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The Special Goods of Childhood: Lessons from Social Constructionism

Abstract: To what extent does the common claim that childhood is ‘socially constructed’ affect the ethical debate on the ‘intrinsic’ and ‘special’ goods of childhood? Philosophers have referred to this kind of goods in their critique of overly adult-centred and future-oriented conceptions of childhood. The view that some goods are child-specific, in the sense that they are only good for children, not for adults, seems to presuppose an understanding of what children ‘are’, and how they differ from adults. However, if the social-constructionist view is accepted, it cannot be assumed that childhood is a given. This essay claims that the social-constructionist understanding of childhood does not undermine the debate on the moral status and the goods of childhood, but that nevertheless important lessons can be drawn from the insight that childhood, as we know it, is not a natural and universal phenomenon.

Moral philosophy has long neglected the issue of childhood.¹ In recent years, however, questions regarding the moral status of children and childhood have received growing attention. In the philosophical literature, it has become common to criticise those conceptions of childhood that do not account for children *as children*, but consider them only as the adults they will become. In this adult-centred perspective, children are seen as defective adults. As Anca Gheaus puts it, childhood is considered as a ‘predicament, a stage of life to be overcome in order to enter adulthood, the truly valuable state of life’ (Gheaus, 2015a, 39; see also Gheaus 2015b).² It might be added that childhood is not seen as valuable in itself, but only as instrumentally valuable. Alexander Bagattini states that what he calls ‘the instrumental conception of childhood’ is the ‘preferred conception of the modern era’ (Bagattini 2016, 20). Bagattini, Gheaus, but also authors such as Colin Mcleod (2002), Samantha Brennan (2014), Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift (2014, 65), react to this conception of childhood by discussing the role of ‘intrinsic’, ‘distinct’ or ‘special’ goods of childhood.

It should be noted, however, that in modern educational thought, the critique of the adult-centred, future-oriented, or instrumental conception has been prominent from the outset. It was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his *Émile* (Rousseau 1961, first published in 1762) who promoted the view that childhood is a stage of life in its own right, and that children should be acknowledged as children – not merely as future adults. Ellen Key’s influential book *The Century of the Child* (Key 1909, originally published in 1900) proceeds in this spirit. Rousseau, Key, and other educational and social reformers shaped the view of childhood that became prevalent in the 20th century.

Interestingly, this view – which might be called the modern conception of childhood – has itself been criticised in recent decades. This critique is inspired by Philippe Ariès’s claim that childhood, as we know it in our societies, is not a universal phenomenon (Ariès 1962). Against this background, it has been claimed that childhood is not naturally given, but ‘socially constructed’.

My main question, in this essay, is whether or to what extent the constructionist critique of childhood affects the philosophical debate on the goods of childhood. The essay proceeds within the broadly ‘analytic’ philosophical framework in which the current debate on the goods of childhood is situated. It does not address the fundamental conflicts between analytic moral philosophy and those ‘continental’ approaches that rely to constructionist ideas. Its aims are more modest: Given that the current normative debate on childhood goods makes sense at all, how can or should it account for constructionist claims regarding childhood?

In a first step I provide an outline of this debate. In the second part, I try to clarify the basic ideas of the social constructionist view. In the third part, I bring these two lines of thought together. The core problem might be put as follows: The talk of (intrinsic, distinct or special) childhood goods seems to rely on some notion of what a child or childhood ‘is’, as distinguished from an adult or adulthood. The constructionist view calls into question that there ‘is’ such as thing as a child, independently of social contexts. On what grounds, then, should we discuss whether there are special goods of childhood? Roughly, I claim that while social constructionism does not undermine the ethical debate on childhood, there are some lessons to be learned from it.

The goods of childhood

What is good for children, in the sense that it contributes to their well-being? This is the question that motivates the work on the goods of childhood.³ Some authors (especially Mcleod 2002, and Brighouse/Swift 2014, and Gheaus 2015a) explicitly relate their considerations to the issue of distributive justice: determining distributive prin-

ciples must go along with the discussion of *which goods* are to be distributed. Talk of goods (of childhood) might also be connected to the question of what *interests* children have: as the terms are used in this essay, to say that something is a good for children means that it is in children's interest.⁴

In a first step, I consider the temporal dimension of the problem of children's well-being: children's immediate interests can be distinguished from their future-oriented interests. This distinction is interrelated with another dimension of the problem. Here, the question is whether some goods are instrumentally or intrinsically valuable. Against this backdrop, it can further be asked whether some goods are child-specific.

Children obviously have immediate interests, such as the interest not to be in pain. It is bad for children in their present lives as children to suffer pain. However, children also have future-oriented interests, that is, interests regarding their future lives as adults. Some of their adult interests have nothing to do with their lives as children: For instance, children have an interest not to be injured, in their adult lives. In the ethics of childhood, we will neglect these interests and focus on those that are related to childhood. For instance, smoking in childhood might not undermine a child's immediate interests, but would affect his or her health as an adult. Some of the child's future-oriented interests have to do with the development of valuable capacities, attitudes, or forms of knowledge. We might refer to these specifically as developmental interests (see also Brighouse/Swift 2014, 64).

In this context, the problem of future-oriented paternalism towards children arises (Birnbacher 2014, Bagattini 2016). It is mostly assumed that paternalism towards children is morally legitimate due to children's lack of rationality, competence, or autonomy. This means that we are justified in intervening into children's agency for the sake of their own good. We might paternalize children in order to protect their immediate interests, but in many cases we have their future interests as adults in mind. For instance, we send children to school, even against their will, because in our societies, adults are unlikely to have a good life without at least a basic kind of education. The question is, then, to what extent is it justified to act against the immediate interests of children in order to promote their long-term interests.

One line of critique against the adult-centred view of childhood is that it tends to give too much weight to children's future-oriented interests and neglects their well-being as children. In this context, the distinction between the intrinsic and instrumental goods of childhood might be introduced. Some things can be seen as intrinsically valuable for children in the sense that they are valuable independently of future (developmental) benefits. For instance, having the opportunity for unstructured play

might be of that kind. For children, play is valuable in itself – at the same time, it also has developmental value. The critique of the adult-centred view states that this conception of children gives too much weight to those learning activities that are likely to have instrumental value and neglects the intrinsic goods of childhood.

The intrinsic goods of childhood are not necessarily special or distinct goods of childhood in the sense that they are only valuable for children as children and not for adults. Consider the example of play: Should we really say that playful activities are not valuable for adults? Brighouse and Swift claim that a sense of being carefree is good in children, but not in adults. They also point out the value of sexual innocence for children (Brighouse/Swift 2014, 65). Mcleod thinks of innocence in a different sense when he says that it is good for children, and not for adults, to be insulated from possibly harmful information (Mcleod 2016, 14).⁵

The idea that some goods are child-specific is likely to be rooted in the view that there are relevant *descriptive* differences between children and adults. This is confirmed by Bagattini who mentions ‘distinct child-specific faculties such as imagination, curiosity, playfulness, open-mindedness’ (Bagattini 2016, 27). His idea is, then, that reference to child-specific traits plays a role in the justification of child-specific goods.

Gheaus ascribes similar qualities to children as Bagattini: Children are, in her view, small scientists, philosophers and artists. They are more imaginative, curious and open-minded than the average adult. She also writes that ‘the real distinguishing mark of childhood is children’s superior ability to learn and change in the light of experience and their mental flexibility that allows them to imagine how things could be – as opposed to how they actually are – better than adults’ (Gheaus 2015a, 41). Thus, against the picture of children as defective adults, Gheaus states that children are in some regards superior to adults.

But although she seems to acknowledge relevant descriptive differences between children and adults in this regard, she denies that the intrinsic goods of childhood are specific to childhood. She thinks that enjoying unstructured play would also be valuable for adults, but that this good is more difficult to attain for adults. So, in her view, certain childhood goods are only child-specific in the sense that they are more easily accessible to children than to adults. This must be due the descriptive differences between the two groups.

Gheaus also points out that some adults – philosophers or artists – have maintained certain ‘child-like’ qualities that are often considered as valuable. She further makes clear that the question of what is good for children or adults must be distinguished from the question of what we owe to them. It might well be, against this

background, that unstructured play is good for adults, but that it is not demanded by justice to provide them with plenty of time for play. This can only be because it is, in some sense, more important for children than for adults.

I do not want, here, to engage in a closer discussion of the various claims made in this debate. My aim is to relate the debate on the goods of childhood with the constructionist claim regarding childhood. In this regard, it is the debate on special goods of childhood that matters most. We have seen that the defence of child-specific goods must refer, in some sense or other, to child-specific properties.

The social construction of childhood

It is a commonplace in education studies, and even more in the sociology of childhood, to say that childhood is socially constructed.⁶ So, for instance, the child sociologists Allison James and Alan Prout write about the basic assumptions on which their research proceeds:

Childhood is understood as a social construction. As such, it provides an interpretive frame for contextualizing the early years of human life. Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity is neither a natural nor a universal feature of human groups, but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies (James/Prout 1997, 8).

James and Prout use ‘childhood’ as an exclusively social concept, but they do not deny that the first stage of human life is characterized by a particular natural condition (‘biological immaturity’). I propose to distinguish ‘biological childhood’ from ‘social childhood’.⁷ This distinction, as well as the one made by James and Prout, is analogous to the feminist distinction between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’. In a first step I now try to clarify the constructionist claim. For this, I do not discuss the educational and sociological work on the construction of childhood. Instead, I draw on Sally Haslanger’s considerations on social construction that are focused on gender and race and do not refer to childhood (Haslanger 2012a and 2012b). Haslanger’s account has not so far been discussed either in the sociology of childhood, nor in the philosophical debate on childhood goods.

Haslanger clarifies the notion of social construction by introducing two distinctions: First, she says that the notion of social construction either refers to the practice of distinguishing or classifying, or to the objects of classification (Haslanger 2012b, 187). As far as our conceptual classifications have linguistic character and are embedded in a wider cultural framework, it is clear that they are in this way socially constructed. They are not pre-given in nature, but were developed in social and cultural processes, and persons acquire them in being initiated in a cultural form of life. In

this way, we learn concepts such as ‘man’, ‘woman’, or ‘child’. This does not mean, however, that what socially constructed concepts and distinctions refer to is itself constructed. Socially constructed distinctions might well pick out naturally given differences – that is, differences that are not themselves socially constructed. For instance, there is a feminist debate on whether sex – which is originally taken as a biological category – is socially constructed. With Haslanger, we can say that the distinction of two sexes (male and female) has social origins, but nevertheless refers to biological facts. On the basis of the very same biological facts, a different social categorization might be developed.

As for children and adults, the distinction between the two groups can be taken as socially constructed. The question is then whether or to what extent it refers to natural differences. Possible candidates for relevant natural features are body height or the development of secondary sexual characteristics. Both features play a role in distinguishing children from adults. However, the distinction cannot be fully explained or justified on these grounds. We would not say that a person is an adult as soon as he or she has reached puberty. It is also clear that some very small persons can count as adults, while some children can be taller than many adults.

As noted above, Haslanger says that the notion of social construction can also refer to the objects of categorization – children and adults, or childhood and adulthood. This leads us to the second of her distinctions. In this second sense, gender, race, or childhood can be constructed in two different ways: Haslanger distinguishes causal from constitutive construction. The notion of causal construction makes clear that social construction is not just an epistemic phenomenon, but has the potential to causally bring about certain features in the world. Thus, the idea of childhood as socially constructed does not only refer to social images or conceptions of childhood, but also to the way childhood ‘is’ due to social factors. At this point, Haslanger introduces the concept of discursive construction, which she takes as a form of causal construction. She writes: ‘Something is discursively constructed just in case it is the way it is, to some substantial extent, because of what is attributed (and/or self-attributed) to it’ (Haslanger 2012a, 88). So, in processes of attribution, persons acquire the features that are attributed to them. Persons develop, for instance, those properties that count as ‘female’ within a particular conception of gender. In the same way, it might be said, children are ‘made’ in social processes. As a consequence, young persons empirically develop certain properties that count as ‘child-like’. This does not mean that these properties are naturally pre-given.

The phenomenon of constitutive construction is circumscribed by Haslanger as follows: ‘Something is constitutively constructed iff in defining it we must make refer-

ence to social factors' (Haslanger 2012a, 87). She further explains: '[L]andlords and tenants are socially constituted because the conditions that must be met in order to be a landlord or tenant are social conditions. The category of gender (relying on the slogan that gender is the social meaning of sex) is also socially constituted, that is, one is a man or a woman (cf. male/ female) by virtue of the social relations one stands in' (Haslanger 2012b, 190–191). In other words, 'being female' marks the position or status of persons in a framework of social relationships. In the same way, 'being a child' might be seen as expressing a particular social position in relation to adults, and to special groups of adults (parents, teachers).⁸ To see childhood as socially constructed, in this sense, then means that a person cannot be a 'child' independently of certain social structures in which such a status exists.

Relying on Haslanger, I would like to propose a threefold notion of what it means to be a child. Childhood is, first, a biological condition in the first years of human life. Second, childhood is discursively constructed: Children become children because certain child-specific features are attributed to them. Third, childhood is a social status concept. Being a child means to have a particular position in the social order.

Theoretical functions of the constructionist claim

The social constructionist claim regarding childhood can have different theoretical functions, as I would like to make clear. To begin with, the claim points to facts in the world: There is not *one* childhood. Childhood is not a universal and natural phenomenon, but can take many social forms. Inspired by Ariès's work (Ariès 1962), it is sometimes claimed that childhood did not exist in earlier periods of European history. This view is taken up by the child sociologist Jens Qvortrup (2005) who describes what he calls the 'Arièsian vision of children's representation in medieval and immediate post-medieval society'. Qvortrup explains: 'That was a vision of society which was not short of children, but lacked childhood. Children were plentifully (and visibly) there, but they did not constitute a *conceptual category*' (Qvortrup 2005, 2). David Archard (1993) reacts to this view by using Rawls's distinction between 'concept' and 'conception'. Archard states that any society knows the *concept* of childhood, but that there can be various *conceptions* of childhood. This may be explained with reference to the biological basis of childhood: Each society has to react to the fact that human beings are not born as grown-ups, but are in a weak, vulnerable, and dependent state at the first stage of their lives.

In a second step, it can be pointed out that given the various social forms of childhood in different historical and cultural contexts, it is clear that childhood can be designed in different ways. Childhood, as it exists in modern societies, is not an un-

changeable fact of human life. It does not have to be accepted as it is (see also Alanen 2005, 37).

This line of thought is closely related to a third aspect. Given that childhood is a social phenomenon, it can be said that the current form of childhood is not *justified* by biology. It has often been assumed, in modern educational thought, that the modern conception of childhood mirrors the special ‘nature of the child’ and is therefore normatively justified. Reference to children’s nature was and is typically made with a normative undertone. In many usages of the expression, ‘nature’ is not used as a biological but as a teleological concept. In a similar way, talk of ‘woman’s nature’ was and sometimes still is used to justify a social order in which women are subordinated to men. The sex/gender distinction can be used to undermine this justificatory framework. It points out that the social position of woman is not biologically pre-given, but socially constructed.

From here, it is a short step to a comprehensive critique of regimes of gender or childhood.⁹ The basic idea is that these regimes are constructed the way they are due to power interests of dominant groups – men in one case, adults in the other (Alanen 2005, 39–40). The suspicion is – with regards to childhood – that the social construction of childhood works out to the disadvantage of children as a social group, a group that is subordinated to adults and excluded from adult life (Qvortrup 2005, 2; Hood-Williams 1990). Since the current settings could be changed (the second point) and are not justified by nature (the third point), the social order of childhood and adulthood might be radically modified.

The (‘new’) sociology of childhood, as it has developed since the 80s and 90s, is motivated by this kind of critical impulse. Childhood is seen as a political and moral issue. However, child-sociologists do not aim at developing a positive account of how childhood should be designed. One of their main concerns is to change the research agenda in sociology and related fields. Their aim is to make children and their standpoint more visible in social research. They criticise the view of children as incompetent and in need of special protection. They also question the common focus on the developmental aspect of childhood that typically goes along with the view that children are not yet what they should be. As Alanen explains, the new sociology of childhood shows a ‘tendency to play down many presumed differences between children and adults. Children in and through this research, appear as “ordinary social beings”’ (Alanen 2005, 35).

Interestingly, these child sociologists do not give much attention to those traits that are highlighted by the (philosophical) defenders of specific childhood goods, such as playfulness, curiosity, or imagination. They do not directly criticise the modern

tendency to describe children as special in a positive sense, which sometimes amounts to the view that children are superior to adults. Sociologists focus on the view of children as defective adults. They state that the special attention for children in modernity has put them in a disadvantageous position. This view might also be expressed as follows: The modern view of childhood goes along with the aim of improving the social situation of children, but in fact it excludes children from the core of society.

It is important to note that the view of children as defective adults is also criticised by those philosophers who defend the idea of child-specific goods. This idea is set against the future-oriented and instrumental conception of childhood. At the same time, however, it confirms the view of children as special persons – as non-adults. In this latter sense, it seems incompatible with the view of children as ordinary social beings.

Lessons from social constructionism

The social constructionist claims regarding childhood are not unknown in the ethics of childhood. Nevertheless, the challenge from constructionism has so far been neglected in the debate on the intrinsic or special goods of childhood. It must be asked whether the constructionist claim undermines the normative argument for these goods. As indicated in the introduction, I do not intend to engage in fundamental epistemological discussions on the possibility of normative argument.¹⁰ My considerations presuppose a broadly analytic point of view. The question is, then, how normative discourse of this type can and should account for constructionist insights.

In this vein, it can be stated that accepting a constructionist notion of childhood opens up space for normative argument. If childhood is not to be taken as a given, but can be designed in various ways, it is worth debating how we *should* design it. We can ask whether ‘childhood’ and ‘adulthood’ should be constructed as separate stages of human life, and by which features the child’s form of life should be distinguished from adult life. In this sense, then, constructionism does not undermine the normative debate, but makes the ‘normative construction’ of childhood possible. If we accept the threefold notion of childhood developed above (in the section ‘The social construction of childhood’), it is clear that there are biological limits to the normative construction of childhood. The normative design of childhood has to take into account the special biological features of childhood – the special weakness and smallness of children, their lack of certain relevant capacities, but also their special ability to learn and develop.

The details of which features of children are to be seen as natural, and which as social, will remain contested. This leads us to an important lesson that has to be drawn from the constructionist idea. Recall that in the debate on the distinct goods of childhood, reference is made to the empirical features of children. For instance, playfulness, imagination, open-mindedness, but also innocence and a sense of being care-free, are taken as child-specific properties. From constructionist considerations, we learn that making these kinds of ascriptions to children might be problematic. We must be careful in our statements as to how children ‘are’ or what childhood ‘is’.

The picture of the child as imaginative or innocent might be just that – a picture that has nothing to do with real children. Rousseau’s or Key’s views have been criticised for expressing an overly romantic picture of childhood. Moreover, many people have a nostalgic image of their own childhood; for instance, they imagine themselves as having known no problems in this period of their lives. Gheaus (2015a) provides a vivid example of this attitude in her description of the winters of her childhood. Others have a dark memory of their childhood that might equally poorly reflect the real lives that they had as children.

Haslanger’s notion of discursive construction makes clear that social or cultural images of childhood are often more than just images. They are realised in discursive processes of attribution. This means that the empirical properties of young persons are not necessarily naturally pre-given. They might well be the consequence of processes of social construction: Children may be a certain way because they are treated as being that way. This, however, raises problems for the normative debate on child-specific goods, to the extent that the argument for these goods relies on the assumption of child-specific traits.

Consider, as an example, the claim – made by Gareth B. Matthews (1994) and taken up by Gheaus (2015a; 2015b) – that children are small philosophers. It must be specified how this claim is meant. Is it an empirical statement saying that children normally ask philosophical questions, in their everyday lives? Here, it might be objected that many children spend a lot of time playing around with their smart phones, and do not have strong interests in engaging in intellectual or creative activities. Maybe the claim is to be understood in a weaker sense: *Some* children are inclined to do philosophy, and ask philosophical questions, without being prompted to do so. If only some children are like that, the question is whether philosophical talk should be seen as a good for *all* children. Moreover, it can be asked whether some children’s inclination for philosophy is naturally given or the result of discursive construction: Some parents react to philosophical questions in a much more encouraging way than to their child’s wish to play a game on the smart phone. Some parents, having read

Matthews, expect their child to be a philosopher, and – so we might assume – thereby reinforce philosophical interests in the child. In this sense, then, the philosophical child is a social construction.

It might be assumed that under the right social and educational circumstances, not only *some* but *many* children would engage in philosophy. This raises the question of whether we *should* construct children as philosophers and thereby make them into philosophers. Obviously, as some children already engage in philosophy, there is the potential for philosophy in many or all children. It becomes clear, at this point, that the crucial question is a normative one. The question is whether philosophy is a valuable activity for children. If we adopt the view that engaging in philosophy is good for children, we will organize the relationship to children in a way that fosters their philosophy-related capacities and attitudes, including imagination, creativity, open-mindedness, clarity in thinking, or a critical attitude to one's own and others' thoughts. These properties might well be described as 'socially constructed', but this does not undermine the normative argument in any way.

If we focus on features that are not seen as valuable – such as incompetence, or the lack of autonomy and rationality – things look different. From the constructionist standpoint, it can be claimed that these features, even if they are empirically there, are not naturally given, but the result of social construction.¹¹ With regard to these features, it is a matter of discussion whether the lack of valuable capacities is fully due to discursive construction. In the case of young children, for instance, it is unlikely that they would be fully competent even if competence was constantly attributed to them. Obviously, the biological features of the early years of human life make it impossible for young children to have all the valuable capacities that older persons can have. This does not mean that the constructionist intervention is pointless: It might well be that some fourteen-year-olds could lead the life of an adult if they were ascribed full adult competencies and responsibilities.

Another important point is that discursive construction is interdependent with constitutive construction. This is clear with regards to competence and autonomy: Childhood, in our societies, is a social status with restricted autonomy rights and political rights. The ascription of childhood status goes along with the attribution of certain descriptive features – in particular the lack of competence or autonomy. In this sense, we can say that being in this particular social position has discursive effects. Children who are deprived of the right to autonomy will typically see themselves as lacking autonomy-related capacities, and they will in fact lack these capacities.

A similar consideration can be made with regards to being carefree. Having a steady sense of being carefree, Brighthouse and Swift (2014) say, is a distinct good of childhood. To be sure, these authors do not claim that children are carefree, but that they should be. This implies, however, that it is possible to be carefree as a child, under the right circumstances. Here, it must be pointed out that if children are in fact carefree, this is also due to their special social position – that is, due to constitutive construction. For instance, in our societies, children do not have economic responsibilities, so they can be carefree in this regard, at least if their parents earn enough money. Adults in a similar social position are likely to be similarly carefree, in economic regards. So, in descriptive terms, being carefree does not mark a distinguishing feature between children and adults. It might be added, of course, that children’s ability to be carefree is partly due to their internal conditions, such as the incapacity for long-term thinking.

The connection between the debate on childhood goods and the idea of constitutive construction might also be made in another way: Considering children as special human beings tends to have effects with regards to their social position that might not be directly intended. The basic idea can be illustrated with an example offered by Qvortrup that does not refer to the special goods of childhood, but to the notion that children need special protection. Qvortrup points to the fact that in recent years, fewer and fewer children have died in traffic accidents. He explains: ‘Although the reduction in traffic fatalities is of course welcome, is it permissible to suggest that the price for the positive result is by and large paid by children in terms of a decrease in their freedom of independent mobility? The price was certainly not paid by adults in terms of adapting to children’s needs, or in acceding to their legitimate demands to be able to use the city as if it was theirs as well’ (Qvortrup 2005, 8).

Here, Qvortrup does not deny that the aim to protect children from being harmed is grounded in good intentions, but he points to the moral costs of better protection with regards to children’s social position. Children are restrained in their liberty, and expelled from the public sphere into the private realm of the family. A similar consideration might be made with regards to the idea of special childhood goods: No doubt, providing such goods to children is guided by the aim of doing justice to children’s special ‘nature’. It is based on the conviction that children are not ‘small adults’, but human beings with distinct traits. But if it is assumed that children’s form of life should differ significantly from adult life, it is likely that children are to some extent segregated from adults: While adults are to be productive and do their share as cooperative members of society, children do not have to do this, but are allowed to do

what pleases them – e.g. play with others in the snow. As already indicated, talk of intrinsic or special goods of childhood is often embedded in the context of considerations of distributive justice. This debate, however, often neglects that ascribing special goods to children tends to have structural and positional consequences. The worlds of children and adults tend to be separated.

So, allowing children to live ‘as children’ is, on the one hand, good for them. Childhood status is, in some sense, a privileged position in society: Children are cared for and protected. They do not have to work. They do not have to take full responsibility for what they do. On the other hand, children are not taken fully seriously. They are not seen as full-blooded participants in adult society. These are the moral costs of providing them with child-specific goods: The attempt to account for their special needs confirms their subordinate position in society.

The normative construction of childhood

The core question of an ethics of childhood is: How should childhood be constructed? Thus, we cannot take childhood as a given, and assume that normative arguments can be based on a clear-cut descriptive understanding of what a child is. Childhood is a biological condition, but there are also discursive and constitutive construction processes at work.

The latter idea is especially important because it provides us with the insight that childhood is a status concept. The child-liberationist position that some child sociologists might sympathize with can be expressed as follows: The status of childhood should be abolished. This means that persons of different age groups should have equal rights. This view is sometimes justified with reference to the idea that children should have full and independent moral status. It is assumed that ascribing an equal moral status to persons is tantamount to granting them equal rights. However, treating someone as an equal does not necessarily mean that he or she must be treated equally. Rather, it means that inequalities in the treatment of persons must be justified with reference to relevant descriptive differences. Modern philosophical and educational thought has acknowledged the equal moral status of children, but has insisted that children should be treated specially due to their special condition. At this point, however, the social-constructionist view of childhood raises problems: On what grounds should the special treatment of children be justified if childhood is socially constructed?

It can be argued that the biological condition of childhood requires setting up special arrangements for the care and education of children. These arrangements constitute the special position of children in the social order. As children are ‘by nature’ de-

pendent and vulnerable, they have a special interest to be cared for. Care entails a paternalistic protection of their basic needs. Children cannot yet have the capacities necessary to decide for themselves. They are in a period of development and learning, and have to be supported in acquiring relevant capacities, attitudes, or forms of knowledge. Of course, it is not naturally given what children *should* learn. In determining the aims of education, we must refer to a normative notion of what it means to be an adult: Children must develop those capacities that are considered as necessary to live a full-blooded adult life. Educational arrangements designed to ensure this are part of what constitutes the status of childhood.

I assume, then, that establishing childhood as a special status is justified, first, by biological facts and, second, by the requirement to develop adult capacities (however these are defined in detail). If it is agreed that childhood should be constructed as a status, important questions remain: a) How long should childhood last? In which way and at what point should the transition into the status of adulthood be organised? b) How should children's form of life be designed? What goods should be provided to children? How exactly should they be educated?

The debate on the goods of childhood refers to the second question. Those philosophers who discuss this issue acknowledge that children must be cared for, paternalized, and educated. They do not deny that future-oriented considerations are relevant, but criticise an overly adult-centred understanding of childhood. It became clear in the first section that the adult-centred conception of childhood can be criticised without referring to distinct childhood goods. Children's immediate interests can be seen as relevant even if they do not significantly differ from adult interests. It is also obvious that we can account for the intrinsic goods of childhood without assuming that these goods are child-specific. This means that the demand to see childhood as more than just a preparation for adulthood does not depend on the ascription of child-specific traits that might be due to discursive construction processes.

The critique of the adult-centred understanding of childhood might be based on the idea of children's full moral status: On this basis, it comes natural to say that children must be morally accounted for as children, not only as the adults they are likely to become. It is not that simple, though. Even if we start from the assumption of the equal moral standing of children, we might come to the view that their present welfare can be sacrificed for future benefits, under certain circumstances. This might be the case if we adopt the consequentialist idea that a person's overall welfare should be maximised (Birnbacher 2015). This view allows for intrapersonal trade-offs: Immediate interests might be subordinated to a greater gain of welfare in the future. In an educational perspective, it might be legitimate to violate children's interests in the

educational situation itself, if this is likely to promote the development of valuable capacities or attitudes. Within this framework, then, the intrinsic goods of childhood are not strongly protected. In this regard, further discussion is necessary to determine how immediate and future goods can be balanced to provide appropriate consideration of both of them. It must be considered, in this context, whether strict normative constraints on certain actions towards children as children should be introduced: One might say, for instance, that children should not be punished in humiliating ways, independently of possible future benefits that might come from that.¹²

So, we can morally account for children *qua* children without referring to child-specific traits, or child-specific goods. For Gheaus (2015a), the intrinsic goods of childhood are not child-specific. However, Gheaus correctly notes that the question of what is good for persons must be distinguished from what we owe to them: Maybe we owe these goods to children, but not to adults. In this way, a playful and joyful childhood might be contrasted with a serious and burdensome adulthood. Gheaus points out, however, that alternatives to this view are possible. She proposes to make adult life more child-like by providing childhood goods to adults: Adulthood could be designed in a way that entails more leisure time than today, and more opportunities to engage in joyful activities, even if this would result in a decrease of economic prosperity.

Gheaus's proposal is situated within the distributive paradigm regarding justice. It seems to me, however, that the focus on distributive patterns does not appropriately capture the main issue that is at stake here: We can understand the core problem better when we focus on the structural and positional aspects of childhood and adulthood. Providing adults with more time to play does not change the essentials of the childhood/adulthood status distinction. Adult status is tied to duties and responsibilities regarding one's own and others' lives. Adults have to run society. They have to function as full participants in political and economic life, and they have to care for the specially vulnerable and dependent persons, among them children. Adulthood is, in some regard, an unattractive status, while childhood is a privileged stage of life. Children can play and have fun because they do not have many responsibilities. Adults who play and have fun still have to be careful not to neglect their duties (e.g. not to forget to feed their baby). But of course, they do not only have more duties and responsibilities than children, but also more rights. They are the ones in power. Children are excluded from important spheres of social life, such as politics and the economy. So, instead of focussing on leisure and fun, a reform of the status of childhood could start from the idea that the social position of children might be improved by giving them more responsibilities than they have today. Instead of merely playing in

the snow – to take up Gheaus’s example – children might help to clear the street of snow. From early on, children are able to significantly contribute to social life. They can take over responsibilities in the family, the school, or the wider community.¹³ At the same time, it can be discussed whether providing children with more duties should go along with granting them additional rights, including some form of (child-specific) autonomy rights, or rights of political participation that do not amount to a full right to vote.

Providing children with additional responsibilities and rights might also be justified for educational reasons, as opening up new practical spheres to children gives them the opportunity to develop valuable capacities and attitudes. It should be noted, however, that providing new options to children *within an educational setting* confirms their subordinate status as addressees of education. As long as some persons (parents, teachers) are specially responsible for children, and have specific (educational and paternalistic) rights towards them, their social positions significantly differs from the position of adults, even if they can to some extent contribute to the life of the community.

Concluding remarks

How, then, does the social-constructionist challenge affect the ethical debate on special childhood goods? *First*, the view of childhood as socially constructed opens up space for normative debates on the question of how the status of childhood should be set up. *Second*, we must be careful, in the ethical debate, when it comes to descriptive assumptions about what childhood or a child ‘is’. Our own views are already influenced by common conceptions of childhood. Moreover, empirical traits of children might be the result of discursive construction. *Third*, we can criticise the adult-centred conception of childhood without relying on an account of child-specific traits, or child-specific goods. *Fourth*, when we discuss these goods, we should not only consider distributive matters, but embed this debate within considerations on the social position of children.

¹ Here, I refer to the type of moral philosophy that has developed since the publication of John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*, in 1971. The work in the philosophy of childhood mentioned in this essay is to be situated within this tradition, that is, within a broadly ‘analytic’ philosophical framework. It should also be noted that the authors who have recently written on the (special) goods of childhood are mostly unfamiliar with the debates in the philosophy of education.

² The view of childhood as a predicament is defended by Tamar Schapiro (1999), and Sarah Hannan (2017).

³ See also Sarah Hannan’s talk of the ‘bads’ of childhood (Hannan 2017).

- ⁴ So, for instance, to say that children have an interest in unstructured play is tantamount to the claim that unstructured play is a good for children.
- ⁵ For a recent critique of these ideas, see Hannan 2017.
- ⁶ On the role of constructionist ideas in the sociology of childhood, see also the remarks of Leena Alanen (2015).
- ⁷ A similar terminology is used by the child sociologist Leena Alanen (2005, p. 40). She distinguishes ‘natural childhood’ and ‘natural children’ from ‘social childhood’ and ‘social children’. Surprisingly, Alanen does not use this distinction in a recent handbook article on the concept of childhood (Alanen 2014).
- ⁸ This view is confirmed by Leena Alanen in an early paper (Alanen 1988, p. 63–64; my emphasis): ‘A more thorough analysis of Ariès’ historical method and his mostly implicit social theory, however, helps to produce another view for thinking about childhood. In this reading childhood emerges, not as an idea of the child in the first place, but as *a particular social status within specially constituted institutional frames*’.
- ⁹ An alternative route that could be taken from here leads into relativism. The relativist position might be put as follows: There are different conceptions of childhood, and we cannot determine whether one of them is more adequate than others. In this regard, Gunter Graf (2015, 31) writes: ‘Even if childhood is socially constructed, it is important to acknowledge that some constructions might be more adequate than others. From the fact of diversity does not immediately follow that all conceptions of childhood are of equal value’.
- ¹⁰ I do not deny, that many constructionist will see it differently – they consider normative discourse as some sort of social construction that might be analysed and criticised.
- ¹¹ This point is also discussed by Brighouse and Swift (2014, 68)
- ¹² Further inspiration for this debate might come from Friedrich Schleiermacher’s pedagogical lectures (held in 1826). Schleiermacher (2000, p. 54) states that future-oriented educational activities in childhood must also have their *satisfaction* in the present. In cases where immediate satisfaction is lacking, Schleiermacher adds, it might suffice that the child consents to an educational activity.
- ¹³ Interestingly, Brennan (2014, 42) mentions ‘opportunities to meaningfully contribute to household and community’ among the goods of childhood.

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