one account of wellbeing to another, and with an increased moral status. *All else equal* my higher moral status makes me better off. But we have no way of knowing whether all else *is* equal, since the accounts of wellbeing are different, and there is no metric on which we can compare them.

Now imagine that moral status is a dominant element of how well our lives are going in a hierarchical account: it is *always* better (all-things-considered) to be a being of higher moral status, with differing accounts of 'wellbeing' operating below that level. This would rather alter our understanding of the situation – my discussion here has been premised on the idea that our *ultimate* account of internal value differs between beings, but here, the most important determinant of internal value would share a metric (moral status) across beings. Some of our conclusions, however, could still stand: we would no longer be able to say that being moved from one kind of being to another is neither good or bad for you, but we *could* still say that wellbeing between beings is non-comparable, *and* (provided harm is conceptually related to wellbeing rather than moral status) that you are not harmed when you are moved to a new type of being, or kept as one kind of being rather than being moved to another.

VIII

Does this mean that, contrary to what we normally think, parents could refuse to raise their children, and keep them as children? They wouldn't, after all, be harming them by making them remain children.

I still think this would be wrong. It could be wrong on many grounds not focused on the wellbeing of the individual, but I think it would still be wrong even on the basis of the individual's wellbeing. Here my tentative suggestion for squaring this circle: by stunting development, you would be giving the child a bad *childhood*. My claim that you harm someone by making them remain a child is not based on the idea that childhood is inferior to adulthood, or that becoming an adult makes one better off. Rather, it is based on this claim: A *good* childhood naturally leads to adulthood. To be clear, this isn't to say that childhoods which are tragically cut short were bad childhoods. Rather, good childhoods demand *progress*, and that will (all being well) eventually lead to adulthood. This is Schapiro's view. There is an internal pressure from inside a (well-lived) childhood that pushes us toward adulthood. Given this, we better get our children ready for adulthood, and help them along the path toward it.

We can underpin this claim by positing a childhood good of development – getting better at things. We needn't say that *being* good at things is itself what makes childhood go well, but just that *getting better at them*, working at them, is part of what makes a childhood go well. Consider those pills we're giving Erin – they keep her just as she is. My claim is that even if adulthood isn't better than childhood, this is a bad childhood. Either Erin doesn't learn and develop *or* she learns and develops but is forced backward each time she takes a pill.

IX

In conclusion, in this paper I have explored some tricky issues about ways in which we might compare the goods of childhood and adulthood. I have tried to argue for the following claims:

First, there are several (potentially) distinct comparisons that we can (try to) make between childhood and adulthood. We must keep them distinct and try to be clear about which we are addressing. Second, it may be harder than we think to think about what makes children's lives go well – that we used to be children makes us more confident than we should be that we can imagine what it is like to be a child. Third, there are, in essence two views about the internal value of childhood and adulthood – that adult and child wellbeing has a single (ultimate) account, or that there are different adult- and child-specific accounts. Fourth, if the former, it seems likely to me that children's lives go worse (in general) than adult lives (the Sapling View), in particular because of the way that children are dominated. Fifth, if (as seems plausible to me) the latter, then we cannot compare children's and adults' lives – it cannot be better or worse to be an adult or a child, as what is better or worse for you depends on whether you are an adult or a child (the Caterpillar View).[39]

Patrick Tomlin, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Reading, Whiteknights, Reading, RG6 6AA, UK. p.r.tomlin@reading.ac.uk

[1] If you have an understanding of human wellbeing in which none of these matter for how well a life is going, then you can replace them with whatever you think makes a life go well.
[2] Frances Kamm, *Intricate Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 234-235: 'It is possible that some of the things [e.g., moral choice] that give value and meaningfulness to human life are not best thought of as benefits to the person'.
[3] Tamir Schapiro, 'What is a Child?', *Ethics* 109 (1999): 715-738; Samantha Brennan, 'The Goods of Childhood, Children's Rights and the Role of Parents as Advocates and Interpreters' in Francois Baylis and Carolyn McLeod eds., *Family-Making: Contemporary Ethical Challenges* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[4] Shapiro op. cit., p. 727.
[5] Jeff McMahan, 'Cognitive Disability, Misfortune, and Justice' in *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 25 (1996): 3-35, at p. 24: 'it is better to be a higher form of being' since they 'have an inherent worth that lower beings lack.'
[6] McMahan op. cit. As McMahan puts it (p. 9): we can 'distinguish between an individual's level of wellbeing, on the one hand, and whether that individual is well or badly off, flourishing or unfortunate on the other.'
[7] Ronald Dworkin, 'What is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources' in *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 10 (1981): 283-345.
[8] Thomas Nagel, 'What is it like to be a Bat?' in Douglas R. Hofstadter and Daniel C. Dennett eds., *The Mind's I* (New York: Basic Books, 1981): 391-402, at p. 394.
[9] I am grateful to Miriam Ronzoni and Bas Van der Vossen for a useful exchange here. See also Anca Gheaus, 'The Intrinsic Goods of Childhood and the Just Society' in Alexander Bagattini and Colin Macleod eds., *The Nature of Children's Wellbeing: Theory and Practice* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015): 35-52.
[10] This is an adaptation of a case presented in Brennan op. cit. For discussion on fine-tuning the example, see Anca Gheaus, 'Unfinished Adults and Defective Children' in *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 9 (2015): 1-21.
[11] Loren Lomasky, *Persons, Rights and the Moral Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 202.
[12] Gareth Matthews and Amy Mullin, 'The Philosophy of Childhood' in Edward N. Zalta ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 Edition):
http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/childhood/
[13] I took this analogy from Sarah Hannan's presentation, 'What Sort of Rights Do Children Have?' at The Graduate Political Theory Workshop, University of Oxford, November 12, 2009.
[14] I am grateful to Simon Caney for drawing this worry to my attention. That said, at least part, if not a large part, of this worry is that children are having experiences or being exposed to things *before they are (emotionally) ready*. *That* worry isn't that they're not being children for long enough – rather it is that they *are* children and they shouldn't be experiencing or exposed to these kinds of things *when children*. This wouldn't be a concern with Dane.
[15] Nick Bostrom and Toby Ord, 'The Reversal Test: Eliminating Status Quo Bias in Applied Ethics' in *Ethics* 116 (2006): 656-679.
[16] Bostrom and Ord, op. cit., pp. 664-665.
[17] Children undoubtedly have *some* physical capacities beyond those of most adults – flexibility and ability to recover from injury being notable ones. They also have *some* mental capacities beyond those of adults, in particular the speed and ease with which they learn some things. The important point, however, is that *overall* they are physically and mentally less capable than adults. Perhaps some may think the ways in which children are superior to adults to be so important as to render them overall as well off or better off than adults. I am doubtful of this – any adult with the physical and mental capabilities of a four year old would not be doing well. I am grateful to Anca Gheaus for useful comments here.
[18] This is often thought to be the position developed in Colin M. Macleod, 'Primary Goods, Capabilities, and Children' in Harry Brighouse and Ingrid Robeyns eds., *Measuring Justice: Primary Goods and Capabilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). However, there are two important features of Macleod's account to note. First, Macleod's claim is that there are distinctive childhood goods *from the perspective of justice*, and not (necessarily) wellbeing tout court. So he is primarily focused on answering question 6, not question 1. Second, Macleod assumes that a single metric must be developed

on which justice-comparisons between adults and children can be made (p. 183), and so actually seems committed to the view that the there *is* a single, not differentiated, account.

[19] Anca Gheaus seems to take this position as 'during childhood we are likely to experience and realize valuable things that are a lot less likely to be available to us during adulthood' ('Unfinished Adults and Defective Children', p. 5). See also, Gheaus, 'Intrinsic Goods' op. cit. Someone who held a view like this could (though need not) believe that there are analogous adult-specific goods, that *would* be good for children, but that children are poor at accessing.

[20] 'I'm not claiming here that the intrinsic goods of childhood are distinct to childhood'; 'I am not committed to the claim that there are goods only attainable in childhood'. Brennan, op. cit., p. 42.

[21] G.A. Cohen, 'Equality of What?' in his *On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice and Other Essays in Political Philosophy*, Michael Otsuka ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011): 44-60, at pp. 47-51.

[22] I am grateful to Daniel Viehoff for this thought, which in turn draws on the work of Philip Pettit. See, for example, Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). Everything I say here relies on domination being – in itself – bad for adults. It does *not* rely on understanding *freedom* as non-domination.

[23] Philip Pettit, 'Republican Freedom and Contestatory Democratization' in Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordon ed., *Democracy's Value* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press) pp. 163-90, at p. 170. I am grateful to Dan Butt for pointing out this passage to me.

[24] Anca Gheaus has put it to me that this may be a way in which children's lives *currently* go badly, but isn't this a reason to reform our child-rearing institutions, rather than to say that children's lives inevitably go worse than those of adults? I think not. Our domination of children is justified. They need to be dominated in order to achieve certain goods. It is, all-things-considered, good for them. But this doesn't change the fact that it is a bad-making feature of their lives (*if* we are to hold them to the same standards as adults).

[25] Gheaus, 'Unfinished Adults', op. cit., p. 14.

[26] http://www.ted.com/speakers/alison_gopnik

[27] I am grateful to John Filling for discussion here.

[28] Gheaus, 'Unfinished Adults', op. cit., p. 14.

[29] http://www.reasonsmysoniscrying.com

[30] See Antony Skelton, 'Children's Wellbeing: A Philosophical Analysis' in Guy Fletcher ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Wellbeing* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[31] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Roger Crisp ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p 57.

[32] Roger Crisp, *Mill on Utilitarianism* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 24.

[33] If death is ordinarily bad for us (as most believe) then bringing about the change would still be bad (or in some cases good) for me. But, crucially, it wouldn't be the new life, but rather the extinguishing of my old one, that was bad (or good) for me in such a case. I am grateful to a *JAP* referee for useful comments here.

[34] That said, whilst *I* may have survived the (gradual) transition from childhood to adulthood, it does not necessarily follow that one could survive an abrupt transition, such as that which Dane experiences. This could influence our intuitions in the Dane case, either because Dane does not survive, or because we may intuitively think he does not survive, even if he in fact does. Therefore the pill would be bad for Dane *because he ceases to exist*.

[35] It won't do to claim that there is some very thin higher-level account such as 'being treated appropriately for the kind of being you are' since this would still give us the same conclusion: that neither adulthood nor childhood can be judged better or worse, provided the adult or child is treated appropriately for the kind of being they are.

[36] An alternative, but related, claim we might make is the one McMahan makes about humans and chimpanzees – there *is* a single wellbeing scale that applies to both, but they are different enough such that comparisons of them are not relevant in certain respects.

[37] I am grateful to Anca Gheaus and a JAP referee here.

[38] Including a referee for this journal.

[39] I am grateful to the editors and referees who provided very helpful comments on this paper. I am grateful to Anca Gheaus for informative discussion on these issues at an early stage in my thinking. I am also grateful to her and Lindsey Porter for the invitation to write this paper for a conference at the University of Sheffield, and to the conference attendees for stimulating discussion of my own paper, as

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