***Paideusis*, Volume 17 (2008), No. 2, pp. 27-37**

Deconstructing Childhood as a Way to Justice

CHI-MING LAM
The University of Hong Kong, People's Republic of China

Despite the multiplicity of constructions of childhood in various disciplines, the prevalent view is that children are incompetent in the sense of lacking reason, maturity, or independence. In this paper, I first examine how this dominant view is constructed in the fields of philosophy and psychology, highlighting the perspectives of Plato, Aristotle, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Jean Piaget. Then, following Jacques Derrida who conceives justice as a source of meaning for deconstruction, I deconstruct several of the dominant constructions and argue that they do not do children justice. To return justice to childhood, I suggest that childhood should be regarded as a self-contained state with distinctive features that are worthy of consideration in their own right rather than as an incomplete state of incompetence relative to adulthood that is considered a complete state of humans, while adulthood should be regarded as a never-ending process of becoming mature that includes rather than excludes childhood. Moreover, I suggest that both the absolute denial of adult rights to children and the naturalization of childhood in developmental psychology as a biologically determined and culturally universal stage of irrationality should be challenged.

Introduction

Many educators, like ordinary people, are dominated by the idea that children are distinct from adults, yet dependent on them for protection, supervision, and decision-making. This idea of childhood distinctiveness and dependence is typically concomitant with a universalization of childhood – a view that childhood is much the same across historical and cultural boundaries – promoted by mainstream developmental psychology (Kincheloe, 2002). It is assumed, to a great extent, that such dominant conceptions of childhood are justified and beneficial because they are believed to serve the interests of children. However, it is doubtful whether this assumption is valid, considering, for instance, the following two disturbing facts. First, some early childhood educators have propounded that the predominant knowledge base grounding the field actually serves to maintain the status quo, perpetuates stereotypes and prejudices about children, and ignores their real life (Cannella, 1997). Second, developmental psychology is often criticized for undermining an appreciation of the diversity of childhood, and thus equating difference with deficiency and cultural construction with natural fact (Kincheloe, 2002). After all, how do children come to be regarded as qualitatively distinct from and essentially dependent on adults? Do the dominant beliefs and practices concerning children do them justice, leading to increased acceptance and opportunity for all? In the following discussion, I first examine how the dominant views of childhood are constructed in the fields of philosophy and psychology, highlighting the perspectives of Plato, Aristotle, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Jean Piaget. Then, following Jacques Derrida who conceives justice as a source of meaning for deconstruction, I deconstruct, or problematize, these taken-for-granted views together with their associated practices in order to find out a just way of constructing the world for children.

Construction of Childhood in Philosophy

Despite the multiplicity of constructions of childhood in such disciplines as philosophy and psychology, the prevalent view is that children are *incompetent* in the sense of lacking reason, maturity, or independence. To start with, in the discipline of philosophy, children have been viewed as incompetent by many influential philosophers throughout its history. Plato (1961), for instance, in his tripartite conception of the soul as comprising reason (the mental faculty that loves and sees truth), high spirit (the passion that provides motivation for action), and appetite (the desire for physical things), depicts children lacking reason. As he puts it, "they [children] are from their very birth chock-full of rage and high spirit, but as for reason, some of them, to my thinking, never participate in it, and the majority quite late" (ibid., p. 683). Consequently, according to Plato, children not only have to be held in check by their attendants and teachers, but also have access to mere opinion about the ever-changing world of appearance rather than to true knowledge of the unchanging world of reality.

Concurring with Plato in the construction of children as deficient in reason, Aristotle (1984) argues that children are particularly susceptible to self-indulgence because they "live at the beck and call of appetite, and it is in them that the desire for what is pleasant is strongest" (p. 1767). Indeed, to justify ruling over slaves, women, and children, he points up the fundamental differences in their lack of the rational part of the soul: slaves have no deliberative faculty at all; women have it, but it lacks authority in that it is often overruled by the irrational part of the soul; and children have it in an immature way, so they need proper education to develop it. What Aristotle means in regard to children here is that they have not yet acquired reason, or the capacity to deliberate, hence their life in complete subjection.

Incredible as it seems, such ancient characterization of childhood as lacking self-discipline and thus deserving submission has been passed down over the centuries to quite a few modern philosophers who are renowned for their advocacy of human rights and freedom, like John Locke and John Stuart Mill. For Locke (1988), children are born with both freedom and reason. However, he does not consider their natural freedom inconsistent with their subjection to parents in that children are not mature enough to acquire the necessary qualification for the exercise of freedom, that is, the intellectual capability for the exercise of reason to govern their behaviour. Since Locke holds that freedom requires action in conformity with the law of reason, children cannot be truly free without the use of reason. Given that children are not yet capable of acting rationally for their own best interests, their parents as rational adults are justified in acting on their behalf and choosing for them. Apart from this justification, Locke argues, in terms of children's natural right to be nourished and cared for, that parents actually have an obligation to rule over their children:

> The *Power*, then, *that Parents have* over their Children, arises from that Duty which is incumbent on them, to take care of their Off-spring, during the imperfect state of Childhood. To inform the Mind, and govern the Actions of their yet ignorant Nonage, till Reason shall take its place, and ease them of that Trouble, is what the Children want, and the Parents are bound to. (Ibid., p. 306)

As for Mill (1993), he states clearly in the following oft-quoted passage that his principle of liberty – the idea that people should be free to pursue what interests them without any interference from the state or society unless they harm others through their actions – is not applicable to children:

> It is, perhaps, hardly necessary to say that this doctrine is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. We are not speaking of children, or of young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood. Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others, must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury. (p. 78)

Obviously, Mill's main reason for the exclusion of children from the domain of liberty is that they lack maturity, although he does not explain in detail what he means by maturity, which faculties he intends, and why anyone considered a minor by law is immature in the relevant sense. On the surface, Mill seems to have a low opinion of children and a disrespect for their civil rights. However, upon a closer examination of his philosophy, this interpretation is rather simplistic. In fact, it is possible to argue that Mill's isolation of children for special treatment originates from his commitment to not only their development but also the progress of society. For instance, taking a utilitarian line, Habibi (2001) contends in defence of Mill's position that the benefit of restricting the freedom of children outweighs the cost: while insisting on adult supervision of children helps enhance both their and public safety, compulsory schooling provides children with necessary training and contributes to the overall improvement in society.

Construction of Childhood in Psychology

In the discipline of psychology, Jean Piaget, who putatively formulated the most comprehensive and influential theory of intellectual development, seems to be the single most important figure in the construction of children as incompetent. Viewing cognitive development as a series of transformations rather than a gradual growth of knowledge or skills, Piaget asserts that children's thinking progresses through four major stages, viz. the sensorimotor stage, preoperational stage, concrete operational stage, and formal operational stage. During the sensorimotor stage (from birth to about 2 years old), according to Piaget (1947/1950), children's intelligence is restricted to their own actions on the environment, which consist solely in co-ordinating successive perceptions and overt movements without involving mental representation in that they are unable to think about an object without acting directly upon it. As he puts it, "an act of sensori-motor intelligence leads only to practical satisfaction, i.e. to the success of the action, and not to knowledge as such …. Sensori-motor intelligence is thus an intelligence in action and in no way reflective" (ibid., p. 121). The cognition of this stage cannot be internalized as representational thought until the advent of the symbolic function (in the latter part of the second year) that is expressed by, say, language children use to represent their world.

With regard to children's thinking during the preoperational stage (from about 2 to about 7 years old), Piaget (1947/1950) characterizes it as symbolic yet deficient in logic: although they are capable of using symbols, including images and words, for mental representation and comparison of objects out of immediate perception; their reasoning, owing to its preconceptual and intuitive nature, tends to generate contradictions. By preconceptual reasoning, or transduction, Piaget means a kind of primitive inference that proceeds from the particular to the particular. It typically prevails in children between the ages of 2 and 4, and frequently fails when "nestings of classes or compositions of relations are required" (Piaget, 1951, p. 235). For one thing, instead of the concept proper that carries generality, children within this period can only form the *preconcept* that is marked by the absence of both individual identity (e.g. Jacqueline at 2 rejected the identity of her sister when she was wearing a bathing-costume, and then recognized her when she was wearing her dress again) and general class (e.g. Jacqueline at 2 regarded the class of slugs as all the individual slugs she encountered along the road) (Piaget, 1951). For another, children within this period are particularly egocentric – thinking everybody experiences the world in just the same way they do without the capacity to group relations with other individuals or with other objects – with the result that their assimilation of the particular to the particular tends to be centred on the individual elements they find interesting and thus be distorting (e.g. Lucienne's thought at 4 was probably centred on her nap when she said, "I haven't had my nap so it isn't afternoon" (Piaget, 1951, p. 232)).

As to the intuitive reasoning characteristic of children between the ages of 4 and 7, Piaget (1947/1950) deems it an advance on preconceptual reasoning considering it leads to a rudimentary logic. However, he points out that children in this phase are still much more affected by the

appearance of things other than the logic, having a propensity to judge by the most prominent aspect of their perceptual field. This is perfectly illustrated by their incapacity for conservation, which means the awareness that quantity is preserved no matter what transformations are made, as long as nothing is added or taken away. For example, when water is poured from one glass into another shorter but wider one, the children often centre on a single striking dimension (i.e. the height of the glasses) without the ability to decentre and consider two dimensions (i.e. the height and width of the glasses) simultaneously; hence the illogical nonconservation response that the shorter glass has less water.

In fact, according to Piaget (1947/1950), it is not until the beginning of the concrete operational stage (from about 7 to about 11 years old) that children's thinking becomes less egocentric and more logical: they are capable of considering and coordinating two aspects of a problem at once, basing judgements on the entire perceptual field rather than on its most salient dimension. More specifically, this stage marks the emergence of "logico-arithmetical and spatio-temporal operations" (ibid., p. 139) that enable children to classify, serialize, and number objects (including space and time); and thus to apply deductive reasoning (e.g. A > B, B > C, therefore A > C) and acquire conservation (of number, length, weight, volume etc.). Logical as the thinking of concrete operational children is, for Piaget, it is still limited to tangible objects and facts.

It is only when children reach the formal operational stage (from about 11 to about 15 years old) that their thought can transcend the confines of everyday experience, including hypothetico-deductive reasoning (i.e. deducing conclusions from hypotheses that are not necessarily related to reality or to their beliefs), inductive reasoning (i.e. inferring general theories from specific cases especially through experimentation), and internal reflection (i.e. producing new insights by purely contemplating what they already know) (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958). Interestingly, concomitant with their ability to comprehend such abstract ideas as social justice, intellectual courage, and freedom of conscience, Piaget observes that children at this stage, or adolescents, tend to be both idealistic and egocentric: while dreaming "of a glorious future or of transforming the world through Ideas" (ibid., p. 345), they believe their own ideas to be unique and superior, regardless of whether and how they can be realized. In his view, the ultimate decentration, in the sense that adolescents wake up to reality and accordingly to limitations of their thoughts, will not come to pass until they attain adulthood.

Given Piaget's beliefs that the order in which children progress through these stages is invariable, and that the cognitive structures of each preceding stage are integrated as subordinate ones into each subsequent stage, it is understandable that he views cognitive development at earlier stages as preparatory for cognitive development at later stages (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969). Such Piagetian stage concept, however, has two adverse implications for the image of children. First, children are regarded as intellectually inferior to adults who achieve the highest level of cognitive competence. Second, childhood is deemed an inadequate precursor to adulthood which represents the complete state of human being. Hence the intellectually immature and incompetent image of children.

Deconstruction of Childhood for Justice

The primary message of the foregoing inquiry into representations of childhood in philosophy and psychology is that children are constructed by adults, at least in the Western world. Adults, having enormous social and political power over children, can define the reality of children by shaping and restricting the ways in which it is possible to talk and think about issues concerning them in society. But the key question is, does the adult-made reality of childhood reflect the true state of affairs fairly and adequately? An exceptionally useful way to address this question is by deconstruction, for it typically seeks to transform the taken-for-granted (e.g. representations of childhood) into the problematic through the revealing of power, competing interests, and conceptual or theoretical privilege (e.g. underpinning the representations). More specifically, as a method of reading texts, deconstruction involves identifying the underlying assumptions, ideas, and frameworks that form the

basis for thought yet are often dressed up as fundamental ahistorical intuitions, with a view to subverting the apparent significance of texts through uncovering contradictions and tensions within them.

Indeed, deconstruction may be seen in particular as a critique of what Derrida (1967/1976) calls *logocentrism* – the authoritarian structure in (philosophical) texts that establishes a series of hierarchical binary relationships in which the dominant term / concept (e.g. speech) marginalizes the subordinate one (e.g. writing). One of the deconstructive strategies adopted by Derrida to subvert the binary logic in logocentrism is the unmasking of the "logic of supplementarity" – the reasoning that the marginalized subordinate term / concept (*supplement*) is presupposed by, and thus should be given priority over, the dominant one (*presence*). As the binary logic, which organizes ideological constructions in logocentric ways, tends to perpetuate discourses and practices of domination, such a deconstructive attack on it illustrates the paramount importance Derrida (1997) attaches to *justice* for deconstruction:

> That is what gives deconstruction its movement, that is, constantly to suspect, to criticize the given determinations of culture, of institutions, of legal systems, not in order to destroy them or simply to cancel them, but to be just with justice, to respect this relation to the other as justice. (p. 18)

In other words, it is justice that gives deconstruction momentum and meaning. Given that justice from a Derridean perspective is a concern for the other, or the otherness which is concealed, excluded, marginalized, and suppressed, deconstruction is well suited for answering the question of how to do justice to a similar concern here, viz. childhood.

Problem One

The first problem is that childhood is generally regarded as a relative and negative concept: it is an incomplete state of incompetence relative to adulthood as a complete state of humans, being defined in a negative way as that which lacks the capacities of adulthood like reason and independence. Since childhood is understood as that which is not yet adulthood, but is on the way to it, or as "*becoming* (growing to adult maturity), rather than *being* (children as their own persons)" (Hendrick, 1997, pp. 3-4), it is actually represented, in the form of a binary opposition, as the excluded other in relation to the dominant adulthood. Following Derrida, however, this logocentric representation can and should be subverted by the logic of supplementarity that childhood is a supplement to adulthood, being excluded, yet presupposed in its definition, by adulthood. Accordingly, the identity of adulthood is not as complete as it is deemed to be.

What is equally important to note is that there is no necessity to conceive childhood as becoming (i.e. an incomplete state) and adulthood as being (i.e. a complete state); instead, it is both possible and valuable to think the contrary. For instance, Rousseau (1762/1979), who is widely credited with transforming the adult-centred conception of childhood into a child-centred one, views childhood as a self-contained state with distinctive features that are worthy of consideration in their own right. On the one hand, he insists that "childhood has its [place] in the order of human life. The man must be considered in the man, and the child in the child" (ibid., p. 80), criticizing those who "are always seeking the man in the child without thinking of what he is before being a man" (ibid., p. 34). On the other hand, he asserts that "childhood has its ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling which are proper to it. Nothing is less sensible than to want to substitute ours for theirs" (ibid., p. 90). Rousseau's emphasis on recognizing children's identity and characteristics has inaugurated a child-centred approach to education, the proponents of which typically argue that the school should serve the needs and interests of children rather than the other way round.

With regard to the alternative conception of adulthood as becoming, in contrast to what Archard (2004) claims that it is oriental while the mainstream conception of adulthood as being is occidental, it

is arguable that it is embodied in both oriental and occidental cultures. For instance, Confucianism, as a complex system of philosophical, moral, social, and political thought that has profoundly influenced oriental cultures (especially the East Asian ones) for a long time, perceives adulthood as a process of becoming a human, or realizing one's humanity, through a continuous effort of self-cultivation (Tu, 1976). This process, according to Tseng Tzu (one of Confucius' most faithful disciples), is just like setting out on a ceaseless course with a heavy burden on one's shoulders:

> An officer [*shi*] must be great and strong. His burden is heavy and his course is long. He has taken humanity [*ren*] to be his own burden – is that not heavy? Only with death does his course stop – is that not long? (Chan, 1963, p. 33)

Interestingly enough, the image of adult as being "on the way" is also present in occidental cultures. A good example can be found in Christianity, which conceives adulthood as a process of growing indefinitely to Christ – the model of perfect maturity or complete adulthood that no human can achieve; hence "the figure of the Christian as wayfarer (*viator*) or pilgrim" (Bouwsma, 1976, p. 83). Indeed, insisting on a process of growth wherein the past is not left behind but survives and shapes the present, the Christian conception of adulthood assumes that the child cannot be left behind but lives on in the adult and forms the basis of a more mature personality (ibid.). Such an assumption that the child is incorporated into the developing adult can also be found in Romanticism – the movement that swept European and thence American culture in the late 18th and early 19th century. More specifically, the ideal adult is represented in Romanticism as the artist in whom "the child's freshness of sensation survives in the powers of the adult, and manifests itself in the perception of novelty in old and familiar appearances" (Kennedy, 2006, p. 59). It can be seen from the above that it is possible to view adulthood as not only a never-ending process of becoming, rather than a finished state of being, mature; but including, rather than excluding, childhood in the ideal of maturity.

Problem Two

The second problem is that children are generally constructed as incompetent in the sense of lacking reason and independence, which have been the putative prerequisites for moral agency since the Classical period. Aristotle, for instance, asserts that an agent can be subject to moral evaluation (e.g. praise or blame), and thus be morally responsible, for an action only if s/he possesses reason, or relevant knowledge (e.g. about the consequences of the action), and acts independently, or voluntarily (Sauvé Meyer, 1998). Therefore, children are not considered to be morally responsible agents and, in turn, to be capable of possessing rights as adults are. Although many children in real life are already granted some rights like the rights to health, protection, and education, it is still possible to challenge the denial to them of those rights that are conferred exclusively on adults like the rights to vote, drink alcohol, and sign binding contracts.

One way to do so is by acknowledgement of the significance of having rights, or rather powers to claim what is due, for children: it enables them not only to preserve self-respect but also to gain respect from others, especially adults. The reason is, according to Feinberg (1992), that people respect themselves when they think of themselves as potential makers of claims against others on their own behalf, and gain respect when they are thought similarly by others to be potential makers of claims whose interests matter. In other words, the denial to children of adult rights can be seen as meaning a disablement and relegation of childhood, which tend to "maintain an artificial separation between the worlds of adulthood and childhood, condemning children to a false and oppressive condition of infantile dependence and vulnerability" (Archard, 2001, p. 52).

Another way to challenge the withholding of adult rights from children is by denial of the claim that children lack independence and knowledge – the prerequisites for holding rights – supposed to be possessed solely by adults. Concerning the former precondition, despite the fact that children are easily

influenced by significant others (e.g. their parents, teachers, and peers) and their own desires (e.g. for immediate satisfaction) and thus unable to make truly independent decisions, it seems doubtful that adults are not. After all, all people, children and adults alike, come under the influence of significant others through internalizing social norms and values during socialization, and of their overwhelming desires. Accordingly, in a sense, either both children and adults act without independence or children act with more or less the same degree of independence as adults.

As regards the latter precondition, it is arguable that children do have knowledge which is not so trivial and limited as adults think. To start with, in contrast to Piaget's thought that children's egocentrism prevents them from having an objective understanding of the world, Olsen (1994) maintains that it is possible for them to acquire objective knowledge, by which he means knowledge that can be shared in principle with other knowers and thus be assessed as knowledge according to the norms or standards shared within a community of knowers. Olsen introduces Wittgenstein's (1974) notion of "forms of life" that he interprets – Wittgenstein himself has neither defined nor explicated it – as "very broad types of human activities and practices which have a certain purpose, regularity, and internal coherence, and which have a history…. forms of life constitute the tacitly agreed upon ways of doing things within a social community" (ibid., p. 110). And he argues that the objectivity of knowledge is dependent on forms of life: "the objectivity of knowledge entails the objectivity of the concepts by which we structure that knowledge; the objectivity of concepts presupposes agreement in the application of concepts in judgments which in turn presupposes participation in forms of life" (ibid., p. 112). Since knowledge, if it is to be objective, must always be relative to a *relevant* cultural context (i.e. form of life), whether or not children have knowledge should not be determined by appraising their understanding of the adult world against an adult standard, but by judging how far their conceptual capacity vis-à-vis a certain type of knowledge meets the objective standards for that knowledge in their own world. To illustrate such a context-dependent, even task-specific, nature of knowledge, Olsen (ibid.) uses the knowledge of tying shoelaces as an example, asserting that a child can be said to possess this knowledge if s/he understands what it is to tie shoelaces and performs it to a culturally required standard. Given children's capacity to participate in various forms of life and thus to acquire objective knowledge to some degree, it seems unjustified to attribute complete subjectivity, which is synonymous with triviality, to childhood knowledge; hence the challenge to the underlying assumption in Piaget's theory of cognitive development that knowledge progresses, stage by stage, from egocentrism (i.e. subjectivity) to objectivity.

In fact, concomitant with the development of electronic media and of information and communications technologies, the epistemic boundary that separates children and adults is steadily eroded. On the one hand, children are becoming well-informed about the adult forms of life through the media. For instance, television, being first and foremost a pictographic medium rather than a linguistic one, makes such secrets of adult life as sex and violence accessible to children as young as three years old (Postman, 1994). On the other hand, children can broaden their own forms of life and acquire extensive knowledge by means of the technologies. For instance, while informational websites on the Internet, which rest on a system of links, enable children to construct knowledge in a non-linear and associative – hence more liberated and creative – way (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2003); communications technologies, like e-mail and video-conferencing, allow them to communicate and collaborate with children in other countries and thus to understand and appreciate different cultures (Szente, 2003).

Problem Three

The third problem is that childhood is *naturalized* in a Piagetian model of child development, which continues to inform contemporary child-rearing practices, as a biologically determined and culturally universal stage of progression from child irrationality to adult rationality. Here, it is debatable whether children are naturally, or rather necessarily, irrational in comparison with adults as Piaget believes. For

one thing, researches have shown that preoperational children and concrete operational children can be trained to acquire conservation characteristic of concrete operational thought and to solve formal operational problems respectively (Bjorklund, 2005). This not only indicates that Piaget underestimated children's intellectual capacities, but calls into question his notion of stages of development that are supposed to describe qualitatively distinct patterns of thinking. For another, researches have demonstrated that most adults do not regularly display formal operational thought when tackling Piaget's standard tasks: "Most middle-class adults employ formal operations only some of the time… and in many small village and tribal communities, many adults barely use any formal operations at all" (Crain, 2005, p. 143). This implies that Piaget's portrayal of adults as models of logicality and rationality is hardly realistic but reflects probably an overestimation of how they actually reason.

A major source of such Piagetian denigration of children's rationality in developmental psychology is recapitulationism, the essence of which is famously captured by the 19th-century embryologist Ernst Haeckel as "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny", that is, the development of the individual repeats the development of the species. In the case of humans, the recapitulation theory suggests that the development of an individual human from embryo to adult (ontogeny) re-enacts the evolutionary history of humankind (phylogeny). Although recapitulationism, in Haeckel's biological form, has long been discredited, it has gained much credence among developmental psychologists who, drawing parallels between ontogeny and phylogeny, tend to regard children as resembling *primeval*, or instinctive, humans. For instance, Jung (1922) asserts that "ontogenesis corresponds in psychology to phylogenesis…. [and thus] that the state of infantile thinking in the child's psychic life… is nothing but a re-echo of the prehistoric and the ancient" (p. 14); and Piaget (1930) holds that compared with adults,

> the child is both closer to immediate observation and further removed from reality …. The causality which results from phenomenism of this kind is not unlike that which is to be found in primitive races …. Anything can produce anything: so long as two facts are given together in raw observation, the one may be considered the cause of the other. (p. 253)

Hence the illogical and irrational image of children, especially at Piaget's sensorimotor and preoperational stages.

However, it is arguable that such a negative recapitulationist image does not do justice to children, particularly the preoperational ones. The reasons are twofold. First, a body of anecdotal and empirical evidence has demonstrated that preoperational children are capable of doing philosophy – essentially a rational and logical inquiry – whether by themselves or with others (Lam, in press). Second, preoperational children's perceptual and intuitional thought, when considered in its own terms without assuming the paramountcy of logicality in thinking, is not so much inferior to adults' logical thought as it is a qualitatively different way of viewing the world; indeed, its artistic and poetic orientation may even serve as a source of inspiration for scientists and artists alike (Crain, 2005). The implication in these reasons is that the underlying assumption of Piagetian theory that children's intelligence will mature with age may not be appropriate, at least for philosophy. It is echoed by Matthews (1994), who explains that "there is no reason whatsoever to suppose that, simply by virtue of growing up in some standard way, adolescents or adults [in comparison with preoperational children] naturally achieve an appropriate level of maturity in handling philosophical questions" (p. 17), and that "[young children's philosophical] comments and questions [often] have a freshness and inventiveness that is hard for even the most imaginative adult to match" (p. 17).

Moreover, paradoxically, it can be argued that childhood is as much natural as artificial in developmental psychology: a developmental norm, which is a standard based on the average abilities of children at a certain age in a particular task, not only describes but *prescribes* what is normal for children at such an age, suggesting that the natural course of development in childhood, if it is to emerge properly, should be carefully monitored, supported, and rectified in conformity with the norm; hence the normalization of childhood and the comment of Burman (1994) that "that which is designated as

natural or spontaneously arising is in fact constructed or even forced" (p. 19). This is consistent with Foucault's (2000) conception of developmental psychology as a form of disciplinary power – he calls panopticism – in modern society, where normalization in different institutions (including schools, prisons, hospitals, and factories) is aimed at producing docile yet productive subjects through the use of such disciplinary methods as surveillance and examination. Indeed, in the field of education, normalization operates at an increasingly early age. For instance, Grieshaber (2002) found that the introduction of a national accreditation system for all long-day childcare centres in Australia was more a legal means of regulating and normalizing preschoolers than an effective measure for providing quality assurance, and Mozère (2007) showed that a new form of normalization developed recently in daycare centres in France where children's (from 4 months to 3 years old) verbal and non-verbal languages of desire were mostly ignored by the staff conforming to regulations against physical intimacy like hugging or cradling them.

Here, it is noteworthy that the normalization of childhood, however well-intentioned, is problematic due to its generative and oppressive effects. It can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, the developmental norm, which subjects children to constant evaluation against a universal standard of the normal child, seems to have far more to do with regulating them than realizing their capabilities as individuals. Yet the so-called normal child, which is distilled from the comparative scores of age-graded populations without any real child lying at its basis, is actually a myth, or rather a product of the testing apparatus that constructs rather than describes the child by virtue of its panoptic gaze (Burman, 1994). On the other hand, over the past few decades, developmental psychologists have been producing different types of abnormal or deficient children through different categories for deficit assessment such as learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, and oppositional defiant disorder. But these categories of deficit arguably owe less to children's nature than to dominant cultural practices that specifically privilege the values of intelligence, rationality, a love of reading and writing, a willingness to submit to authority, and self-control (Baker, 1998). Hence the assertion of Baker that

> embodied in the very techniques for identifying and helping children "having difficulties", then, are both productive and repressive moments – moments that signify the operation of power in the extremities of its reach, in the very mechanisms of "care" for the child. (Ibid., p. 138)

Conclusion

To sum up: the construction of children as incompetent in the sense of lacking reason, maturity, or independence – hence their inferiority and subjection to adults – by certain influential philosophers and psychologists does not do justice to childhood. This is reflected in the process of deconstruction which problematizes various taken-for-granted conceptions of childhood through revealing the assumptions, ideas, values, contradictions, and power that underlie them. As a way to return justice to childhood, childhood should be viewed as a self-contained state with distinctive features that are worthy of consideration in their own right rather than as an incomplete state of incompetence relative to adulthood that is considered a complete state of humans, while adulthood should be viewed as a never-ending process of becoming mature that includes rather than excludes childhood. Moreover, the absolute denial of adult rights to children should be challenged, given that the possession of rights enables them not only to preserve self-respect but to gain respect from others (especially adults), and that they are arguably capable of acquiring objective knowledge as well as acting with independence to some degree and thus of fulfilling the prerequisites for holding rights. Last but not least, the naturalization of childhood in developmental psychology as a biologically determined and culturally universal stage of irrationality should also be disputed. For one thing, a body of compelling evidence has already demonstrated that even preoperational children in Piagetian model of cognitive development are able to engage in such rational and logical inquiries as philosophy. For another, it is

arguable that childhood is as much natural as artificial in developmental psychology which, as a form of disciplinary power, leads to the normalization of childhood that is problematic due to its generative and oppressive effects.

References

Archard, D. (2001). Philosophical perspectives on childhood. In J. Fionda (Ed.), *Legal concepts of childhood* (pp. 43-56). Portland, Oregon: Hart Publishing.

Archard, D. (2004). *Children: Rights and childhood* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Aristotle (1984). *The complete works of Aristotle: The revised Oxford translation* (Rev. ed., Vol. 2, J. Barnes, Ed.). Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Baker, B. (1998). "Childhood" in the emergence and spread of U. S. public schools. In T. S. Popkewitz & M. Brennan (Eds.), *Foucault's challenge: Discourse, knowledge, and power in education* (pp. 117-143). New York: Teachers College Press.

Bjorklund, D. F. (2005). *Children's thinking: Cognitive development and individual differences* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth / Thomson Learning.

Bouwsma, W. J. (1976). Christian adulthood. *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 105* (2), 77-92.

Burman, E. (1994). *Deconstructing developmental psychology*. London: Routledge.

Cannella, G. S. (1997). *Deconstructing early childhood education: Social justice and revolution*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Chan, W.-T. (Ed. & Trans.). (1963). *A source book in Chinese philosophy*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Crain, W. (2005). *Theories of development: Concepts and applications* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.

Derrida, J. (1976). *Of grammatology* (G. C. Spivak, Trans.). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. (Original work published 1967)

Derrida, J. (1997). The Villanova roundtable: A conversation with Jacques Derrida. In J. D. Caputo (Ed.), *Deconstruction in a nutshell: A conversation with Jacques Derrida* (pp. 3-28). New York: Fordham University Press.

Feinberg, J. (1992). *Freedom and fulfillment: Philosophical essays*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Foucault, M. (2000). Truth and juridical forms. In J. D. Faubion (Ed.), *Power* (R. Hurley & Others, Trans., pp. 1-89). New York: The New Press.

Grieshaber, S. (2002). A national system of childcare accreditation: Quality assurance or a technique of normalization? In G. S. Cannella & J. L. Kincheloe (Eds.), *Kidworld: Childhood studies, global perspectives, and education* (pp. 161-180). New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Habibi, D. A. (2001). *John Stuart Mill and the ethic of human growth*. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Hendrick, H. (1997). *Children, childhood and English society 1880-1990*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Inhelder, B., & Piaget, J. (1958). *The growth of logical thinking from childhood to adolescence: An essay on the construction of formal operational structures* (A. Parsons & S. Milgram, Trans.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

Jung, C. G. (1922). *Psychology of the unconscious: A study of the transformations and symbolisms of the libido* (B. M. Hinkle, Trans.). London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd.

Kennedy, D. (2006). *The well of being: Childhood, subjectivity, and education*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Kincheloe, J. L. (2002). The complex politics of McDonald's and the new childhood: Colonizing kidworld. In G. S. Cannella & J. L. Kincheloe (Eds.), *Kidworld: Childhood studies, global perspectives, and education* (pp. 75-121). New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Lam, C. M. (in press). A justification for children's capacity to do philosophy. In E. Marsal, T. Dobashi, & B. Weber (Eds.), *Children philosophize worldwide: Theoretical and practical concepts*. Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Locke, J. (1988). *Two treatises of government* (Student ed., P. Laslett, Ed.). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Matthews, G. B. (1994). *The philosophy of childhood.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mill, J. S. (1993). On liberty. In G. Williams (Ed.), *Utilitarianism, on liberty, considerations on representative government, remarks on Bentham's philosophy* (pp. 69-185). London: Orion Publishing Group.

Mozère, L. (2007). In early childhood: What's language about? *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 39* (3), 291-299.

Olsen, C. (1994). Epistemology and the developing child. In M. Lipman & A. M. Sharp (Eds.), *Growing up with philosophy* (pp. 98-120). Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall / Hunt Publishing Company.

Piaget, J. (1930). *The child's conception of physical causality* (M. Gabain, Trans.). London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd.

Piaget, J. (1950). *The psychology of intelligence* (M. Piercy & D. E. Berlyne, Trans.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited. (Original work published 1947)

Piaget, J. (1951). *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood* (C. Gattegno & F. M. Hodgson, Trans.). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.

Piaget, J., & Inhelder, B. (1969). *The psychology of the child* (H. Weaver, Trans.). New York: Basic Books, Inc. (Original work published 1966)

Plato (1961). *The collected dialogues of Plato: Including the letters* (E. Hamilton & H. Cairns, Eds.). Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Postman, N. (1994). *The disappearance of childhood.* New York: Vintage Books.

Rousseau, J.-J. (1979). *Emile or on education* (A. Bloom, Trans.). New York: Basic Books. (Original work published 1762)

Sauvé Meyer, S. (1998). Moral responsibility: Aristotle and after. In S. Everson (Ed.), *Ethics* (pp. 221-240). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Sheridan, S., & Pramling Samuelsson, I. (2003). Learning through ICT in Swedish early childhood education from a pedagogical perspective of quality. *Childhood Education, 79*, 276-282.

Szente, J. (2003). Teleconferencing across borders: Promoting literacy – and more – in the elementary grades. *Childhood Education, 79*, 299-306.

Tu, W.-M. (1976). The Confucian perception of adulthood. *Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 105* (2), 109-123.

Wittgenstein, L. (1974). *Philosophical investigations* (3rd ed., G. E. M. Anscombe, Trans.). Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell & Mott, Ltd.

About the Author

Chi-Ming Lam is a PhD candidate in philosophy of education in the Faculty of Education at the University of Hong Kong. His research interests include the philosophy of Karl Popper, critical thinking, and philosophy for children. He has published articles on these areas of interest in *Educational Philosophy and Theory* and in *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children*. E-Mail address of the author: a130865a@netvigator.com