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Proposal for the 1st Think! Conference • Extended Abstract

Rethinking biographies, Respecting beginnings: Towards a Philosophy of Biographical Development that Balances Respect for Creative Self-expression, Correction and Care.

The reflection that the ancient philosophical question “Who am I?” requires a shifting, evolving answer over an entire life span leads up to the issue of biographical development and how to conceive of developing personalities: their needs and capacities, the respect they deserve.

Philosophical tradition generally instructs us to apply a markedly teleological scheme to understand and evaluate personal development and emerging biographies. On this classical view, an independent adulthood is the decisive, normative central stage of development, with few questions asked about the becoming and the nature of the self that is “self-reliant” and “expresses itself autonomously” therein. Childhood and old age, by contrast, predominantly figure as discounted, slightly suspicious stages of subordinate relevance, serving as an introduction / preparation, or conclusion/epilogue, respectively. Later – more “mature” – life stages are taken to be superior to precedent ones, until the goal of “adulthood” is reached, at the end of which “decline” into another stage of dependency begins. However, an overly teleological approach threatens to distort the evaluation of biographical developments, suggesting that there is a uni-directional progression upward and forward ideally inherent in an individual's course of life, a single trail to be pursued as an ideal(ised) guideline, rather than a shifting particular mixture of possible gains and losses untangling itself over time.

As a consequence, little room remains for the notion that childhood and old age offer “special goods” (→A. Gheaus) typically pertaining to these life stages only. Moreover, a strong tendency to marginalise children – and other atypical agents –, along with their unique personal perspectives and their contributions to society, is implicit in the revived teleological hierarchy of life stages. This paper outlines a critique of such traditional understandings of personal development, with a view to augmenting standard conceptions of personal human life and human(e) (inter-)action, so as to give due consideration to (nascent) atypical agents and ambiguous, uneven courses of personal development.

A traditional teleological approach may well be repudiated for its restrictiveness and the oversimplification of actual life courses, but it doubtlessly provides rich sources of orientation for personal conduct, interaction and education, stabilising extant social ways of life. It rests on two assumptions: a) The developing person does not yet know how to conduct his/her life. b) The senior person, familiar with the (cultural) workings of life, which in themselves are taken to remain relatively stable, is able to provide reliable guidance. Providing it is his/her proper role.

From a modern perspective, there is reason to doubt both these percepts: Firstly, psychological research – as well as astute observation of everyday interactions – indicates that some of the capabilities required to form and maintain an individual perspective of one's own pertain to humans – in some primordial form – from early on. The astonishing abilities of children to pose

intelligent questions (→M. Lipman) and cope with crises points in the same direction.

Secondly, assuming a globalised, value-pluralistic society subjected to rapid socio-economic change, it is far from obvious that adults/seniors are in the (best) position to provide the guidance they have traditionally been expected to warrant.

Establishing a cogent alternative perspective reflecting these concerns is an ethically, anthropologically, and practically complex task philosophers should consider. It is inevitable that, for most of their vulnerable and valuable personal development, children, for instance, need manifest protection, care and socio-cultural efforts of introduction to thrive. To deny this means to trap critical reflections in the thicket of the more quixotic positions of the 1970s "Children's Liberation Movement". *Respecting* that a) children are principally entitled to their irreducible, unique, personal position in/on life, which deserves to be given normative weight, while *recognising* b) their special need for profound care as imperative, poses a conundrum: how to align a rejuvenating openness for children's opinions and impulses with the demands of care, protection and correction? Moreover, since the formation of a (normative) self is inevitably founded in an engagement with "alien" external influences (→ R. Noggle), and a child's nascent self is not yet stably formed, it is far from clear which notions are to count as authentically hers/his.

How are we to consider children's (atypical actor's) developing selves, valuing their creative potential, while at the same time correcting mistakes and dangerous developments – without a definite course charted out before us? How are we to make sense of our personal biographies without unambiguous, hierarchical life stages and goals to guide our understanding?

This paper proceeds in four steps to stimulate discussion:

First 1.), the "traditional, teleological" approach from which this search for more malleable alternatives has taken its departure will be outlined. Its prevalence and implications will be explored.

Second 2.), the major philosophical and practical quandaries confronting an alternative approach will be discussed. A promising proposal might be a) to strengthen *dialogue*, *negotiation* and *questioning*, and consider b) the force of resistance displayed by the developing agent against the common course s/he is expected to adopt.

Accordingly 3.), insights from contemporary German Philosophy of Childhood (→M. Betzler et al.) and from feminist literature (*inter alia*) will be employed to approach possible solutions and indicate avenues for further reflection and research.

Finally 4.), the paper culminates in the question how the proposed change of perspective on personal biographical development might enhance our equal respect for other atypical or "unfinished" actors – and possibly even for creative "newcomers" other than children, e.g. migrants (→ S.R. Ben Porath).

In conclusion, the paper surveys the issues revealed by this critique. It cannot, however, provide a conclusive philosophical theory for a suitable adjustment of perspective the realisation of which is a major cultural challenge for societies globally.