According to the liberal standard view of adulthood and childhood, adults differ from children in that they are rational, autonomous, independent agents. Children are consequently described as non-rational, non-autonomous beings who are highly vulnerable and dependent. It is also acknowledged, of course, that children are autonomous agents in the making – future or potential autonomous agents. The standard distinction between adults and children grounds the normative claim that autonomous adults should have full autonomy rights while the autonomy of children is legitimately restricted, especially for paternalistic and educational reasons. It is assumed that children should be specially protected and cared for.

It has been criticized that the liberal standard view considers children merely as non-adults, and childhood as a deficient form of adult existence. Childhood is not seen as a stage in life in its own right, but merely as a preparation for adulthood. Furthermore, the picture of the adult as a fully rational, autonomous and independent agent has been under critique, especially from feminists and poststructuralists. In this context, the notion of vulnerability has been brought into play.¹ It has been used to characterize the human condition as such: Not only children, but all human beings are thus to be seen as essentially vulnerable. Alternatively, the concept of vulnerability is used – especially in medical ethics – for particular groups, among them children, who are thought to need special protection from being harmed or exploited (e.g. Luna 2009; Luna/Vanderpoel 2013). This restricted usage of the term seems compatible with the liberal standard view of childhood.

By contrast, the universalist notion of vulnerability might be used to undermine the standard distinction between childhood and adulthood. If not only children, but all human beings are vulnerable and dependent, these notions cannot be used as distinguishing features between children and adults any more. Moreover, the picture of children as deficient adults might be overcome by focusing on the common vulnerability of all human beings: While children's lack of autonomy and independence appears

¹ The work of Judith Butler is especially important, in this context (Butler 2004 and 2009). In this talk, I do not discuss Butler's considerations on vulnerability in detail.
as a shortcoming, in the autonomy-based liberal view, it is a normal feature of humanity, according to the vulnerability-based approach. This approach includes children among the members of the community of vulnerable and dependent beings. The liberal standard view, by contrast, sees them merely as becoming full-blooded human agents.

While this can be considered as an advantage of the universalist approach, it has one important disadvantage: It makes it difficult to account for the special needs, vulnerabilities and dependencies of children. If it is agreed that children – in particular young children – are special in this regard, the universalist notion of vulnerability must be complemented with a notion of children’s special vulnerability. In the second part of this talk I try to clarify this notion. My claim is that the attempt to elucidate in which way children are specially vulnerable leads us back to some version of the liberal standard view. In other words: Children’s special vulnerability is due to their lack of autonomy and independence.

I think, then, that introducing the notion of vulnerability does not seriously question the autonomy-based distinction between childhood and adulthood, as long as the special vulnerability of children is acknowledged. However, as I would like to make clear in the third part of this talk, the vulnerability-based approach urges us to re-consider the liberal standard view of what it means to be an adult. Also, it leads us to rethink childhood, at least in some of its aspects. I start with some conceptual clarifications, focusing on the concepts of vulnerability, dependence, and autonomy.

Vulnerability, dependence, autonomy

Persons might be seen as vulnerable to the extent that they are unable to avert being violated. Vulnerability, thus understood, presupposes that a person can be violated at all. In other words, it presupposes a basic form of vulnerability. Stones, for instance, are not vulnerable in this basic sense. Basic vulnerability might be seen as grounded in sentience, or the ability to suffer. According to this view, adults and children, including the newborn and even some of the unborn, are clearly among those who can be violated.

Sentience grounds particular interests, especially the interest not to be in pain. However, the notion of basic vulnerability cannot be reduced to this interest. It includes all kinds of interests, needs and desires – everything that human beings care for and value. It should be noted, here, that there are forms of basic vulnerability that not all sentient beings possess. For instance: Cats are sentient, but they cannot be humiliated because they lack self-respect (or the capacity to develop self-respect).
Also, they cannot experience the specific form of violation that arises from restrictions of a person’s autonomy. Cats might suffer when they are locked in, but their suffering differs from the corresponding suffering of an autonomous human being. Thus, certain forms of basic vulnerability presuppose specific qualities and capacities that not all sentient beings – and not all human beings – have.

Being vulnerable in the basic sense is not tantamount to being violated. For instance, each human being has a basic need for food, but this does not mean that all human beings must starve. Those who are able to provide food – or have others provide food for them – will not starve. In other words, some have the power to avert being violated. This leads us back to the understanding of vulnerability stated at the beginning: I propose to describe persons as vulnerable to the extent that a) they can be violated at all (basic vulnerability) and b) are unable to prevent being violated.

Basic vulnerability has its source in the qualities and capacities of the individual. Vulnerability in its second aspect, however, can have both internal (“inherent”) and external (“situational”) sources (Mackenzie 2014). So, it can be due to the lack of capacities or powers on the side of the individual, or due to social, economic or environmental circumstances. In many cases, a person’s vulnerability involves both kinds of sources. It is often a question of whether a person has the internal powers to counteract external forces that undermine her attempts to avert being violated (Anderson 2014, p. 135). Persons might be vulnerable to assaults from others, to exploitation or manipulation. They are vulnerable in this sense to the extent that they are unable to defend themselves. They might also be violated, however, if no one acts against them, when they lack the necessary capacities to take care of themselves.

The notion of vulnerability is closely related to the concept of dependence. This concept might be used in a purely negative sense: We depend on others not to assault us. In many usages of the term, dependence entails more than this: It is used in cases where persons depend on others to do things for them, to help them or to love them. In relationships of care, dependence is normally asymmetrical: One person depends on the other to care for him or her. Relationships of love and friendship are often symmetrical: The partners mutually depend on each other. The notion of independence can be contrasted with both the concepts of vulnerability and dependence. Persons are independent to the extent that they do not have to rely on others to avert being violated. Even healthy and strong adults are to some extent dependent in the negative sense. One way to become more independent is to develop one’s capacities and skills, and to acquire knowledge. This enables persons to do things by them-
selves, to protect themselves from assaults, and to meet their own needs or the needs of others. This kind of (internal) independence should not be conflated with autonomy, although autonomy might be seen as an aspect of independence. But a person can be autonomous without being fully independent in this sense. Autonomy as a personal capacity is often defined as the capacity to act on attitudes that are fully one’s own (or authentic). It has become common to distinguish the authenticity conditions from the competency conditions of autonomy (Christman 2009). Among the latter are minimal rationality and self-control. Competencies of this kind enable us to act on those attitudes that are really our own, provided that we have this kind of attitudes.

There are external factors – restrictions of external liberty – that might hinder a person from acting autonomously. But there are also additional internal conditions, namely, the capacities to do what one autonomously decides to do. For instance, a person who lacks the capacity to walk cannot effectively decide to take a walk. A person who cannot cook lacks the option to prepare her own meals. She is not independent in this regard. Developing capacities makes persons more independent and expands their options for autonomous agency.

The special vulnerability of children

This conceptual framework expresses a universalist notion of vulnerability, but it also allows us to get clear about the special vulnerability of children. On the one hand, all human beings can be seen as vulnerable, at least in the basic sense. But not only this: It would be wrong to describe adults as persons who possess (always and in any respect) the power to avert being violated. Adults are dependent in the negative sense, but they are also dependent on being loved and, at least temporarily, on being cared for or supported.

On the other hand, children can be described as specially vulnerable, within this conceptual framework. They can, as I shall show in a second, be considered as having special basic vulnerability. Moreover, they are more vulnerable than adults in the sense that are less able to avert being violated.

Let us consider, first, the special basic vulnerability of children. We can assume that children have a range of interests and needs that can be violated. These constitute their basic vulnerability. Children share with all other human beings certain basic bodily interests, such as the interest to survive and to be free from pain. In this regard, they are not special. Moreover, they have specific relational interests – relation-
al interests that are not identical with the relational interests of adults. In particular, children have an interest to be cared for, to be loved and esteemed by particular persons ("parents") in a reliable, continuous relationship. Their relational interests are tied to another type of child-specific interests – developmental interests. It is commonly assumed that children’s development as a whole, and in particular the development of a positive relationship to themselves, depends on being loved and esteemed. Children also depend on others (parents, teachers) to be initiated into relevant cultural practices and to acquire capacities to participate in these practices. While developmental interests are future-directed, children might also be ascribed the interest to pursue child-specific activities in the present, in particular, the interest in opportunities to play alone and with others. Finally, the problem of autonomy should be mentioned. On the one hand, it seems important for children to have room for (maybe only domain-specific, “local”) independent decision-making and acting. On the other hand, it is commonly assumed that their capacity for autonomy is not yet fully developed. Both the competency and the authenticity conditions can be mentioned here: Children are said to lack rationality, self-control, but also attitudes that are fully their own. Nevertheless, children (at least from the age of two or three) can be described as basically vulnerable with regards to autonomy, although not in the same way as adults.

This rough picture of children’s special basic vulnerability can ground our considerations on children’s vulnerability in its second aspect, that is, their special inability to prevent being violated. In what follows I do not consider all types of interests just mentioned, but focus on basic bodily interests and relational interests. With regards to the former, it is obvious that children are specially vulnerable because they lack many of the capacities necessary to care for their bodily well-being. For instance, young children are unable to provide their own food. In our societies, it is not skills for hunting, gathering or farming that are required. Children lack economic independence (that is, the money to buy food). Moreover, they do not know what is good for them to eat: Children left on their own with plenty of money, in our societies, are unlikely to starve, but rather to become sick and obese.

I now turn to children’s relational interests. For the satisfaction of these interests, children are essentially dependent on others. This means: Their dependence is not due to a lack of agency-related capacities that would make them independent. It is not possible for a person to satisfy her interest in love all by herself. She needs another person to love her. So, we can say that children’s basic vulnerability in this regard...
– that is tied to corresponding relational interests – inevitably brings about the second aspect of vulnerability, the incapacity to avert being violated. But here, we must ask whether this really makes children *specially* vulnerable. Adults too have relational interests that they cannot satisfy by themselves.

Children however are less than adults in a position to react to the neglect to their relational interests. This is – first – due to their status in the existing social arrangements that are set up to ensure an appropriate child care. Parents are not only ascribed duties with regard to their children, but also rights over them. This makes it difficult for children to escape an unsatisfactory family situation. It also creates a specific form of external vulnerability that has been labelled *pathogenic vulnerability* (Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 2014). But it is not only children’s social position, but also their lack of certain emotional and cognitive capacities related to autonomous agency that make it difficult for them to fully understand the situation they are in and to be able to escape it. So, with regards to relational interests too, adults are typically more independent than children. Their status and their capacities should enable them, for instance, to leave a relationship, in which their relational interests are unsatisfied.

This elucidation of children’s special vulnerability confirms the liberal standard view of the distinction between childhood and adulthood: The two stages of life are to be distinguished regarding capacities related to autonomy and independence. Adults are not to be seen as fully independent or invulnerable, but as more independent and autonomous than children. There are, of course, groups of adults that can also be described as specially vulnerable, but not in the same way as children. Moreover, it must be acknowledged, that some fourteen-year-olds are in fact more autonomous and independent than some twenty-four-year-olds. This raises the question as to how the transition from childhood into adulthood should be organized (Franklin-Hall 2013; Anderson/Claassen 2012; Schrag 1977). Should we work with fixed age-limits that neglect individual differences, or should we establish an individualistic model of transition, possibly based on competence tests? The alternative to both these solutions is to take a radically individualistic stance: Instead of creating two categories of people (or two moral status – child status and adult status), we could see each individual in his or her specific vulnerabilities, dependencies and capacities. This sounds good, and it is probably the right way to address vulnerabilities in face-to-face situations. So, for instance, parents should see children as individuals, in their specific
capacities and vulnerabilities. Parental care, however, already takes place within a particular social setting in which certain persons are ascribed the role of a parent.

An important argument for establishing two categories of people and two moral status is that the special vulnerability of children requires setting up a reliable, temporally continuous social arrangement, in which the children can be appropriately cared for. To address the specific needs of children, there must be persons who take over the responsibilities, duties – and also the rights – constitutive for the status of parenthood. Parenting is a long-term-project. You cannot fulfil your duties as a parent by intervening once or twice in a child's life. For one, parenting demands the cultivation of a stable loving-caring relationship with the child to account for both the relational and the developmental interests of the child. Being continuously related to the child is also necessary to make appropriate decisions for him or her: Only if parents know the individual needs and capacities of a child can they know what is good for him or her, both in the present and in the long run. Also, the parental task of educating the child requires to live with the child, to act with him or her, to talk to him or her more than once or twice. Now, since the duties of a parent can only be fulfilled in a continuous relational process, parents must have the right to live with the child, to care for him and educate him for a certain period of time. For if we speak about the rights of parents, we must at least assume that parents have the rights necessary to fulfil their duties (Archard 2010, p. 43; Blustein 1982, p. 104). Against this backdrop, I claim that children's special vulnerability requires the establishment of reliable social arrangements that regulate the parent-child-relationship for a fixed period of time.

Adulthood and childhood reconsidered

So, in my view, the vulnerability-based approach does not undermine the liberal standard view of the distinction between childhood and adulthood. However, it brings us to reconsider our picture of both the adult and the child. It has already become clear that adults are to be seen as vulnerable and dependent in multiple ways. They are vulnerable in a basic sense, but also dependent on others, in both a negative and a positive sense. According to my view, however, we should maintain the idea that adults have both the capacity and the right to lead an independent life.

It is clear that living independently in our societies requires a range of capacities that allow persons to do things by themselves and to avert certain forms of harm. However, it seems impossible to provide an exact list of the relevant capacities: For instance, you can live as an adult if your are unable to walk, given the necessary sup-
port and the technical means. You can also lead an independent adult life without being able to cook or to do the laundry, because you may have someone else who does it for you (either your partner, your mother or persons you pay for their services). Maybe the only capacity that is essential for an adult life is autonomy. But what kind of autonomy is presupposed for adulthood?

If we choose a very demanding notion of autonomy and take it as a precondition for respect (for the person's autonomy), then many persons who normally count as adults will have to be seen as non-autonomous. Here, then, an minimalist notion of autonomy that entails a non-demanding version of both the competence and the authenticity conditions must suffice. From this minimalist notion of autonomy, an ideal of adult autonomy can be distinguished. This ideal can also serve as an educational aim. Both conceptions of autonomy must be compatible with the notion of the adult as dependent and vulnerable. Here, I would like to mention the debate on relational autonomy without presenting or discussing the various conceptions that have been proposed under this heading (Mackenzie/Stoljar 2000). Conceptions of relational autonomy are both directed against individualist accounts of autonomy, and against the view that the relational nature of human existence makes autonomy obsolete. The claim is, then, that we can be autonomous as relationally dependent beings – and even more than that – that we depend on others for our autonomy. To give an example: Recognition-based accounts of relational autonomy state that we can only become autonomous and act autonomously under the condition that we are recognised (loved, esteemed, respected) by others (Anderson/Honneth 2005; Mackenzie 2008). So, as autonomous adults, we are not only negatively dependent on others (that is, dependent not to be assaulted), but also positively dependent. Our (basic) vulnerability as autonomous persons is tied to our relational vulnerability. This sort of autonomy is "full" autonomy, it is not a compromise between dependency and autonomy. As autonomous persons, we can have no interest in becoming fully independent, because this might inhibit our autonomy.

The question is how the picture of the adult as dependent and vulnerable changes our picture of the child. The basic point is that children’s upbringing is not to be seen as a process directed towards full or maximum independence and invulnerability. Its aim is not to fully escape relational dependencies and become self-sufficient. Three aspects can be mentioned here. First, the development during childhood can be con-

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2 In this context, it is discussed whether relational factors are constitutive of autonomy, that is, whether they belong to its conceptual core. I assume that this is not the case. In my view, (certain forms of) social relationships function as background conditions for autonomous agency.
sidered, in some regards, as a development towards more vulnerability. Basic vulnerabilities are dependent on the qualities and capacities of the individual. A person who lacks authentic attitudes cannot be violated in his or her authenticity. A person incapable of loving is not vulnerable to loss, or at least not in the same way as a loving person. So, the process of growing up goes along with a cultivation of basic vulnerabilities, or the capacities that make a person vulnerable.

Second, with regards to relational vulnerabilities, it is not desirable to become fully independent. There are certain goods – relationship goods (Brighouse/Swift 2014) – that we can only enjoy as dependent beings. Children have an interest in developing their relational capacities and becoming capable for new kinds of relationships. They do not have an interest in becoming independent of relationships. The typical relationships between adults differ from the parent-child-relationship. There is no reason, however, to assume that in a (symmetrical) adult relationship, a higher type of relationship good is realized than in the parent-child-relationship. This type of relationship provides a special sort of relationship goods for both the parents and the child. The relationship goods that arise from being loved by parents is not deficient compared to the goods realized in adult friendships and erotic relationships.

Finally, I would like to come back to the problem of autonomy. I take it that developing the capacity for autonomy should be seen as an important aim of education. Children are dependent on others to become autonomous. Relational factors are thus important for developmental reasons. Moreover, I have already pointed out that becoming autonomous is not tantamount to becoming relationally independent. Here, I speak about autonomy as an aim of education: Children should be enabled to become autonomous as relationally dependent beings.

Furthermore, the notion of relational autonomy might be applied to children as children. Here, the point is that children as individuals might be highly deficient regarding certain agency-related capacities. It is commonly assumed that they lack procedural rationality, self-control, or authenticity. As relational persons, however, that is, as persons embedded in loving-caring relationships, they can act autonomously, to some extent, despite their individual deficiencies. Love, respect and esteem function as background conditions for both the development of authentic attitudes and the capacity to act on them. A child who lacks self-confidence might not have the courage to express what he or she really likes but pay too much attention to what the peers like. Moreover, children need to be supported in their reasoning, both to find out what they really want and how they can best act on their values or desires. Adults can provide them with knowledge and share their own experience with them. They can
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discuss important issues with the children and thereby introduce them into discurs-
ive practices. They can also open up options for agency that the child is not yet aware
of, for instance by initiating the child into certain valuable activities. But of course,
parents must also keep certain options closed and restrict children’s agency, for pa-
ternalistic or other reasons. For instance, parents might intervene into the child’s
agency if the child lacks self-control. Maybe, the parents are certain that the child
really wants to go play in a football tournament. On the day of the tournament,
however, the child does not want to get up. So, if the parents (paternalistically) force
him or her out of bed, this enables the child to act on his or her own true desires –
that is, to act more authentically. Regarding situations of this type, we can distin-
guish respect for autonomy from the promotion of autonomy (Christman 2014). In this
example, the child’s current desire (to stay in bed) is not respected, but the child’s ca-
pacity to act in accordance with his authentic desires is promoted.

The question is whether considerations of this kind should also be applied to
adults: Should we promote the autonomy of adults – and should we promote it, in
some cases, by restricting them in their agency? I cannot pursue these questions,
here. My point is that seeing autonomy and dependency as entwined (Anderson 2014)
in adult agency can make us see the child’s autonomy in a new light. Children can be
ascribed a special kind of relational autonomy.

**Main Claims**

In this talk I made the following claims:

1. The notion of vulnerability has two aspects – basic vulnerability (possessed by
all those who can be violated at all) and the inability to avert being violated.

2. Children are specially vulnerable. Their special vulnerability is due to their lack
of autonomy and independence.

3. This is why the vulnerability-based approach does not undermine the liberal
standard view regarding the adult-child-distinction.

4. However, it brings us to reconsider our picture of adulthood and childhood.


Christman (ed.), Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press:
127–149.
Vulnerability and Autonomy – Children and Adults


