Children's well-being and vulnerability

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This special issue deals with ethical topics concerning the relation of children’s well-being and vulnerability. The concepts are linked in some way, but there are many open questions about their precise relation. The papers of this collection intend to contribute a little to clarify things. Many people believe, for example, that children are in need of care by adults in order to have flourishing lives. This paternalistic attitude is rooted in the assumption that children’s well-being is more fragile than adult’s and this, in turn, is usually combined with a general paternalistic attitude towards children. While there is a pro tanto plausibility of this picture in the case of very young children, it looks less plausible in the case of older children and adolescents. It is important to note that questions like this already arise at the conceptual level. To start with children’s well-being: it is a multidimensional concept (Alexandrova 2017) at the descriptive and at the normative level. We can see an increasing amount of indicators used to measure children’s well-being (Ben-Arieh et al. 2013). Contemporary empirical research on children’s well-being is not only interested in rudimentary conditions of well-being such as health and housing but takes a much more refined perspective, incorporating indicators of children’s education, social lives and participation. Yet it is still controversial which indicators should be used and how they should be categorised and balanced against each other in the case of conflicts (Raghavan and Alexandrova 2014). The clarification of these normative questions belongs to the business of philosophy, and there is indeed a growing body of literature in the field (Bagattini and Macleod 2015; Schweiger and Graf 2015; Drerup 2016; Tomlin 2016; Calder, Gheaus, and Skelton 2019). Three main topics are discussed: first, how children’s well-being is related to autonomy and paternalism, second, which theory of well-being is appropriate to define children’s well-being, and thirdly, questions concerning the authority over the definition of children’s well-being. These topics are obviously interrelated in many complex ways, and the notion of vulnerability plays a vital role in many regards.

Childhood is arguably the most vulnerable period of human life. Children are highly dependent on others to satisfy their basic needs, and this makes them particularly vulnerable. This is, of course, true for other stages of life as well. Many elderly people, for example, are not able to care for themselves. However, they are at least in principle entitled to choose the persons that care for them, and not all elderly people are dependent in the same way as children are. The situation of children seems to be categorically different, insofar as they do not start, as elderly people normally do, from a position in which they are autonomous, i.e. entitled to make their own decisions about their course of life. Children are dependent on decisions that others make for them right from the start. This seems to be the most salient source of children’s vulnerability. But even this allegedly uncontroversial position is not undisputable. Some critics point out that depicting a whole group of people as vulnerable has always the air of stigmatization. A more influential line of criticism holds that generally considering children as vulnerable is too vague to account for more specific aspects of children’s vulnerability. The debate on vulnerability is very much coined by the idea that there are situational vulnerabilities, viz. vulnerabilities that are brought about by specific contextual features (Goodin 1986). The more current trend in the debate is, however, to reconcile both, the ontological and the situational
aspects of vulnerability. Some authors suggest distinguishing situational and inherent sources of vulnerability in order to make that point, (Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2014).

The main aim of this special issue is to discuss different ways in which children’s vulnerability can impact their well-being. The papers are grouped into three parts: in the first part, the role of vulnerability for children’s development of autonomy as a vital part of their well-being is addressed. The papers of the second part discuss how specific duties towards children arise from their vulnerability. The third part focusses on applied topics.

The special issue on children’s well-being and vulnerability is complemented by a further section ‘Ethical issues in practise’. It includes a non-peer-reviewed paper that has been reviewed and supported by the editors of this section, Andrew Maynard and Beverley Burke: Steven Walker’s ‘Children’s Rights and the Ethics of Child and Adolescent Mental Health’. Walker addresses ethical dilemmas in the context of child-care that can arise for social workers: Social workers should respect the principle of confidentiality and only act against it if higher ethical principles are concerned. The paper supplements the special issue nicely, as it discusses vulnerability-related issues concerning children’s well-being in practical contexts such as social care and health.

**Children’s well-being, vulnerability and autonomy**

In his paper ‘Vulnerability and Autonomy – Children and Adults’ Johannes Giesinger reassesses one of the most widespread assumptions in liberal societies, namely that adults are autonomous while children are non-autonomous, dependent, and hence vulnerable. Giesinger is certainly not the first to raise doubts concerning an all too simple picture of the relation of child – and adulthood. It is legion among feminist philosophers to point out that all humans (indeed all animals) are vulnerable. Giesinger, too, is interested in the way vulnerability contributes to the distinction between adults and children. Yet he defends a different notion of vulnerability because the ontological account seems to be too unspecific for the situation of children. He proposes a ‘two-level conception of vulnerability’, according to which persons are vulnerable to the extent that they can be harmed at all, and are liable to harm due to their inability to avert being harmed. Hence, Giesinger’s account is similar to the one applied by Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds that deals with the distinction of inherent and situational vulnerability. Giesinger’s two-level account allows acknowledgement of children’s specific vulnerabilities in the sense that they are less able to avoid being harmed. This, in turn, allows for sustaining the classical liberal picture according to which children enjoy a different moral status than adults because the former has to be protected from the latter. Furthermore, Giesinger argues that the classical liberal picture is misguided in another sense, namely by drawing too radical a distinction between children and adults, according to which children are dependent and non-autonomous and adults are autonomous and independent. However, as Giesinger explains, by using a relational account of autonomy, neither are adults completely independent nor is this a desirable goal. For this reason, he suggests a reconsideration of the relation of adulthood and childhood.

In her paper ‘Children’s Hope, Resilience and Autonomy’ Amy Mullin fills a lacuna of the debate concerning children’s well-being and vulnerability, namely the role that hope plays for children’s autonomy and resilience. Mullin argues that there is evidence that hope enhances mental and emotional abilities that are relevant for children’s development of autonomy and resilience. She borrows her concept of hope, which she calls engaged hope, from psychologist C.R. Snyder. It has three dimensions: goals, pathways, and motivation. The basic idea of this concept of hope is that A only hopes that p if A aims for p, considers p possible, and is motivated to render p possible. Clair may, for example, want to become representative of her class
while not believing that enough of her classmates will vote for her. In that case, Clair would not hope to become representative of her class. Mullin points out that these prerequisites of hope are instrumentally valuable for children’s autonomy and resilience. Hope is useful for children’s (local) autonomy because having goals and being motivated to reach for them means that they can exert the kind of self-control necessary for autonomy. Furthermore, Mullin highlights empirical evidence suggesting that positive future expectations and self-confidence are important for children’s resilience. She cites work by Ciccetti and Rogosch, according to which there is evidence that children’s positive future expectations are a major predictor of resilience in highly stressed children. At the end of her paper, Mullin sketches several implications for social policy, such as incorporating hope-enhancing strategies at schools and in programs for the social support of families.

**Children’s vulnerability and special duties towards children**

It is widely acknowledged that becoming a parent is less than an altruistic project. But some authors go further, claiming that parents can only enjoy the good aspects of parenting if children experience certain bad experiences such as domination. This alleged paradox is the target of Mianna Lotz’s paper ‘The Real Value of the Child-Parent Vulnerability’. At the heart of the paradox lies the intuitive assumption that some of the good things of parenting are related to the idea of caring for a less competent, rational, and emotionally stable person. As has been argued quite recently, being less competent, rational and emotionally stable is a source of domination over children’s lives and in this vein bad for children. According to Lotz, the paradox only arises from a misguided conception of the value of child–parent vulnerability. In the first part of her argument, she discusses two prominent accounts of the good aspects of parenting where the paradox arises: Brighouse and Swift’s ‘family-goods’ account and Macleod’s ‘creative self-extension’ account. According to Lotz, the paradox can arise in both accounts, due to a one-sided perspective on the parent–child relationship. On these accounts, being a parent is considered either a sort of sequel of one’s own personal values (Macleod) or a vital contribution to one’s flourishing (Brighouse and Swift). What is left out, according to Lotz, is the mutuality and relationality of the parent–child relation. This mutuality and relationality consist of the way in which the parent–child relationship constantly retroacts on parents and children alike. In other words: parents are in the same way ‘changed and (re)created’ as their children are influenced by their actions. Hence, the role of children is less passive than in the accounts of Brighouse/Swift and Macleod. This allows, in turn, for making space for a solution of the paradox, because in this picture vulnerability functions as a prerequisite for what Lotz calls ‘mutual reflexive co-constitution’. It is primarily defined in terms of openness, exposure and being changed. These are not necessarily bad for children but can indeed even be considered part of their goods. The paper ‘Paradoxes of Children’s Vulnerability’ by Colin Macleod deals with problems that arise in relation to duties concerning children’s specific vulnerability. Macleod endorses the relational account of vulnerability, according to which adults have special or relational duties towards children. The general idea of the paper is to flesh out the normative implications of this account of vulnerability and to single out which duties towards children arise from their specific vulnerability. The argument develops by means of two apparent paradoxes and their solution. The first paradox is the idea that an adequate moral response to children’s vulnerability might come along with making them subject to dangerous situations, said to be vital for their development. One way of getting rid of the paradox is the protection view, namely the view that children should be protected against unnecessary risks. To make that point, Macleod distinguishes pointless risks, required risks, and option risks. Pointless risks and option risks are
both unnecessary risks, while required risks are vital for children’s development. Macleod argues that it makes sense to protect children against all pointless risks. This means risks where no benefit for the child can be expected. So far so good for the protection view which, however, also forbids option risks that are unnecessary but can lead to benefits for a child. Laura Dekker’s circumnavigation of the world, for example, was certainly connected to several serious risks for her. Furthermore, those risks were no requirement for her development. Rather, they were option risks. It is, however, far from clear that Laura’s parents had the duty to protect her from her own option to sail around the world. Macleod uses this example to extrapolate a deeper issue, namely that adolescents enjoy what he calls juvenile agency, which is part of their gradual development to autonomous beings. According to Macleod, this speaks against the protection view: there is no duty to protect children from all unnecessary risks (respectively from option risks) as long as they are sensible and contribute to children’s flourishing, of which the development of juvenile agency is a vital part.

**Children’s well-being and vulnerability: applied topics**

Malcolm Carey’s paper ‘Some ethical limitations of privatising and marketizing social care and social work provision in England for children and young people’ considers ethical problems as they occur alongside the increasing marketization of social care and social work from a very practical point of view. The upshot of the argument, in the end, is that such systems render especially children and adolescents more vulnerable. The argument starts by assessing that market-based care systems – such as the one in England – lead to risk adverse and detached roles of social workers, and furthermore to a more and more specialised and fragmented contexts of care. It is the increasing number of so-called service user objectification and, hence, commodifications that is alarming from an ethical point of view. The paper deals with such issues from a consequentialist as well as from a deontologist perspective. For example, it is pointed out in detail that especially children and adolescents have severely reduced life chances in market-based care systems. Hence, children’s well-being in the sense of their future quality of life and health is impaired at a drastic level. However, the more fundamental argument of the paper aims at the limiting of choice and social exclusion of many involved parties in the care system. The worry is addressed that children are more and more utilised, and therefore instrumentalised at an unethical level in business-oriented contexts of care.

Usually, not much argument is necessary to convince people that we have special obligations towards poor people and especially towards poor children. But what is the content of these obligations, and under which conditions do they arise? Gottfried Schweiger’s paper ‘Ethics, Poverty and Children’s Vulnerability’ presents a vulnerability-based analysis of these issues. Schweiger starts with the observation that child poverty often leads to situational vulnerabilities and hence to ethical questions concerning the resulting harms for children’s well-being and well-becoming. In the light of these distinctions, four general aspects concerning the relation of vulnerability and child poverty are highlighted: the developmental aspect, multidimensionality, corrosive disadvantage, and temporal features of children’s vulnerability. There is, for example, evidence that child poverty affects children’s lives in different ways at different stages, concerning several dimensions of children’s well-being, and that it causes other situational vulnerabilities. For example, poor children are statistically less educated or have a greater risk for negligence or toxic environments. This, in turn, endangers several good things such as health, education, and even future goods such as autonomy. After these descriptive remarks about the relation of children’s vulnerability and child poverty, Schweiger turns to ethical issues concerning this relation. He focuses on two main aspects that some children are more vulnerable than others, and that some children are less protected from harm than others.
According to Schweiger, these vulnerabilities are unjust because they violate the moral claims of children, and he takes this general claim to be valid irrespectively of the respective theory of justice (sufficiency or egalitarian for example). Schweiger accepts that it is not uncontroversial up to which level vulnerabilities caused by child poverty give rise to obligations. Yet, by applying Sen’s notion of an ‘absolute core’ of poverty he points out that there are certainly clear cases where such obligations arise. By means of conclusion, he argues that we not only have an obligation to push political and social programmes to do as much as possible to protect poor children. What is more, there are further obligations to support empirical research about the adverse effects of poverty, in order to obtain a clearer picture of the scope of those duties.

Notes on contributor

Alexander Bagattini studied philosophy, social sciences and logic and philosophy of sciences in Heidelberg and Leipzig. He took his doctorate in philosophy in 2010 and worked as a postdoc in several fields of applied ethics. One of the focal points of his research concerns the well-being of children. He has published several articles and volumes and organised various international workshops about this issue.

References


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