

# Chapter 3

## The ‘Intrinsic Goods of Childhood’ and the Just Society

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### 3.1 ‘Intrinsic Goods of Childhood’

Philosophers’ interest has recently turned to the issue of the so-called intrinsic goods of childhood; the existence and identity of such goods are likely to carry important implications for what is a good childhood and for what adults collectively owe to children. The concern with the intrinsic goods of childhood, as it has been expressed by philosophers such as Samantha Brennan ([forthcoming](#)), Colin Macleod (2010) and Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift ([forthcoming](#), 2014), covers several interconnected questions. At least three different issues are being addressed under the heading of the intrinsic goods of childhood:

(a) Is childhood itself intrinsically valuable?

The first, and fundamental, issue, is whether childhood itself is an intrinsic good – that is, a stage of life that is intrinsically good, rather than valuable only instrumentally, in preparation for adulthood.<sup>1</sup> Is it worthwhile to have had a childhood? If we had the choice to skip childhood and come into the world as fully formed adults,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>This is the focus of Brennan’s paper, who also raises the second question but engages with it to a lesser extent.

<sup>2</sup>‘Possible’ both metaphysically and practically. Some will think it is a metaphysical impossibility to ‘skip’ childhood, since the identity of adults is constituted, in part, by memories and experiences that presuppose childhood.

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would it be rational to do so? If childhood is intrinsically good, then some of childhood's own goods – that is, things that are necessary for a good childhood – also have intrinsic value, rather than being merely instrumental for subsequent stages of life. In different words, if it is desirable that we start life as children, then it is important that we enjoy the things that make for a good childhood even if not all these things will also be conducive to a good adulthood – indeed, even if enjoying the goods of childhood was to jeopardise some of the goods of adulthood.

For example, suppose that having significant economic responsibilities as a child makes one's childhood overall worse, and one's adulthood overall better. If childhood was valuable only as preparation for adulthood, little would speak against assigning significant economic responsibilities to children. But if childhood has intrinsic value, the question is how much, if any, economic responsibility should be attributed to children in order to secure the best trade-off across individuals' different life stages.

In this paper, I take the position that childhood is indeed intrinsically good; by 'the intrinsic goods of childhood' I refer to those goods that, first, make an important and direct contribution<sup>3</sup> to a good childhood, and that are, therefore, intrinsically important for a well-lived human life; and, second, have some developmental value for children. To illustrate, play is an intrinsic good of childhood and therefore, on the view of childhood that I adopt, play is valuable beyond its usefulness to a good adulthood. (That is, above and beyond the fact that it helps children acquire information and skills that will be useful to them later on). Instead, childhood play is an intrinsic good of a human life. In contrast, fulfilling sexual relationships, for instance, are an intrinsic good of a human life, but not of childhood.

(b) Are the intrinsic goods of childhood only valuable for children?

The second issue at stake is whether some of the intrinsic goods of childhood are also *special* goods of childhood – that is, whether they are valuable, or particularly valuable, for children, and not valuable for adults.<sup>4</sup> Is it true that (a subset of) the intrinsic goods of childhood cannot also directly contribute to good adult-hoods? Unstructured time and play, a sense of being carefree, and sexual innocence are among the suggested examples of things that are good for children, but not, or much less so, for adults. The focus of this paper is on exploring what it means for childhood goods to be special, and whether it is plausible that there are any special goods of childhood.

I shall argue that the intrinsic goods of childhood discussed so far in the philosophical literature are not likely to be special: they are also good for adults. In the case of children, however, I assume that many of these goods also play an important developmental role. For this reason, individuals who had been deprived of them in childhood cannot simply be compensated for the loss by being allowed to enjoy

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<sup>3</sup>I cast my argument, and its terminology, in terms of goods that make an important contribution to a good childhood rather than goods that are *necessary* for a good childhood, in an attempt to minimise the contentious nature of the claims I make.

<sup>4</sup>This seems to be the main concern of Brighouse and Swift ([forthcoming 2014](#)).

these goods later in life. On this account, play – for instance – is good for adults as well as for children; but it benefits children both *qua* children and *qua* future adults, because it is necessary in order to foster, in children, the acquisition of knowledge and skills that are essential for a good adulthood.

(c) What goods are owed to children?

The third issue, very closely related to the second, is whether just treatment of children requires that they be provided with goods that are different in nature from the goods owed to adults: this is the question of an appropriate metric of justice towards children.<sup>5</sup>

Is Childhood Itself Intrinsically Valuable?, Are the Intrinsic Goods of Childhood Only Valuable for Children? and What Goods Are Owed to Children? are independent questions. The first two need not be dependent on each other: It is possible that childhood has intrinsic value, and hence some goods of childhood are intrinsically valuable, but that these goods are not specific to childhood. If so, then all the things that are good for children are also, at least potentially, good for adults. (This is the position for which I argue). It is also possible that childhood and its goods are intrinsically valuable and, at the same time, that some things, such as play, are only valuable during childhood. The other two combinations are possible as well: perhaps only adulthood has intrinsic value, but the things that make for a good childhood also make for a good adulthood; and they are intrinsically valuable only when enjoyed during adulthood. That would be to say – to keep with the same example – that childhood play is merely instrumentally valuable, while playing as an adult is intrinsically valuable. (A somewhat odd, but not incoherent, view). Finally, it is possible to believe that childhood is only instrumentally valuable and that some of its intrinsic goods lose their value once we reach adulthood. The intrinsic goods of childhood, on this view, will contribute only indirectly to a good human life. Indeed, this is the position identified as the conventional view by Brennan.

There is one obvious<sup>6</sup> line of resistance to the claim that these two questions are independent: if those goods that make childhood good are indeed good for and available to adults as well, if therefore they are available throughout a person's life, then why would it be irrational to skip childhood? Can childhood have special value if its goods can be realised in adulthood? I do not deny the force of this challenge; but I work with the assumption, which I find plausible, that the intrinsic goods of childhood – at least those I discuss here – are, for a variety of reasons, *more easily* available to children though also realisable in adulthood. Loosing yourself in unstructured play, for instance, may come a lot easier if you are a child than if you are an adult, and yet be a good and feasible thing to do in both cases. The intrinsic goods of childhood may be sufficiently valuable for us to think that a good life should have plenty of them. In this case it would be irrational to skip childhood, given how difficult they are to come by in adulthood.

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<sup>5</sup>And has been discussed by Macleod (2010).

<sup>6</sup>And I am grateful to several readers of previous drafts, who brought it to my attention.

The last two questions – of whether the intrinsic goods of childhood are only good for children, and of what children are owed – bear more on each other, but the relation is unidirectional. A positive answer to the former implies a positive answer to the latter: if some of the intrinsic goods of childhood are different in kind from adulthood goods, this means that some of the goods owed to children are of a different kind than those owed to adults. A negative answer to the former question may seem to imply a negative answer to the latter question, but it does not. The relationship between the two issues is complicated by the different kinds of authoritative relationships between, on the one hand, states and its citizens, and, on the one hand, between states, adults and children.

In liberal societies, adults are supposed to be autonomous, to stand in relationships of equality to each other, and hence to be governed by states that are neutral with respect to citizens' conceptions of the good. For this reason, it is plausible to think that justice requires states to watch over the redistribution of only a limited number of goods – say, income and wealth, and possibly other basic goods. Adult recipients of these goods are then free to pursue their own plans and preferred lifestyles. There is no complaint of justice that many other kinds of goods, that can be essential to leading good human lives (such as music lessons), are left out of state redistribution. Adults should be free to pursue these goods, if they wish to, but there is no injustice if they are not being provided with these goods – and, of course, they should never be *forced* to pursue them.

By contrast, children stand in relationships of authority with both the adults who rear them and the state: the latter kinds of agents are allowed – and often required – to be paternalistic towards children. It is contentious whether parents or states should have the final say with respect to what goods should be provided to children. But the legitimacy of paternalism in relationships with children is rarely disputed; it entails that children ought, as a matter of justice, to be provided with the kinds of goods that are important for their well-being *qua* children and *qua* future adults and, possibly, that they should be compelled to accept these goods.

Therefore, even if one could draft a plausible list of intrinsic adulthood goods, this list would not necessarily have a direct consequence for the metric of justice towards adults: adults should be allowed to choose whether to pursue or not things that are good for them. In contrast, the existence of childhood goods does have direct consequences for the metric of justice towards children. Moreover – and this is an additional point – some things that are good for both children and adults may be too scarce to be available, or equally available, to all members of the society and there may be reasons of justice to give priority to children when we distribute them.

This means that the position I adopt here – that the intrinsic goods of childhood are not specific to childhood – is compatible with the belief that children and adults are not owed the same goods. To illustrate, it is possible to think that unstructured time is equally good for children and for adults but it is owed, as a matter of justice, only to the former.

The focus on this paper is on the question of whether the intrinsic goods of childhood are only valuable for children; I provide a very sketchy defence of a positive

answer to the question of whether childhood is intrinsically valuable in the next section,<sup>7</sup> and then I move on to defend a view according to which the intrinsic goods of childhood are also valuable to adults in the third section. The short narrative intermezzo in the fourth section invites readers to examine their own beliefs concerning the relationship between childhood goods and adulthood goods. I engage only tangentially with question "What Goods Are Owed to Children?", of the adequate metric of justice for children. In the last section I draw a tentative conclusion about the social implications of childhood goods.

## 3.2 Childhood's Intrinsic Value

According to an influential view, childhood is a predicament, a stage of life to be overcome in order to enter adulthood, the truly valuable state of life.<sup>8</sup> One important duty that child-rearers have towards children is to help them grow up psychologically and morally, that is to overcome the state of childhood, because 'were one condemned ... to remain a child throughout one's existence...it would be a personal misfortune of the utmost gravity.' (Lomasky 1987: 202)

Does this necessarily mean that childhood is a harmful, or otherwise regrettable state? I take the position that it is not. A belief that childhood is in no way intrinsically harmful is compatible with the existence of a duty to help children grow out of childhood and become adults. Here is a plausible explanation of this duty: in order to have an even minimally good life, children need adults' care. But since adults become frail, and die, they are unable to provide care endlessly. Therefore, if they are to avoid being harmed, children have to eventually grow out of their childhood state. This is to say that childhood is not, as such, a harmful state but rather that it can become one under certain conditions that, indeed, apply in the real world.

On the predicament view of childhood, childhood is valuable only because it leads to adulthood; it does not have intrinsic value: the child's present good is a function of its status as a prospective project pursuer' (Lomasky 1987: 202) – that is, an adult. How plausible is it to believe that childhood is to be gotten over with as soon as possible and, if possible, skipped altogether? That it would be good for individuals to forego their own childhood?<sup>9</sup> Samantha Brennan suggested the following thought experiment as a test for whether one believes that childhood has any intrinsic value: if a pill existed that could turn newborns into adults instantaneously would it be rational to take it? I cannot do full justice to this question here.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>I address this question more fully in paper 'Unfinished adults and defective children' (work in progress).

<sup>8</sup>A classical text in analytical philosophy that can be interpreted as advancing this view is Tamar Schapiro (1999).

<sup>9</sup>Brennan raises these questions in her forthcoming paper.

<sup>10</sup>A variation on this question qualifies it: if individuals are given adulthood-time instead of childhood-time, would this make it rational to skip childhood? To show that it wouldn't, one would

But, since the argument I propose in this paper is strengthened by a negative answer to this question, I start by indicating how implausible the view of childhood-as-mere-predicament is.

Many will perhaps find it unnecessary to argue that the above view of childhood is implausible; childhood nostalgia is common, and childhood is often represented as the golden age of one's life. Even adults who do not judge their own childhoods as good, are often longing for the sense of freshness, limitless possibilities, excitement and relative freedom from social expectations they had as children. But at least some of these attractive features of childhood are, presumably, the bonus of being at the beginning of one's life rather than that of a particular age. Of course, we all start life as children, and therefore, in the world as it is, these are typical advantages of being a child. However, this does not necessarily mean that one *has* to be a child in order to enjoy them. Possibly, if the instant-adulthood pill from Brennan's thought experiment existed, the instant adults would enjoy the same sense of freshness, limitless possibilities and excitement that children enjoy in the real world. Many of the good things about being a child may in fact derive from being at the beginning of one's life rather than from being a child. (Assuming, that is, that 'being at the beginning of one's life' is not an sufficient feature of being a child).

The place to look for the intrinsic value of childhood then is in the essential feature(s) of childhood, that is the feature(s) that necessarily separate children from adults. Philosophers have traditionally identified children's temporary lack of rationality and autonomy – which, in turn, were said to make even older children less than full agents – as the distinctive characteristic of childhood.<sup>11</sup> And children's defective agency made some doubt that childhood can be an intrinsically valuable life stage; therefore, this conception of childhood is also responsible for qualifying childhood as a predicament to be overcome.

This view may come in a stronger or a weaker version. One may think, quite extremely, that since children lack rationality, they also lack personhood and hence they are less morally worthy than adults. Or one may, less extremely, hold that in spite of their diminished rationality children are persons, hence proper objects of moral concern, but that children's irrationality justifies paternalistic attitudes towards them – that is, the denial of freedom considered basic in the case of adults.<sup>12</sup> The belief that childhood has intrinsic value may be compatible with paternalism, but not with the stronger version of childhood-as-predicament.

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have to explain not only why childhood has intrinsic value, but why it has a value that is of a different kind than that of adulthood, such that skipping childhood would impoverish one's life in a way that cannot be made up for with the extra years of adulthood. Indeed, this seems to be the more interesting and difficult issue, since few people would think it rational to just skip childhood. Here I gesture towards such an explanation, which I discuss at length in 'Unfinished adults and defective children'.

<sup>11</sup> Or, at least, the characteristic that matters morally and legally; thus, adult human beings lacking sufficient rationality and autonomy have traditionally been deemed on a par – morally and legally – to children.

<sup>12</sup> Amongst contemporary philosophers, Schapiro herself holds this Kantian view.

The normative belief that rationality is *the* source of personhood and hence of (full) moral status, combined with a descriptive belief that children are insufficiently rational, yields the conclusion that childhood is a predicament. If both the descriptive and the normative elements of this view on childhood are correct, then children's moral status is indeed derivative from the expectation that they will reach adulthood. In this case, there would still exist childhood goods: things that make childhoods go well. But if childhood was merely instrumentally valuable, then things that prepare children for a good adulthood should be considered the most important childhood goods, since a childhood could not be considered overall good if it failed to prepare you for adulthood. Similarly, the view that childhood has merely instrumental value and contains merely instrumental goods implies that what is owed to children *qua* future adults should always have priority over what it is owed to them *qua* children. On this view, a successful adulthood can easily redeem, for example, a tedious or stressful childhood, if the same things that caused misery during childhood brought about success during adulthood.

Here I assume – with very little argument – that the descriptive element of the above argument is false. In this age and time, nobody would probably want to uphold a sharp contrast between children's utter irrationality and adults' rationality. Not only is rationality a matter of degree, but, more importantly, children's ability to reason in general, and, in particular, to understand and give consideration to other people's interests, has arguably been underestimated. Developmental psychologists seem increasingly confident of toddlers' ability to use reasoning, imagination and empathy within the constraints of their lack of experience, that is information about the world (Gopnik 2009). In Alison Gopnik's words:

we used to think that babies and young children were irrational, egocentric, and amoral. Their thinking and experience were concrete, immediate and limited. In fact, psychologists and neuroscientists have discovered that babies not only learn more, but imagine more, care more, and experience more than we would ever have thought possible. In some ways, young children are actually smarter, more imaginative, more caring and even more conscious than adults are. (Gopnik 2009: 5)

According to this newly emerging understanding of childhood, 'children aren't just defective adults, primitive grown-ups gradually attaining our perfection and complexity. Instead, children and adults are different forms of *Homo Sapiens*.' (Gopnik 2009: 9). The real distinguishing mark of childhood is children's superior ability to learn and change in the light of experience. and their exceptional mental flexibility, that allows them to imagine how things could be – as opposed from how they actually are – better than adults. On this view, children have, to a higher degree than adults, a distinctive and particularly precious human feature: the ability to conceive of change. Adulthood, by contrast, is the age when we are best suited to bring about the changes that we can only envisage thanks to our child-like abilities. So children, like adults, are rational beings; the difference between them is that children are better at imagining things while adults – who have the benefit of experience and enhanced self-control – are better at turning imagination into reality.

As I discuss in more detail in the next section, Gopnik compares children with small scientists or social reformers, a comparison that makes sense if we think that scientists and social reformers need child-like qualities. We of course often think this – and we also think that artists or philosophers exhibit to a high degree child-like qualities like curiosity and the ability to see the world with a fresh eye, that other adults have lost in the transition to adulthood. This means that, at the very least, childhood is a mixed state with respect to the constitutive features of rational and moral agency. Childhood contains elements that are intrinsically – and especially! – valuable and others that are less valuable, such as lack of experience or a relative low ability to control the expression of one’s emotions and their impact on one’s behaviour.

Much detail is still missing from this picture of childhood and adulthood. But its core – the discovery that babies not older than a few months and young children have a very active mental life that includes logical thinking – makes it plausible that children in general are above the threshold of rationality necessary to give them equal moral worth to that of adults. Thus, if developmental psychologists are right, even if rationality was indeed the source of full moral status, children from very young ages onwards would be likely to qualify.

The normative element of the childhood-as predicament view is also contentious. It is very contentious that rationality is the unique, or even supreme, source of moral status. Sentience, and the capacity for empathy – and with it, an ability to relate to others emotionally – are important contenders for moral status, and they obviously characterise children. Not that it has never been contested that (very young) children possess sentience or empathy: It is interesting to note that in the late nineteenth, and early twentieth, century newborns were deemed incapable of pain – to the extent of having medical procedures including surgery done on them without anaesthesia<sup>13</sup> – a theory fully disproved nowadays. Similarly, one twentieth century school of child-rearing seems to deny much of babies’ emotions and interprets their signs of distress as attempts to manipulate their adult caregivers. The denial of emotional relatedness, however, is only possible by postulating a form of instrumental – in this case, manipulative – rationality. There seems to be no way of consistently denying to children *qua* children *all* grounds for moral status on any minimally plausible view.

Childhood, I will assume for the remaining of this paper, has intrinsic worth. Taking a pill that makes one skip childhood and plunge straight into adult life would be irrational, because it would deprive the pill taker of a part of her life during which she can exist as an individual whose life has intrinsic value. Some things, hereby called ‘the intrinsic goods of childhood’, will be necessary or at least conducive to good lives for children.

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<sup>13</sup> Fortunately, in the beginning of the twentieth century scientific experiments started to be made to test – and refute – this belief. One of the earliest such experiments is reported in M.G. Blanton (1917). For more on this, see D. B. Chamberlain (1991).



### 3.3 The Intrinsic Goods of Childhood in Adulthood

The next question is whether the intrinsic goods of childhood necessarily lose their value once individuals have grown up. I suggest not: it is implausible that the intrinsic goods of childhood are also *special* goods of childhood – in other words, that they cannot also be adulthood goods. Of course, different adults have different ideas of what represents a good life, and therefore few things are likely to be considered universally good. But the things that have been recently suggested as likely intrinsic goods of childhood *are* considered important goods by many adults. One of them is play, as I will soon illustrate. Moreover, there is nothing about the intrinsic goods of childhood that is necessarily inimical to good adulthoods, even allowing for the vast diversity of reasonable conceptions of the good held by different adults.

The truth of this claim obviously depends on what it could mean that some goods are specific to childhood. I distinguish between several likely interpretations:

- (1) First, if one has in mind valuable dispositions and abilities, one may want to say that we can only enjoy these goods as children, and not as adults, because as adults we had most probably lost them. Possible examples include the ability to learn very quickly, the disposition to react with wonder to new persons, objects or events or the ability to take a lot of joy from one's imagination and from unstructured play. It would be difficult to deny that the above abilities and dispositions characterise children, and not adults, *in general*. But this is a merely descriptive interpretation of the claim 'there are intrinsic goods of childhood'; I will turn to the exploration of its normative import below.
- (2) More interesting is a second possible claim, that some dispositions or states of mind are good for us only when we are children, and once we have reached adulthood they turn bad, or at most indifferent. Examples may include sexual innocence or a sense of being care-free, as suggested by Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift: 'innocence about sexuality, for example, is good in childhood, even though for most people it would not be valuable for their adulthood. A certain steady sense of being carefree is also valuable in childhood but is a flaw in most adults.' (Brighouse and Swift [forthcoming](#), Chap. 4). Certain dispositions may be childhood-specific goods because they advance the well-being of children, but not that of adults – as it seems to be the case with sexual innocence. Other dispositions seem to be morally significant: virtues if they characterise children and are vices, or perhaps morally neutral, if they characterise adults. This would be the case with a disposition of being care-free.
- (3) A third sense in which some things could be special goods of childhood concerns the goods at which we can hope to have access at different stages of life. It is perhaps reasonable to expect to enjoy certain goods during childhood, but not after we had become adults. An example is the unstructured time that is necessary if children are to use the capacities mentioned in (1): to learn, play, discover the world at their pace. In this interpretation, the intrinsic goods of childhood are those that would have value for adults but to which adults could not reasonably aspire because it would be too impractical to structure society

such that adults have access to them. This interpretation of what it is for something to be a special good of childhood is, of course, not independent from the issue of what goods are being owed to children, respectively to adults: even if it was indeed impractical to ensure that adults have access to some goods given the current social organisation, these goods may still be owed to adults and – at least above a certain threshold of affluence – considerations of justice trump considerations of efficiency.

So how plausible is it that there are any intrinsic goods of childhood on any of the above interpretations? With respect to the abilities and dispositions listed in the first category, it is likely that they would be good for adults if adults could keep them, just as they are good for children; it is *regrettable* when adults lose them. In fact, many adults *do* retain curiosity, the ability to be excited by novelty, imagination and the ability to learn and to enjoy play – to varying degrees. Perhaps it is possible to ensure the retention of these abilities and dispositions in most adults. And some adults who attain excellence in fields such as science, arts, or philosophy<sup>14</sup> possess some of these abilities and dispositions to a very high degree. That we admire these people and the accomplishments made possible by their child-like abilities and dispositions indicates that the loss of child-like abilities and dispositions is regrettable. (I cannot go into a lengthy discussion of whether the loss is regrettable all things considered or only in some way; curiosity – for instance – may get you into trouble in some circumstances, and it is thinkable that such circumstances pertain more to adult life than to children's lives). A possible implication is that adults should be helped and encouraged to retain as much as possible the valuable abilities and dispositions that children display spontaneously; they are not childhood specific goods in a normative sense – they are not indifferent or bad for adults.

I assume that adults can, within limits, influence the extent to which they can enjoy the capacities mentioned in (1). This can be achieved for instance through particular educational practices (based perhaps on Montessori-like pedagogical principles) and, as adults, through the creation of a society conducive to their exercise. The pursuit of art, science or philosophy as a hobby, easy access to popularised science and learned societies, arts, sports and dancing clubs and, crucially, sufficient leisure time, are examples of social features that can make a difference to adults' ability to remain curious, fun-loving and adventurous, if they wish to.

Similarly, the dispositions from the second group seem, at least sometimes, capable to benefit, or to count as virtues in, adults. Occasionally, the ability to forget that they are sexual beings,<sup>15</sup> and to behave as if they were not, will allow adults to better

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<sup>14</sup>Gopnik repeatedly uses the image of children as experimental scientists in order to convey the typical mental abilities of babies and small children, which is another way of saying that scientists and children share a high level of curiosity and imagination. Imagination has also been closely connected to artistic creativity. And Plato and Aristotle famously claimed that wonder is the distinctive reaction of philosophers to the world: philosophy begins in wonder (see, for instance, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 1,2: 982b.)

<sup>15</sup>Note that on a moral view, once very widespread, according to which sex is evil, sexual innocence could be good for both children and adults.

attain valuable goals such as pursuing friendships or allow themselves to enjoy activities that are more enjoyable when one is unselfconscious of one's sexual nature (such as a pillow fight, or a visit to a nudist beach).<sup>16</sup> A sense of being care-free may be enjoyable, attractive, and morally unobjectionable in adults as well as in children, as long as it does not result in irresponsible behaviour. If it leads to irresponsible behaviour, it ceases to be admirable in children as well as in adults.

But perhaps the real concern behind the emerging discussion of childhood specific goods is that some of the good things in life – which many adults are able to enjoy, although perhaps not quite as much as children – cannot be afforded, or at least cannot be guaranteed to, adults. Most adults *cannot afford* to follow their imagination, sense of curiosity and wonder, to exercise their capacity to enjoy new things, people and ideas and to have a care-free attitude. One may think this is for good reason: adults should collectively bear the responsibility of providing for themselves and for their young. On this view, if individuals and society are to survive and thrive, adults have to give up these kinds of leisure and devote themselves to productive and reproductive pursuits. But different social organisations of work and child-rearing will be more or less compatible with adults' enjoyment of these capacities.<sup>17</sup> A worker who works 30 h per week will have more time to play, learn and explore new interests that are not relevant to her job than a worker who works 50 h per week. A parent who is not the only one responsible for her children's access to adequate nutrition, health care and educational opportunities (because, for instance, much of childcare is provided in social contexts such as institutions or less formal communities, and/or socially subsidised) can afford to cultivate a general sense of being care-free that good parents who are alone responsible for these things cannot. Generally, the practicality of adults continuing to enjoy childhood goods is not a given; it depends on how societies are set up.

Let me illustrate the claim that the intrinsic goods of childhood are not specific to childhood, either in the sense that only children *can* enjoy them, or in the sense that only children *should* enjoy them, or in the sense that it is *unreasonable* for adults to expect them. Norvin Richards, a philosopher who believes that children ought to be allowed to enjoy some unstructured time whether or not this advances children's good *qua* future adults, notes that talented children trained for stardom have childhoods too much like adulthood in the sense that their work is virtually all there is to their lives. Such children, according to Richards, miss out on the only

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<sup>16</sup>It is not easy to see, in the first place, why sexual innocence is a childhood good. A plausible interpretation may be to see sexual awareness as either a body of knowledge or a disposition that may, but need not, afford more benefits than burdens. Since an active sexual life does not benefit children, they have no need of sexual awareness, which would therefore be a net burden to them. But the same is true about full knowledge of the traffic code: we do not need this knowledge as children because as children we are not supposed to drive cars, so it would be an unnecessary burden. Yet, it would be odd to suggest that ignorance of the traffic code is a specific good of childhood.

<sup>17</sup>And, if Bertrand Russell (1935) in his *In Praise of Idleness* was right, we have since long reached the technological development to afford the leisure necessary for the enjoyment of childhood goods.

time in their lives when they could explore the world freely, enjoy the pleasures of aimlessness and the chance to discover and cultivate other capacities they have.<sup>18</sup> But, of course, adulthood is not *necessarily* a time of life when work is virtually all there is to one's life<sup>19</sup> (in addition, perhaps, to enjoying those parts of family relationships and friendships that are not work). Such an exclusive focus on work is merely one among several conceptions of a good adulthood. The childhood goods discussed by Richards seem capable of being good for adults as well: adults can explore the world freely, enjoy aimlessness and cultivate capacities that are not directly relevant to their work. Doing these things can obviously be valuable for adults, and they seem admirable things to do. Finally, it is up to us collectively to make ample space for such activities in adults' lives – albeit not without sacrificing to some extent other valuable things.

It is therefore far from obvious that the intrinsic goods of childhood discussed in this paper are specific to childhood. How appealing would it be to shape society such that a majority of adults can continue to enjoy the intrinsic goods of childhood? The highly stylised stories in the next section are three variations on a short episode in the life of children and adults. They are meant to tease your intuitions with respect to the desirability of some of the above-discussed childhood goods for adults.

### 3.4 Three Stories

#### *One*

It has been snowing the entire weekend, and the public transportation stopped working. Schools closed, and children are happily playing in the snow for hours. Adults struggle to get to work and to carry on with business as usual. This is an urban image that I remember from my own childhood, as I assume many other readers will. It is a world of Care-free Childhood and Serious Adulthood, where children and adults lead partially separate lives and enjoy partly different goods.

#### *Two*

It has been snowing the entire weekend, and the public transportation stopped working. Schools closed, and children, who have to stay at home, received additional homework by email. They concentrate on independent study and try to make sure they don't fall behind with it. Adults struggle to get to work and to carry on with business as usual. Twenty years later, the children in world Two will be slightly better off as adults than the children in world One; they will have a slightly better work ethics, and as a result will be slightly more prosperous. If they ever meet, most

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<sup>18</sup> See the discussion in Richards (2010), at page 156.

<sup>19</sup> Nor does Richards claim that it is; his argument about what children are owed in the world as it is, given contingent social expectations.

One-people will say they would never trade their wonderful childhood for a slightly better adulthood. But Two-people may not understand what One-people mean by their wonderful childhood and its memories, and perhaps nobody will be able to arbitrate who is, overall, better off. This is an urban image that one can occasionally see these days. It is a world of Serious Childhood and Serious Adulthood, one in which children and adults lead more similar lives than in world One because children do not have access to some goods which are plausibly intrinsic to a good childhood.

### *Three*

It has been snowing the entire weekend, and the public transportation stopped working. Schools closed, and children are happily playing in the snow for hours. The government grants a national holiday to everybody, but all adults and children have to take turns in cleaning the roads and providing emergency services according to their ability. (Organisation gets occasionally messy). Adults join in the play, and in the evening everybody eats reheated leftovers from the previous days. Nobody worries too much about damages to the economy, which do not affect basic necessities, and everybody is ready to share equally the losses. In the middle of snow fun, adults often forget they are mature, sexual beings and play with each other just like the kids. This is a world that I have not really experienced,<sup>20</sup> but perhaps others have and I can easily imagine it. It is a world of mostly Care-free Childhood<sup>21</sup> and relatively Care-free Adulthood, one in which children and adults lead more similar lives than in world One because the intrinsic goods of childhood are also amply available to adults.

In which of these worlds would you like to live as an adult? Which of these worlds would you choose for your children? Together, these questions can help us evaluate the comparative worth of the three worlds above.

## **3.5 Minimal Trade-Offs and the Just Society**

I expect that different adults will answer the first question differently – some would go for fun, others for more work and the additional rewards that more work can bring. Children may incline for world Three because here we assume that they value fun over maximal prosperity, and world Three contains the greatest amount of fun over the course of one's life. But we would not typically put the first question to children, because we would not know what to do with their answer: what if their opinion about how they would like to live diverges from ours? Paternalism in

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<sup>20</sup>At times, however, the world of my own childhood was similar to the world in Three.

<sup>21</sup>Children here do a bit more work – such as shovelling snow – than in the first world; I assume the added 'care' is however very small, since adults, not children, bear the ultimate responsibility for getting things done.

relationship with children, I assume, is legitimate, and so it is ultimately adults' responsibility to decide what is good for children both *qua* children and *qua* future adults.

Any adult preference for one of the three worlds falls within the range of reasonable comprehensive conceptions of the good. So is there anything that can guide a principled choice between the three worlds<sup>22</sup>? In this section I explain why there is a case in favour of world Three, if indeed childhood is intrinsically valuable, as argued in the second section, and if the intrinsic goods of childhood are not special goods of childhood, as argued in the third section.

Preference for more fun versus more prosperity will determine one's preference for one of the three worlds. Those who prefer more fun and less prosperity would be happy to live in world Three. But adults who would prefer the additional benefits of more work – and hence a Serious Adulthood – will hesitate between One and Two. One source of hesitation is the lack of a general consensus about how to weight a good childhood against a good adulthood. If Two-people have better adulthoods, but worse childhoods than One-people, whose life is better overall? As Brennan notices, there is a widespread tendency to evaluate practices or policies aimed at children in the light of the long-term good they are likely to produce for the future adults.<sup>23</sup>

One consideration that can help to narrow down the choice is the premise that childhood is an intrinsically valuable stage of life, and hence that a miserable childhood cannot be compensated for by a good adulthood. Here I assume – possibly controversially – that adults collectively know what a good childhood is. A good childhood should include significant amounts of free time, unstructured play, opportunities for joyful and experimental social interaction, and a sense of being care-free.<sup>24</sup> These features of the good childhood are the same as those identified by Brennan and by Brighouse and Swift as plausible intrinsic goods of childhood. (They are of course not all, or the most important, things that children need: protection from violence and cruelty; freedom from hunger; clean water and air; shelter; loving and caring adults – all these seem basic to a good childhood. But the focus here is on those intrinsic goods of childhood that are threatened by attempts to weigh good childhoods against good adulthoods, and that may be sacrificed for the sake of the latter). If childhood is intrinsically valuable, then children are owed good childhoods; hence, adults should choose the Care-free Childhood worlds One or Three.

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<sup>22</sup>There are several complications in these comparisons that I would like to leave on the side. A main complication is that perhaps One-people and Two-people will participate in common competitive quests as adults, and that Two-people will then have a competitive advantage over One-people. To avoid this additional complication, let us assume that they will never meet in competitive contexts. Another complication for comparisons that I shall not consider at this stage is that adults' sharing play with children can impact on the evaluation of both childhood and adulthood.

<sup>23</sup>She writes: 'When we enquire whether a particular practice or policy is good for children our usual entry into that problem is in terms of its long term effects.'

<sup>24</sup>This belief is encoded in article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which stipulates a 'right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.'

The second consideration that can guide the subsequent evaluation of worlds One and Three is the belief that the intrinsic goods of childhood such as play, fun and unstructured time are not specific to childhood. If the intrinsic goods of childhood are also capable to directly contribute to a good adulthood, there is a case for ranking Three as the best of the above worlds. Depending on the relative weight that the intrinsic goods of childhood have in an adult life, Three may appear to be the better world because in Three adults as well as children have access to the intrinsic goods of childhood whereas in One they do not. (The qualification is explained by the possibility that childhood goods are good, but extremely trivial, for adults).

But, given that adults in Three cannot choose to give up the opportunity to enjoy intrinsic goods of childhood in exchange for more work-and-prosperity, is Three also the more just world? Many of the conditions necessary if most adults are to retain and enjoy as much as possible their capacities to learn and play are public, rather than private, goods: labour market regulations to allow people to have decently paid jobs without long hours, a level of general prosperity and equality that makes it possible for individuals to enjoy leisure, clubs and societies accessible to all. In practice, it may take a high level of redistribution to create such a society. Moreover, additional services such as social security, public provision of healthcare and education may be necessary to ensure individuals against the vagaries of markets, and allow them to lead the relatively care-free lives that are necessary for the enjoyment of most of the intrinsic goods of childhood. Redistribution and the creation of these public goods at everybody's expense *for the sake of adults' enjoyment of particular goods* may be objected to on grounds of state neutrality: the enjoyment of the capacities to learn or play do not figure in every adult's conception of the good. Do the individuals who would prefer a Serious Adulthood, and who live in world Three, have reasons to complain that they cannot pursue their idea of a good life – that is, less fun, more work and more prosperity?

I am not sure about the answer to this question. But here comes a *pro tanto* reason why something like world Three is more likely to be desirable on grounds of justice than world One: because world One is more likely to antagonise good childhoods and good adulthoods. As noted above, the tendency to evaluate childrearing practices mostly in light of how well they serve the interests of children *qua* future adults may indicate that we discount the intrinsic goods of childhood. But it *need* not indicate such discounting. Instead, it may indicate adults' worry that there will be a time when they no longer can protect the children for whom they are responsible – and in whose future they take legitimate interest. Such adults may feel morally obliged to ensure, as far as they can, and perhaps as quickly as they can, that children become able to take care of themselves. Therefore, a source of hesitation between world Two and world One<sup>25</sup> is that world Two, of hard work and little play, seems to provide individual children with the best safeguards against a life of adult

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<sup>25</sup>Even adults who wholeheartedly prefer world Three may experience this hesitation, if there is not enough prosperity in world Three. To avoid complicating the examples too much, I assume that conditions in world Three are such that everybody can enjoy a decent living standard even if adults as well as children play occasionally.

deprivation. In world Two children are rushed through childhood and likely to become self-standing quicker than in the other two worlds.

Few people, I assume, are willing to risk that their children will have a deprived adulthood for the sake of a good childhood. Of course, the degree to which such worries are warranted depends on the degree to which particular social arrangements provide safety nets to their members. If safety nets are not available, or if they are not reliable or sufficiently robust, parents will have good reasons to worry in case their children are left at the mercy of the society. Not providing adequate safety nets is therefore a way in which social organisation can antagonise good of childhoods and good adulthoods. Another way is extreme competitiveness in the acquisition of material goods and social prestige. In a very competitive economy, that rewards individuals strictly according to their market contribution, parents and teachers will know that, in order to fare well as adults, children should learn to be goal-oriented, hard working and efficient very early in life; it may then be rational for parents and teachers to sacrifice unstructured time – and maybe other intrinsic goods of childhood – for the sake of a safer adulthood.

If there is an obligation to give children good childhoods, this obligation narrows the choice down to One or Three. However, as long as there is a real possibility that their children will live in over-competitive societies lacking safety nets, parents have reasonable incentives to shape the worlds of their children to resemble more world Two. Individual parents have reason to push their children towards a Serious Childhood, in order to make sure that they will not end up deprived in a world of Serious, and very competitive, Adulthood. Assuming that world One, rather than world Three, is more likely to exhibit high competitiveness and lack of safety nets, then world One is less stable in the protection it gives to children's enjoyment of the intrinsic goods of childhood.<sup>26</sup> In world Three, by contrast, children can safely enjoy the goods of childhood.

If children are owed the intrinsic goods of childhood, then world Three seems better suited to protect justice for children. Given that it is rational to seek to minimise the trade-offs between the long-term and the short-term interests of one and the same person, world Three also appears more rationally organised: in world Three children can enjoy the intrinsic goods of childhood without worry that this will impair their future ability to compete in the adult world of work, and hence their chances to a good adulthood. Would-be workaholics who live in world Three can be told that limitations on the hours they can work serve the purpose of protecting justice for children.

This is not sufficient to argue that structural limitations on adults' use of time, of the type present in World Three, are necessarily just. To settle this question one would need to address other questions: Is it possible to secure justice for children without putting constraints on the combination of work and leisure that adults can choose? (That is, is a hybrid of worlds One and Three possible?) And if not – if

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<sup>26</sup>I assume the antecedent of this conditional is true in the real world, but I cannot argue for this belief here.



practical conflicts between the demands of justice towards children and the demands justice towards adults are unavoidable – which should be given priority? These questions are beyond the scope of my paper.

### 3.6 Conclusion

Philosophical interest in the intrinsic goods of childhood is being fuelled by a sense that it is wrong to make children's lives more adult-like – that is, to move closer to something like World Two. Here I argued that, in fact, there are two alternatives to this development, both of which can acknowledge the intrinsic value of childhood: one emphasises the differences between childhood and adulthood and to tries to avoid putting pressure on children to live like adults. The other one makes space for more childish adulthoods and thus moves closer to World Three. I hope to have shown that there are good reasons in favour of the latter option.

This is not to deny that childhood and adulthood are different stages of life and that the precise content of our duties to children differ from what is owed to adults. Even so, it is possible that the same kinds of goods contribute to a good childhood and to a good adulthood; the difference may be one of degree. Even if we strived to preserve forever some of the features that make childhood valuable – such as the capacity to learn or to derive pleasure from play – we would probably not be able to enjoy them, as adults, to the same degree as we had enjoyed them as children. And even if we were able to hold on to child-like capacities for learning and for play, the legitimate burdens of adulthood might prevent us from enjoying these capacities as much as we would like to. Nonetheless, as a society we do have a considerable level of freedom to determine exactly how much the lives of children and those of adults *can* have in common – and, in fact, in different times and places childhood and adulthood have been more or less similar to each other. Some philosophers who pay close attention to childhood deplore that recently, in at least some social environments, too much of adults' goals and time structuring are being imposed on children. I share these worries, while at the same time believing it would be wise to resist this trend without overemphasising the difference between the two stages of life. Instead, I argued, we should aim to make the lives of children and adults more alike by making more space for childhood goods in the lives of adults. Adults can, and should, have the freedom to cultivate and enjoy capacities to learn and play a lot more than they are typically able to in highly competitive and efficiency-driven societies. Making room for more child-like adulthoods would be conducive to a desirable society by accomplishing three important goals: first, it would make it easier to live up to the requirements of justice towards children; second, it could improve the lives of adults; and third, it would minimise the (possibly unavoidable) trade-offs between childhood and adulthood goods. The first two are moral requirements; the third, a rational desiderata – provided we give enough weight to children's interests *qua* children.

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