

Dignity, Respect, and the Personhood of Students: The Educational Importance of Stephen Darwall

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Most K-12 schools define their educational aims using language that implies the ambition to improve students in ways that go far beyond the development of academic skills. By declaring that such a transformation should positively affect the young people under their care in fundamental areas of their human nature (that is, emotionally, socially, morally, etc.) schools invoke a commitment to students as “whole persons.” Current discourses on educational aims, not surprisingly, are often the object of worthy debates about what could and should be the nature and extent of these educational objectives, but notwithstanding these debates stakeholders in education appear to share a commitment that behooves schools to pursue lofty goals of personal transformation.

Beneath this apparent common ground, however, a misunderstanding hides in plain sight: If educators say they want to transform students in ways that actualize their value as whole, complex human beings (as opposed to mere repositories of knowledge or expert test-takers), why do we tend to address children and adolescents in ways that reduce them to being the passive target of our efforts? Is it not contradictory for schools to proclaim that they want to develop the humanity of students, but espouse practices in which students are called mostly to compliance, imitation, and repetition? I will show that the basis of this contradiction is an ambivalence in the way educators conceive the moral status of students, which in turn comes from the way in which we think of children and, more broadly, our philosophy of childhood. Furthermore, I will argue that Stephen Darwall’s work on respect, and particularly the distinction he draws between recognition and appraisal respect, can be the basis for a conceptualization of childhood that addresses this educational problem through a better understanding of the personhood of children.

In his work on moral philosophy and the foundations of moral thought Darwall has produced a detailed account that distinguishes between two different forms of respect: recognition and appraisal respect. Both forms of respect

can be directed to persons as moral equals whose dignity entitles them to “the authority to make claims and demands of one another as equal free and rational agents.”¹ This view of responsibility grounds Darwall’s view of moral life as second-personal, in which moral obligation is a matter of reciprocal accountability between essentially equal moral agents.² It also allows for an explanation on how we can fundamentally respect all persons in the same manner due to their dignity *qua* persons, while at the same time engaging in different degrees of respect for persons based on particular character evaluations.

Darwall’s work on respect is not directed to the field of education, nor to the issues of childhood. I will explain how his understanding of the dignity of persons, and his thought on what respect for such dignity entails, allows for a better understanding of students as persons within K-12 education. Such an understanding can support educational practices that foster the development of the whole student. To support this claim, I begin by explaining the difference between two philosophies of childhood: a deficit model and a non-deficit model that sees in childhood much more than instrumental value. Having reviewed the philosophical literature on the rights of children and the intrinsic goods of childhood, I argue that a view based on the dignity of children and the requisite respect it entails is the most promising option to properly recognize the personhood of students. I conclude that this view best resolves the apparent contradiction between aiming to educate the whole child, on the one hand, and addressing students as passives objects of instructional and disciplinary intervention, on the other.

DEFICIT-BASED VIEWS OF CHILDREN VS. SEEING CHILDHOOD ON ITS OWN TERMS

K-12 school students are usually young people roughly between four and eighteen years of age. Talking about students as children can seem counterintuitive, as it is not easy to think of kindergarteners in the same way as we do of high school seniors. It is important to note, however, that within school life all students typically (and to different degrees) share two characteristics that directly relate to the issue addressed in this paper: they are mostly under the age at which they are considered to be adults, both in a legal and a cultural sense, and they occupy a particular place in the structure of school characterized by

paternalistic attitudes towards them. In this sense, all K-12 students are treated as children, and thus it might be assumed they share a status of diminished personhood within the context of the school.

It is unlikely to find a school mission that fails to recognize the humanity of children, and we usually think of the conditions of being human and being a person to be so closely related as to be almost equivalent. At the same time, our practices towards children show that we find it just to interfere in their decision-making in ways that we would not accept in the case of adults, precisely because they are persons. Thus, defining the status of children seems to require holding together two apparently conflicting commonsense claims: 1) that, just as adults do, the young deserve moral consideration from others; and 2) that they can and should be treated differently to adults, being placed under the ample authority of their parents (and, by extension, the adults who sometimes act in their place).³ Those committed to properly address children seem to be caught in a dilemma. One option is to address the young as persons who deserve to be taken seriously as moral agents just as adults are, and thus risk ignoring the needs of their age and the considerations they require. Alternatively, they could think of children as provisional not-quite persons, making it just to treat them as subjects to the authority of others in ways that would not hold for adults. The risk here is hindering their development by overlooking valuable and irreparable features of childhood. One horn of this apparent dilemma depends on the conception of a person as the rational, autonomous author of their own behavior. The other horn relates to the practice and justification of paternalism.

The scholarly literature on the personhood of children can be characterized by different approaches to this dilemma. A common approach is informed by a conception of children as immature and therefore incomplete. These scholars adopt a deficit-based understanding of childhood as a stage of instrumental value in the transition towards mature adult life: children are conceived as potential persons whose full humanity can only be actualized in adulthood. The central notion is that children are in the process of developing certain essential human skills and dispositions that define what it is to be a person. Childhood is a stage of diminished but potential personhood whose chief purpose is to develop the moral and political agency of the (adult) per-

son.⁴ Tamar Schapiro has articulated this influential view of children based on Immanuel Kant's political and moral work according to which an adult is "the *source* of her beliefs and actions in the sense that she *authorizes* them."⁵ Since children have not yet developed a fully reflective consciousness, they cannot hold a normative relationship of authorship towards their actions nor be morally responsible for its outcomes.⁶ Childhood is a predicament, a liminal state in which reason, autonomy, and therefore personhood is not yet present.⁷

The identification of personhood with rational autonomous agency establishes the core of current deficit-based views of childhood. These views fit with the classic liberal definition of a citizen as a mature individual that freely and deliberately consents to participate in a community of equals. Such an understanding of citizenship explains the exclusion of children from active participation in the political community and justifies paternalism towards them as "potentially rational beings"⁸ whose future consent can be legitimately presupposed.⁹ Interventions affecting both young children and adolescents would be justified not by an identical lack of agency in them but because they both are in an early stage of life with a preparatory purpose, a "normal period of preparation for assuming full authority over the direction of one's life."¹⁰ Schapiro, Gutmann, and Franklin-Hall see childhood's value as entirely instrumental in the development of the moral and political agency of an adult and the dilemma of "young personhood" is resolved in the negative: children are *not yet* to be addressed as persons and the need to develop the conditions for life authorship requires paternalistic interventions towards them.

The deficit-based approach is not, however, the only way to think about the personhood of children: childhood can also be seen as a stage that is valuable in itself. To do this, we require accounts of personhood that do not rely exclusively on full autonomous agency, include children, and provide a different basis for the legitimacy and purpose of paternalism.

An aspect of this literature is concerned with the intrinsic value of childhood because of its inherent goods. Authors who adopt this perspective define the intrinsic goods of childhood as those that are characteristically present in childhood and "the value of which doesn't follow from their contribution to the goods of adult life."¹¹ Furthermore, their proper enjoyment cannot be

delayed until a later stage, and therefore the value and protection of these goods define the obligations of adults towards children.¹² Asserting the intrinsic value of childhood and its goods implies that agency is not the single criterion of personhood,¹³ moving from childhood to adulthood is a transition from one valuable stage of life to another, and viewing children as unfinished adults is just as wrong as seeing adults as defective children.¹⁴

A separate but related literature bases the personhood of children in their capacity to bear rights. Persons are characterized by having substantial interests that merit protection, and thus personhood is defined as the social standing made manifest by the endowment of rights.¹⁵ Children as right-bearers are a particular kind of person characterized by their vulnerability, dependence, and ability to grow out of these conditions.¹⁶ In this view autonomy is possessed in degrees: children are both immature decision makers *and* persons with interests that merit protection, which means that childhood is not an impediment but one of many unique and significant stages of human life.¹⁷

According to this literature the rights a person has are defined by the interests they are meant to protect. Children are endowed with the basic human rights that attach to every person *qua* person, which serve to protect the legitimate claims they have pursuant to their subsistence and wellbeing, independently of whether they can or cannot articulate or defend specific demands based on them.¹⁸ They also have an interest in developing the ability to act in accordance with their own judgement¹⁹ and the relevant capacities for agency.²⁰ Children's vulnerability and dependence, and the obligation to foster their ability to exercise agency rights, justify a purpose-full brand of paternalism which does not challenge their personhood.

DIGNITY, RESPECT, AND THE PERSONHOOD OF STUDENTS

While these accounts succeed in revealing the shortcomings of thinking of childhood solely in terms of what sets it apart from an idealized adulthood, they are not enough to address the problem of educational processes that reduce students to the passive object of an intervention. The purpose of addressing students holistically is better served by an understanding of the personhood of children that recognizes in them the dignity of persons and therefore grants them the respect this dignity requires. The relevant issues to support this view

are the grounds of a person's dignity, what respect for someone's dignity entails, and how these considerations apply during the formative stage of childhood.

Stephen Darwall's fundamental understanding of dignity is relatively straightforward: "The dignity of persons [...] is the second personal standing of an equal: the authority to make claims and demands of one another as equal free and rational agents."²¹ Thus conceived, a person's dignity is the ground for respect towards them: "To say that persons as such are entitled to respect is to say that they are entitled to have other persons take seriously and weigh appropriately the fact that they are persons in deliberating about what to do."²² Dignity also provides the grounds for self-respect, understood as someone's awareness of their own standing as an equal endowed with valid claims toward others, and the respect such claims elicit. Darwall's emphasis on the equal status of "free and rational agents" can provoke questions as to the extent to which his notion of dignity includes children, but I believe that his definition of respect requires that all children, independently of their level of maturity as rational agents, are deserving of such consideration and therefore endowed with the dignity of persons. Recognizing that children deserve our respect and duly taking them into consideration when deciding how to act towards them implies that we recognize their personhood. The language of rights mentioned before helps expand this point: children, as persons, have fundamental human interests that are protected through rights. These include the interests of developing a sense of self-respect (becoming increasingly aware of themselves as *presently* having the standing to make moral claims),²³ and of progressively developing the agency skills of a mature moral agent.

Once we think of children as persons, any response that appropriately recognizes the dignity of children would necessarily have to be interpersonal: it would be directed towards the child as an equal who deserves the same considerations to which one is entitled, while recognizing their specific interests and limitations. The alternative to an interpersonal stance is to engage children from an objective one, that is, as the object of an intervention upon whom something is done. Here, as I have noted, is where the contradiction between educational aims and practices often originates.

Once again, Darwall's work on the issues of respect and the second-per-

sonal standpoint supports a better understanding of the issue. The second-personal standpoint, as defined by Darwall, is a qualified form of interpersonal stance that proves central to his conception of the moral life: in this view, we address each other second-personally, that is, recognizing the reciprocal authority we have as persons to lay legitimate claims on one another. The fundamental reasons for a person to act in a certain way towards another do not come from without (like from the law or other third party that has authority upon us), nor from within (for example, dictated from our own reason alone), but from the fact that as mutually accountable persons we can expect others to respond to legitimate claims our dignity lays upon them, and the realization that we are similarly bound towards them.²⁴

A question remains: how do we accommodate the ideas that children are persons endowed with dignity and thus deserving of our respect with the fact that they are immature in a way that justifies paternalistic interferences that we would not accept in the presence of a mature agent? Darwall's distinction between recognition respect and appraisal respect offer an answer to this outstanding problem. Each of these forms of respect has different objects and can be directed towards persons *qua* persons or in other capacities.²⁵ Recognition respect for persons has as its object a person's dignity and is the one discussed above as a key to appreciate the personhood of children. It is "respect for the moral requirements that are placed on one by the existence of other persons"²⁶ so that "to respect something in this sense is to *give it standing in one's relations to it.*"²⁷ Appraisal respect for a person, on the other hand, has as its object a person's character and is "a positive appraisal of an individual made with regard to those features which are excellences of persons."²⁸ I have argued that Darwall's idea of recognition respect provides an insight to why educators should appropriately respect children as persons who are going through a particular phase of life, which includes understanding and valuing the characteristic interests of childhood and appropriately responding to them. Since a fundamental interest among these is to grow as independent moral agents worthy of appraisal respect, there is an implied interest in every child towards improving their character.²⁹

The distinction between the objects of each sort of respect is key for this point. Recognition respect for persons responds to *dignity*, an attribute in-

herent to personhood that one ought to consider when acting in ways that affect another, and arguably oneself.³⁰ Appraisal respect, in turn, is an expression of esteem for the features that constitute someone's *character*: stable dispositions to act out of reasons, accompanied by the higher-level disposition to act out of the best possible ones.³¹ The distinction between these objects of respect for persons, explains why it is possible for us to equally respect every person, in one sense, while at the same time respecting some individuals more than others, in another. In education it allows me to argue that educators within schools must respect student as persons (recognition respect) and thus work with them to foster their moral growth (as they become more deserving of appraisal respect). Respecting school-aged students requires engaging them *as persons*, from one agent endowed with dignity to another, and thus honor their vital interest to grow into agents who progressively deserve appraisal respect. Paternalistic interventions towards students can thus be justified, not despite their personhood but as an expression of the respect for their present *and* future interests.

To illustrate the nuances that come with engaging children as persons from this perspective, let's imagine the case of a kindergarten teacher, Michael, who has discovered a young student, Annie, misbehaving.³² It is a legitimate expectation that a teacher will be respected by his students, and vice versa. Because of this mutual respect, and even if Michael is justly frustrated by his charges' behavior, he will not use violence of any kind to discipline them, even if Annie has breached classroom's norms. This expectation does not come (at least not exclusively, nor fundamentally) from the fact that there are rules against these kinds of punishment (which usually exist and would provide agent-neutral reasons to abstain from mistreating a child) nor from the possibility of a third party (the school, the parents) causing trouble for the teacher if he acts in such a way. They don't even come from the fact that Michael accepts the idea that an adult in a position of power should not inflict pain on a child. Finally, this expectation does not depend on whether Annie has the power to defend herself. This legitimate expectation comes from the fact that Annie, as a person, is endowed with a certain dignity that gives her the standing to lay a claim on him and thus places (second-personal) restrictions in how Michael can act towards her. If Michael is to behave respectfully towards Annie, he must acknowledge

her as someone who has the authority to legitimately expect more from him, and who has a standing to hold him personally accountable if he fails to do so, regardless of whether she can articulate any of these claims or not.

Importantly, holding himself responsible in this way is the key to his holding Annie responsible in turn: she's at fault because she did not hold her part of the compact implicit in the reciprocal relation of respect, and Michael's role as an educator requires him not only to point this out, but to enact all the implications of a second-personal address.³³ This second-personal relation of respect is fundamental for the moral growth of the young student: Through these interactions, Annie will learn about her moral status and the dues and duties that come from being an agent endowed with dignity within a moral community.

In summary, being human entails a certain dignity, which implies being a person who legitimately holds a set of expectations regarding the behavior of others towards you. This is a fundamentally second-personal account of dignity, because the one doing the respecting is in a direct relation of mutual accountability with a person endowed with dignity, that is, to whom respect is owed. As such, the understanding of dignity relies on four interconnected concepts: the authority of a person to make demands on the behavior of others, the claims that such authority enables a person to make, the second-personal reasons to act in a certain way that such claims provoke and that require an acknowledgment of the person's authority to make them, and the responsibility towards a person (or a community) to accept these claims and thus be held accountable by them.³⁴ The youth of a student does not drive any of these concepts out of the picture. As shown, it qualifies them in substantive ways.

CONCLUSION

To date, Darwall's second-personal standpoint has not been applied to children. He assumes that the persons he is talking about are adults. However, my argument is that Darwall's ideas apply to children and importantly to students in a school context. Once we recognize the personhood of children based on their human dignity, it becomes necessary to engage students with respect, and therefore to engage them interpersonally; not as objects of adult interventions but fundamentally as equals who participate in a community in morally significant ways.

This argument also provides nuance to important concepts introduced in the literature focused on the intrinsic goods of childhood and the personhood of children based on their standing as bearers of rights: The emphasis placed by Darwall on the second-personal nature of respect shows that recognizing the rights of children does not imply that respect for them is an exclusively third-personal matter in which adults acts towards them out of the constraint of external reasons.³⁵ In other words, the fact that children have rights does not mean that our respect for them is merely respect for the formal structures that protect them; in truth we respect *them*, so that those interests that justify their rights are indeed legitimate claims that emanate from their own moral standing, require our present and effective acknowledgement, and determine what we justly owe them not despite but *while* and *because* they are children.

Specifically, a fundamental aspect of the respect owed to children within the school context requires fostering the development of students' individual characters, so that they develop the features that will make them increasingly worthy of appraisal respect. To respect someone as a person is therefore not just to regulate one's conduct by the fact that one is accountable to them, or even just to acknowledge the truth of this fact explicitly. It is also to make oneself accountable to them. This is necessary for them to develop their agency as mature moral agents and impossible outside of a second-personal relation.³⁶

Recognizing the personhood of students requires giving them the effective standing of equals who act in morally relevant ways. In education, this recognition requires that teachers and students (adults and children living together in school), relate to each other as members of a moral community in which all are effectively engaged as equals in terms of their dignity as persons. The educational importance of Darwall's second-personal view of moral life starts to take shape as the implications of addressing students as persons are explicated. Within this framework, further research is justified to fully elucidate the importance of bringing this understanding of dignity and respect to bear upon education.

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