

## Carefreeness and Children's Well-Being<sup>1</sup>

(This is the penultimate version of a paper that is forthcoming in the *Journal of Applied Philosophy*)

### Introduction

What do *children* need in order to lead good lives? One familiar answer is that children need the opportunity to play, among other things. That is, children need the opportunity to engage in playful activities, which can include sports, make-believe, games, role-play, and unstructured exploration of their environment. This familiar answer finds expression in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which stipulates “that every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to [their age] and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts” (Art 31). In contrast, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which applies to persons of all ages, only mentions the right “to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay” (Art 24). So, it seems, play is understood by political leaders as a special good of *childhood* and not a special good of *adulthood*.

Philosophers too have found this familiar view quite compelling. Virtually everyone interested in philosophical questions relating to childhood believes that the activity of play is an important part of a childhood well lived. The disagreement amongst philosophers working on childhood is whether play is instrumentally or intrinsically valuable to a good life, and whether playing, broadly conceived, should be seen as a special good of childhood, or rather as a good that contributes to the well-being of any person, irrespective of their age.<sup>2</sup> One

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<sup>2</sup> See S. Brennan, ‘The goods of childhood, children’s rights, and the role of parents as advocates and interpreters,’ Baylis & C. McLeod (eds.) *Family-Making: Contemporary Ethical Challenges* (Oxford University Press, 2014): 29-48; A. Gheaus, ‘The ‘Intrinsic Goods of Childhood’ and the Just Society,’ A. Bagattini & C. Macleod (eds.) *The Nature of Children's Well-Being*.

influential position in this debate has been put forward by Anca Gheaus, who claims that play is both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable, and that not only children, but also adults, “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.”<sup>3</sup> Gheaus does not go so far as to claim that the interest of adults to play rises to the level of a basic human right, but she supports policy proposals that would see society being arranged such that adults are given meaningful opportunities for playing if that is something they are attracted to.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, I want to take this debate in a different direction. My aim here is twofold. First, insofar as play is widely seen as a special good of childhood, I want to investigate the relationship between play and another good typically associated with childhood; the good of carefreeness. Moreover, because it is plausible to hold that play does not exhaust a good childhood, I also want to investigate the relationship between carefreeness and other valuable childhood goods. Indeed, other goods that are not directly aimed at protecting and promoting the bodily interests of the child, such as loving relationships and education, are also valuable childhood goods, even if not special childhood goods. Here I want to suggest that carefreeness counts as a precondition for all these childhood goods to constitute a good childhood, while *not* counting as a precondition for adults to enjoy a good adulthood. By looking closely at the relationship between carefreeness, play and other childhood goods, I hope to mount a compelling case for the conclusion that carefreeness is a *necessary* component of a good childhood.

The discussion is structured as follows. In part I, I make some preliminary points about the definition and value of childhood. In part II, I set the stage for the discussion by endorsing a hybrid view of well-being, one that takes both objective goods, and subjective endorsement of these goods *as jointly necessary* for a life to go well. In part III, I defend an account of carefreeness that I believe best captures the significance of carefreeness and the role it plays in the pursuit of a good life. In part IV, I move on to the relationship between carefreeness and the lives of children. I show that the psychological disposition of carefreeness is a precondition for valuable goods to constitute a good childhood. One upshot of my discussion is that a child who is allowed to play, who receives an adequate education,

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*Children's Well-Being: Indicators and Research* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015); H. Brighouse and A. Swift, *Family values: The ethics of parent-child relationships* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> A. Gheaus, ‘The ‘Intrinsic Goods of Childhood,’ 51.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

and who has loving parents, but who lacks the psychological *disposition* of carefreeness leads an impoverished life, even if she might lead a good life in adulthood.<sup>5</sup>

## I – Preliminary Points

For the purposes of this essay, I will operate with a narrow understanding of childhood, which sees childhood as starting sometime after infancy, with the development of basic social skills and self-awareness, and ending sometime around puberty, when so-called adolescence begins and the adolescent can take on a subset of rights and responsibilities of adulthood (e.g., working and training for a profession). This means that I am primarily interested in creatures that have begun to develop their practical reasoning skills, but have not developed them to a degree such that they can take on some or all of the rights and responsibilities of adulthood. This means that I am silent on what it takes for babies, toddlers and adolescents to live well.<sup>6</sup>

Another important point to note is that I will not be focusing on the well-being of children *qua* future adults. Instead, I will focus on the goods that make a childhood go well, and that either enable a good adulthood or have mere trivial negative impacts on it. The justification for this focus on what is good for children *qua* children is that we should neither render childhood subservient to a good adulthood, nor render adulthood subservient to a good childhood. For instance, a child that is not allowed to play misses a core aspect of a good life even if that makes her excel in some professional domain later on in life. Similarly, a child that is not exposed to *any* degree of hardship in childhood is placed in a position of psychological vulnerability in adulthood even if such lack of hardship enables an idyllic form of childhood. In both cases, there is a trade-off between a good childhood and a good adulthood that we have both moral and prudential reasons to avoid. Anca Gheaus makes the

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<sup>5</sup> The focus here is on the psychological conditions for a good childhood. It goes without saying that children's core interests in life, bodily integrity, freedom from unnecessary and cruel pain (among others), are also important. This is not to affirm that there is robust agreement about which interests of the child are the most central, and there is still work to be done on this. At the same time, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UNICEF report on children's well-being provides a list of interests that has already garnered some cross-cultural support. See P. Bou-Habib and S. Olsaretti, 'Autonomy and Children's Well-Being,' A. Bagattini & C MacLeod (eds.) *The Nature of Children's Well-Being: Theory and Practice* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015); H. Brighouse, 'What Rights (if any) do Children Have?,' D. Archard & C. Macleod (eds.) *The Moral and Political Status of Children: New Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> I am unsure about which ages should be used as proxies for each life stage, but on a conservative notion of childhood, it would start roughly at age 3 (the beginning of the pre-school years) and finish roughly at the age of 12, when adolescence begins.

point more strongly: “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.”<sup>7</sup>

## II- On Well-being

With these preliminary points about children and childhood in mind, we can now move on to the topic of well-being. The philosophical literature on this topic is primarily interested in answering the following question: what does it mean for human lives to go well? This literature can be roughly divided in three main camps. Some theorists focus on facts about a person’s circumstances that make her life go well.<sup>8</sup> Other theorists focus instead on facts about a person’s mental states.<sup>9</sup> Finally, some theorists defend hybrid accounts of well-being, which combine subjective and objective elements.<sup>10</sup>

One particularly promising version of a hybrid theory defends the position that an agent leads a good life insofar as facts about her circumstances *combine* with her mental states in an *appropriate* way. Moreover, this version of the hybrid theory requires that fulfilling both an objective and a subjective condition are *jointly necessary* for well-being.<sup>11</sup> In this section, I lend support to such ‘joint necessity’ hybrid accounts by briefly surveying what I take to be the most compelling arguments in their favour. Although I lack the space to discuss the merits of alternative accounts, I hope to convince the reader that ‘joint necessity’ hybrid accounts of well-being are quite promising, and that we have good reasons to theorise about children’s well-being under the assumption that they are in fact correct.

So what can be said in favour of ‘joint necessity’ hybrid accounts? In recent decades, a number of philosophers have endorsed the position that subjective and objective elements

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<sup>7</sup> A. Gheaus, ‘The ‘Intrinsic Goods of Childhood’ and the Just Society,’ 36. See also S. Brennan, ‘The goods of childhood, children’s rights, and the role of parents as advocates and interpreters.’

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, T. Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, J. Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, J. Burns and H.L. A. Hart (ed.) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1789 [1996]).

<sup>10</sup> A brief first defence of hybrid accounts of well-being can be found in the work of T. M. Scanlon. When discussing the role of subjective preferences in adjudicating between equally compelling moral claims, Scanlon makes the point that the more subjective importance one attaches to a moral claim, the stronger the claim becomes, even if its objective value remains the same. See T. M. Scanlon, ‘Preference and urgency,’ *The Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975), 666.

<sup>11</sup> These are ‘joint necessity’ views. See C. Woodard, ‘Hybrid Theories,’ in G. Fletcher (Ed), *Handbook of Well-Being* (Abingdon: Routledge 2016).

are jointly necessary for a life well lived. Joseph Raz, for instance, makes it clear that the objective value of a person's life goals is not all that matters when assessing how well her life goes. The question of whether such goals are endorsed by the agent also matters when we are in the business of assessing how his or her life goes. As he puts it, "[Such goals] contribute to a person's well-being because they are his goals, they are what matters to him."<sup>12</sup> Susan Wolf argues that a good life is a meaningful life, and that meaning arises when we engage in projects and relationships that are both subjectively and objectively attractive.<sup>13</sup> In a similar vein, Shelly Kagan defends the view that well-being requires that one's enjoyment be properly connected to objective goods.<sup>14</sup>

To illustrate: if it is equally morally good for a 10-year-old child that she learns a second language or owns a dog, but her parents can only afford one of these projects, it seems quite plausible that the subjective importance she attaches to each project should guide their decision-making process. Indeed, an account of well-being that recommends to the parents that they simply flip a coin seem to miss a core element of what it means for a life to go well. Equally, an account of well-being that recommends to the parents that they take the child's preferences into account, but that her preferences *merely* adds to her overall well-being does not seem to take seriously the necessity of endorsement for a project or relationship to constitute a good childhood. A relationship with a dog will constitute a good life only if the child delights in the companionship of a dog, but not if she is uncomfortable around animals. Similarly, the ability to speak another language and engage in depth with another culture will constitute a good life only if the child has a sociable disposition and is curious about other cultures, but not if she is an introvert who shows no interest in cultural diversity. (Note that because children are appropriate targets of paternalistic intervention, some valuable goods will need to be secured by parents and the state irrespective of whether the child is in fact subjectively attracted to them. This does not change the fact that were the child to become subjectively attracted to such projects and relationships, they would also contribute, in a constitutive manner, to her leading a good childhood).

Finally, support for 'joint necessity' hybrid accounts of well-being can be found in the work of proponents of the capabilities approach, which aims at providing an account of well-

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<sup>12</sup> J. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 292.

<sup>13</sup> S. Wolf, 'Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life,' *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14 (1997): 207-25.

<sup>14</sup> S. Kagan, 'Well-being as Enjoying the Good,' *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (2009), 257.

being for the purposes of securing human development and achieving social justice.<sup>15</sup> For these theorists, subjective attraction to valuable doings and beings is constitutive of well-being. Indeed, theorists working on the question of which capabilities matter morally have focused their attention on the capabilities that allow persons to achieve *valuable* functionings, rather than any capability, such as the capability to get sunburnt or count grass in one's backyard. Moreover, such valuable functionings are taken to be a function of what persons have *reasons* to value.<sup>16</sup> But unlike standard objective list theories which focus solely on the ingredients of a good life, the capabilities approach supports the claim that a life goes well insofar as the valuable functionings that are achieved are in fact endorsed by the agent. As Serena Olsaretti explains, "On this view, it is necessary both that certain objects that are present in one's life be valuable (where their being valuable is not a function of the person's attitude), and that one deem them in some way valuable for oneself."<sup>17</sup>

To return to the example of the parents deciding how to benefit their offspring, we can claim that a child achieves the valuable functioning of affiliation with another species if she is given a dog after expressing a desire to care for one, rather than being forced to own a dog because her parents are themselves animal lovers. In contrast, a child does not achieve any valuable functioning when she convinces her parents to buy her a number of violent video games. In the first case, the functioning of being part of a cross species relationship contributes to a good life not only due the child's endorsement but also due to the fact that there are agent-neutral reasons to value a friendship with a non-human animal. In the second case, the functioning of playing violent video games does not contribute to a good life despite the child's endorsement since there are no agent-neutral reasons to value virtual violence. Endorsement of a set of childhood beings and doings are necessary but not sufficient for the pursuit of a good life since the functionings at stake must also be the sorts of things one has reasons to value.

As we have just seen, there are compelling arguments in support of the view that a good life requires both engagement with valuable goods, and some form of endorsement of such goods on the part of the agent. Moreover, such 'joint necessity' hybrid accounts can make sense of both adults' and children's well-being since both groups can and do engage

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<sup>15</sup> See Amartya Sen, *Inequality Re-examined* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); M. C. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> S. Olsaretti, 'Endorsement and freedom in Amartya Sen's capability approach,' *Economics & Philosophy* 21 (2005), 94.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

with valuable relationships and projects in the respective life stages they find themselves in, and both groups can and do endorse such relationships and projects to a lesser or greater extent. Or so I will argue in part IV. For now, I explore the implications of endorsing ‘joint necessity’ hybrid views of well-being for our understanding of the relationship between carefreeness and the pursuit of a good life.

### **III – Carefreeness and Adulthood**

Before we get clear on how and why carefreeness matters, let me start by defining the state of being “carefree.” On a standard definition, to be carefree is to be free “from care or anxiety.” That is, a maximally carefree person is one that has nothing worrisome in her mind. She does not ever worry about the state of the economy, the possibility of a new world war, the likelihood of a breakdown in her marriage, etc. A person who is not at all carefree, on the other hand, is someone “experiencing worry or nervousness, typically about the future or something with an uncertain outcome; in a troubled or uneasy state of mind as a result of such worry.”<sup>18</sup>

There are two ways of understanding carefreeness. One can think of it as a state of mind at time  $t$ , or one can think of it as a psychological disposition. The two are obviously related, since a person who is disposed to worry, often finds herself in a worrisome state of mind, for instance. In this essay, I will take “being carefree” to mean having a mental life whereby an agent experiences the world without worry and responsibility to a significant extent even though there will be some moments where she experiences an array of negative emotions associated with stress and anxiety.

So what is required for someone to count as being carefree? I take it that carefree persons are sufficiently devoid of worry and responsibility partly due to their psychological make-up and partly due to their personal and socio-political circumstances. Some persons are much more prone to worry and stress than others, even when they have had similar upbringings and even when their life conditions are not significantly different. At the same time, however, personal and socio-political conditions play a key role in one’s ability to lead a carefree life. Being able to reliably enjoy personal projects or securely access the goods of intimate relationships is obviously important for finding oneself devoid of serious concerns. A person who loves cycling but lives in a city where cycling is extremely dangerous cannot

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<sup>18</sup> J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed (Oxford University Press; 1989).

enjoy an important personal project without some degree of stress. Similarly, a person whose best friend is a war journalist cannot but feel constantly concerned about the whereabouts of her friend. And of course, being able to provide for one's basic needs makes a significant difference to one's ability to be carefree. A wealthy person living in an affluent state is in a much better position to lead a carefree life than a poor person living in a developing state, all else being equal.

Now, it could well be that there are coping strategies that can be developed by any person in any circumstance, making her capable of leading a carefree life irrespective of what is taking place in her life. I take it though that we are justified in assuming that such coping strategies are not always available, and that some agents might not find them desirable. The important philosophical question that arises for us is whether such lack of carefreeness affects their ability to lead good lives.

Before we can answer this question, it pays to revisit a core commitment of 'joint necessity' hybrid accounts of well-being: objectively valuable projects and relationships must be in some sense *endorsed* by the agent for them to contribute to a good life. This means that agents must feel that the valuable projects and relationships they engage in are in some important sense their own. Indeed, theorists defending hybrid accounts of well-being refer to enjoyment, pro-attitudes, subjective attraction, attachment of subjective importance, and a sense of ownership over valuable projects and relationships, all of which can be best captured by the language of *endorsement*.<sup>19</sup> In fact, endorsement seems to be the most helpful notion in this literature since it encompasses both cognitive and affective responses.<sup>20</sup> A schoolteacher will *endorse* her profession if she believes that she is a great educator or if she feels a great deal of joy and satisfaction around children (or both). Similarly, a crime journalist will fail to endorse his profession if he believes that he is a terrible writer or if he experiences a great deal of melancholy every time he covers a crime (or both).

Notice though that although endorsement can take place by both cognitive and affective means, the two can come apart in many instances. A schoolteacher might strongly believe that she is a great educator and yet feel uncomfortable around children. A crime

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<sup>19</sup> For a defence of this choice of term, see Olsaretti, 'Endorsement and freedom in Amartya Sen's capability approach,' 98.

<sup>20</sup> According to psychologists, both affective/emotional well-being and evaluative/cognitive well-being are part of 'subjective well-being'. See E. Diener, 'Subjective well-being,' *Psychological bulletin* 95 (1984): 542-575. For a philosophical account that requires affect, see J. Hawkins, 'The Subjective Intuition,' *Philosophical Studies* 148 (2010): 62-68. Kagan also talks about enjoyment as "taking pleasure in the good" which suggests a similar commitment, in 'Well-Being as Enjoying the Good.'



journalist might believe that he is unable to find information that goes beyond what has already been made public by the police, and yet feel excitement every time he works on a new story. This raises the question of whether there is in fact endorsement on the part of such agents, given that their beliefs and emotions pull them in different directions. I take it that in cases of this sort, either beliefs or emotions can do the trick, although endorsement will certainly be stronger in cases where both obtain. As I see it, compelling self-regarding reasons in favour of partaking in a valuable project or relationship can secure endorsement of a project or relationship even when *all* affective responses to it are negative. This is why the schoolteacher above endorses teaching as a vocation, despite not ‘enjoying’ the job. By the same token, one or more sufficiently strong positive affective responses to a valuable project or relationship can secure endorsement even when the agent struggles to find self-regarding reasons in their favour and lacks sufficiently strong reasons against it. This is why the journalist above endorses crime journalism as a profession despite struggling to find compelling self-regarding reasons that justify his long life devotion to journalism.

So how does carefreeness enter into the picture? If carefreeness is a disposition not to feel stressed or worried, then carefreeness is not necessary for a good adulthood. After all, many adults endorse a life of worry and responsibility so as to realize valuable goods that they care deeply about. The South Sudanese humanitarian delivering aid in war torn South Sudan, the writer tapping into his own neuroses for writing brilliant books, the brain surgeon operating on the worst types of brain cancer will be leading good lives if it is true that they have access to self-regarding reasons that lead them to endorse such projects despite the immense stress and anxiety that they cause. Indeed, the humanitarian worker knows that her vast cultural knowledge can render aid projects more effective. The writer knows that she has important stories to tell. The doctor knows that her perfectionism gives her patients a good shot at surviving. And of course, there is no denying that humanitarianism, literature and medicine are the sorts of objectively valuable projects that hybrid theorists believe can constitute a good life.

But if being carefree is not necessary for a good adulthood, then why do we think that adults also lose something important if they find themselves constantly worrying and feeling the weight of an array of life responsibilities? As is clear from the examples above, some people do choose, or benefit from, such a life, and it is not at all obvious that they deserve our pity. The neurotic writer might respond that if she were differently disposed, her novels wouldn’t be as deep and confronting. She might go as far as to claim that were she to become

carefree, she would be unable to write with any level of depth. The surgeon might raise a similar response. She might claim that the stakes in her job are simply too high for her to approach life in a carefree manner. What explains this, I think, is that an adult's more complex evaluative capacity (i.e., capacity for self-reflection, capacity to acquire relevant moral knowledge, adequate sense of time, ability to recognize foreseeable costs, risks and opportunities attached to certain actions, and so on and so forth), allows her to be subjectively attracted to worthwhile projects even when positive affective responses to these projects are lacking. After all, human adults are the sorts of creatures that often give a great deal of weight to whether or not their goals are being achieved or fulfilled over time, and this can render them quite tolerant to an array of negative affective responses that may accompany the pursuit of such goals. This means that adults can be satisfied with their lives even if they do not feel happy with the projects they are currently engaged with.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the humanitarian worker in Sudan who finds her job stressful can step back and evaluate humanitarian assistance as a desirable project to engage in despite the stress involved. She might hope that the experience will set her up for a career in politics, land her a dream job at the United Nations, or simply make her a better, more compassionate, person.

But how about persons who would like to be sufficiently carefree but cannot afford to do so? Doesn't that show that being carefree is in fact necessary to a good adulthood? I don't think so. For a good to be necessary to the positive evaluation of a stage of life, it has to be the case that without that good, positive evaluation is not possible. And as we have just seen, we can in fact positively evaluate the lives of many adults who lack the disposition of being carefree. In fact, we can say that many adults lead wonderful lives despite not being carefree, and they do so because they choose a life that is inimical to carefreeness, or they believe that their difficult circumstances will enable the enjoyment of valuable goods that would not otherwise be available.

At this stage of the discussion, it is important to make two observations. Carefreeness can of course make endorsement of valuable projects and relationships more likely simply by preventing core negative affective responses from arising. This does not lead us to the conclusion that carefreeness is *necessary* for endorsement on the part of adults, and therefore necessary for a good adult life. Second, my understanding of carefreeness departs significantly from other philosophical accounts on the topic. Anca Gheaus, for instance, claims that although carefreeness is more readily accessible to children, it is still available to,

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<sup>21</sup> D. Kahneman, 'Objective happiness,' *Well-being: The foundations of hedonic psychology* 3 (1999): 1-23.

and *valuable* for, adults. For Gheaus, carefreeness is the good of experiencing “trust and love wholeheartedly and unstructured time during which children engage in fantasy play, experimentation, and undirected exploration of the world and of their minds.”<sup>22</sup> She also believes that the good of being carefree also makes for a good adulthood, despite it being obviously true that children typically find it easier to be carefree than adults do, and typically benefit more from enjoying this good than adults do.

Gheaus and I clearly disagree about how to best conceive of the good of carefreeness. Gheaus understands carefreeness as the enjoyment of unstructured time, as well as engagement in fantasy play, experimentation, and undirected exploration of the world and of one’s mind. I, on the other hand, see it as a disposition that affects all the other pursuits in a person’s life, including her structured time. As I understand it, a carefree adult is an adult who is disposed to approach life in a carefree manner even when undertaking paid work, fulfilling caring responsibilities or engaging in any activity that requires a great degree of focus and responsibility. (Similarly, a carefree child is a child who does not frequently experience stress and anxiety, whether or not she is having unstructured fun, playing with friends, doing household chores or looking after a young sibling for a short period of time. I will return to the case of children in the next section).

There might be one point of broad agreement between us, however. Although Gheaus is not explicit about this, at times she seems sympathetic to a ‘joint necessity’ hybrid theory of well-being since she makes clear that adults should not be *forced* to play.<sup>23</sup> She might therefore believe that endorsement matters for a good life, which would mean that carefreeness is valuable for a person only if she endorses it.<sup>24</sup>

Despite this potential point of agreement, Gheaus’ understanding of carefreeness as an objectively valuable set of activities will have as a result that they can contribute to the life of an adult in a way similar to things like loving relationships, pursuit of knowledge and aesthetic enterprises so long as persons are not forced by the state to lead a carefree life. That is, carefreeness will count as one of the many ingredients of an objective list aimed at describing what is in fact required for a person’s life to go well. By contrast, my understanding of carefreeness as a disposition does not allow for carefreeness to be *on a par*

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<sup>22</sup> A. Gheaus, ‘Children's Vulnerability and Legitimate Authority Over Children,’ *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 35 (2018), 66.

<sup>23</sup> Gheaus, ‘The ‘Intrinsic Goods of Childhood’ and the Just Society,’ 38.

<sup>24</sup> Note that for Gheaus, the endorsement condition might not be necessary, but merely additive. Alternatively, she might believe that adults should not be forced to be carefree due to the value of state neutrality.

with objectively valuable activities and projects. Rather, carefreeness as a disposition merely makes it easier for endorsement on the part of adults to take place by preventing negative affective responses to valuable projects and relationships. Carefreeness thereby plays at best an instrumental role in a ‘joint necessity’ hybrid account of *adult* well-being. But because endorsement of valuable projects and relationships can still take place via cognitive means alone, its instrumental role is in fact replaceable by agent-relative reasons for endorsement.

To summarize the discussion so far. I have argued that we should understand carefreeness as a disposition that affects all the projects and relationships in a person’s life, rather than a set of activities that persons engage in. I have also argued that there are good reasons to believe that a good adult life requires that agents endorse the valuable projects they engage with either by acting on self-regarding reasons in their support or by displaying positive affective responses in their favour. This leads to the conclusion that carefreeness is not in fact necessary for a good adulthood. In the next section, I show that in the case of children, positive affective responses to valuable projects and relationships are in fact necessary for endorsement, and that this makes carefreeness necessary for a good *childhood*.

#### **IV – Carefreeness and a Good Childhood**

We are now in a position to argue for the claim that being carefree is necessary for a child to lead a good life. The idea here is this: a childhood full of stress and anxiety is necessarily impoverished even if it is full of other valuable properties. A child that receives a great level of education, has parents who love her, and is given ample opportunity to play still fails to lead a good childhood if her mental life is so constituted that she is never or rarely able to not feel concerned, worried or stressed. Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift get close to my own view of carefreeness in the following passage:

Childhood is a period during which it is possible to enjoy being carefree, and not to have to bear responsibility for decisions about others or, to a considerable extent, one’s own interaction with the world (...) A child who knows that her participation in the labor market is essential for her family’s survival misses out on one of the special goods of childhood; so does the child who is the main carer for his severely epileptic parent.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> H. Brighouse and A. Swift, *Family values*, 69.

To be sure, Brighthouse and Swift don't go as far as to claim that the children above don't lead a good childhood as a result of their responsibilities towards their parents. What we are told in their discussion on carefreeness is that children who bear significant responsibility during childhood miss something of great value. The trouble, of course, is that this claim is compatible with the further claim that they could have made up for such a loss by accessing other special goods of childhood, or by appealing to self-regarding reasons that would secure a level of endorsement of their caring responsibilities.<sup>26</sup> In what follows, I show that the children above don't enjoy a good childhood precisely because their personal circumstances renders them unable to be carefree. I also show that precisely because these children are not carefree they can neither authoritatively endorse their caring responsibilities nor the other valuable goods in their lives.

The argument to follow has three premises, which I defend in detail below.

P1. A good childhood requires endorsement of the valuable goods that are present in one's childhood

P2. Endorsement requires positive affect in the case of children

P3. A sufficient level of positive affect requires carefreeness

C: A good childhood requires carefreeness

### *The Case for P1.*

This is a philosophical premise, and one that I take to be fairly uncontroversial. As I already alluded to with the case of the parents deciding whether to give their child a dog or language lessons, it seems quite important for a theory of well-being to be able to prescribe valuable projects and relationships for children to engage with, as well as require endorsement on their part.

For one, children find themselves in a position where they can adequately respond to a full array of *valuable* activities and relationships. That is, children can have real friendships, experience beauty *qua* beauty, play by themselves or with other children, and so on and so forth. Moreover, there is good reason to think that such projects and relationships contribute

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<sup>26</sup> I am not suggesting that Brighthouse and Swift defend this further claim in their work, but only noting that carefreeness needs to be both necessary and special in order for us to adequately refute it.

to a good childhood in a way that merely counting grass on the backyard or playing violent video games does not.

Apart from being able to pursue valuable relationships and projects, pre-schoolers and children occupying the middle childhood range are able to endorse them to a greater or lesser extent. Some are attracted to music and want to learn an instrument, others would rather do something else with their time. Some are very sociable and love playing with other children, others are only comfortable playing by themselves. Despite the objective value of these activities being the same for each child, there is a great deal of variation in how much subjective attraction is at play. A theory of well-being that is oblivious to these variations fails to capture an important part of what it means for a childhood to go well.

None of this is to deny that because children are legitimate targets of paternalistic intervention by parents and the state, they will sometimes lack the choice about which valuable projects and relationships to engage with. But even when children have not had a say over some of the valuable goods in their childhoods, there is still a question about whether or not they have come to endorse them, which in turn, will affect whether or not such goods have contributed, in a constitutive manner, to them leading a good life.

### *The Case for P2.*

The premise that endorsement requires positive affect in the case of children is also a philosophical premise, but it relies on empirical claims about how children respond to the valuable projects and relationships they engage with. The idea here is that unlike adults, children's cognitive abilities are not sufficiently developed so as to produce, via *cognitive means*, authoritative endorsement of worthwhile projects and relationships. This means that when it comes to children, there is only authoritative endorsement via positive affect.

Now, it is well known that children have different thought patterns and priorities than adults, but the question is why exactly this is the case. Psychologists specializing on childhood point to numerous factors. The most obvious one is that children have more limited life experience than adults, and so have less expertise to draw on in the course of their childhoods. But the difference between adults and children goes much further than the degree of expertise they have access to. There is also a significant difference in cognitive abilities between children and adults due to the former having relatively immature capacity for self-

reflection and self-perception, high degree of optimism (which leads to an inability to realistically assess risks and costs), as well as an overestimation of their positive values.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, such cognitive differences between adults and children have led Tamar Shapiro to refer to childhood as a predicament. In her discussion on the status of children, Shapiro calls attention to how a child lacks a “principled perspective which would count as the law of her will.”<sup>28</sup> That is, a child doesn’t yet have a practical identity with a realistic insight into her values (and their overall ranking), so as to be able to authoritatively adjudicate between conflicting motivational claims. Of course, children can appreciate reasons for and against different actions, but they cannot adequately *evaluate* these reasons in light of established values and moral beliefs, for they don’t yet possess values that are sufficiently established, nor a fully developed capacity to acquire relevant moral knowledge and engage in complex moral reasoning. This is why we take children to be appropriate targets of paternalistic intervention, and do not believe they are wronged for being denied the opportunity to make important decisions about their lives.

This difference between the authority of the judgments of children and adults about their own good is a crucial step in the argument. When discussing endorsement of valuable projects and relationships on the part of adults, I merely pointed out that when positive affective responses are lacking, adults can still identify self-regarding reasons in their favor. That is, the humanitarian worker in Sudan who is anxious about the activities associated with her profession can still appeal to the value of becoming a better person as *her* reason for persevering with that type of work. But of course, for that reason to be hers in any meaningful sense, we must presuppose an agent that has sufficient moral knowledge that is relevant to the case at hand, an adequate sense of what kind of person she is, what she would like to achieve in her life, a good sense of time and what it means to commit to a project for a certain period of time, the risks, costs and opportunities involved with different life choices, and so on and so forth. This means that when she identifies whatever self-regarding reason in support of being a humanitarian worker, she has gone through a complex deliberative process that allows us to say that the reason in question is indeed her own. As Shapiro puts it, an adult

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<sup>27</sup> P. C. Scales, ‘Developmental assets and the promotion of well-being in middle childhood,’ *Handbook of child well-being: Theories, methods and policies in global perspective* (2014), 1671. See also S. Hannan, ‘Why childhood is bad for children’, *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 35 (2018): 11-28.

<sup>28</sup> T. Schapiro, ‘What Is a Child?’ *Ethics* 109 (1999), 729.

“is one who is in a position to speak in her own voice, the voice of one who stands in determinate, authoritative relation to the various motivational forces within her.”<sup>29</sup>

For comparison, imagine a 9-year-old child who volunteers at the local kitchen soup every day for two hours. Let us imagine that the work does not jeopardize any of her core interests. Now suppose that she finds it stressful, but believes that that just like her parents, it is her life call to serve the needs of others. What shall we make of this reason? Should we take it as authoritative in the way we would take the reason of an adult doing a similar type of work?

If we take the cognitive limitations of children seriously, then we cannot possibly trust that this reason is the outcome of an adequate deliberative process. This child might believe that she values charity but in reality she is just trying out that identity for the time being, and will soon move on to experimenting with a new one. Or she might con-culpably hold the clearly false belief that morality requires children to volunteer on a daily basis. She might also underestimate the opportunity costs associated with volunteer work, by not realizing that two hours each day will take away precious time playing with an older sibling who will soon move out of home.

At this stage, it is important to be careful not to let our pro-attitudes in favor of charity obscure the fact that this child’s reason lacks in authority. If she wanted to leave school so as to spend the whole day volunteering so as to serve the needs of others, we would wholeheartedly object. But the only way we can consistently prevent a child from devoting her whole life to charity without simultaneously preventing an adult doing the same is by appealing to the fact that only the adult’s deliberative capacities are able to produce authoritative reasons in support of valuable projects and relationships. Moreover, one thing is clear; if we take children’s deliberative capacity as authoritative due to the fact that they can sometimes produce *good* reasons in favor of worthwhile projects, we cannot but take *bad* reasons in favor of worthless projects as authoritative as well. They are after all produced by the same psychological process or mechanism. This will in effect spell out the end of justified *comprehensive* paternalism towards children.<sup>30</sup>

Does this mean that endorsement is not possible in the case of children? Not at all. Recall that endorsement can take place via positive affect, and that children can come to endorse a project or relationship on the basis that it produces joyfulness, satisfaction,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> We might only be able to justify the same level of paternalism towards children that can be justified towards adults.



pleasure, amusement, and delight. These positive affective responses might not be enough to render children immune from paternalistic intervention (for it seems that paternalism tracks a lack of authority over one's reasons rather than a lack of endorsement of one's projects and relationships), but it is certainly enough for assessments over how well their childhood go. The child who delights on her volunteer work engages with a project that no doubt contributes, in a constitutive manner, to her leading a good childhood.

### *The Case for P3.*

The premise that a sufficient level of positive affect requires carefreeness is fully empirical. Social psychologists have identified that positive and negative affect are not independent from each other at any given period of time. According to one expert “each type of affect clearly tends to suppress the other, although the mechanism by which this occurs is not yet clearly understood. [Moreover], because of the suppressive mechanism, the two types of affect are not independent in terms of their frequency of occurrence.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, the more a person feels positive affect, the less she will feel negative affect, and vice versa.

This suppression mechanism could explain, for example, why children who report to feeling happy are more likely to perform well academically, for their happiness allows them to develop positive affective responses to schooling and education.<sup>32</sup> It could also explain why children who report to feeling happy show more imagination and creativity during play, for their happiness allows them to develop positive affective responses to play.<sup>33</sup> That is, carefreeness creates space for children to authoritatively endorse the valuable projects and relationships in their lives. Stress and anxiety have the exact opposite effect.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> E. Diener, ‘Subjective well-being,’ 548. See also E. Diener et al, ‘Intensity and Frequency: Dimensions Underlying Positive and Negative Affect,’ *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 48 (1985): 1253-1265.

<sup>32</sup> P. D. Quinn, and A. L. Duckworth, ‘Happiness and academic achievement: Evidence for reciprocal causality,’ In *Poster Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Society* (2007).

<sup>33</sup> A. Holte, et al. “Psychology of Child Well-Being,” *Handbook of child well-being: Theories, methods and policies in global perspective* (2014), 596.

<sup>34</sup> Here I do not conceive of a lack of carefreeness as a mental illness. This is for two reasons. First, some children are not carefree purely due to their circumstances. Second, recent empirical evidence “indicates that the determinants of wellbeing are in many instances different from the determinants of mental illness,” in P. Patalay and E. Fitzsimons, ‘Correlates of mental illness and wellbeing in children: are they the same? Results from the UK Millennium Cohort Study,’ *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 55 (2016), 781.

Notice though that the mere fact that highly stressed and anxious children will at times display positive affective responses to valuable projects and relationships will not suffice for endorsement. The valuable projects and relationships that contribute to a meaningful life extend across a non-trivial period of time, or are in fact on-going. For positive affective responses to count as endorsement, they have to be present most of the time in which they are pursued. A child who only occasionally feels happy in the playground or the classroom does not in fact endorse play or education, since what is actually needed is that she feels this way most of the time in which she pursues these valuable projects.<sup>35</sup>

This completes my case for the conclusion that carefreeness is a necessary good of a childhood well lived because children need to have enough mental space for developing positive affective responses that secure endorsement of worthwhile projects and relationships. Unlike adults who can endorse worthwhile goods merely due to how well they fit with their life goals, children's endorsement are authoritatively mediated via their affective responses. Children will therefore *fail to endorse* play, loving relationships, and education, when they are constantly finding themselves worried or stressed. So, although we can concede that many children in stressful circumstances still have access to valuable goods, we shouldn't be naïve in thinking that they by themselves constitute a good childhood. If we want children to lead good lives *qua children*, they must be carefree.

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<sup>35</sup> This is not to deny that play or education are *instrumentally* valuable for this child, but rather to affirm that without sufficient positive affective responses on her part, they will not count as intrinsic goods of *her* childhood. Being carefree is required for endorsement of the valuable goods of childhood, and so required for them to *constitute* a good childhood.