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# Childhood Studies, Hermeneutics, and Theological Ethics

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The purpose of this essay is to ask how, both methodologically and substantively, theological ethics should engage today in childhood studies.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, since there is now emerging an international interdisciplinary field of childhood studies, primarily in the social sciences, I ask both how theological ethics may contribute toward this broader field and how this field may in turn influence theological ethics.

My argument is that, in an analogous way to women's and environmental studies, childhood studies should not only apply existing theological methods and norms but also challenge and transform them. It should do so in new and distinctive ways. In analogy to terms like feminism and environmentalism I call this approach "childism." Christian ethics in particular has a long history of this kind of child-centered self-reflection: such as Jesus's placing a child "in the midst" of his disciples to explain the kingdom of heaven, the early church fathers using childhood to describe the ideal human image of God, Augustine's beginning his groundbreaking *Confessions* through his original sin in infancy and youth, and Friedrich Schleiermacher's exploration of the "feeling of absolute dependence" in relation to the notion of the child as gift.<sup>2</sup> The difference today is both a changed situation for children around the world and the possibility for greater empirical sophistication about the nature of childhood and its relations to families and society. The question for theological ethics is how to respond to the complex lives of children in the contemporary world in as sufficiently attentive and

<sup>1</sup> A version of this essay will appear in John Witte Jr. and M. Christian Green, eds., *Practical Theological Ethics and the Family* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), forthcoming.

<sup>2</sup> See Matt. 18:1-14; Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), bk. 1; Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christmas Eve: Dialogues on the Incarnation* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon, 1990), and *The Christian Household: A Sermonic Treatise* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon, 1991).

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meaningful a way as to enrich, in turn, theological ethical understanding itself.

That a new ethical focus is needed regarding childhood today is evident from children's uniquely marginalized status under contemporary conditions of pluralism, individualism, and globalization. It is hardly news that children in rich and poor countries alike have become the poorest segment of the population, receive the least health care, face ever more complex challenges growing up, suffer the most from disintegrating families and communities, are the most vulnerable targets of mass media and advertising manipulation, and in various parts of the world are increasingly enslaved to sex trafficking, drugs, gang violence, and soldiering. What is more difficult to answer is why professional theological ethicists have played such a limited role in social debates on such issues.

Using the work of Paul Ricoeur, David Tracy, Don Browning, Sallie McFague, and Richard Kearney, I argue that the most promising methodological approach lies in theological ethical dialogue with the human sciences through a mutually transforming "hermeneutical circle." This hermeneutical circle allows theological ethics to make substantive critiques of the situation of children in today's world while at the same time learning from children's experiences in such a way as to deepen theological ethics itself. The resulting "childist" theological ethics will demand a fundamental rethinking of the nature of human responsibility toward others.

### THE CONTEMPORARY FIELD OF CHILDHOOD STUDIES

Although the term "childhood studies" is relatively new, the interdisciplinary field of study that it describes has deep roots in the twentieth-century academy and continues to evolve. The center of gravity for this field lies in the human sciences, principally sociology, anthropology, developmental psychology, history, cultural studies, and law. It is these disciplines that, sometimes in contention with one another, have moved beyond isolated studies of children to found an increasing number of programs and centers for interdisciplinary childhood research, as well as scholarly journals devoted to childhood.<sup>3</sup> Much of this work is con-

<sup>3</sup> Such research centers include the Centre for the Social Study of Childhood (Sheffield University), the Chapin Hall Center for Children (University of Chicago), Childwatch International Research Network (University of Oslo), the Center for Children and Childhood Studies (Rutgers University), the Schubert Center for Child Development (Case Western Reserve University), and the Child Policy Research Institute (University of Florida). Major interdisciplinary childhood studies journals include *Childhood: A Global Journal of Child Research*,

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ducted on the analogy of women's studies and African-American studies. It has also influenced public policy in many ways, including most visibly the formation and interpretation of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Humanists in literature, the arts, philosophy, and other areas are by no means excluded from this field, even if they have not generally taken the lead. Important work is being done here, for example, in children's rights, children as philosophical thinkers, and children's voices and constructions in art and literature.

Within the current state of this field, one can detect two major methodological disputes. One dispute is over the usefulness of longer-standing developmental psychological approaches versus more recent approaches from social sciences like sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies. The issue here is whether childhood is better understood through generalized stages of individual, cognitive, emotional, and moral development or through wider, diverse meanings and constructions of childhood in history, culture, and society. A second dispute is over the degree to which the well-being of children is bound up with the well-being of families. Some psychologists and social scientists believe families and marriage lie at the center of childhood studies, while others do not. The result of these disputes is that "childhood studies" involves at least four major methodological approaches, which could be termed developmental-psychological, family-psychological, politico-sociological, and family-sociological. Let us briefly examine these in turn.

Developmental psychology ever since Sigmund Freud has set itself the fundamental task of looking beneath cultural and social variation to uncover general child development stages. Freud himself speaks of rather biologically determined phases of oral, anal, phallic (oedipal), latent, and genital (adolescent) development. Later psychoanalysts speak more broadly of children's development in such areas as ego identity (Heinz Hartmann), object-relations (Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott), social identity (Erik Erikson), and sense of self (Heinz Kohut).<sup>4</sup> At the same time, psychologists have investigated the specifically

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*Child: Care, Health, and Development, Children and Society, and Sociological Studies of Children and Youth.*

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures in Psycho-Analysis*, trans. James Strachey (1933; repr., New York: Norton, 1965), 123; Heinz Hartmann, *Ego Psychology and the Problem of Adaptation*, trans. David Rapaport (1939; repr., New York: International Universities Press, 1958); Melanie Klein, *The Psycho-Analysis of Children*, rev. ed., trans. Alix Strachey (1932; repr., New York: Delacorte, 1975); Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950); D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Basic, 1971); Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self: A Systematic Approach to the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Narcissistic Personality Disorders* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971).

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“moral” development of children, including Jean Piaget’s studies of children’s internalization of social rules, Lawrence Kohlberg’s stages of pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional moral reasoning, and Carol Gilligan’s observations of growing capabilities for relationality and care.<sup>5</sup> These somewhat universalistic approaches to childhood have not been without internal disciplinary critique from the point of view of possible larger cultural differences, such as by Margaret Mead, Sudir Kakar, and Richard Shweder.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, they have produced powerful insights for education, therapy, law, and social policy in the United States and around the world.

More recently, and especially in the United States, psychologists have developed a different kind of “systems theory” approach that views children’s well-being less individualistically as fundamentally bound up with the complex interactive context of their family.<sup>7</sup> Related to this family-centered approach is the field of “evolutionary psychology,” in which figures such as W. D. Hamilton, Martin Daly, and Margo Wilson link child outcomes to aspects of genetic natural selection through such things as paternal bonding and kin altruism.<sup>8</sup> Here also can be located the work of family psychologists such as Judith Wallerstein, Sandra Blakeslee, and Mavis Hetherington, who examine the impact on children of family disruption.<sup>9</sup> There is now a “marriage movement” in the academy and beyond that takes as one of its central concerns the impact of stable marriages for children, including most notably the “marriage education” work of psychologists involved in the Coalition of Marriage, Family, and Couples Education.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, trans. Marjorie Gabain (1924; repr., New York: Free Press, 1965); Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Philosophy of Moral Development*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1981); Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization* (New York: W. Morrow, 1928); Sudir Kakar, *The Inner World: A Psycho-Analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); Richard Jessor, Anne Colby, and Richard Shweder, eds., *Ethnography and Human Development: Context and Meaning in Social Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Salvatore Minuchin and H. Charles Fishman, *Techniques of Family Therapy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> W. D. Hamilton, “The Genetical Evolution of Social Behavior, II,” *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 7 (1974): 17–52; Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, *Sex, Evolution, and Behavior* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> Judith Wallerstein, Julia Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study* (New York: Hyperion, 2000); E. Mavis Hetherington and John Kelly, *For Better or For Worse: Divorce Reconsidered* (New York: Norton, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Classic texts here include Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, and Susan L. Blumberg, *Fighting for Your Marriage: Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving a Lasting Love* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994); and John Gottman, *What Predicts Divorce? The Relationship between Marital Processes and Marital Outcomes* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1994).

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The greatest fault line in the childhood studies literature, however, comes from the critique made of psychological models overall by what has been termed a “social sciences” approach that arose primarily in Europe in the late 1980s. Instead of examining individual children or family systems, this approach investigates children as they participate in and are constructed by their diverse cultures and societies. The origins of this methodology can be traced back to the historian Philippe Ariès, who famously argued in 1960 that experiences and interpretations of childhood have varied significantly across Western history (even if his narrower claim that childhood was invented only after the Middle Ages is generally rejected).<sup>11</sup> The seminal text in this new social sciences paradigm is the 1990 interdisciplinary volume, edited by the British sociologists Allison James and Alan Prout, titled *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*.<sup>12</sup> Here the argument is advanced that childhood—or rather “childhoods”—cannot be understood apart from how children interact with a range of diverse social variables such as poverty, class, gender, race, culture, and ethnicity. As James puts it elsewhere, “to see children as social actors is core to childhood studies. From that perspective, one sees children both as individuals who participate in a social world and as members of a social category defined by particular social, historical, and ideological processes.”<sup>13</sup> This new methodology has spawned a worldwide explosion in childhood studies across disciplines as varied as sociology, anthropology, law, medicine, cultural studies, media studies, education, economics, and public policy.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, trans. Robert Baldick (1960; repr., New York: Vintage, 1962). Those who contest Ariès’s claim of childhood’s invention—though not his claim of childhood’s variation—include Linda Pollack, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500–1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>12</sup> Allison James and Alan Prout, eds., *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: New Directions in the Sociology of Childhood* (New York: Falmer, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Allison James, “Understanding Childhood from an Interdisciplinary Perspective: Problems and Potentials” in *Rethinking Childhood*, ed. Peter B. Pufall and Richard P. Unsworth (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 25–36, 36.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Chris Jenks, *Childhood* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout, *Theorizing Childhood* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998); Myra Bluebond-Langnor, *The Private Worlds of Dying Children* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978); Paul Willis, *Critical Education in the New Information Age* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999); Pam Foley, Jeremy Roche, and Stanley Tucker, eds., *Children in Society: Contemporary Theory, Policy and Practice* (New York: Palgrave/Open University Press, 2001); Flemming Mouritsen and Jens Qvortrup, eds., *Childhood and Children’s Culture* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2002); Irene Rizzini, *From Street Children to All Children: Improving the Opportunities of Low Income Urban Children and Youth in Brazil* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Kathleen Marshall and Paul Parvis, *Honoring Children: The Human Rights of the Child in Christian Perspective* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 2004); and Peter B. Pufall and Richard P. Unsworth, *Rethinking Childhood*. A large international and interdisciplinary conference on this paradigm of childhood studies, including over a thousand papers, took place at the University

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A fourth and final method in the study of childhood can be found in some of the ways that sociology and other social sciences have been applied to children in the United States, where the focus is again more frequently around the specific arena of marriage and families. Beginning around the same time in the late 1980s as the above Europeans, American sociologists such as Sarah McLanahan, Gary Sandefur, David Popenoe, Alan Wolfe, William Goode, and Linda Waite have investigated the impacts of marriage and divorce on children in terms of broad social outcomes like poverty, education, health, and general social capital.<sup>15</sup> Some of this research is partnered with the marriage movement mentioned above. However, it focuses less on what it takes therapeutically to create strong marriages and families and more on the consequences of marriage and its disruption on children's broad social well-being (as well as the resulting well-being of society). Unlike in the above originally European politico-sociological model, this family-sociological model places less emphasis on children's agency and diversity than on their social vulnerability and their dependency on families for social mediation.

### EMERGING THEOLOGICAL ETHICS OF CHILDHOOD

Despite the obvious ethical questions raised in all four major areas of this field, and despite its own long and complex traditions of reflection on childhood, theological ethics today has not, as a field, approached childhood with the same disciplinary focus as it has approached, for example, women, race, medicine, the environment, business, or war. Theologians tend to engage issues of children, if they do so at all, around specific and isolated questions such as abortion, health insurance, and spiritual formation. Nevertheless, several scholarly voices have recently emerged, especially in the United States, that are rethinking childhood as an important Christian ethical concern in its own right. These voices are asking new—and sometimes very old—questions about the larger aims and purposes of child rearing and the obligations toward children of families, churches, communities, and the state. Let

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of Oslo in 2005 and was titled "Childhoods 2005 Oslo: Children and Youth in Emerging and Transforming Societies."

<sup>15</sup> Sarah McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); David Popenoe, *Disturbing the Nest* (New York: Crown, 1993); Alan Wolfe, *Whose Keeper? Social Science and Moral Obligation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); William Goode, *World Changes in Divorce Patterns* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); and Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

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us examine how this conversation is developing and how it varies both normatively and methodologically.<sup>16</sup>

The earliest recent Christian ethics of childhood go back as far as the 1980s in what I will call the “communitarian” approaches of figures such as Stanley Hauerwas, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Gilbert Meilander.<sup>17</sup> Drawing chiefly on premodern thinkers like Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and John Calvin, this approach generally opposes itself to modernity and its perceived betrayal of children through moral and expressive individualism. It argues that children fare poorly in the contemporary world primarily because they lack strong families, traditions, and social narratives under which to develop civilized and meaningful social values. Children are not just individual or autonomous agents but need to be socialized into the larger values and virtues of coherent moral communities. As Meilander puts it, “parents commit themselves to initiating their children into the human inheritance and, more particularly, into the stories that depict their way of life. In so doing they shape, mold, and civilize their children.”<sup>18</sup>

Methodologically, communitarianism can be described as taking a “top-down” approach in which children’s lives are to be formed in accordance with traditionally established norms and values. Similarly, child rearing itself places children under the disciplinary tutelage of normatively grounded adults, particularly parents. The strength of this model is that it managed to break through the virtual silence of Christian ethical voices on childhood in the late twentieth century by demonstrating the importance of substantive child rearing aims and communities. It also places in question a profound individualism within especially the psychological (but also frequently the sociological) sciences of childhood. At the same time, however, communitarianism has generally approached the human sciences as an object of critique and not a source of new insight. This arguably opposes much of the very Christian tradition on which it stands, which has frequently learned a

<sup>16</sup> I have also examined this conversation in “Animals and Innocents: Theological Reflections on the Meaning and Purpose of Child-Rearing,” *Theology Today* 59 (January 2003): 559–82, “The Christian Ethics of Children: Emerging Questions and Possibilities,” *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 4 (January 2004), <http://www.elca.org/scriptlib/dcs/jle/article.asp?aid=203>, “Let the Little Children Come”: Child Rearing as Challenge to Contemporary Christian Ethics,” *Horizons* 31 (Spring 2004): 64–87, and “Fallen Angels: A Contemporary Christian Ethical Ontology of Childhood,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 8 (Fall 2004): 160–84.

<sup>17</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Jean Bethke Elshtain, “The Family and Civic Life,” and Gilbert Meilander, “A Christian View of the Family,” in *Rebuilding the Nest: A New Commitment to the American Family*, ed. David Blankenhorn, Steven Bayme, and Jean Bethke Elshtain (Milwaukee: Family Service America, 1990), 119–32, 133–48.

<sup>18</sup> Meilander, “Christian View of the Family,” 143.

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great deal from the scientific observations of the time, such as in Thomas Aquinas's use of medieval stage developmental theory and Aristotelian sociobiology.<sup>19</sup> One could argue also that such an approach underestimates the impact on children's lives of larger economic, political, and global conditions, so that a starving child in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, may need more than initiation into moral values. It is also not clear from this perspective how (indeed if) one would view children as having their own moral agency or voice.

In part in response to such problems, a more recent view of the Christian ethics of childhood has emerged in figures like Kathleen and James McGinnis, Cornel West, Herbert Anderson, Susan Johnson, Pamela Couture, and Adrian Thatcher, who take what I will term a "liberationist" approach.<sup>20</sup> Rather than opposing modernity and critiquing the contemporary human sciences of childhood, this approach learns a great deal from them. Methodologically, it shares what could be called a "bottom-up" approach that starts in children's own actual lives, voices, agency, and experiences. The reason to engage theologically with childhood is that, as Thatcher puts it, children "are often the ones with no voice, the unconsulted and sometimes undeserving victims of oppression."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in terms of guiding norms, children should be appreciated—much as claimed by the father of modern liberal theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher—not just as recipients of adult values but more importantly as gifts of God and bringers of divine goodness and wisdom into the world.<sup>22</sup> Couture argues, for example, that "shared responsibility become words of liberation when they result in practices that contribute to the resilience of children and those who care for

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948), Supplement, Q. 43, a. 2. Thomas here adopts a theory of development in which in the first seven years a child "neither understands by himself nor learns from another," in the second seven years "can learn from another but is incapable by himself of consideration and understanding," in the third seven years becomes "both able to learn from another and to consider by himself," and finally in the fourth seven years (i.e., starting at twenty-one!) can reason about not only "things concerning [one's own] person" but also "the things outside [one's] person."

<sup>20</sup> Kathleen and James McGinnis, *Parenting for Peace and Justice: Ten Years Later* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990); Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West, *The War against Parents: What We Can Do for America's Beleaguered Moms and Dads* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998); Herbert Anderson and Susan Johnson, *Regarding Children: A New Respect for Childhood and Families* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994); Pamela Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000); and Adrian Thatcher, *Marriage after Modernity: Christian Marriage in Postmodern Times* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> Thatcher, *Marriage after Modernity*, 152.

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed discussion of Schleiermacher on childhood, see Dawn DeVries, "Be Converted and Become as Little Children": Friedrich Schleiermacher on the Religious Significance of Childhood," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 329–49.



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them, the kind of resilience that continues to share responsibility despite overwhelming odds, gains, and disappointments, a resilience that is tenacious because it arises from God's grace."<sup>23</sup>

The result, methodologically, is that theological ethics not only learns a great deal from the empirical study of children's contemporary lives but also uses the experiences of children to transform theological ethics' own understanding of the kingdom of God. Liberationist childhood studies is thereby significantly patterned on Christian feminism, black theology, and other movements that start with experiences of social marginalization and move from there to a deepened interpretation of the Christian message. Such an approach is arguably closer than communitarianism to Jesus's holding up childhood as a theological model of the kingdom of heaven. At the same time, however, it is not altogether clear how far childhood studies can in fact be patterned on feminist and other liberationist methods. Unlike other marginalized groups, children do not, as children, have sufficient capacities to enact their own grassroots liberation for themselves. They will never, for example, organize their own communities of resistance or hold university faculty positions in which to challenge ethical hegemonies. As vulnerable beings they may in fact rely, more than women and minorities, on substantive guidance and support from others. While liberationism does frequently call for children's social and political protection, its bottom-up methodology may ultimately leave unclear what *unique* form of responsibility children in particular demand from adults and society.

A still more recent theological ethical approach to childhood, starting in the mid-1990s in figures such as Don Browning, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, and Bonnie Miller-McLemore, offers a third model that some have termed "progressive familism." All of these Christian thinkers have close ties to liberationism and feminism (hence the term "progressive"), but they also believe that the well-being of children is uniquely dependent on others and particularly on parents (hence "familism"). Significantly, progressive familists are deeply engaged with the fields of developmental and evolutionary psychology, partly because these fields offer empirical insight into families, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, because they help describe how children *become*—rather than just already are—competent social agents. In other words, children's social agency is not just a given but also a developmental task falling first and foremost on families. Thus, for example, Browning and Van Leeuwen use developmental psychology to argue for the importance of marriage in the "attachment" of fathers in

<sup>23</sup> Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God*, 16.

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particular to their child-rearing responsibilities. Cahill blends psychological insight into how children form compassion with Catholic natural law theory to argue for the family's unique role in educating children to grow into active participants in the larger common good. And Miller-McLemore uses feminist psychology to articulate a Christian theology of parenting centered on developing children's agency in relation to their larger world.<sup>24</sup>

This third approach has arguably a more complex relation to the human sciences than the other two. It self-consciously strives to form a clear balance of both ethical critique and empirical learning. Browning in particular has developed a sophisticated hermeneutical methodology for theological engagement with the human sciences based on the work of Paul Ricoeur.<sup>25</sup> From this perspective, the human sciences never achieve complete independence from historical values and ethical assumptions, out of which their investigations and animating questions arise. But at the same time, historical values are themselves enriched through the capacity of the human sciences to provide critical reflection upon them. The human sciences should be viewed (from a theological ethical point of view) as infusing theological ethics with what Ricoeur calls a "moment of distanciation" or "critical test."<sup>26</sup> That is, they provide linguistically structured empirical observations in relation to which ethical values may be rendered more complex, tested in relation to practices and reality, shown their limits, and critiqued from points of view such as gender and race. Theological ethics questions the ethical presuppositions that animate the human sciences, while the human sciences in turn test historically settled ethical ideals against the complexities of human reality.

This "hermeneutical circle" or "hermeneutical realism" is similar, Browning claims, to David Tracy's "critical correlational" theological method except applied more specifically to the human sciences. Tracy

<sup>24</sup> See Don S. Browning, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Pamela D. Couture, K. Brynolf Lyon, and Robert M. Franklin, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000); Don S. Browning, *Marriage and Modernization: How Globalization Threatens Marriage and What to Do about It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000); Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace: Love, Work, and Parenting in a Changing World* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1990); and Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

<sup>26</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 87–100, 131–44, and 203–9.

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himself revises Paul Tillich's method of correlation (which had a profound influence on liberationism) so that not only does the contemporary world put new questions to historical traditions (as for Tillich), but, in a more circular way, traditions are also used in turn to question contemporary ontological and moral assumptions. Thus a critical correlation or genuine hermeneutical circle involves theological ethics and the human sciences in a two-way and mutually enriching "dialogue" or "conversation."<sup>27</sup>

The advantage of this circular methodology for childhood studies is that it combines the strengths of both a communitarian top-down injection of robust traditions and a liberationist bottom-up attention to children's actual situation and experiences. Christian ethics is able to make central use of the human sciences while retaining an independent critical voice of its own. The disadvantage, as I will shortly suggest, is that it remains too narrowly focused on the relation of children to families. As the name "progressive familism" implies, childhood studies is here understood as a subset of family studies, as if the ethics of childhood is reducible to how families should function and how society should support them. This is why this approach has gravitated toward engagement with psychological and sociological models that have the same family focus. This centering of childhood studies around families in the North American academy needs to be questioned since, as the above European social sciences approach to childhood studies has shown, children's lives are also related to larger social structures directly, not just indirectly through the mediating functions of marriage and parenting. While family is central to how children experience society, it does not exhaust all that may be said about children's interactions with such factors as mass media, culture, education, rights, class, gender constructions, economics, health care, and politics.

A truly child-centered theological ethics will build on this third way but also press beyond familism to a broader childism—that is, to placing children themselves at the center of inquiry in all their family, cultural, economic, gender, historical, and social complexity.

### A POSTMODERN HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE OF CHILDHOOD STUDIES

In order to develop a revised hermeneutical circle that can respond to the unique challenges of studying childhood, it is worth recalling that hermeneutics itself has a complex developmental history. Not coinci-

<sup>27</sup> Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 44–47; David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981). See also Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

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dentally, Schleiermacher is the father of both the modern theology of childhood and modern hermeneutics. He it is, in the early nineteenth century, who moves hermeneutics beyond mere techniques for the exegesis of classic texts (especially scripture) into a general method of human social understanding. Schleiermacher adapts Kant's critique of reason to argue for a new hermeneutics as the practice of "divining" behind human linguistic expressions the mysterious "genius" or "subjectivity" of the individual author.<sup>28</sup> Although the connection is not stated directly, childhood, for Schleiermacher, is a divine gift from God to the world that epitomizes this subjective hermeneutical mystery. Hermes as the messenger of the gods takes his purest and most complete form in each new baby that enters the world. Hermeneutics divines the kind of inner natural wisdom or intuition that each of us still in some way retains from childhood despite the inevitable corruptions and distortions of language and society. Likewise, childhood becomes a vital hermeneutical concern (no other major theologian has written as much on childhood as Schleiermacher) in part because it embodies the kind of sacred human inwardness that hermeneutics seeks to approach. It may not be going too far (though I cannot defend it here) to make the childist argument that Schleiermacher's early writings on childhood deeply influence his later theology and hermeneutics.

While I do not share Schleiermacher's romanticism about either hermeneutics or childhood—his valorization of subjective purity—I do believe we can profit from once again rethinking hermeneutics in relation to children. This possibility has been obscured by subsequent developments in hermeneutics itself. In the early twentieth century, Wilhelm Dilthey insisted against Schleiermacher that the proper object of hermeneutical interpretation is not the hidden subject behind language but rather language itself, as the means by which humanity expresses itself in history.<sup>29</sup> Because history and language are dominated by adults, however, the relation of hermeneutics to childhood becomes that much more difficult to establish. On this account, children will never have the same hermeneutical agency or voice as adults, but rather, insofar as they are not yet as linguistically competent, remain outside the hermeneutical circle. Subsequently, Martin Heidegger argues that hermeneutics should *oppose* empirical inquiry by describing

<sup>28</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, ed. Heinz Kimmerle, trans. James Duke and Jack Forstman (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977), 112. For Schleiermacher's writings on childhood, see *Christmas Eve* and *The Christian Household*.

<sup>29</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, "The Development of Hermeneutics," in *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. H. P. Rickman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

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Dasein's pure phenomenological "being-in-the-world."<sup>30</sup> His student Hans-Georg Gadamer interprets this to mean that the proper object of hermeneutics is "historically effected consciousness" or human understanding as it is always already constituted by historical traditions.<sup>31</sup> The relation to childhood becomes again, however, obscure: while children share historical being-in-the-world with adults, they do not share the same historically effected capabilities for its deliberate hermeneutical interpretation.

Fortunately, as Browning has understood, a more complex hermeneutical theory has more recently been developed by Ricoeur. While Ricoeur never addresses the study of childhood, his hermeneutical circle involving distanciation proves significantly more useful for childhood studies. This is because, in Ricoeur's view, the historically effected interpretation of human being-in-the-world cannot be carried out apart from larger circular dialogue with the empirical tests of actual human experience. Such distanciation occurs whenever one enters what Ricoeur calls the linguistically structured world of a "text," whether that text is a literary classic or an empirically informed human scientific observation. The psychological and social sciences therefore provide one important means for gaining a critical or self-reflective "distance" on one's historically ingrained values and assumptions.<sup>32</sup>

Such a critical hermeneutical circle has two advantages for childhood studies. First, it includes both child and adult perspectives as sources of meaning: prereflective historical horizons that shape adults' and children's worlds alike and reflective textual and scientific modes of reflection that are more distinctively adult and toward which children only gradually develop. Children may even, as has been suggested in Jerome Berryman's adaptation of Ricoeur, be able to explore this pre-scientific world more authentically than adults through their deep capacities for symbolism and play.<sup>33</sup> But only adults (at least in principle) are fully capable of making arguments about their tradition-constituted values by subjecting them to cultural and scientific critique and, as a result, taking ultimate responsibility for their own moral perspectives and actions. It is these kinds of critically self-reflective capabilities that make it meaningful to distinguish the terms "child" and "adult" in the

<sup>30</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (1926; repr., New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 30, 31, and 62.

<sup>31</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (1960; repr., New York: Crossroad, 1992), 265–307.

<sup>32</sup> Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 43–62 and 131–44.

<sup>33</sup> Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

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first place. Yet the distinction is a matter of degree rather than kind and does not eject children from the hermeneutical circle itself.

Second, a critical hermeneutical circle of this kind shows, methodologically, how children may be studied as at once participants in their shared social worlds and distinctive objects of empirical inquiry. For adults, these two sides of the hermeneutical circle can operate as one: we belong to a moral history that we can also interpret critically for ourselves. But for children this relation or tension of belonging and reflection is relatively undeveloped. Children bring their own interpretive perspectives to their worlds. But the younger the child, the less she or he brings to this interpretation socially distancing capabilities such as scientific observation, falsification of assumptions, cultural comparison, testing against experience, or accounting for others' points of view. As a result, children's well-being depends to a particularly high degree on empirical understanding and response from adults. The younger the child, the more she or he needs adults to stand in, as it were, to provide for them the critical and empirical dimensions of the hermeneutical circle.

The Ricoeurian hermeneutical circle requires further modification, however, if it is to answer to the full challenge of childism. This modification reflects my own and others' sympathetic revisions of Ricoeurian hermeneutics in a more postmodern direction. Childhood raises to an especially sharp degree the problem of what Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, John Caputo, Sallie McFague, and Richard Kearney have called the interpretation of "otherness" or "difference." In my view it is possible, indeed necessary, to recognize otherness without (as some have claimed) abandoning the notion of a hermeneutical circle. "Otherness" does not mean "othering": the marginalization of those who are different. Rather, it refers to the sense in which each singular human being is ultimately irreducible to any understanding, narration, or construction of them whatsoever. Levinas claims that no other is fully reducible to anything "said" about them but is always also its own transcending or infinite "saying" beyond language and meaning (indeed, as a "face" of the Wholly Other).<sup>34</sup> Or as others have argued, a little differently, each "other" person continually escapes interpretation as a linguistic object by virtue of their utter and mysterious *différance* (their difference as endlessly deferred).

A similar modification to our hermeneutical circle is suggested by certain forms of feminism that argue that critique of traditional as-

<sup>34</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (1974; repr., Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 46.

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sumptions needs to be radicalized into critique also of who controls the hermeneutical circle itself by which traditions are interpreted. As McFague has said of feminist theology, the interpretation of traditional worldviews should be viewed as “metaphorical” in the sense that “good metaphors shock, they bring unlikes together, they upset conventions, they involve tension, and they are implicitly revolutionary.”<sup>35</sup> The hermeneutical circle must be performed with an eye to who is being marginalized from participation in the hermeneutical circle itself. It should seek to become ever more responsive to “others” in the sense of the shock of those whose participation has historically been excluded.

Such is especially if not most profoundly of all the case when one considers children. Children perhaps more than any other group are prone to having their “saying” capabilities overshadowed by what is “said” by others about them. They are the most easily marginalized segment of society. The fact is that the study of children is of necessity originated and conducted not by children themselves but by nonchildren, that is, adults. Such is the case even in the laudable efforts of social scientists to include children’s participation in research, since this participation is still initiated, guided, and interpreted ultimately by grown-ups. The underlying problem is not how to make children equal research participants. It is how to interpret the meaning and status of children in their “otherness,” when children more than any other group cannot fully interpret their own otherness for themselves.

The hermeneutical circle of childhood studies should therefore include what I would call a decentering or asymmetrical moment. It should, perhaps, be a hermeneutical *ellipse* orbiting not one point but two: the interpreter and the interpreter’s irreducible other. The problem of interpreting childhood in society makes the need for an asymmetrical hermeneutical circle especially evident. Children’s experiences must be allowed to disrupt and constantly open up even the interpretive assumptions adults bring to them. Ricoeurian distancing must be radicalized into a hermeneutical decentering in which traditional ethical assumptions are open-endedly tested through dialogue with empirical, textual, and moral difference. Oddly enough, such a task returns us in a certain sense to Schleiermacher’s divination of the child (and humanity) as gift. Children demand from adults an interpretation of not only their sameness to adults but also their irreducibility and even mystery. However, through a more sophisticated hermeneutical circle based on Ricoeur, this gift need not become romanticized—which

<sup>35</sup> Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 17.

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is itself a form of marginalization. Rather, children's gifts of meaning to the world may be provided concrete interpretive responses by adults and society through the hard, tireless, and ultimately endless work of better understanding children's distinctive voices and experiences.

### THE THEOLOGICAL ETHICS OF CHILDHOOD

Theological ethicists, from this perspective, should seek to engage in the field of childhood studies through the fullest possible dimensions of such a hermeneutical circle. Top-down ethical critique of the social sciences and bottom-up experiential learning from them should be placed in dynamic and critical tension with one another. In this way, theological ethics may more readily function, as it frequently has in history, in a genuinely creative and transforming way: responsive to new understandings and situations but also productive of new insight and debate.

Allow me to illustrate this theological ethical role by discussing perhaps the most important claim of the new childhood studies literature in the social sciences: namely, that children should be understood as social "agents." Children's agency has taken a central place in the sociology, anthropology, history, law, and other studies of childhood in Europe and now increasingly in the United States. According to a recent interpretation, children's agency means that "children's actions affect their worlds and especially their social worlds," so that childhood studies "emphasizes children's quest to make sense of their world and to construct a good fit with it."<sup>36</sup> The study of children's agency is the study of how children participate in creating their social environments, exercise their own social competencies, act diversely rather than stereotypically, construct independent ideas and meaning, and help to interpret their own cultures, communities, and identities. Agency also includes "voice," which "puts the focus on children's commitment to make known their own ability to act on their own behalf, whether to ensure their own interests or to modify the world that surrounds them."<sup>37</sup>

The appeal of this language of children's agency is twofold. First, it helps the social sciences distinguish themselves from the otherwise dominant methods of developmental psychology, which, it is argued, start from the point of view of what children are not yet, namely, developed adults, rather than what they are and can do in and of them-

<sup>36</sup> Peter B. Pufall and Richard P. Unsworth, "Introduction: The Imperative and the Process for Rethinking Childhood," in their *Rethinking Childhood*, 1-21, 9.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*



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selves, as well as in their full cultural and individual diversity. While some would argue that this critique is unfair, nevertheless a stand is taken that you cannot understand childhood without understanding children as competent and diverse social actors. Second, and more important for our purposes, the notion of children's agency is appealing because it suggests an alternative to how children have generally been understood throughout history. Children actively participate in their social worlds rather than being passive recipients of adult socialization. This claim expands and further develops the Enlightenment view beginning with John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau that "un-enlightened" practices of child rearing ignore children's distinctive human capabilities. What is added by the new social sciences perspective, however, is both an empirically precise method of stripping away easy adult preconceptions about childhood and, most important, a resulting and perhaps even unprecedented appreciation for children's own social agency in all its fullness and complexity.

To the ear of a theological ethicist, however, this emphasis on children's agency raises significant questions. The notion that agency defines what it means to be human has profound problems even when it comes to adults. Postmodern ethics of various kinds has shown that human life in society is fundamentally conditioned by a number of non-agential factors. These include historical and cultural traditions, shared social narratives, systems of power, commitments to common goods, biological and evolutionary needs, intersubjective norms of dialogue and relationship, transcending sources of social meaning, and needs for receptivity and responsiveness toward persons and cultures that are other. Jürgen Habermas argues that since ethics confronts human life with a "pluralism of ultimate value orientations," it must be grounded ultimately not in the expression of subjective agency but in procedures of larger "intersubjective discourse" that allow for mutual dialogue to arise and flourish between diverse points of view.<sup>38</sup> Ricoeur has criticized one-sided ethics of agency as masking the mere utilitarian pursuit of self-interest in which the powerless silently lose out.<sup>39</sup> More emphatically, Levinas has shown how the ethics of agency can be used to justify social violence (Levinas himself was a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust) in permitting those with the greatest social agency to "totalize" shared moral worlds. Ethics should begin, according to Levinas,

<sup>38</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (1983; repr., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 66 and 76.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Love and Justice" in his *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (1990; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 315–29, 329.

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in agency's very opposite: the otherness of the other calling the self to "a passivity more passive still than the passivity of matter."<sup>40</sup>

From the hermeneutical point of view developed above, persons are both agents and patients at once, capable of interpreting their social worlds but also in turn always interpreted by those social worlds and by others within them. As Ricoeur has argued (in a way that I view as more complex than in either Habermas or Levinas), moral, intellectual, and affective life are everywhere voluntary and involuntary at once, constituting from within and constituted from without, so that agency is but one point in a larger passive-active hermeneutical circle necessary for forming social meaning.<sup>41</sup>

The Christian tradition supports such a view by qualifying human agency or freedom with humanity's primordial fallibility and, hence, ultimate dependence on sources of meaning larger than itself. For Ricoeur this means that love for others is not just an autonomous act (as in the classic Enlightenment ethics of Immanuel Kant) but also the placing of ultimate faith in an already given goodness of creation. As he puts it, moral agency takes place within the context of an "economy of the gift" in which the reception of a sense of one's own "given" human goodness makes it possible in turn to imagine resisting one's own participation in evil and "giving" a more superabundant love to others.<sup>42</sup> Or, as Kearney has similarly put it, moral life should involve neither pure agency nor pure prostration before the other—each of which he calls a form of "idolatry"—but rather a constantly self-transforming "practical wisdom" that seeks through love of others ever broader "interlacings of alterities."<sup>43</sup> If the Christian tradition has sometimes moved too far away from agency by emphasizing self-sacrifice, a hermeneutical perspective reminds us instead that love is ultimately interactive, mutual, responsive, and productive of new social relations.

On these grounds, theological ethics may make at least two important forms of critique of the recent social science emphasis on children's agency. First, one can argue for a more complex view of children in and of themselves. As full human beings, children do not simply act on their world but rather interact in a passive-active way with a world that itself shapes and influences their interpretations of

<sup>40</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, trans. Erazim V. Kohák (1950; repr., Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1966).

<sup>42</sup> Ricoeur, "Love and Justice," 315–29. See also my "The Economy of the Gift: Paul Ricoeur's Significance for Theological Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 29 (Summer 2001): 235–60.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 12.

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their experiences. As well as conditions such as history, culture, power, and community, children also face the moral condition of having to learn to respond in an active-passive way to others. Respecting children's full humanity involves recognizing their fullest dimensions as both actively participating in and passively belonging to larger moral worlds. Indeed, few adults would, in the end, welcome being treated one-dimensionally as agents alone. Overemphasizing children's agency is just as simplistic and therefore dehumanizing as overemphasizing their need to be molded and socialized.

Second, a more interdependent understanding of childhood demands more complex thinking about the responsibilities owed children by adults. It is true that adults need to better appreciate children's own agential competencies. However, adults and society should also recognize the special depths of children's human vulnerability. For example, mass media advertising does not simply confront children with a potential loss of social agency but, more importantly, can take advantage of children's market passivity or receptivity in a more profound way than it may adults'. The younger a child the easier it becomes to manipulate their wants and desires for independent or harmful adult ends. Failing to see children as not just agents in but also patients of their larger social worlds ironically obscures their being influenced by adult ambitions and exposes them to greater rather than lesser societal manipulation.

Such a critique of the one-sidedness of talk of children's agency could also be carried forward into a similar critique of the social sciences' adoption of the language of children's "rights," although we can only touch on this question briefly here. From a hermeneutical point of view, children require both "negative" rights to protection and appropriate participation and "positive" rights to state and social aid. This point is lost on those in the United States, particularly as informed by the above form of communitarianism, who largely reject rights language as such or who view children only through the lens of family life. Children in this country would be significantly better off in many ways with stronger rights to health, economic well-being, and a social voice, as outlined in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (which the United States is one of only two countries not to have ratified). If rights language has limitations it also sets a basic groundwork for treatment with full human dignity that too many children clearly lack.

However, rights language when it comes to children should also be balanced with languages of adult responsibility. This can be seen by considering such children's rights in the UN Convention as "freedom

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of expression” (art. 13), “freedom of thought, conscience and religion” (art. 14), and “access to [mass media] information” (art. 17). Expression, conscience, religion, and mass media information are issues, for children more acutely than for adults, not just of freedom and access—norms grounded in human agency—but also of nurturance, dependency, and guidance. The special relation of children’s rights to adult responsibilities was more clearly recognized in earlier international agreements in 1924 and 1959 on which the 1989 convention is partly based. Here one finds significantly more central language of adult and societal “duty” toward children, “responsibilities” for “special safeguards and care,” and children’s needs for “special protection” and extra “love and understanding.”<sup>44</sup> The language of adult responsibility, while not absent from the 1989 convention, in earlier agreements provides a clearer recognition that children are not just little adult agents deserving the same rights as all but are also profoundly vulnerable, relational, conditioned, and in need of special care from others.

In these and many other ways, the contemporary field of childhood studies would be greatly enriched by more complex ethical inquiry. Theological ethics could play a vital role in bringing its diverse languages and traditions to this task. Its special expertise in this area does not qualify it to dominate all social debate, but it does provide the occasion for a much needed critique of contemporary society’s child-related ethical assumptions. Social scientists, psychologists, and society at large cannot avoid using ethical language concerning children because children’s lives have important ethical dimensions. What is more, childhood studies as a discipline contains inherent ethical aims and ambitions, such as the improvement of children’s lives and respect for their diverse experiences. A full hermeneutical circle of childhood studies suggests that theological ethics has a significant responsibility—both to the childhood studies field and to children themselves—for assessing and helping to shape such underlying normative understandings.

### HOW CHILDHOOD STUDIES SHOULD TRANSFORM THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

The question remains how consideration of childhood may or should in turn transform theological ethics. Here, one might say, is the disciplinary pay-off, the chance to rethink ethical methods and norms so as to reimagine not only childhood but also ethics itself. There are

<sup>44</sup> See the “Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child,” adopted by the League of Nations (the precursor to the United Nations) in 1924; and the United Nations’ “Declaration of the Rights of the Child” of 1959.

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many possible ways in which this might happen. At a minimum, including childhood challenges theological ethics to involve a greater sense of what I call *creative responsibility*.<sup>45</sup> Such a norm mirrors substantively what I have been arguing for methodologically. Childhood shows in the strongest possible terms that human beings are responsible for one another. But it also presses ordinary understandings of moral responsibility toward their radically creative dimensions, dimensions in which those responsible are called to the decentering, disruption, and asymmetrical transformation of their assumed moral horizons. Beyond closely related feminist and liberationist norms of inclusive participation, what may be called a “childist” theological ethics requires the ever new creation of one’s own moral worlds in a way inclusively responsive to others.

What the psychological and social sciences of childhood truly reveal is not just children’s distinctive capabilities and agency—important though these are—but rather, in a more complex way, the kinds of *tension* that exist between children’s agency and their larger surrounding worlds. Let us take, for example, the issue of children’s poverty in the United States. Children in this country have the highest rates of poverty in the developed world for a number of interlocking reasons: lack of government assistance, massive economic inequality, racism, high rates of divorce and teen parenthood, the economic marginalization of mothers, a culture of extreme individualism, children’s commodification and sentimentalization, and much more. Such social conditions, certainly beyond the control of children themselves (not to mention to varying degrees the adults around them), create the “perfect storm” for children to become (as they did in the 1970s, surpassing the elderly) the poorest group in society, and the poorer the younger the child.<sup>46</sup>

Empirical studies of these multiple conditions do in fact suggest ways in which children exercise social agency, such as through resilience to poverty’s effects, awareness of family situation, support of parental employment, self-limitation of wants, and capabilities to adapt and grow even under the severest conditions. However, they also reveal a massive failure of American society to respond to the needs of its most vulnerable members, and indeed to respond to human vulnerability as such. The problem faced in children’s poverty is not just children’s lack of

<sup>45</sup> I have explored this notion of “creative responsibility” in broader terms in *Moral Creativity: Paul Ricoeur and the Poetics of Possibility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), chap. 3.

<sup>46</sup> Statistics on child poverty can be found, among other places, at the United States Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov>, P60–210, and in the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s “Kids Count Data Book,” <http://www.aecf.org>.

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social participation. The problem, more fundamentally, is that “social participation” in the United States today is defined in a primarily adult, individualistic, market competitive, and utilitarian way, so that children are bound to lose out. Barbara Bennett Woodhouse has argued that American “rights” language tends to emphasize this kind of state-free autonomy over state support for needs and dignity.<sup>47</sup> Or, as Jürgen Habermas would put it, the lifeworld of children (both within and outside families) has been thoroughly “colonized” by the values of the marketplace, values that happen to be chiefly agential and adult.<sup>48</sup>

Through various techniques of careful observation, the human sciences stand in a unique position, methodologically, to dig beneath assumptions and stereotypes and explain what makes American child poverty so problematic. This is the case in at least three important respects. First, they can explain how poverty plays into children’s underlying developmental vulnerabilities. For example, the younger a child is, the fewer basic capabilities he or she is likely to possess for such things as securing social capital, supporting parents leaving home to work, resisting mass media exploitation to sell toys, or making heard his or her plight. Second, the human sciences can describe the unique conditions that contribute toward poverty in contemporary families. For example, families in the United States bear significant burdens for children’s health and economic well-being, so that high rates of family and marital disruption represent a major cause of children’s economic hardship. And third, the human sciences can map the multiple and diverse ways in which children’s poverty is related to larger social structures. These include inequalities in the job market, impacts of mass media, and access to political power. The human sciences are particularly well suited to understanding such experiences from the point of view of children because empirical methods can test and disrupt the ordinary assumptions by which adults so easily oversimplify children’s lives. Somewhat as in environmental ethics, the theological ethics of childhood relies deeply on empirical observation for fully understanding the complexities of its subject.

Substantively, such observations help theological ethicists see, among other things, that ordinary adult conceptions of moral responsibility toward one another may not be adequate to the kind of responsibilities owed to children. The theological ethics of love, for example, may look

<sup>47</sup> Barbara Bennett Woodhouse, “Re-visioning Rights for Children,” in Pufall and Unsworth, *Rethinking Childhood*, 229–43.

<sup>48</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (1981; repr., Boston: Beacon, 1987), 325, 355, and 367–73.

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different when confronted with children's being trained by mass media into a culture of consumerism. Love in this case is not served well by either treating children as equal to adults or initiating children into antimarket moral values. Love may require instead a middle approach in which children are nurtured to engage with increasingly critical and creative capabilities their pervasive media and market surroundings. It may also need to confront market distortions of love into an ethic of merely giving children what they want.<sup>49</sup> The empirical work of the social sciences shows that ignoring the reality of the situation is just as problematic as ignoring the special problem it raises for children.

A more adequate interpretation of social responsibility may be developed also by bringing a childist perspective on children's experiences to the Bible. For example, the very first command from God to humanity is the Gen. 1:28 injunction to "be fruitful and multiply." As having just been created "in the image of God," humanity is asked to understand itself somewhat like its own Creator as, primordially, a generative, reproductive, creative being. Most obviously this command implies reproduction of a biological kind, making it inherently related to children. But it can also suggest—as thinkers like Henri Bergson, Martin Buber, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Philip Hefner, and Elizabeth Johnson have variously shown—a broader responsibility for *social* reproduction, so that responsibility for offspring offers a symbol or model for human responsibility overall.<sup>50</sup> Responding to children's poverty, for example, can be placed in the light of a broader human responsibility for social reproduction. Just as God created the world, so also is humanity as God's image obliged to create or cocreate its own social world ever anew, on a paradigm of parental and social fruitfulness and multiplication through care, love, and nurturance of the next generation.

Other biblical groundings of morality are also significantly shaped

<sup>49</sup> Daniel Thomas Cook, in *The Commodification of Childhood* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), has shown that the marketing industry believes it is doing good for children by responding to children's "agency" in this way.

<sup>50</sup> Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (1907; repr., Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1944), 10, 27, 271, 274, 287–88, and 292; Martin Buber, *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies by Martin Buber* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 72 and 87; Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 15th anniversary rev. ed., trans. Sister Caridad Inda and Joh Eagleson (1971; repr., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 168; Philip Hefner *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 239; and Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 38. Classical sources for such an interpretation of Gen. 1:27–28 include Mathetes, *Epistle of Mathetes to Diogenes*, in *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), chap. 10; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), bk. 2, chap. 19; Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1953), bk. 8, chap. 18; and Moses Maimonides, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. Michael Friedländer (New York: Dutton, 1904), chap. 54.

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by considerations of childhood. These include the original “innocence” of Adam and Eve as symbolic of ultimate human goodness; Abraham’s social covenant as building a nation around future offspring; Jesus’s incarnation in this world as an infant; the blessedness in the beatitudes of the meek; the gospel symbolism of becoming “children of God”; and, as mentioned before, Jesus’s placing a child in the midst of his surprised disciples to explain who enters the kingdom of heaven. While the Bible certainly also marginalizes children, there is nevertheless a strong vein of ancient Jewish and Christian moral teaching that suggests that a less fallen society calls for responsiveness to the nature and meaning of children’s lives. This child-centered moral possibility has been taken up throughout Christian theological history, not only, as already mentioned, by the early church fathers, Augustine, and Schleiermacher, but also, as shown in a rich collection of essays edited by Marcia Bunge titled *The Child in Christian Thought*, by figures as diverse as Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley, to mention only a few.<sup>51</sup>

My own interpretation of the significance of childhood for theological ethics—in all of children’s empirical, religious, and social dimensions—reflects normatively the kind of postmodern hermeneutical perspective I have been advancing. That is, childhood calls society to be “fruitful and multiply” in a circular, self-disruptive, asymmetrical, and ongoing self-transforming sense. From a child-centered point of view, human moral responsibility includes responding to the vulnerabilities of others—such as their poverty, incapacity, or powerlessness—in a self-creative and socially creative way. What must be disrupted or recreated most of all is the world of those who hold social opportunities and power. Marginalized members of society such as children are not only “other” in the negative sense of demanding not to be oppressed but also “other” in the positive sense of requiring a different and new response from those who influence their lives.

In the case of children in particular, this responsibility is deeply circular. What is required is both the social self-creativity of the adults around them and the gradual development of social self-creative capabilities within children themselves. These have their beginnings in children’s play and imagination, but they also need to be nurtured into competencies for engaging with and changing society. All of us to one degree or another desire not only to participate in society for ourselves

<sup>51</sup> Marcia Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001). For a groundbreaking discussion of the role of childhood in the theology of the early church fathers, see also O. M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).



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but also to have society respond in turn to our own incapacabilities, vulnerabilities, and dependencies. Moral responsibility involves, in this case, not just reciprocity and equality but also a moment of ethical distancing that opens the worlds of those responsible to surprising and disruptive transformation. From a childist point of view, moral responsibility is neither equally reciprocal nor authoritarian but asymmetrical or decentering. It involves what may be called a “distension” (to use Augustine’s word) of existing social assumptions, a creative “stretching out” (*distensio*) of comfortable moral horizons in response to what they marginalize, as well as a continuing effort to draw others and oneself into deeper social participation.<sup>52</sup>

Such an endlessly self-creative social responsibility arguably articulates something profound in the Christian ethical message. The dependency of humanity on God should open each of us to the important ways in which human beings are radically dependent upon one another. Responsibility for children as “the least among us” shines a particularly strong light on what it means to love fellow creatures of God overall. A sense of responsibility to human vulnerability is suggested in the gospel meaning of the golden rule: “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31). As Ricoeur and others have argued, this formulation implies a double substitution: you are asked to imagine yourself as a recipient of another’s actions so as to understand your own moral agency from another’s point of view.<sup>53</sup> The golden rule puts you in the position of the one responsible, but from the point of view of the one you may potentially victimize. It demands two moral centers at once: yourself and the other. This decentering function of the golden rule is further radicalized by its immediately following Jesus’s extreme love command: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27–28). The juxtaposition of such an asymmetrical or radical love command on the golden rule protects the latter from being reduced to any easy reciprocity or exchange. It renders moral responsibility a demand for superabundance toward others in the service of realizing a common humanity.

From this angle, the child may be viewed as contemporary morality’s greatest test. The work of the human sciences shows the diversity of ways in which children’s lives are disenfranchised but also deeply resilient. It can map the complex contours of problems like children’s

<sup>52</sup> Augustine uses the Latin *distensio* to speak of how the soul stretches out in time through memory, attention, and expectation. See *Confessions*, bk. 11.

<sup>53</sup> Ricoeur, “Love and Justice,” 324, and “Ethical and Theological Considerations on the Golden Rule,” in Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 293–302, 301.

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persistent poverty or relations to mass media. But theological ethics must step in to help imagine how to make children a creative new response. To do to a child as you would have done to yourself is to respond to the profoundest possible depths of human otherness and marginality with a radically self-transforming love and hope. It is to open oneself and one's social world to reversing ingrained exclusions and oversimplifications through ever more other-inclusive moral horizons. Responsibility for children in both families and society reveals the extent to which moral life is not just a fixed reality but also a transcending journey of creative response and renewal.

### CONCLUSION

Whatever normative conclusions may be drawn in the end, theological ethicists ignore the unique situation of children and childhood at their own peril. Neglecting such marginalized groups as women and minorities weakened the voice of theological ethics in the past, both by silently playing into larger social wrongs and by failing to learn and grow from those silenced. Childhood in the United States and the world presents theological ethics today with a new and different but just as acute social challenge. Methodologically, since children cannot speak up as fully as can adults for themselves, theological ethicists should engage as deeply as possible with children's actual social experiences, including through the sophisticated observational work of the human sciences, in order more creatively to understand and respond. Substantively, childhood demands at the very least renewed attention to the asymmetrical tensions of human moral responsibility, the senses in which others demand of those around them creative self-transformation. This childist gesture of responsiveness and self-critique has already begun to animate the human sciences. How much more, then, should it be welcomed and deepened further by Christian ethicists, who in one way or another trace a transformed world to the possibilities incarnated in an infant's birth.