

Introduction: Symposium on The Nature and Value of Childhood

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Children and childhood have been largely ignored by philosophers outside the philosophy of education. Recently this has started to change. In particular, the past few decades have seen a growing interest in children as subjects of political philosophy, with a focus on questions concerning duties of justice towards children and especially parental duties, as well as parental rights and filial duties. Most of the current debates rest on more foundational positions about the nature and value of childhood, issues that are not normally given the same scrutiny. The purpose of this symposium is to examine precisely these foundational questions.

Childhood and children are such a mundane part of our social life that there is little temptation to puzzle about them. And yet, we live in a culture that seems ambivalent about childhood. On the one hand, we inherit a Romantic account of childhood as a privileged time in life and of children as more genuine, creative, wholehearted and inspired human beings than most adults. On the other hand, our philosophical tradition represents childhood as a state of deficiency¹. Other disciplines – most importantly, perhaps, developmental psychology – have built on the latter tradition, and most of the popular advice on childrearing seems preoccupied to advance the wellbeing of the adults that children will eventually become, rather than the wellbeing of children *qua* children². This ambivalence is in itself reason enough to enquire closely into the nature and value of childhood and see whether there are ways of doing justice to both traditions. Beyond this purely theoretical interest, however, there are practical reasons to find out about the goods – and bads – of being a child. Particular understandings of childhood and its value bear on the questions of whether and why we may paternalise children, the limits of authority we have over them, what kinds of things we owe them and whether we should protect childhood as a uniquely valuable stage of life or, to the contrary, help children become adults as soon as they can. Finally, adults may have some difficult decisions to make concerning unavoidable trade-offs between how well children fare *qua* children and their future prospects.

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Aristotle, 'Nicomachean ethics', *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 5. 6. 1134b and, in contemporary philosophy, Loren Lomasky, *Persons, Rights and the Moral Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), and Michael Slote, *Goods and Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

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Samantha Brennan, 'The goods of childhood, children's rights, and the role of parents as advocates and interpreters' in F. Baylis & C. McLeod (eds) *Family-Making: Contemporary Ethical Challenges* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2014), pp. 29–48.

The good of childhood

Children are the standard subjects of paternalistic behaviour; adults tell them how to lead their lives, and, in doing so, exercise a significant amount of power over them. This looks unproblematic if children lack the kind of moral status that makes adults rights-holders. But today most philosophers believe that children do have moral rights, and that we owe them duties of justice. Therefore we need to explain why children lack one of the moral rights attributed to adults, that of self-determination, even in relation to choices for which they sometimes display the same abilities that would grant adults self-determination in a similar context. Tamar Shapiro's influential work³ answered this question by arguing that childhood is a predicament characterised by the lack of a stable practical identity: Unlike a similarly capable adult, a child does not have an established set of values and aims, but is still searching a principled perspective which can count as her own. For this reason, adults are entitled to paternalise children; moreover, they have a duty to help children outgrow their predicament and become fully autonomous – that is, to establish their practical identity and, with it, acquire the right to self-determination. Some have reacted to Shapiro's characterisation of childhood, not necessarily because they disagree with her claim about children's lack of stable practical identity and its implications for paternalising children, but because calling childhood a predicament is, at best, an incomplete account of the normatively relevant features of childhood. If childhood is nothing but a predicament, then we have every reason to wish it away and to help children overcome it quickly. Yet, wouldn't it be regrettable if we could and did rush children through childhood at the blink of an eye, as it were – or if, as in Samantha Brennan's thought experiment, we invented a pill that instantaneously turned newborns into adults⁴? Not only would a world without children be impoverished; many believe that individuals skipping childhood would incur a prudential loss.

This intuition is a bit puzzling: if it is desirable to be the kind of individual who has moral authority to decide over her life, how is it possible to explain the loss in skipping childhood? This loss can only be explained by the existence of some special goods of childhood: that is, goods that are: (i) available only to children (or to which children have very privileged access) and (ii) sufficiently weighty to outbalance the obvious good of self-determination plus any other goods to which adults have exclusive access. Several such goods have been suggested: a sense of being care-free; play – especially during unstructured time and including imaginative play; sexual innocence; the ability to love spontaneously and unreservedly; and openness to future possibilities⁵. With respect to the last one, note that the very lack of established practical identity may carry special

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Tamar Shapiro, 'What is a Child?', *Ethics* 109,4 (1999): 715–38.

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Brennan 2014.

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value, since it makes possible an experimentation with oneself and with fundamental options in life that seems to be, as such, valuable⁶.

And yet, if these or similar goods are available only or mostly to children and are sufficiently valuable to make up for a lack of self-determination, why would it be a bad thing for an individual to remain a child forever – say, to live some version of Peter Pan’s life? As Tomlin (in this symposium) notes, when presented with hypothetical cases of children who mysteriously continue to remain child-like in their minds and bodies in spite of reaching the age of adulthood, most people share the intuition that this, too, is deeply regrettable for the individual in question. Those who see the appeal of both intuitions – that skipping childhood is bad, and that eternal childhood is also bad – face an even bigger puzzle.

Several of the present papers grapple with these puzzles. One possibility is to simply deny that childhood is, overall, good for children. This is the position defended by Sarah Hannan, who argues that, with respect to those goods of childhood that are usually discussed, at least one of the following is true: a. they are not, in fact, all-things-considered good or b. they are or could be made available to adults, too or c. they are insufficiently good to outweigh the bads of childhood.

Concerning children’s carefree nature, for instance, she points to how inherently risky this good is. Like being inebriated, being carefree is good in some respects but, according to Hannan, when one spends a long time in any of these states the bads associated with the states outweigh the goods. Defenders of the good of being a carefree child may however resist this argument: Yes, being carefree may be, all things considered, bad when it is dangerous (that is, in the case of adults, most of the time). But what about the exceptional cases when it isn’t? Whether it’s good or bad to be carefree – or inebriated (effects of alcohol on health aside) – seems to depend on whether you have a friend competently watching over you. This situation would involve deep dependence on another; yet one might think that being carefree under special conditions that limit risk is so good that we are all entitled to experience this at some stage in our lives – for instance, during childhood. Further, Hannan is critical of children’s ability to experience unguarded love, rightly questioning the value of bestowing such love in the absence of any evidence that the recipient deserves it. Adults sometimes do this, too, but in their case this comes from a principled decision to take a leap of faith while aware of – and so taking responsibility for – the consequences. She concludes that the burden of proof is on those who believe that children’s unconditional love of this kind, absent a conscientious and responsible decision, is valuable. Again, the defender of the good of children’s

Brennan 2014; Colin Macleod, ‘Agency, authority, and the vulnerability of children’ in A. Bagattini & C. Macleod (eds) *The Nature of Children’s Well-Being* (New York: Springer, 2015), pp. 53–64; Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, *Family Values: The Ethics of Parent-Child Relationships* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

ability to love unconditionally may speculate that perhaps the very ability to take a leap of faith depends on having experienced the unguarded love that we had, as children, towards some adults, and being lucky to not have been let down. If the ability to take leaps of faith is in itself valuable, then children's unguarded love seems valuable as the only means to acquire this good.

Hannan also thinks that other goods, such as openness towards future possibilities and imaginative play are genuinely desirable, but could be made available to adults to the same extent to which they are available to children. It seems an important matter for future investigation to establish whether it is possible to change the social world such that these goods are generously available to adults, and whether such a change could be consistent with justice requirements (or, possibly, even mandated by justice)⁷. A distinctive possibility is that full access to these goods depends, at least in part, on biological facts about children's brains – for instance, brain plasticity – which itself may or may not be a changeable fact. Even more problematically, it is possible that full openness to future possibilities is the flip side of children's lack of stable commitment to principles and aims. In this case, some goods and some bads of childhood spring from the same source: the absence of established practical identity, making the enjoyment of some childhood goods incompatible with being an adult.

For, as Hannan notices, childhood is also tarred by many specific bads. She discusses four of these: children's impaired capacity for practical reasoning, their lack of an established practical identity, the fact that they are subject to domination from adults, and the deep asymmetry between children's and adults' vulnerability. Together, she concludes, these bads far outweigh any goods that may be shown to be specific to childhood. Hannan assumes that, in order to determine that childhood is prudentially good for the child, one has to balance against each other the goods and the bads necessarily associated with childhood and obtain, as it were, a positive sum. But is this kind of arithmetic method truly compelling? Assume there exist goods, sufficiently weighty to be necessary for an optimal life, which can only be enjoyed under unfavourable general conditions; it is then possible that the best human life includes times during which the balance of goods and bads is not positive, but which offer unique occasions to enjoy such goods.

Like Hannan, Tomlin believes that the wellbeing of children is inferior to that of adults if it is judged by the same yardstick – what he calls the “sapling” view. Some of his reasons overlap with Hannan's: children are subject to many bads. For instance, children's subjection to domination by adults may be justified, yet nevertheless bad for them; also, children may experience more suffering than we commonly acknowledge and are prone to care disproportionately about objectively very trivial matters. Beyond this, he offers the additional argument that any special

goods of childhood are less good than other, adult goods - in particular, self-determination. However, he thinks the “sapling” view is unconvincing, because children and adults seem to be sufficiently different kinds of human beings to make it plausible that different accounts of wellbeing apply to them. Most of Tomlin’s essay therefore considers, and explores, an alternative that he calls the “caterpillar” view: that is, the possibility that neither childhood nor adulthood is superior in wellbeing, because very different kinds of things make each go well. Some (like Hannan in this symposium) will be unpersuaded precisely because they think that the relationship between the developing and the mature human being is more similar to the case of trees than to that butterflies. Moreover, as Tomlin acknowledges, his proposal cannot do justice to *either* of the intuitions discussed above, which he shares and partly discusses in the article: that skipping childhood is bad, and that eternal childhood is also bad. The “caterpillar” view cannot account for either of the two intuitions because it says that you cannot harm an individual by turning her or him into someone to whom a different account of wellbeing applies. Concerning the latter intuition, he thinks it can be saved by maintaining that a good childhood is one that contains development towards adulthood; however, this belief makes sense on the sapling view but is mysterious if the “caterpillar” view is correct.

An alternative to both the “sapling” and the “caterpillar” view is what Tomlin calls the diversity view, according to which the best human life combines childhood and adulthood. Daniel Weinstock provides one version of it. Like Hannan, he assumes that if we could weigh up against each other the goods and bads that are necessarily connected to childhood and adulthood and discovered that during adulthood the net sum is higher, the childhood-as-mere-predicament view would be vindicated. However, Weinstock denies that a complete weighting is possible, for a reason different from Tomlin’s: The goods of childhood and of adulthood, argues Weinstock, are not discrete – that is, we cannot spell out all goods in each type without reference to any good in the other type. Rather, having enjoyed some of the goods of childhood is a necessary condition for enjoying some of the goods of adulthood, and in this sense the two ages are complementary. More specifically, he offers a reading of Shapiro’s thesis according to which the value of having an established practical identity depends on the fact that the individual has arrived to it following a particular path. It is good for us to have stable principles and aims only if we have actively endorsed them. Assuming, counterfactually, that it was possible to genetically program one’s principles and aims such that it unfolded in a pre-determined process in which the agent played no active role, that individual’s practical identity would not have the value it usually has – or, perhaps, it would be inappropriate to attribute a practical identity to her. Moreover, to enjoy the (full) value of having a practical identity, its subject has to be articulate with respect to her principles, values and aims – that is, to be able to exercise judgement about them. These processes – actively endorsing your

principles and aims and becoming articulate about them – are, according to Weinstock’s reading of Shapiro, part and parcel of childhood: during play, children “try on” different selves and experiment with possible practical identities. In the process, they learn how to exercise judgement – that is, acquire articulacy – and eventually get to endorse particular principles and aims. On this account, it is impossible to become an adult without having been a child first – or, at least, it is not possible to enjoy the kind of adulthood that we usually deem valuable.

Another version of the diversity view different from Weinstock’s is illustrated by my own paper, which draws on previous work⁸. I rely on literature in developmental psychology, philosophy with children and children and art in order to elaborate the importance of a class of special goods of childhood that have so far been less explored: children’s unique propensity to investigate the world – encompassing empirical and philosophical issues – and to engage in artistic pursuits. The literature on which I rely contains, in different forms, a claim that, if true, is striking: That, on average, children below a certain age – usually up to their early teens – are more likely than adults to investigate the empirical world with the mindset of a scientist (relentlessly curious in developing and testing hypothesis), to engage in relatively simple but recognisable philosophical investigations (asking questions that are unconstrained by conventional wisdom) and to create art. In other words, childhood is the time when those of us who do not go on to become professional scientists, philosophers or artists are most likely to engage in scientific and philosophical pursuits (often without hope of new discoveries) and in artistic creation (with more chances of creating valuable art than at any other time in our lives.) These abilities are usually explained, at least to some extent, by the particularities of the child and early adolescent brain, which makes young humans exceptionally good at learning, investigating and connecting different areas of knowledge but fairly bad in their executive functions and ability to focus on a task and seeing it to completion. If so, then not only are children unaccomplished adults in some respects, but adults’s abilities, are, in other respects, degraded versions of children’s abilities. We can probably agree that being engaged in the above pursuits, as well as scientific, philosophical and artistic enthusiasm and creativity are in themselves valuable. But we are a lot less likely to agree on the value they have relative to the adults’ self-determination and ability to actually accomplish – most usually much less ambitious – goals. Therefore, as Weinstock observes, my view implies that a judgement whether the best human life contains no childhood, perpetual childhood or a combination of childhood and adulthood will ultimately rely on particular evaluations of the relative weights of different goods. By contrast, his own version of the diversity view is independent from controversial axiology.

The interest in the absolute and relative value of different ages opens a wider discussion, and any decision between the “sapling”, the “caterpillar” and the diversity view is likely to bear on the evaluation of old age. It is sometimes suggested that old age brings the individual into a child-like condition with respect to her abilities; assume this is correct. Then, on the “sapling” view, old age should be judged as a mere degradation (as suggested by Tomlin and Hannan in this symposium) and hence regrettable. If we could eliminate it from the normal life span by extending adulthood until the end of life, we should do so. Those who hold the “caterpillar” view, are more likely to see old age as a profound change in the individual such that a different account of wellbeing will apply to her post-change; in this case, the wellbeing of old people is simply incommensurable to that of adults’. (Though Tomlin explains that the “caterpillar” view need not commit one to this position.) A diversity view limited to Weinstock’s version cannot, by itself, explain why we should resist the elimination of old age from the life span. The diversity view I endorse suggests that, in order to settle this, we should look for any weighty goods that people can only enjoy during their old age and in virtue of features that are necessarily associated with old age (in a biological sense) rather than merely associated with the fact of having already lived for certain number of years.

Duties of justice towards children

Whether there exist special goods of childhood, and how weighty they are, obviously bears on the question of what is owed to children. This, too, has been a largely neglected question: Liberals have long argued that we owe to children those resources needed to help them develop into fully autonomous individuals, ready to join the political community and capable of forming, revising and pursuing their own conception of the good life. But they have been silent on what, if anything, we owe to children *qua* children rather than *qua* future adults.

Yet, as Colin Macleod (in this symposium) notes, childhood constitutes almost a quarter of our life and so, whether or not we flourish during childhood is surely important independently of the developmental value of such flourishing. Macleod, who has been one of the main contributors to the discussion about the intrinsic goods of childhood, argues that some such goods are owed to children and that they should be made available in an egalitarian manner *via* schooling. The goods in question are play and imagination, and the claim is that schools should distribute ample opportunities to all children to enjoy these goods through what he calls the non-preparatory dimension of education. Children spend a very significant proportion of their time in schools, whose attendance is (rightly) compulsory. Different schools facilitate to a different extent children’s engagement in art, music, drama and athletic activities and some schools fail to do this entirely. Such inequalities are unjustified, and the same is true of the inequalities generated by parents’ different abilities to provide their children with opportunities to flourish. Macleod’s proposal is that

all schools ought to give children equally excellent occasions to pursue play and imagination. Moreover, he thinks that – absent special conditions – the non-preparatory dimensions of education should not be sacrificed for the sake of optimising the preparatory dimensions of education (that is, education for future adulthood.)⁹

According to Macleod, his proposal is ecumenical insofar it receives support from all the major contemporary theories of justice: luck egalitarianism, Rawlsianism and relational egalitarianism. In particular, he argues that relational egalitarians ought to endorse egalitarianism rather than sufficientarianism in education (argument which, holds – if successful – for both non-preparatory and preparatory dimensions of education¹⁰). At the same time, his is a perfectionist account with which liberal neutralists may want to take issue: we do not all agree about what constitutes childhood flourishing, and hence disagree on the identification of the special goods of childhood or, indeed, on whether there are any such goods. But it is difficult to see what are the requirements of liberal neutrality with respect to the metric of justice for children. According to liberal neutrality, justice towards adults is confined to the distribution of all-purpose goods, allowing individuals to exercise their judgement and authority in choosing how to use these goods. Children, however, lack a final say with respect to their aims; therefore, it seems that justice must provide them – beyond what is necessary for successful adulthood – with particular goods whose weight, and even existence, is bound to remain controversial¹¹.

The same difficulty besets some of the arguments defended in my own paper. Like Macleod, I believe that all children are owed equally good flourishing childhoods, and schools – but also other childrearing institutions, such as daycares and kindergartens – are the right setting for ensuring equality between children. My concern is with much of the same childhood goods as those discussed by Macleod: the goods of artistic, scientific and philosophical creativity. One reason why they ought to be available in childrearing institutions is that their enjoyment is greatly facilitated by (and sometimes requires) adults who can adequately guide and encourage children; providing such goods in institutional settings is the best way to ensure that all children have equal access to them. Another distinctive reason has to do with a coordination problem: very competitive parents who worry about their children's prospects for future educational and economic access sometimes

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For a brief but illuminating explanation of why an optimally good childhood may be incompatible with an optimally good adulthood see James Murphy, "In Defense of Being a Kid", *The Wall Street Journal*, 9th of February 2011.

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As Macleod argues in 'Justice, Educational Equality and Sufficiency' in Colin Macleod (ed.) *Justice and Equality*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, pp. 151-175, 2012.

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For more on the question of the metric of justice for children see Lars Lindholm, 'Childhood and the metric of justice' in G. Calder, J. De Wispelaere & A. Gheaus (eds) *The Routledge Handbook to Children and Childhood*, forthcoming.

engage in a rat-race of giving their children a competitive edge as early as possible, at the expense of their enjoyment of childhood goods. Publicly regulated schools can solve this coordination problem by protecting enough time for children to enjoy pursuits that are good for them *qua* children whether or not they will be conducive to competitiveness.

Attendance at childrearing institutions, including daycare and kindergartens, I argue, ought to be mandatory. Children are particularly vulnerable, that is, dependent on adults' care. Monopolies of care are, *pro tanto*, illegitimate and current child-rearing practices give parents a monopoly of care over children, which isn't generally justified by appeal to the children's interests. Therefore, if they are to exercise authority over children in a legitimate way, adults must organise childrearing in a non-monopolistic way, by giving children (limited) exit options from particular caring relationships, should these go wrong. The best way to avoid monopolies of care in current societies is to supplement parental care with good institutional care. The childrearing institutions I defend as mandatory would employ enough well-trained staff and ensure low staff turnover in order to provide children not only with academic training but also with enduring caring relationships.

Children and parents

Even if all children attended some non-parental care, their flourishing will obviously continue to depend, in part, on their parents and therefore also on the content of parental rights. One of the most enduring debates in the philosophy of childhood concerns the extent of parents' rights to shape the minds (and bodies) of the children they rear. Liberals participating in this debate all believe that parents ought to equip their children to become, in due course, autonomous individuals capable of making their own life choices¹²; beyond this requirement, there is disagreement between the following three different views. Many believe that parents have a right to shape their children's values, as a form of self-extension as well as a way to honour the parents's own values¹³. The opposite view, defended by Matthew Clayton, holds that parents have no right to intentionally shape their children's values any more than states have a right to shape their citizen's conceptions of the good – that is, that parents must engage in value neutral child-rearing. On this view, parents must go as far as to censor the expression of their enthusiasm about particular values or activities for the sake of respecting the demands of neutrality in childrearing.¹⁴ Finally, on a view that is less

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With some, but not all, liberals, requiring that parents do not foreclose any option in the child's future. See See Joel Feinberg, "The Child's Right to an Open Future," in *Freedom and Fulfillment: Philosophical Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 76–97 and, for criticism, Claudia Mills, "The Child's Right to an Open Future," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 34, no. 4 (2003): 499–509.

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Colin Macleod, 'Parental responsibilities in an unjust world' in D. Archard & D. Benatar (eds), *Procreation and Parenthood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

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Matthew Clayton, *Justice and Legitimacy in Upbringing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

permissive than the first but more permissive than the second, parents may only shape their children's values to the extent to which this is a necessary side-effect of pursuing intimate relationships between children and parents, and as such part and parcel of the familial relationship goods that justify the existence of the family in the first place¹⁵.

Norvin Richards' article in this symposium is a substantial and original contribution to this debate and articulates a distinctive and original view. In contrast to the above positions, he defends the following, intuitively plausible, view: that a good parent shapes their child's values only to the extent to which, given the particular personality (talents, inclinations etc.) of the child, the shaping is likely to facilitate a good life for her or him at the moment when the child emerges from childhood. Unlike the first view, Richards' denies that parents have a general right to shape their children's values: as different individuals, children are not ours to shape. Unlike the second, it denies that parents are morally required to abide by the standards of value-neutral childrearing. And, unlike the third view, it does not ground parents' limited right to shape their children's values in familial relationship goods; indeed, the right to shape is entirely defended by appeal to the child's own interest in having a flourishing childhood (and early adulthood), an interest which encompasses, but is not limited to, an interest in intimate familial relationships. Furthermore, unlike all the three positions briefly described above, Richards' concern is not merely with parental shaping but with parental *discovery* of the child's unique abilities and interests, which can make some further shaping of certain values and talents legitimate. This development of the debate concerning parents' prerogatives to shape their children has the great merit of re-focussing attention on the so-far neglected consideration that children have their own individual personality, which means that the cultivation of *some*, but not of *other*, values can advance their well-being. Beyond equipping their children with what they need for autonomous adulthood, good parents wish to give their children a good childhood, and good prospects to have a good life as they enter adulthood. Given the diversity of conceptions of a good childhood, it is difficult to see how this can be accommodated by Clayton's neutralist view. But it is also difficult to see how one could be a good parent without identifying their child's particular abilities and interests and, out of love and respect for the child's budding personality, help the child cultivate the features that are most likely to be conducive of a good life (granted some theory of the good life.)

In defending this position, Richards provides a powerful criticism of Clayton's view. According to Clayton, parents are not more entitled to encourage their children to adopt a particular conception of the good than are states entitled to do the same thing in relation to their citizens. The two cases, however, are significantly disanalogous, because adults, unlike children, have the moral authority to set and pursue their own aims. Therefore children need help with learning how to live

well – and who is supposed to give such help if not their parents? Richards' position seems plausible to me, as I believe that parental love provides a legitimate reason to wish to advance their children's wellbeing states, by contrast, necessarily lack such reason in relation to their citizens.

Richards' article also contains an analysis of training children for high performance which is nuanced in a helpful way – that is, able to reconcile two plausible and widespread, but apparently contradicting, beliefs. The first is that it is wrong to train one's child for high performance in particular areas because this deprives her of some important childhood goods. The second view holds such training permissible on account of the fact that many children who have been subject to such treatment very much value its results and are grateful to their parents for it – thus seeming to retroactively endorse it. According to Richards, the prudent parent who considers this matter must balance, against each other, considerations about how likely it is for a child to have a good life should those particular talents be cultivated and how likely the child is to have a good life otherwise. Whether or not it is all-things-considered good for the child to have a particular talent cultivated will depend on the full range of the child's inclinations and abilities; therefore a wise parental decision will hinge, in part, on very close knowledge of one's child. While I doubt that Richards' opponents will be ultimately persuaded, his article makes it clear that adopting neutrality in childrearing can come at a very significant prudential cost for the child.

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