# Self-Reflection and Adult Maturity: Adult and Child in Hermeneutical and Critical Reflection

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There has been a considerable concern, over the last twenty or more years, with individual possibilities of growth and development. The influence of developmental psychology in education is a case in point. In many instances developmental psychology, neo-Freudian psychoanalysis, and child centered education have joined forces and provided models of development growth, and maturity, which have found wide acceptance in North American societies. This holds in particular for those groups in society most susceptible to the influence of professional psychological and therapeutic advice.

Habermas (1971, pp. 76-93) makes an ambitious attempt to build theories of cognitive and moral development into a comprehensive theory of social development. His proposal for integrating moral developmental theory into a theory of modernity and his view of cognitive structures being commensurate with the developmental potentials implicit in the institutions and practices of modern societies can be regarded as a fundamental rationale for a concern with growth and development. This rationale focuses on the principles for adopting a developmental perspective on the life of individuals and collectives.

It is a rationale which appeals to the *experience* of individuals (and groups) only indirectly. For Habermas' critical theory of society is organized in terms of metatheoretical considerations and takes up issues of development primarily from a methodological point of view. This view neglects the dimensions of self-understanding and experience which, from a phenomenological and interpretive perspective, appear to be integral to any account of developmental possibilities available to people.

Critical theory places inordinate weight on a purely theoretical account of developmental possibilities for individuals and society, which, while informative by itself, cannot be taken to represent more than suggestions to be integrated into commonly relied upon modes of orientation and everyday reasoning. The subsequent reflections are meant to call such theoretical conceptions such as Habermas' into question.

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## Hermeneutic and Critical Theory in Conversation: The Issue of Development and the Limits of Life

The procedure I follow is that of hermeneutical reflection. Rather than attempting to criticize cognitive developmental psychology and the critical theory of socialization processes building on it with reference to scientific evidence incompatible with them, I treat the relevant conceptions of stage, development, and socialization as contributions to a conversation about childhood, development, and maturity. I do this by taking account of Habermas' insistent claim that the life-world of communication in "developed" industrial societies is itself shot through by procedures emanating from the sciences and their social-technological use. This fact poses *new* problems for hermeneutics. Critical theorists and hermeneuticists alike regard the life-world of communication in modern societies as subject to enormous pressures emanating from forms of economic, bureaucratic, and military organization.

At issue is the possibility and strengthening of human solidarity in the face of humanly created adversity and in the face of the natural limits of life. I pursue this topic only in one dimension, that of personal reflection.

Personal reflection is an important example. For when reflecting on people and life from the perspective of our personal involvement, we cannot help but acknowledge the various forms in which we are connected by and dependent upon certain limits. Birth and death, self and other, youth and old age, childhood and maturity. These limits circumscribe our cultural place. But they are not merely natural limits in the same way as the regular change of the seasons or the change from day to night. Birth and death, youth and old age, are also dimensions of our own selves and of our social existence. As such they are constantly interpreted and reinterpreted events. They have their reality in these interpretations just as much as in their actual, physical occurrence.

Birth, for example, acquires a new meaning when understood with reference to experiences later in life, such as the overcoming of a crisis. Rejuvenation ("rebirth") later in life may make us appreciate the appearance of new life among us differently: We will welcome new life more readily, accept birth as belonging to life, not merely as a distant condition for the possibility of life later on. Or death as the end of life may be anticipated and lived already in one's youth, when the young are overcome by the harshness of life, caused by forms of physical and emotional deprivation.

In these cases there never is a sense of life as more than death, and dying itself loses its liberating power: One cannot willingly let go of the world for the sake of others who can only claim their place with full confidence if the previous generation is willing to relinquish its hold on life. In other words, there are limits to human life and hu-

man social existence. But they are known through interpretations in which we make them our own. They are available to us, in life between birth and death, through cultural forms and whatever attitudes we can adopt toward them.

## Notions of Adult Maturity, Discourse, and the Childlikeness of Adults

Claims are made by developmental psychologists, social theorists, and educational theorists, that the differences between adult and child are to be explicated in terms of stages in the development of reasoning capacities. The child is seen as one growing toward some notion of what counts as an adequate participant in discourse, possessing the cognitive capacities for engaging in formal, argumentive discourse, or having the capacity for moral judgment at a higher stage, in which universal principles of moral judgment are operative.

Further, more ambitious claims are made, mainly by social theorists, that standards providing for the adequacy of self-reflectiveness are to be found in the ability to see one's life history (and even the history of the species) as consisting of blockages to a true understanding of oneself. Capabilities to act and participate in discourse are regarded as dependent upon the overcoming of individuals to the progressive self-possession of reason.

Should one ask oneself where one is actually located as an adult over against either one's own childlikeness, childishness, or immaturity, there is no place for being like a child in these accounts for an adult. Adults only have been children: for example, they have not been capable of reasoning adequately or acting competently and the like.

But how could we interrogate ourselves and what we are as adults without constantly regenerating for ourselves what we have in common with children? How could we put this question to ourselves other than by inquiring how much we have in common with what we take to be "being like a child?" For being an adult, if treated as a matter to be achieved again and again, makes us take note that we, as adults, must sometimes think of ourselves as being *like* children in order for us to be able to say that we are adults.

To be an adult, to be mature, requires the unceasing effort to establish for ourselves the courses of action (indicating possibilities of self-understanding) which are not there as a matter of course. Children are there, all around us, but less so we as adults. Consider this situation (and I hope you have access to it, as I produce it self-reflectively, indicating to myself how I can reflectively achieve or fail to achieve an ideal of maturity): I am faced with the fact that I, as a man of middle age, have accomplished much, but may have failed to accomplish what I most want, whatever this may be: security, hap-

piness, love, maturity. Consider that in facing myself in this way, I may feel deeply insecure about my capacity to face who I am as the one who I do not prefer to be. Consider that here in my adulthood, maturity is in doubt, in the sense that I think of myself in terms of another, of one who has really done what I have failed to do. I am left with myself as the adult who is like a child. I am the person who may not like who he is. I am like so many people who ignore their own reality by hiding behind the imagined reality of another person. I detect a sense of divorce and separation from myself which affects the every character of my self-reflectiveness, the competence to engage in it further. I establish myself as the childish adult who is not at all like a child, yet takes the child to be more adult-like than he himself is. For children with the usual liveliness of well brought up children and good familial environments, children with promise in short, are adults more so than I, because they cannot be blamed or held responsible for what they are not. They can still be all I am not. Yet at the same time they are not adults. They are not the ones who reflect on their feelings; they are, it seems, more at peace with themselves simply because they need not look at themselves in terms of another, someone they cannot be.

But is this the case? Do they not address themselves at times, as if they wanted to be other than they are? Is it mere play for them to take the "point of view of the other?" Will there be no action for them having its consequences, such that taking the point of view of the other means relinquishing something of one's own? Where are they, as selves, such that others for them are merely what they could imagine to be at any time? Is there no clearly circumscribed place for them in the world, which they regard as the place to start out from and to return to? I do not think that is the case. Children do know their place, insist on their place. They will want their parents to clearly identify and secure this place for them.

Thus, when putting themselves into the place of another, children do so in order to reaffirm the place they began as what is best. Children seen in this way are real children, as I notice them. I notice them, let us say, in the case of my own child, as the child who insists that he is the son and I am his father. This is not a matter open to question, no matter how difficult circumstances may make it. Adults then, as the others for children, are merely adults having their definite social place in familial relations, a definite indubitable identity which children treat as just there, as not requiring constant reformulation. I as the adult, when I consider children in these terms, cannot but consider who I am not. I am not the adult the child takes me to be. I am another to myself, yet myself as not that other.

This somewhat loosely organized account of myself as an adult reflecting on myself as someone with a concern for finding a definite

identity, a sense of myself as not always in question, do all this re-
flecting in order to secure this identity. It is recommended to us by
the theories mentioned (cognitive psychology, Habermas' critical
theory) that one can generate this identity by establishing its defi-
nite sense with reference to ideals of discourse and reasoning com-
petence. Thus identity results from a process of deliberation in
which I (this particular individual, located in a particular history)
am only visible as the one submitting to ideal standards of discourse.
If I follow this mode of self-reflection, these standards are to be con-
stitutive of me as possessing adult maturity. They formulate my
capability and willingness to entertain impersonal standards of dis-
course—standards which permit the formulation of what I say, my
utterances as claims—claims to validity in various forms. In organ-
izing my utterances in these terms (let us say my reflections on chil-
dren and my childlikeness) nothing of what I say is something I say
as this definite speaker, until I have held it up to other speakers for
review—to interlocutors who come from no particular place and no
particular history, who are only there to the extent that my
utterances can be made to appear as claims to validity. On what oc-
casions are my formulations addressed to myself or to others identi-
fiable as claims to validity (claims to correctness, truth,
truthfulness)? When all my utterances are treated as transformable
into claims to validity, that occasion, as the opportunity for the
transformation to be done, only arises where the ideal of discursive
validation is already recognized. It is so recognized everywhere and
nowhere. "With the very first sentence the intention of a general and
voluntary concensus is unmistakably enunciated" (Habermas, 1971,
p. 17). And: "The idealization of pure communication would have to
be reconstructed as a condition under which the authenticity of
speaking and acting subjects can be imputed as well as verified"
(p. 19). I as a speaker am nonexistent, until I have spoken as if I
could be an ideal speaker. Yet I am also existent as the one who
never speaks, as this ideal speaker. I am the adult as a child, who can
neither be a child nor an adult, but knows himself to be one of these,
an adult, at least at times. Yet this knowledge counts for nothing. I
cannot proceed as if it were a knowledge on which I could act.

What does all this say about the possibility of emancipation from
the "ignorance of childhood" or from immaturity? How can the
adult, who is not yet an adult, come to adult maturity if he is to treat
everything he can do concretely as an activity to be transcended
toward a form of ideal discourse? How am I ever to value what I can
do, here and now, as what brings forth for me the possibility of being
less of a child, less oriented to myself as having to be completely dif-
ferent from who I am? I could only value what I can do, I could only
place value on what I do at all, should I be able to act as if reflecting
on my action made a difference to what I can do, here and now (in
the face of this circumstance, this contingency, this particular other

person)? One only needs ideals, be they ideals of discourse or ideal requirements for the perfectly rational, (that is fully understood action) in order to remind oneself that what one is is other than these ideals. One learns to see oneself more clearly as the one standing in for his actions with the particular history that one knows oneself to have, the particular openness to examination which one expresses in facing concrete other persons: strangers, acquaintances, friends, lovers, even adversaries or rivals.

Thus the practice of self-reflection and the interrogation of ideals locate us personally and culturally: Childhood and adulthood are two poles of reflective and interpretive efforts in which we identify ourselves for others and for ourselves. They are this *as well as* the publicly observable and conventionally defined identities of adult and child. Both overlap at times, but at other times they also differ. The interpretive self-reflection presented here lays open several "layers" of one's relation to oneself; one or the other of these levels may coincide with how we are publicly perceived. But others may not. They are only known to ourselves, on the background of a relation to ourselves, which is exclusive to each of us and for which each of us primarily is responsible, her/himself. It is we as adults who can engage in this kind of self-responsible reflection and for whom childhood and children become an issue. We cannot expect children to engage in a similar reflection, not at least till they have "grown up" (as we say). It is this last mentioned difference of which cognitive developmental psychology (and Habermas following it) makes so much, and more than it should.

### One's Own Self, the Ideal Self, and the Community of Adult and Child

Adults usually assume that their moral judgments are more impersonal and objective than those of children. They believe they know better than children, that compromise, negotiation and openness to the legitimate interests of others are important features of moral life. Sometimes they are right, for children have a tendency not to distinguish carefully between their own interests and the interests of others. (This is what Piaget somewhat naively describes as their "egocentrism"—analogous to how people in Western industrial societies may look down upon older "native" cultures as more "ethnocentric" than they believe themselves to be.) Children, on the other hand, may be more emphatically compassionate than adults. To them the suffering of others can really be their own. They haven't practiced the making of distinctions sufficiently in order to feel fully separate from others. Thus there is a moral strength in their sense of self. For them cognition may not yet be separate from feeling. Characteristically theories of development which concentrate on cognition have a difficult time with moral affect, with emo-

tional life. They pull adult maturity and adult reasoning competence too far away from feeling. By conceptually fixing a mature stage of moral reasoning, they relegate moral feeling to the level of immature childhood.

We should not merely reason from childhood to adulthood, but also back from adults to children. We should remind ourselves, that children at times can be the moral teachers of adults, especially when it comes to compassion. We should not allow linear models of development (of stage progression in one direction toward increasing complexity) to prevail exclusively in the interrogation of moral life.

Habermas, although not unaware of the complexities mentioned, claims that the impartial attitude of a third person adjudicating moral claims at issue between two people is the paradigm for the adult maturity of people as moral agents. This requires that we as adults have the competence to step aside from interaction. Children are said not to be capable of doing so: They remain attached to the attitude of the mere participant in interaction.

Persons are thus described as beginning to become reflective when they can raise themselves to the level of the impartial judge of their own life and of their own interests. Mature adults have learned to distinguish between rules which are taken for granted (the level of interaction) and principles which permit the examination and justification of rules. Mature adults have acquired cognitive distance from conventions, customs, and traditions. They are capable of principled, adult-like conduct, to the extent to which maturational-developmental processes enable them to recognize and maintain for themselves the distinction between rules and principles.

According to Habermas, principles are to be treated as particular kinds of rules, having a logic of their own which is different from the use to which conventions are put in the generation of evaluations, appraisals, and assessments of ordinary matters under ordinary circumstances. Adult maturity consists of the attainment of the ability to judge rules and conventions in terms of principles such that one's conduct is judged by oneself in terms of criteria which make these judgments consistent with how anyone's conduct would be judged. In the course of producing such judgments, an identity of self (adult maturity) is produced "behind the lines of all particular rules and norms," stabilized only "through the abstract ability to present oneself in all situations as the ones who satisfy the requirements of consistency even in the face of incompatible role expectations" (Habermas, cited in McCarthy, 1978, p. 372). One must be able to present oneself independently of the actual ways in which evaluations, appraisals, and assessments of ordinary matters under ordinary circumstances, are generated. It is such independence which defines adult maturity.

Adult maturity is thus based on a developmental sequence constructed by the theorist as the attainment of a stage of principled reasoning in which one's self is identical with itself, as if it were never in question. It is moreover, the attainment of a self which is identical with other selves, as a mechanism coming into play based on no one's volition, or as the ideal to which one makes reference, in order to secure one's identity behind all and any circumstances which may threaten it and force it to become someone's identity in particular.

Should we follow the procedure implicit in Piaget, proposed by Kohlberg and extended by Habermas into a communications theory of socialization, we would face the difficulties philosophers almost always face when formulating the logic of the discourse in which principles are discovered and affirmed. They do not proceed as if this reflection was carried out through the medium of communal support. If they do, the community is that of ideal reasoners or ideal speakers with little or no effective knowledge of their time or place. Rarely is there the definite confrontation with the moral beliefs of an established community in which we must act both self-responsibly *and* in accord with definite others.

Theories of cognitive-moral development rely too much on a schematization which does not take account of the actual communal basis of our moral beliefs. Most commonly these beliefs are articulated in a conflict-burdened encounter with that basis. This conflict is the real effort to establish, retain, and secure for ourselves a sense of our own adult maturity over the course of everyday life. A theory of adult socialization such as Habermas' presents an ideal of society. It is the society of those committed to an ideal of discourse. Here being a child can only mean that one is not yet capable of the ideal.

Under the ideals of this community it is not knowable how becoming mature is possible as a course of action which requires definite resting points and definite choices. Becoming mature also requires the determination to hold on to what one is, as well as the occasional surrender of all one takes oneself to be to do something unforseen. Rationalist ideals of discourse do not sufficiently account for the development of a situationally accomplished sense of who we can be. We are not shown to be the persons who have to stand up for a history as it happens to be. The latter is merely a matter for explanation. With these assumptions, adult maturity, and the self-understanding it requires, amount to living one's life in the paucity of a constant, yet absolutely uniform self-recognition, as if there was no self to be recognized or achieved except the one which is always there for anyone, the "universal, impartial judge." It requires that one be at home with oneself as if being at home did not require traversing the world, such that what we are returns to us from places other than the ones in which we have already come to rest.

We need a less rationalist conception of personal identity than the one entailed by Habermas' conception. According to this different conception, identity is neither always in question nor permanently secure. It is not as if the community could be located "outside" of ourselves as consisting of other selves, who as we, know themselves as identical with themselves only "behind the line of all particular rules and norms." The mature adult can only be the person who knows him or herself *in the recognition and struggle with a particular history*. Here one's relation to oneself passes through the recognition of others (such as children) as different, distinct, and also similar.

In this way, rather than locating children and adults as being at differing stages in a developmental sequence, with a fixed end point as an immutable standard available for the appraisal of the sequence, a properly self-reflective orientation calls into question the definitely locatable identities of adults and children. It is a questioning in which *the community of adult and child*, their *belonging together*, is brought forth. This only comes about in recognizing that as an adult, one is not beyond the movement back to the child, and from there forward to the point where one began the movement. Having been a child is still a possibility one lives, something one has to return to in order to establish oneself as an adult. One generates in reflection a community of adults and children in which principles and rules are at issue *on both sides*, in which being bound to convention as an adult may be questioned by making reference to children as more principled than adults. For children, at times, may appear to be less convention-bound than adults, thereby appearing more adult-like than adults. Even if, as adults, we orient to ourselves as being capable of making the relation between rules and principles problematic, there is no guarantee that this will make the adult actually conduct him or herself in a way that is more principled than the way in which children are frequently observed to act.

It is clear from this, that the study of development into adulthood is not something to be pursued independently of how we as adults come into question in this process of studying. An interest in children is not independent from an interest in establishing for ourselves who we are, as adults, and what we must orient to in order to live our adulthood. Development, understood in the technical sense derived from developmental theories, becomes an odd way of formulating an interest in achieving maturity, since the latter cannot be gained independently from a willingness to take risks, to expose oneself to the possibility that one has failed as an adult. As adults we may never attain the definiteness in our lives that children seem to be able to possess. To be an adult, to be mature, requires the unceasing effort to establish for ourselves courses of action, indicating possibilities of self-understanding, which are not there as

a matter of course, as a fixed end point achieved once and for all. Thus people never quite exist as adults, while children are all around us (as Piaget once said). When people, conventionally taken to be adults, examine their lives they know that their adult maturity is still in question.

## Notes

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