

**AGE-DISTINCTIONS,
THE PHILOSOPHY OF CHILDHOOD,
AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

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A thesis

submitted to the Victoria University of Wellington
in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Philosophy

Victoria University of Wellington

2021

ABSTRACT

In the philosophy of childhood, conceptions about children and childhood are often understood to be contextually dependent on time and place. I explore and question contemporary conceptions about childhood and how these might be subject to change in the political sphere. Not only is there much vagueness inherent in the adult-child distinction, but many implied inaccuracies as well. Although these distinctions allow for the efficient structuring of social institutions, this comes at the cost of exacerbating the problems brought about by this vagueness and inaccuracy. I challenge the different enfranchisement status of children and adults, arguing that it is better to do away with age-based distinctions in politics. These distinctions are arbitrary and constitute ageism towards children.

My approach is unique in applying a philosophy of childhood lens to children's enfranchisement. Emerging 'strengths-based' conceptions about childhood that move away from 'deficit' conceptions allow for a more accurate representation of children and support a case for their political inclusion. This reconceptualisation of childhood involves a shift in focus away from what children *lack* relative to adults. Consistently with the strengths-based conception, broader understandings of competency allow us to see children's perspectives and lack of habituation to the world as an asset, including in the political sphere.

Age-based demarcations that prohibit children's inclusion reinforce inaccurate, exaggerated and misleading stereotypes about children and adults alike. Actively challenging these stereotypes allows us to overcome these inaccurate understandings about children to see their political inclusion as justified. Practical concerns with children's inclusion, including whether this would compromise the 'goods of childhood', are addressed and quelled. I also speculate on the possible implications of children's enfranchisement in other domains. Challenging the adult-child distinction does not amount to an argument to do away with talk about 'adults' or 'children', but it does command a critical analysis of the implications associated with these terms. Ultimately, there are many avenues for political participation, of which voting is just one. Still, this paper provides a framework for establishing on what terms citizens are justifiably involved in political participation *at all*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my supervisors, Sondra Bacharach and Simon Keller, for their ongoing support throughout the writing of this thesis, as well as Nicholas Agar and Nicholas Munn for their helpful comments. I also express thanks to Victoria University of Wellington for granting me a Master's by Thesis Scholarship. Lastly, thank you to Mirko, family, and some good friends.

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Introduction

What does it mean to be a child? And what, then, does it mean to be an adult? In the philosophy of childhood, conceptions about childhood and children are often understood as contextually dependent on time and place. That conceptions about people differ depending on context is not, of course, unique to children. Conceptions about people are generally dependent on circumstances. However, increasing attention paid to children in the literature, particularly with the acceleration of study in developmental psychology over the last century, has influenced more dedicated thinking about children as a focus of study. The philosophy of childhood increasingly focuses on children not simply as a distinct biological category but as subject to and influenced by social and circumstantial factors. This prompts reflection upon the child's role and relationship to their social institutions in a contemporary context, particularly in relation to adults, and whether dominant conceptions about children are subject to change.

The central concerns of this thesis are to explore and tease out what sense can be made of the adult-child distinction, and to apply this theorising to a significant facet of contemporary life. A critical assessment shows that not only is there much vagueness between these terms, but there are also many inaccurate associations made with these terms as well. Although age-based distinctions help to efficiently structure social institutions, this comes at a high cost that exacerbates the problems facilitated by the vagueness and inaccuracy mentioned. The significant facet of contemporary life to which I apply my theorising is political participation, in particular, participation as enfranchisement. I find that it is better to do away with age-based distinctions in the political sphere. This position is informed by a deeply critical analysis of the adult-child distinction and the role that age plays in structuring contemporary life. This does not mean that we need do away with talk about adults or children, but it does command a critical examination of the assumptions associated with the terms 'adult' and 'child' and their relevant implications.

A person's political status depends on the relevant political system in which they live, as well as the dominant conceptions held by the people existing within that system. By 'dominant conceptions', I refer to the views that predominantly influence and make up a relevant group's culture and social practices. These conceptions might be held and followed by the majority of people in a social context, or by those holding significant power or influence in that context, regardless of whether they constitute a minority or majority. Democracy is one political system in which people may live. According to

basic democratic principle, all citizens are eligible to vote, with all votes counting equally. This recognises (in theory) an inherent equality existing between people. However, children in contemporary democracies are notably excluded from this activity. I challenge the differential treatment of children and adults in the political sphere, arguing against a minimum voting age. Discussing children's political status is increasingly relevant in a contemporary context, given the increased visibility of children and young people's political involvement on a global scale, notably in school climate strikes, anti-racism protests, and voting reform movements (Nissen 2019; Thunberg 2019). The dominant conceptions about children's suitability for political participation, as represented by the structure of the social institutions in which they live, are subject to change again.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In Chapter 1, I provide an overview of important and relevant considerations raised in the philosophy of childhood literature. There are issues not only with vagueness between the terms 'adult' and 'child', but also with establishing clear cases of 'adult' and 'child' at all. As such, distinctions between adults and children are often arbitrary. Conceptions about childhood and children are not fixed and, with particular consideration given to contemporary circumstances, these conceptions are subject to change again. Attempts to appeal to children and adults as being of a different *status* or *kind* do not succeed in justifying children's political exclusion. A voting age that excludes children implies a difference in status where there is no relevant difference to substantiate this, other than age. This perpetuates 'deficit' conceptions about childhood that emphasise what children *lack* in relation to adults. Emerging conceptions about childhood, which I refer to as 'strengths-based' conceptions, move away from deficit conceptions and focus on how children are involved in shaping the world rather than merely being shaped by it. Strengths-based conceptions more accurately reflect children's ways of being and provide support for the case of children's enfranchisement. This thesis therefore speculates on what would appropriately be the political status of children if a strengths-based conception about childhood were to ground their regard in the political sphere.

In Chapter 2, I develop my argument that children's exclusion is arbitrary. Children meet existing and desirable competency standards for political participation. Children's inclusion is feasible to implement and can be easily adapted to existing processes; competency-testing is not required. I proceed to develop an argument for a broader understanding of competency, building on my argument that

strengths-based conceptions about childhood more accurately represent children than deficit conceptions. This approach allows for children's perspectives to be regarded an asset, in particular, their lack of habituation to existing practices. Children's perspectives can contribute to good political decision-making in a system where this involves an openness to changing social circumstances rather than merely preserving the status quo.

Age-based demarcations that exclude children are informed by and reinforce inaccurate, exaggerated and misleading stereotypes about adults and children alike. In Chapter 3, I show how these stereotypes perpetuate incorrect notions that children possess certain essential or signifying features as part of their nature. The deficit conception reflects these inaccurate stereotypes and continues to shape social structures, perpetuating widespread belief that children are inherently unsuitable for political participation. As such, there is a conflict between the strengths-based conception and existing political structures. Actively challenging these stereotypes allows us to overcome inaccurate deficit conceptions about children to see that their enfranchisement is justified. In levelling the standards according to which political perspectives are weighed, children's inclusion opens up opportunities for improved political deliberation, which also contribute to good political decision-making. These benefits accrue not only for children but for all people in a social context.

One might raise practical concerns with children's inclusion, including the risk of harm to children and society. In Chapter 4, I argue that claims that children's inclusion would compromise the supposed 'goods of childhood' or 'children's innocence' involve an idealised and unrealistic understanding of childhood. When understandings about children more accurately reflect their lived experiences, society is better placed to address the concerns lying behind these claims. Other concerns, including fears about the risk of undue influence or pressure on children, do not justify their exclusion but rather highlight existing problems already prevalent in politics. Children's political exclusion is not the remedy for these issues.

Children's political inclusion also presents possible flow-on implications for other domains affecting children. In Chapter 5, I briefly explore the implications of my argument in the domains of family arrangements, genetic engineering, health, sexual consent and choice, and the information age. A revised, critical understanding of childhood and politics need not do away with all our current social and institutional arrangements as they apply to children, but it does encourage responsiveness to changing circumstances and reflection on the values that motivate the directions that societies move in.

Throughout this paper, I use the terms ‘voting’, ‘enfranchisement’, ‘political participation’, and ‘political inclusion’ somewhat interchangeably. One might see elsewhere some of these terms used to refer to political involvement or empowerment, but unless specified otherwise, I use these terms to refer specifically to voting, voter enfranchisement, political participation as voting, and political inclusion as voting eligibility. This paper often refers to the New Zealand context, though most aspects of this discussion will be applicable elsewhere.

Allow me to position myself in this discussion. If we speak according to an age criterion, such that a child is someone under, say, 18-years, and an adult is someone 18-years and over, I am someone who has been a child, but is no longer a child, speaking about children. As such, there is a limit to the authority I can have on the position of a child. Having been a child (on the age-based definition) gives one *some* (though certainly not absolute) authority on theorising about children, though the perspectives of those who fit the age criterion of children described above should be keenly sought, listened to, and engaged with. It could surely be said of anyone, that they have also been a child, and so their views are also authoritative in this way. I do not deny this. Still, it is important here to emphasise the nature of the philosophical enterprise. In philosophy, we are in the business of providing arguments for or against a position. If I can provide arguments for my position, arguments that are stronger than those presented by my challenger, then this gives my view greater weight. The strength of the argument – in this thesis, the argument for children’s political inclusion – wins out.

Age-based distinctions where arbitrary constitute ageism. Age-based distinctions for enfranchisement are arbitrary and constitute ageism towards children. Emerging strengths-based conceptions about children support the abolition of a minimum voting age. Actively challenging stereotypes is key to addressing concerns about arbitrariness and inaccuracy, further supporting the case for children’s political inclusion. Children’s inclusion nonetheless has potentially far-reaching implications for children in their relevant social contexts.

There are broad benefits to the exploration in this thesis. The philosophy of childhood approach, in compelling the active questioning of the adult-child distinction, provides opportunity for greater clarity about what, if anything, might plausibly constitute the difference between children and adults, or childhood and adulthood. We also gain a clearer idea about what considerations matter in assessing

someone's political eligibility. At the very least, this discussion compels us to question the plausibility of our contemporary political systems and assess whether, given the evident arbitrariness in contemporary political practice, revisions of some kind should be made. Ultimately, there are many important avenues for political participation, of which voting is just one. Still, this paper provides a framework for establishing on what terms citizens are justifiably involved in political decision-making *at all*.

Background: Overview of Democratic Theory

Before delving into the main discussion, it is useful to provide an overview of the political contexts to which I speak. In this section, I provide a brief background to democratic theory, outlining the values that underlie democracy, the various forms it can take, as well as some of its limitations. This will position us well to analyse the appropriate roles of children in the social and political systems in which they live.

Democracy is government for the people, by the people. But *who* are ‘the people’? Democracy has its roots in the ancient Athenian *polis* (Greek city-state). The word ‘democracy’ comes from the Greek *demos*, meaning the people of a state or area, and *kratos*, meaning power (Swift 2006, 179). Democracy is a method of political decision-making whereby the citizens of society are the ones who make political decisions about that society. It therefore stands in contrast to totalitarian and dictatorial forms of government. Democracy is the most common form of government worldwide compared to ‘hybrid’ or authoritarian forms. According to the Democracy Index, of the 167 countries included in the model, about one half of the world’s population (49.4%) live in some form of democracy (2020, 3). Freedom House finds that 42.6% of 195 countries are ‘free’ and as such can be considered liberal democracies, compared to those ‘partly free’ or ‘not free’ (2020, 6). Understood as a method of decision-making, democracy can apply on a national or global level as well as in more local and community contexts. On a democratic socialist model, decision-making extends beyond government to more immediate and local institutions and interactions, including the workplace (Wright 2010, 143-144).

Democracy has different variations. There are *direct* and *indirect* forms of democracy (Swift 2006, 184-186). In a *direct democracy*, citizens can feasibly contribute to every political decision to be made. This may be done, for instance, via national referenda. Ancient Greek politics were directly democratic, though only for some members of the population, given the notable exclusion of women, children, and slaves. In contemporary societies, technological development brings increased opportunities for direct democracy. However, a strictly direct democracy would involve regular and intensive deliberation by citizens to an extent unworkable or undesirable for many. Contemporary democracies are quite removed from the Athenian conception and function far more representatively. *Indirect democracy* involves voting for representatives to make decisions on the electorate’s behalf. For democracy to be feasible and desirable, it is said that it must be to some extent representative (ibid). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to advocate for one variation over the other, though it is noted that different considerations or skills may be involved for decision-making on each variation. There are also *aggregate*

and *deliberative* variations of democracy. An *aggregate* approach focuses on ‘adding up’ the preferences cast by individual voters. A *deliberative* approach may employ aggregate methods, but it also involves citizens engaged in active discussion and reflection on issues to reach a decision.

Thicker understandings of democracy establish stronger theoretical groundings, according to which democracy formally acknowledges a symbolic equality of citizens in society who stand (ideally speaking) in equal status to one another. One might understand this as reasonably grounded in all people’s equality of condition at birth: people enter the world as equals, each having no control over being born or the position they are born into. In an ideal or well-structured democracy, this equality of status is represented by all citizens having an equal opportunity to influence political outcomes, that is, with all votes cast counting equally. Each representation of someone’s will in the form of a vote counts (again, ideally) for the same as anyone else’s. Note that equality of *participation* does not necessarily translate to equality of *outcome*. Equality of opportunity to participate can (and does) lead to inequitable results and restricting citizens’ input may secure more equitable outcomes in society. One must therefore weigh up the significance of good outcomes against the value of participation itself, which although an important consideration, is again beyond scope here.

Political systems other than democracy may, on some accounts, be better placed to reach ‘correct’ or ‘better’ decisions. Proponents of epistocracy, for instance, hold that political power should be allocated to persons who possess appropriate levels of competency for decision-making, or that greater weight be given to the votes of competent decision-makers (see Brennan 2018, 54). Even if a political system would lead to ‘correct’ decisions, this would not necessarily translate into effective implementation. Democracy is regarded as a system that, even if ‘correct’ decisions are not always reached, gives legitimacy to the process of decision-making. As such, citizens are more likely to follow decisions produced via the democratic process, perceiving these as authoritative (Swift 2006, 198-200). Applying this understanding to the topic of this paper, even if one believes that decisions may be ‘better’ without children’s input, if children do not perceive decisions as legitimate, decisions affecting them are unlikely to be effective. This nonetheless depends on whether the relevant child has the power or capacity to resist or object to decisions made.¹

¹ Thank you to Nicholas Munn for helping to clarify this point.

It is worth reflecting on the significance of political participation and political activity more generally. In democratic theory, participation can be understood as intrinsically valuable or *good in itself*, that is, the good in the process or active exercise of political expression, representing one's active involvement in social life. One might also advocate an inherent symbolic good reflected in the equality of all persons' input. We might describe this as the 'recognition granted to a person' as an equal political actor (Munn 2018, 610). Participation can also be regarded as good for the *consequences* it brings about, supporting good outcomes for society. As to whether political decisions are the kinds of decisions that can be 'good' or 'bad', 'correct' or 'incorrect', at best, we might be able to say that some decisions are *better at* addressing specific problems than others. Some decisions will be *good at* addressing a particular problem whilst some decisions will be *bad at* addressing that problem. What constitutes a 'better' political decision will depend on one's broader objectives about whether, for instance, to improve social services, address climate change, accelerate business interests, or something else. When I refer to 'good political decision-making' throughout this paper, I refer to decisions that are *better at* or *good at* addressing particular problems.

This paper speaks to both the intrinsic and consequentialist goods of participation. Voting has intrinsic *symbolic* significance, a recognition of the *equal status* of *different people* standing in relation to one another. Intrinsic considerations bear directly on consequences and as such the symbolic significance attributed to whether one does or does not have the right to vote directly influences the regard and treatment that people have towards one another. Ideally speaking, this regard and treatment, where one has the relevant symbolic political status, involves at the very least a willingness to see another as someone in possession a voice to be listened to and engaged with in the pursuit of finding solutions to an issue or problem. Equal symbolic status represented by the vote does not require equality in the sense of identical social roles; it is sensitive to the different lives that people lead and the roles in which they participate. As such, it can represent equal symbolic value placed albeit on people participating in different social roles.

Despite the notion of equality that grounds democratic participation, certain groups have faced and continue to face political exclusion. This exclusion has been imposed on the basis of such factors as land-ownership status or identity according to gender and race. Enfranchisement has extended to include these people over time. Political exclusion nonetheless continues to apply to certain members of the population, notably those incarcerated in prison, in certain kinds of medical care, non-citizens and non-permanent residents – and those below the age of majority (López-Guerra 2014; Electoral

Act 1993). Arguments for the consistent application of enfranchisement standards in this thesis are invested in extending rather than restricting inclusion. Still, some philosophers have argued for the latter (see Brennan 2011).

To ascertain the significance of enfranchisement, we must consider what it means to *not* be enfranchised. The enfranchised and non-enfranchised exist in an asymmetry of political power that permeates through all aspects of social interaction, perpetuating deficit conceptions and notions of political superiority held by those included, whilst notions of inferiority are directed at those excluded. As far as this concerns children, children are denied the symbolic status that voting eligibility represents. However, there is no relevant difference between adults and children to substantiate children's exclusion, other than age. Exclusion from voting based on age is arbitrary and constitutes ageism towards children.

Addressing the participatory status of children in politics is timely. Children and youth political involvement has gained increased visibility on a global scale. This includes school climate strikes, involvement in racial justice protests, and youth enfranchisement movements. Their increased political activity may be interpreted as a rejection of the authority of political decision-making to which they are not party. Though children's participation in politics is not new, their contemporary involvement is especially vocal and compels critical reflection about their participatory status and the kinds of change that can be implemented in the social and political sphere.

There are of course political participation methods other than voting. Enfranchisement alone has not been and is not adequate to address citizens' demands, especially for those with a history of exclusion from voting. I explore this point in this section, maintaining that enfranchisement is significant, even if not the only important site of political participation.

The Limits of Democracy

Democracy as voting has numerous limitations. Where all votes are counted equally, minority interests can lose out to majority interests. We might also doubt the impact of participation in something like an oligarchy where, despite the existence of democratic methods, political direction is largely driven by socially or economically dominant elites. Methods beyond voting offer significant opportunities for influence, meaningful political deliberation, and making change. Plenty of impactful political

activity occurs *beyond* the ballot box through, for instance, community projects and grassroots movements.

Children and young people can and already do participate in politics in other ways, shaping discourse and challenging norms of power (Mattheis 2020, 11). Children participate in various informal methods of participation, including marches, protests, and membership in political groups and organisations. Anyone can make a submission to select committees, small groups of government representatives who examine specific laws and policies in detail. Historically, there have been many instances of children and young people engaging in political and legal rebellion, including student involvement in civil rights protests in the 1960's, students in South Africa protesting against Apartheid and restrictive language laws, and school walkouts by students in response to school shootings in the United States. In the 19th century, newsboys (including minors) went on strike to campaign for increases to wages. More recently, children's political activism has gained increased visibility, including racial justice protests, voting age reform movements, and 'Fridays for Future', a global youth-led protest movement in response to the climate crisis, which although is sometimes regarded as truancy, is more appropriately understood as an example of civil disobedience (ibid, 20). These alternative avenues for participation allow children to influence voters and decision-makers who can *consider* children's political activity in the calculations of their decisions. One might not be so concerned whether children have the vote, provided that they have the opportunity to influence politics in some way.

Engaging in disobedience might be considered a more effective way for children and youth to achieve their political goals. Children's exclusion from formal political participation through voting and running for office may itself ground justification for their disobedience, especially where adults inadequately represent their interests or views. Politicians are accountable to their electorate; given that children are not included in the electorate, politicians are not directly accountable to them. This gives political leaders less incentive to give effect to children's political objectives than to those of the adult electorate. This may give children 'especially weighty grounds' for civil disobedience (ibid, 2-9). Political participation through disobedience and other informal channels may be required to effect political change and assist in overcoming what formal institutions fail to address (ibid). Informal channels are not constrained by the same systems and associations as formal channels and as such participants can stake their position as explicitly critical of the systems and processes that subjugate them. Still, identifying the merits of informal channels does not warrant exclusion from formal channels that, ultimately, have a significant impact on the law.

There are issues with restricting children's participation to disobedience and informal channels. This is especially true when considered in light of the disenfranchisement and political barriers faced by other historically excluded groups. If we were to say the same of women's protests and campaigning for their enfranchisement, that a society should pay special attention to their objectives *because* they are excluded or restricted from participation, but then continue to deny their inclusion, we are missing the point. If exclusion gives a person or group 'especially weighty grounds' to disobey, we must consider *in virtue of what* those weighty grounds exist. If someone has weighty grounds to disobey, surely this is because they are justified in not obeying the current state of affairs. The current state of affairs against which children are disobedient is a political system from which they are excluded, a system in which weight is not formally given to their input, a system where the decisions made are unsatisfactory to them. There are also costs to disobedience, including the risks of violent rebellion, extremism, and compromising children's education (Thunberg 2019, 30-31).

Giving weight to someone's view whilst withholding the vote from them involves a confused attitude towards why we would give weight to someone's political input at all. Indeed, children might already influence outcomes by attracting attention to their interests through protests or disobedience. However, despite the benefits of these activities, the point of disobedience is not simply to attract attention; it is to influence social and political outcomes. Without the weight given to children's objectives through enfranchisement, their ability to influence outcomes depends on whether those who possess formal political power are persuaded to act on children's vocalised interests. If giving weight to a person's view matters, it is inadequate to leave it up to chance that someone will act on their behalf.

Political inclusion through enfranchisement is consistent with a more holistic view of politics beyond voting. In New Zealand, elections data show that voter turnout is disproportionately lower for Māori (the indigenous peoples of New Zealand) than for Pākehā (settler European) New Zealanders (Electoral Commission 2020, 15). According to a Māori worldview, political participation goes beyond voting (Bargh 2013, 454). Māori politics operates differently from Western politics and involves other centres of governance outside of parliament, including hapū and iwi (tribal) organisations and marae (meeting and community spaces), which are also important sites of political engagement (ibid; Waitoa 2020). Beyond voting, many Māori are politically active, often in ways that centre on self-determination and dedicated involvement and investment in community.

The very institution of voting may be understood as structurally exclusionary. In colonised states, for instance, democratic systems have been introduced in ways that undermine the sovereignty of indigenous peoples. The historical development of law and politics in these contexts is rooted in discriminatory practice, with the ideals of democracy applied prejudicially. Voting in general elections is not always regarded by indigenous peoples as a legitimate avenue for their political participation, given its association with assimilation into settler-imposed systems, and may even be regarded by indigenous persons as a renunciation of their own self-governance (Ladner and McCrossan 2007). Participation beyond voting allows for pursuing one's own projects without conforming to formal processes.

We can apply these considerations to children. If voting as a political institution inherently discriminates against children, they may not perceive it as a legitimate avenue for their participation. Children may prefer to pursue their own projects than conform to a system that has excluded and discriminated against them since its inception. Enfranchisement includes the oppressed or marginalised into social institutions that are affiliated with asymmetrical power structures. Women are *included* in men's systems, indigenous peoples are *included* in settler-imposed systems, and children will be *included* in adults' systems. Inclusion within that system may mean that perspectives are filtered through the socially dominant lens which may fail to accurately represent the relevant group's objectives. However, just because a system has historically discriminated against a group, and therefore has inherent limitations, that does not justify continued disenfranchisement. Highlighting the system's limitations can provoke change to the system itself.

We can acknowledge that there are limits to voting whilst also acknowledging *who* is justifiably included in an imperfect process. Recall that enfranchisement is symbolic. Each representation of someone's will in the form of a vote counts for the same as anyone else's. In the case of historically marginalised groups, inclusion has communicated that those previously excluded groups are not in fact inferior to the historically included. The same would be true for children, especially when they are understood according to the strengths-based conception about childhood argued for in this paper. Even so, where children constitute a minority of the population, their aggregated input may carry little weight. Still, being a minority does not justify a group's *exclusion*. That aggregated voting favours majority interests over minority interests does not justify the exclusion of minorities, though it does alert us to thinking about how democracy could better meet minority interests whilst upholding the inherent or symbolic equality of its citizens.

Acknowledging the limits of enfranchisement does not mean that enfranchisement is unimportant. Voting as a formal method of participation is often regarded as the key influence, even if not the only influence, on societal outcomes (see Munn 2018, 602). With reference to historic enfranchisement movements, I also propose that including the marginalised in the dominant social and political system of voting is an important step for socially dominant groups to formally recognise the marginalised as holding a status as valid or significant as their own. Following enfranchisement, other political activities and practices participated in by those previously excluded are more likely to be engaged with and regarded as significant by socially dominant groups. One's voting status impacts the influence and perceived significance of one's activities elsewhere.

Of course, oppressive and discriminatory conditions do not cease to exist with enfranchisement status. Inclusion is only one part of a collaborative political system. Still, acknowledging status through inclusion means that the system in which enfranchisement occurs is open to incorporating different perspectives and therefore changing its own landscape. The *meaningfulness* of other political avenues does not make voting or the status it denotes *meaningless*, given the intrinsic and consequentialist value of this method as already discussed. Children and adults do not occupy a different status such that justifies children's exclusion.

Chapter 1

THE PHILOSOPHY OF CHILDHOOD

I think I was, briefly, the youngest man on earth (having just previously been the oldest boy on earth).
(Sorensen 2001, 1)

In this chapter, I provide an overview of some important considerations in the philosophy of childhood literature. The significance of studying childhood is obvious. The features and experience of childhood impact people's entire lives, influencing the people who make up society, and therefore the kind of society in which people live and participate. 'Childhood' can be understood as a *concept* or a *conception* (see Archard 2004, 27-29). This is in a similar vein to John Rawls' distinction between concepts and conceptions of justice (in *ibid*). The concept 'childhood' refers to how children are in some way distinct from adults. A relatively straightforward way of understanding the concept 'childhood' is in a biological sense, according to which childhood is understood as a developmental stage preceding adulthood.

The conception 'childhood' involves a view about what *substantiates* that difference between adults and children. Conceptions about childhood, including the roles of and opportunities available to children in societies, are contextually dependent on time and place. Different societies have had the concept 'childhood' but have nonetheless differed in their conception about childhood. On a modern conception of childhood, described very generally, this would refer to how children are understood to need protection, nurturing and education *in preparation for* their adult life for which one day they will be 'ready' (Archard 2004, 37-45; Holloway and Valentine 2003, 5). This is seen in the ways that children relate to various structures and institutions, including home and family life, as well as organisations specific to their age-groups such as schools, clubs, and sports teams (Ariès 1962, 334-335). This modern conception about childhood involves an understanding about the child as being *shaped for* adulthood. Childhood stands in contrast with adulthood and children are characterised in virtue of what they *lack* in relation to adults.

Emerging conceptions about childhood are different. They take a strengths-based view of the child, understanding the child not as lacking in relation to adults, focusing instead on the strengths and assets that children possess. The difference in emphasis involved in these conceptions indicates a

significant shift in the way that children relate or might relate to their societies, including in the political sphere. As I will show, the strengths-based conception reflects a more accurate understanding about children than the deficit conception and supports an argument for their political inclusion.

Age-based distinctions that exclude children from enfranchisement are arbitrary and constitute ageism towards children. These age-based distinctions are insensitive to the vague distinctions between children and adults and the ambiguity involved in these social concepts. Children and adults are not different in kind or status in a way that justifies children's exclusion. Ageism – arbitrary differential treatment on the basis of age alone – is comparable to other forms of arbitrary differential treatment of social groups, like sexism and racism, though of course has its own unique characteristics. Ageism also applies to members of other age-groups, depending on context. However, the focus of ageism this thesis is in relation to children's experience of ageism in the political context. Children's political exclusion amounts to ageism towards children. Exposing this is the purpose of this chapter.

1.1: Definitions and Vagueness

The terms 'child' and 'adult' are not as easy to define as one might initially think. A seemingly straightforward way to distinguish between children and adults is with age demarcations in law. The law permits different behaviours at different ages, depending on the relevant domain. One must reach a certain age to apply for a driver's licence, purchase land, undertake paid employment, consent to sexual intercourse, among other things. According to the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC), a child is any person younger than 18-years (UN General Assembly 1989). In domestic law, the use of the term 'child' may refer to anyone below the voting age, which is 18-years in most jurisdictions (including New Zealand, Australia, Russia, Somalia, and the United States) and 16-years in some others (such as Argentina, Cuba and Scotland). However, these distinctions do not map on to concrete differences between those who have reached a certain age and those who have not. Making sense of the adult-child distinction is not as straightforward as looking to age-based demarcations.

The terms 'child' and 'adult' are vague. Although we might have clear examples of 'child' and clear examples of 'adult', it is not clear exactly when one ceases to be a child and when one becomes an adult. As such, there are many borderline cases. The sorites paradox captures this problem (adapted from Hyde and Raffman 2018):

- (1) One grain of sand is not a heap. (*Base step*)
- (2) If n grains of sand is not a heap, adding one grain does not make a heap. (*Induction step*)
- (3) Therefore, 1,000,000 grains of sand do not make a heap. (*Conclusion*)

The reasoning results in a falsehood. If I continue to add grains of sand to a non-heap, there will eventually come a time when we describe the collection of grains as a heap. The precise point at which a collection of grains becomes a heap is unclear, even if we can distinguish between *non-heaps* and *heaps* of sand. Any vague predicate can be used to form the paradox, including ‘child’ (Sorensen 2018):

- (1) A one-day-old human being is a child.
- (2) If an n -day-old human being is a child, then that human being is also a child at $n + 1$ -days-old.
- (3) Therefore, a 36,500-day-old human being is a child.

Again, the reasoning looks flawed. At one stage of life, a person might be clearly a child, and at a later stage of life, clearly an adult. However, there is no precise point at which one ceases to be a child and becomes an adult. There are many individuals who do not fit neatly into either category.

That there are vague cases does not mean that there are no clear cases. Green and yellow are distinct colours. That there are greenish-yellows and yellowish-greens does not mean that green and yellow cease to be distinct. It also seems that just because we might observe adultish-children or child-ish-adults, that does not mean that adults and children are not distinct. However, we should not jump to simplify the child-adult case in the way we can for the heap-non-heap or green-yellow cases. People are far more complex than heaps or colours. Of course, there are further distinctions that can be made between the categories of ‘adult’ and ‘child’, including infancy, early childhood, adolescence, and old age, and there is a case to be made that vagueness is inevitable and so should not make us uncomfortable. However, it is whether there really are ‘clear’ cases that I am interested in exploring in this thesis. Understandings about ‘clear’ cases establish the bounds of our concepts, guiding our thinking about what those further distinctions are *measured against*. This paper tests the plausibility of there being clear cases of children and adults at all.

The term ‘child’ is not only vague; it is also ambiguous. A vague term contains *borderline cases* whilst an ambiguous term has *multiple meanings* (ibid). The main properties referred to in distinguishing between childhood and adulthood and therefore ascribing meaning to these terms are: chronological age, biological or physical condition, psychological or mental condition, and behaviour (Balzer 2016, 215). The term ‘child’ might be used to mean ‘immature offspring’, as in, someone who is yet to

achieve biological maturity. ‘Child’ might also refer to ‘offspring’ more generally, as in, every person being a child of someone. A 50-year-old is not an immature offspring but might be described as a ‘child’ if they display ‘immature’ behaviours. If the intended meaning of ‘child’ is ‘immature offspring’, age might tell us whether someone is a child, given that on this meaning a child is someone associated with earlier stages of biological development. However, age fails to tell us about other relevant properties of a person.

Knowing someone’s age only reveals so much. It provides information about how certain *laws* apply to a person, what stage of biological development one is *likely* to have reached or what skills one *possibly* has. Overreliance on likelihoods glosses over experiences outside these bounds. Consider a 5-year-old (Metis) and a 35-year-old (Atlas). Only Atlas can legally vote in national elections but may not have exercised this institutional right. Metis is not eligible to vote in national elections but may have actively voted in school or home contexts. Greater employment restrictions likely apply to Metis than Atlas, though Metis may have a job helping in a restaurant whilst Atlas may be unemployed. The law currently prohibits Metis from buying their own house, though Atlas has not necessarily purchased one either. At 5-years old, Metis is unlikely to be the ruler of a country, though many infants and young children throughout history have occupied rulership status over states. As for their living situations, thirty-five-year-old Atlas might be living at their parents’ home or in permanent palliative care whilst Metis might be homeless or living in an orphanage. It is very unlikely that Metis is pregnant, though children as young as 5-years old have been pregnant and given birth. As such, even references to biological and developmental stages are not totally helpful, for they are unreliable. We cannot be sure that a person has met these developmental norms. Age may correlate with having certain capacities, behaviours, or circumstances, but it does not guarantee them. Intersecting factors like gender, race, class, ability, religion, and sexuality further complicate this picture and establishing characteristic examples of childhood or adulthood looks increasingly difficult.

Age-based distinctions in law do not reflect this vagueness or ambiguity. The law nonetheless treats persons of different ages very differently. Only those who have reached the age of majority can participate in political elections. Where the voting age is set at 18-years, a person who turns 18-years on the day of the election (Albert) is eligible to vote whilst a person who turns 18-years the day after (Frost) is not. Suppose that Albert and Frost are similar in every way other than age. This differential treatment of Albert and Frost is arbitrary. Note that lowering the voting age is not enough to address this problem; any set voting age would face the same issue. Where there is a voting age, there will

always be arbitrary differences between those who have reached the age of majority and those who have not.

Working Definition

Although there are complexities in establishing definitions here, we nonetheless need to establish working definitions for the terms ‘child’ and ‘adult’, in order to make sense of the referents of the discussion. Just because there are issues with clarifying and distinguishing between children and adults does not mean we need do away with these terms, nor do we need to deny the existence of chronological age. We can acknowledge that there are arbitrary age-based distinctions whilst accepting that aging of some kind occurs (though this paper will challenge norms about what ‘aging’ means). For the purposes of this paper, consistently with the UNCRC and many domestic jurisdictions when it comes to voting, I will use the term ‘child’ to refer to those under 18-years and the term ‘adult’ for those 18-years and over, unless specified otherwise. It might seem contrary to the purposes of this paper, to challenge age-based distinctions whilst using such a distinction as a working definition. However, the intention is not to perpetuate ideas of what it is to be a ‘normal child’ or ‘normal adult’. Rather, it is to examine *existing* demarcations and assess their plausibility. Proposing a working definition is required to outline the scope of this discussion but it does not preclude us from applying a critical approach to assess and revise the nature of the concept we are attempting to understand.

1.2: Conceptions about Childhood

In the philosophy of childhood, conceptions about children and childhood are often understood to be contextually dependent on time and place (Matthews and Mullin 2018). The philosophy of childhood literature explores such issues as the change in conceptions about childhood over time, children’s cognitive development, theories about children’s interests and rights, the supposed ‘goods of childhood’, as well as the roles children play in society and the opportunities available to them (ibid). This paper touches on most of these points though focuses mostly on children’s roles and opportunities in the political sphere.

There is no universal experience of childhood. A child may experience anything from extreme affluence, access to adequate material goods and health care, poverty, or conscription into armed con-

flict, among many other things. In their unique domestic and cultural contexts, children may experience a childhood dominated by play, doting love, demand for strict obedience, neglect, or abuse. Children's opportunities and responsibilities also vary according to the relevant domain. Institutional structures and laws prescribe different requirements for treatment of and care for children, including in education and the home. There are different ages at which one can legally have a job, consume alcohol, participate in sexual relations, join the army, and so on. Existing regulations in these domains are debated and contested by children and adults alike.

Throughout the history of philosophy, children have predominantly been discussed in the context of education. Arguments for the appropriate roles and treatment of children depended on the relevant context in which these philosophers were writing. Plato understood children's early experiences as having a significant impact on their development (in Ryan 2012, 58-61). Education should expose children to the 'right' kinds of ideas and each person is to cultivate their natural talents, with those most suitable to receive philosophical training for political rule. In *Emile*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau outlines the kind of education required for one to become a citizen of a republic, advocating active citizenship over a minimalist approach to politics (1979; also see Ryan 2012, 537-553). However, on his view, engaging in reasoning with children compromises their development, a point on which he disagreed with John Locke (in Matthews and Mullin 2018). John Stuart Mill emphasised the importance of children's education, for it harms both children and society if children are released into the world without the ability to support themselves (in Ryan 2012, 719-720). Whilst education remains an important focus in theorising about children, the philosophical literature has expanded to incorporate a critical analysis of childhood more generally.

1.2.1: Ariès' Influence

The idea that conceptions about and attitudes towards childhood change depending on historical and social context was popularised following Philippe Ariès' influential work *Centuries of Childhood* (1962). Ariès spanned the development of these conceptions in a French and British context, from the Middle Ages to the mid-twentieth century. Ariès' work was hugely influential in popularising the idea that understandings about children and childhood are culturally and historically dependent (Matthews and Mullin 2018). This influenced understandings about childhood as not simply a fixed biological category but as a phenomenon to be understood in light of historical and social factors.

Ariès provides evidence in his discussion of children in the Middle Ages. These children, he claims, were regarded as ‘little adults’ rather than a distinct category of person. Children entered adult society, participated in adult institutions, and had adult responsibilities as soon as they were able. According to Ariès, representations of children in medieval literature and art did not show children and adults as occupying a different status. Infants were unable to participate in adult life and simply ‘did not count’, though this did not necessarily amount to their being ignored or mistreated (Ariès 1962, 128). This lack of clear distinction between children and adults meant that the protecting, nurturing, and educating of children were not exercised to the same extent or in the same ways as they are today. Sharper distinctions between adult and child developed from the 17th century onward and from here, the modern conception of the child came to dominate social understandings. Childhood was increasingly distinguished from other stages of life as characterised by dependence. Families, previously living in closer quarters with one another, developed a nuclear structure. Children were increasingly regarded as something in need of special, dedicated protection and nurturing, with concern increasingly centred upon children’s education and welfare. Contemporary regulated education, childcare, and social welfare policies and services build from this conception.

A critical reading of Ariès is advised. Alternative explanations can be provided for some of his claims. It is not necessarily the case that medieval thinkers did not see childhood as a clearly defined stage of life (Shahar 1990, 1). Representations of children in medieval art do not necessarily imply that the child was not regarded as a distinct category of person (ibid, 95). It is also plausible that earlier societies’ beliefs about the differences between the categories ‘adults’ and ‘children’ simply differed from modern conceptions (Archard 2004, 21-24). Attitudes are influenced by social, technological, and living circumstances. Take for example the high mortality rates of children in the Middle Ages. Whilst Ariès could attribute this to a less nurturing attitude towards children, an alternative explanation is available, that being differences in medical knowledge and practice. It is also important to keep in mind the Western context that Ariès works within. For Māori in New Zealand, extended families typically lived together in the vicinity of the marae and community. Following colonisation by European settlers, families became more dispersed and children were more likely to be raised in a nuclear structure (Bird and Drewery 2004, 28). We should therefore be wary of interpreting the changes over time that Ariès describes as universal or inevitable. It would also be an oversimplification to interpret the change in conceptions over time as a continuously improving progression towards children’s protection or care. During the Industrial Revolution, child labour was widespread, with children often

working in far more dangerous conditions than children in earlier periods. Conceptions about children can also differ *within* a society, depending on such factors as one's culture or family life.

The importance of Ariès' work is his emphasising that dominant social understandings about childhood change depending on historical and social circumstances, even if this is not exactly to the extent or detail that he describes. The significance of this approach should not be downplayed. Our conceptions about a subject inform the questions we are able to ask and therefore the information we are able to ascertain about that subject. What we perceive to be contained in the concept 'child' informs what we can find out about children. The takeaway here is that conceptions about children and childhood – understandings about what a child *is* and what this means for their appropriate roles within and relationship to their society – have changed, and are subject to change again. As I argue, emerging strengths-based conceptions about children challenge modern deficit conceptions. The deficit conception about childhood perpetuates an inaccurate view about children and compromises our ability to see children's enfranchisement as justified. A strengths-based approach, one that moves away from thinking about what children lack in relation to adults, allows for a more accurate understanding of children, according to which children's political exclusion clearly constitutes ageism – discrimination on the basis of age – towards children.

1.2.2: Ageism: Childhood as Oppression?

Following Ariès came a stream of child liberationist texts. Children's liberationists latched onto Ariès' analysis of childhood as not simply a biological category but also as socially constructed. According to children's liberationists, children should have the same rights as are available to adults across multiple domains, including to vote (Farson 1974; Holt 1974; Cohen 1980; see Archard 2004, 70-84). The liberationist view is radical and far-reaching; the position is complex and is best analysed domain by domain. This paper supports the liberationist case as far as it applies to the *political* domain: equal institutional rights to vote should be available to adults and children alike.

Children's liberationists argue that ageism negatively impacts children, comparing the exclusion of children from voting and other spheres of life to other forms of oppression based on gender, race, class, disability, sexuality, or religion (Firestone 1970, 104; Farson 1974, 213). Liberationists regarded childhood as oppressive for children, arguing for radical change to societal structures. Oppressive treatment here is understood as discriminatory, prejudicial treatment by and to the arbitrary advantage

of socially dominant groups over others. For Shulamith Firestone, questioning the basic relations between children and adults, just like questioning those of gender, ‘is to take the psychological pattern of dominance-submission to its very roots’ (1970, 40). In this paper, questioning the basic relations between children and adults is to crack open and challenge one of the predominant distinctions that structures our social and political lives.

There are differences between children and other socially oppressed groups. Other marginalised groups tend to possess their discriminated-against properties *permanently* (not always, of course; one might cease to have a health issue for which one was discriminated against, for example). However, childhood, according to age or biological standards, is a *temporary* stage of life. Provided that one eventually reaches the age of majority, political exclusion is not permanent. For those discriminated against due to gender, race, landownership, or other features, exclusion or barriers to inclusion applied to members of these groups regardless of whether they reached a set age. Age excludes people only temporarily; all otherwise eligible people who reach the age of majority are included. However, that something is temporary and applied equally does not serve as justification for its application. Healthcare could temporarily be denied to all people until they reach 18-years; this practice being temporary would not justify the restriction.

One might object that children in modern societies receive extensive protection, nurturing, and education, and so do not seem to live under oppressive conditions at all. However, being protected, nurtured, and educated is not inconsistent with being oppressed. Children might be protected, nurtured, and educated in some ways, but nonetheless be oppressed in the political domain (though arguably, no domain is strictly independent from the political domain). Furthermore, ‘protection’ does not mean an absence of oppression. Concerns with women’s political inclusion included that men had a responsibility to ‘protect’ women, particularly to ensure their reproductive fitness (Koren 2019). Even where we are convinced that our well-intentioned practices constitute ‘good’ or ‘right’ treatment, we are always warranted in digging deeper.

Liberationists emphasised that conceptions and institutions of childhood are *socially constructed*. To apply a social constructionist lens to age and childhood is not to deny that aging occurs or that stages of life exist. Social constructionist rhetoric need not involve rejecting the existence of truth; very often it involves an appeal to truth. A social constructionist lens encourages critique of existing societal

institutions and practices to question whether these could have been or could be otherwise. If someone is a social constructionist about childhood, that person likely believes the following (adapted from Hacking 1999, 6-7, my emphasis):

- (0) In the present state of affairs, childhood is taken for granted; childhood *appears to be inevitable*.
- (1) Childhood, or childhood as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; *it is not inevitable*.
- (2) Childhood is *quite bad* as it is.
- (3) We would be much better off if childhood were done away with, or at least *radically transformed*.

Contemporary conceptions or circumstances of childhood need not have developed in the way that they have; there are problems with the contemporary circumstances of childhood, and these justify transformation. Constructionists are focused on the ‘unmasking of established order’ and its associated norms (ibid, 95). These norms are reinforced in society in a cyclical process: there are societal norms, people behave in accordance with those norms, thereby reinforcing those norms. Existing societal structures designate, prescribe, and reinforce notions about how people *should behave* within their society.

In principle, the circumstances of childhood as enforced by institutional arrangements, such as the voting age or compulsory education, could have been different. Age-based institutions, including nurseries, kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, polytechnics and universities, the adult workforce, and rest homes, could feasibly be otherwise. The contemporary view of children as less competent and developed than their adult counterparts, associated with a deficit conception about childhood, may also be unique to this approximate point in history. Of course, just because something could theoretically be otherwise, that does not make challenging or changing that societal norm simple. Observing that changeable circumstances account for children’s political exclusion does not make changing those circumstances straightforward. The hold that those circumstances have over individuals and institutions is strong.

It is illuminating to study the social constructionist approach alongside biological considerations. Social and biological factors both influence development and the extent to which humans can influence their circumstances. Feminist theorists have explored the extent to which humans are limited by their biological bases (Firestone 1970; Butler 1990). The sexual reproductive organs that one is born with inform the roles that an individual is expected to undertake in society, providing opportunities

for and/or imposing restraints on human beings and the kinds of lives that they can live. A woman's biological function to reproduce has and continues to have influence over the roles she has or is expected to perform in the family, community, and society, regardless of whether a woman desires to have children. Social attitudes about gender and behaviour are informed by and reinforce gender-based expectations and norms. It is not simply the case that sex informs gender but that beliefs about sex are actually *informed by* gendered practices (Butler 1990, 170-179). In *performing* a gendered activity, one is understood as *being of* a particular gender category, and this directly impacts beliefs about one's nature and the kinds of activities it is 'appropriate' for one to participate in more generally. However, despite gendered associations, one's suitability for these activities is not determined by gender. True gender equality could only be brought about by challenging the sex distinction itself (ibid).

I develop this theorising, applying it in the case of children. We can acknowledge the biological and cognitive development that leads from childhood to adulthood whilst still acknowledging that there are aspects of childhood that are socially constructed. One's stage of biological development influences what one is able to do, but this does not exist in isolation from expectations from others or about oneself. Social attitudes about children and childhood are informed by and reinforce age-based expectations and norms. Children's biological features not only inform social understandings about children, but beliefs about children's biology are *also* informed by these social practices. In performing (or not being able or permitted to perform) an age-associated activity, one is understood as belonging to a particular age category, and this directly impacts beliefs about one's nature and the kinds of activities it is 'appropriate' for one to participate in more generally. Children, often it is said, are not at all appropriate candidates for inclusion. And yet it is precisely because children are already excluded that this narrative continues. As I argue throughout this paper, one's suitability for particular activities is not determined by age. In the political sphere, children are inherently limited in their opportunities to challenge beliefs about their appropriateness for political inclusion. Although I focus on the political domain, my argument plausibly applies to other domains as well.

Children's possessing equal institutional rights to vote as adults in the political sphere can only be brought about by challenging the age distinction, or more specifically, questioning *what it means to be a particular age*. Again, this does not involve denying that aging exists, but it does involve challenging associations made between age and appropriate activities applicable to that age. Although we enter the world with the capacity for making normative judgments, one does not enter the world with specific normative values; these develop in a relevant society or context. The normative judgments we make

about what behaviours are appropriate for children to participate in are influenced by that context, but these judgments are subject to change, if we are presented with the relevant evidence and persuasive argument to motivate a shift in our shared norms.

The issue speaks to that question lying at the heart of this thesis: to what extent are our social concepts about people – children and adults – *fixed*, and to what extent are they *malleable*? In describing a child, *what is the nature of the subject* that am I describing? For a relevant subject, what kind of concepts or language am I *justified* in using to represent that subject? These questions have been touched on already, and will continue to be addressed throughout this thesis. The next section illuminates further answers to these questions in discussing emerging strengths-based conceptions that move away from deficit conceptions about children.

1.3: Strengths-Based and Deficit Conceptions

Certain conceptions about childhood have prevailed across societies. Although there have been vast circumstantial changes to the societies in which people live, there are certain features of human beings that have endured. Infants, after all, have always required nurturing to some extent in order to survive, and as such, the belief that children should be nurtured has manifested in societies over time. However, the nature of this nurturing, and what it *means* to nurture a child more generally, has changed and is subject to change again. I demonstrate this by outlining the difference between what I refer to as ‘deficit’ and ‘strengths-based’ conceptions about childhood.

A ‘deficit’ conception about childhood understands children as *lacking* in relation to adults (Matthews 2009). The point of childhood is to *prepare one* for adulthood; childhood itself is not characterised as a stage at which one is regarded as ‘ready’ to participate in social and political life. This can be traced to Aristotle’s discussion about an organism’s ‘final cause’ as being its function upon reaching maturity (see Matthews and Mullin 2018). A child is an immature human organism and develops to become a mature adult human organism. This might sound like a straightforward description of biological development, but the significance for my purposes is in the way that it *frames* the understanding of childhood. On this view, the significance of childhood is primarily in supporting one’s development into a functioning adult. This conception has been influential in informing beliefs about the appropriate treatment of children and the nature of the institutions they engage with. Contemporary social practices devote protection, nurture, and education to children, preparing and shaping them for their adult

life, for which one day they will reach maturity and be ready to participate in. Children are regarded as *becoming* citizens, being *shaped* for life in adulthood. On this understanding, children's political exclusion is justified until they reach the maturity of adulthood. However, notions of nurturing, protecting, and educating children need not be framed in this way.

More recent work in the philosophy of childhood suggests a different understanding. This work is not totally removed from the above conception – nurture, protection, and education of children can still be regarded as important – but the emphasis or framing involves a shift in understanding about children. Emerging 'strengths-based' conceptions about children in the philosophy of childhood regard the child as a human *being* rather than merely becoming, placing importance on the child's own experience, understandings, and agency (Holloway and Valentine 2003; Matthews 2009; Gheaus 2014, 2015). According to this conception, there are possibilities for children 'to renegotiate the flexible boundaries of adulthood and childhood' (Holloway and Valentine 2003, 9). These emerging conceptions challenge the deficit conception about childhood and instead emphasise the child's abilities to *shape* rather than merely be shaped by their world. This is set against a context of rapid technological change, which has already and is likely to lead to further changes to our basic social and political practices as they affect children. This emergent strengths-based understanding, in moving beyond a conception about children as *lacking* in relation to adults, supports the case for children's political enfranchisement.

Note the different ways of understanding the child which are at play. Practices of nurture, protection, and education can be consistent on one hand with the deficit understanding of children as subjects to be *shaped* to develop into a 'mature person'. In this scenario, the bounds of the child's future are dictated by preconceived notions of how one should behave in society. However, the aforementioned practices are also consistent with a strengths-based conception about childhood, as long as these allow the child to be an active participant in *shaping* their world, rather than being merely *shaped by* it. According to the strengths-based conception, children govern their own thinking, rather than have their perspectives be rigidly moulded. A child can and does have their own notion of the good life and critical perspectives on the social and political context that are not necessarily in line with those existing in the adult landscape. As I argue throughout this paper, the strengths-based conception provides a more accurate reflection of children's ways of being than does the deficit conception, and justifies their political inclusion.

There is nothing *strictly* wrong with a preconceived understanding of the good that we work towards. However, regular critical reflection rather than blind adherence is required, to confirm that the relevant understanding is in fact ‘good’. In challenging preconceived notions, one remains open that the ‘good’ is subject to change.

One might wonder what is involved in the development or change of conceptions. There is a complex and intimate relationship between *conceptions about* social phenomena and the *manifestations of* social phenomena. This applies to the relationship between *conceptions about* the child and *manifestations of* and by the child. Whilst conceptions and manifestations can mutually reinforce one another, they are also subject to change. There are many reasons that society and conceptions about people develop and emerge. Biological and evolutionary factors influence the ways that people are and the societies they build. New conceptions emerge in response to world events including shifts in circumstances; developments in empirical evidence, understandings, and technologies; and critical reflection. The interactions between these various factors influence the ways that people behave and the conceptions they hold. Emerging conceptions build on, develop, or discredit previous conceptions, allowing for new understandings or a shift in emphasis about social kinds. In the case of the shift from the deficit conception to the strengths-based conception about childhood, we can cite such influences as improvements in living standards and access to education, the development of technology and its accessibility for children, as well as environmental factors such as the climate crisis and children’s response to this. These factors work together to facilitate the emergence of a strengths-based conception.

Of course, the upbringing of children always involves shaping *to some extent*. Just as living in a society always involves the shaping of the people living in it, one cannot be totally removed from circumstances. The important difference between the deficit and strengths-based conceptions is the extent to which a child is understood as the *kind of being* who is able to shape rather than merely be shaped by their environment. Despite arguments to the contrary, I argue that the child can be understood as the kind of being who is able to shape their environment, including their political context.

1.4: Children and Adults: A Difference in Kind?

Some nonetheless argue that there is a *qualitative* difference between children and adults. According to Tamar Schapiro, the difference between children and adults is not simply one of *degree* but *kind*

(1999). This justifies adults' paternalistic behaviour towards children. Paternalism involves decision-making on the behalf of and intended to be in the interests of another agent, often considered to make the agent better off. I provide a critical assessment and rejection of Schapiro's argument, showing that adults' paternalistic behaviour in the political sphere, that is, adult's political inclusion and children's political exclusion, is not justified on the basis of a difference in kind between children and adults.

Schapiro takes a Kantian perspective. She describes paternalism as '*prima facie* wrong because it involves bypassing the will of another person' (ibid, 730-731). Paternalism, she argues, is not justified by adults *towards other adults*. However, it is justified by adults *towards children*. To make this case, Schapiro outlines the distinction between a pre-political society in the state of nature, and a post-state of nature society in which political authority has been established. The child is likened to a *pre-political society*, for there is no autonomous, authoritative voice that counts as the child's own. The adult, likened to a political society in which authority has been established, is in a position to act according to their own reasons, 'governed by a constitution' in a way the child is not (ibid, 729). Children, Schapiro claims, are not in possession of a self, this being required for one to act autonomously. Children lack the *basic structure* to authoritatively make clear their desires and make their own choices.

To clarify her position, Schapiro draws an analogy between masters and apprentices (ibid). A master, she says, is not simply a *skilled* apprentice. There is a difference in *status* between the master and apprentice and thus a difference in *qualitative kind*. Likewise, the distinction between children and adults is 'one of status' (ibid, 716). Schapiro acknowledges some gradual change from apprentice to master and from younger children to older children, claiming that paternalistic treatment is less appropriate as children grow (ibid, 733). However, an adult is not simply an *older child*. The child and adult are distinct kinds because an adult has developed and cultivated qualities that a child has not.

Schapiro stages the adult as master and child as apprentice, but this conception of the adult is over-idealised. Firstly, her argument inaccurately implies a status distinction between a master and an apprentice. A master is not so far removed from an apprentice. Indeed, a master is someone highly competent at a task, but generally, just like the apprentice, there is still room for the master to improve their skills. A 'master' or highly experienced craftsman still has something to learn in being receptive to others' skills, including those of apprentices. Such an attitude often facilitates a high degree of competency at a task in the first place. Just as masters and apprentices can accommodate the same attitudes and approaches to learning, so too can children and adults. If a similar approach is warranted by both masters and apprentices, it is not clear what substantiates the *status* distinction, given that

‘apprentices’ can possess skills in excess of those of ‘masters’. Secondly, if we assume, for the sake of argument, that there is a status distinction between masters and apprentices, the analogy does not apply to adults and children. This is especially apparent in the political domain. Adults in general are by no means masterful political participants; rather than making the ‘odd mistake’ every now and again, a great many mistakes are made. This helps to explain children and young people’s increased political activism and protest. So far, Schapiro’s argument, especially when applied to the political domain, fails to persuade that adults have mastery status and children do not.

Developing her view in a later paper, Schapiro declines to base the adult-child distinction on grounds of proficiency (2003). On a proficiency account, what matters is whether one is capable of making good choices. However, that account does not succeed in grounding a status distinction between adults and children, since proficiencies are often held by children but lacked by adults. Instead, Schapiro argues for an ‘attributability’ account, according to which what matters is whether one can make their own choices *at all*, which she denies that children are able to do. The attributability account justifies paternalistic action by adults towards children, without justifying it by adults towards other adults. Her approach centres on whether someone is able to ‘govern themselves’ (ibid). An adult is able to govern themselves whereas a child is not, since ‘children are persons, but not full ones’ (ibid). Childhood, she claims, is a condition whereby ‘a person is not yet herself’, in a similar way as depression constitutes a condition whereby ‘a person is no longer herself’ (ibid, 584-585).

Schapiro argues that paternalism is appropriate where the *condition itself* deprives one of the capacity to exercise choice. She describes a friend in a depressive episode who wants to quit her job, arguing that the friend’s deliberative capacities are no longer of her own will (ibid). Paternalistic interference with the friend is not direct interference with *her* because she is *no longer herself*. This is because, Schapiro argues, where depression is an ‘alienating condition’, the ‘attributability between agent and action’ is undermined (ibid). Although depression and childhood are not totally analogous, Schapiro argues that both are cases where action attributability is undermined in this way. For Schapiro, it matters whether an action is someone’s own in the sense of *production* or *authorship* (ibid, 586-589). Production refers to a causal relationship between a subject and an action; authorship involves identifying with and taking responsibility for an action. Children produce actions but are yet to establish constitutions according to which they can be the authors of their own wills. Paternalistic interference is not direct interference with *the child as person* because she is *not yet herself*.

Again, the idealistic strain in Schapiro's argument is clear. Her analysis overstates the features of adults whilst understating those of children (and incidentally, those experiencing depression). If paternalism is justified towards children because they are not able to 'govern themselves', it seems that paternalism is justified towards anyone who is confused about their identity or no longer feels like themselves, regardless of whether they are a child. Mark Schroeder makes a similar point, holding that Schapiro's argument can effectively apply to anyone 'in search of themselves' (2020, 7). Many adults experience these feelings and as such, on Schapiro's own account, paternalism by adults towards other adults (not simply towards children) would be justified in these cases. Furthermore, children who have a very strong sense of direction or self, for instance, those set on a specific career pathway, can be understood as having a will that 'counts as their own'. Consistently with Schapiro's argument, paternalism in such cases would not be justified. Having a 'constituted will' or 'governing oneself' does not depend on being a child or adult, nor is it clear how we are to establish whether someone can be understood as the 'author' of their own actions.

Rather than locating the justifiability of paternalism in a difference in kind between adults and children, Schroeder proposes a *relational* account of paternalism. According to this account, the acceptability of paternalism depends on the nature of the relationship between subjects. Paternalism is justified by parents towards their children because they belong to 'committed, forward-looking relationships of influence' (ibid). Adults do not tend to share with each other the kinds of relationships that parents have with young children and therefore paternalistic action towards them is less justified. Schroeder suggests the possibility of acceptable paternalistic behaviour between adults where such a relationship exists, for instance, between spouses. Such an account overcomes many of the limitations of Schapiro's argument, though I suggest that, on a relational account, the extent of paternalistic behaviour by adults towards other adults may be far more extensive than Schroeder suggests.

There are also flaws in Schapiro's claim that the depressed person 'is no longer herself'. This misrepresents the experience of depression and mental illness for many people. Having depression or being in a 'depressive episode' does not necessarily mean one does not feel or is not themselves. One does not necessarily 'overcome' a depressive episode or mental illness to become fully themselves 'once again'. Managing oneself and one's mental illness is part of one's lived experience and *what it means* to be fully oneself. A depressive episode can be an especially *confronting* experience of the nature of one's reality, rather than an *alienating* one. Childhood may be regarded in the same way, as an especially confronting experience about one's own reality, and not necessarily alienating. There are of

course different kinds or degrees of depressive episodes and some seem more appropriate for interference than others. However, this does not mean that the depressed person is not governing themselves; it means that their behaviour does not accord with what *we want for them*. This more accurately reflects Schroeder's account than Schapiro's account; the relational investment may justify paternalism towards a person, not that the person 'is not themselves'.

This section has refuted that there is a status distinction between children and adults. Schapiro's status account and attributability account do not apply to neatly differentiate children and adults after all. As such, adults' paternalistic activity in and children's exclusion from the political sphere are not justified on the basis of a status distinction.

1.5: Liberation and Habituation

If we suppose, again for the sake of argument, that there is a status distinction between children and adults, this still does not justify paternalism towards children. There is an important point that Schapiro makes which is directly relevant to the strengths-based conception about childhood that I argue for. She claims that children, unlike adults, are yet to be *liberated* from mere 'instinct'. They need governance from adults or 'full persons' who have completed the task of governing themselves (Schapiro 2003, 590). However, I question whether her notion of 'constituting a will' or governing oneself really does amount to *liberation*. Constituting a will plausibly involves *habituation* to a context, *disguised* as liberation. 'Habituation', as I use the term, means familiarity to a context or one's social environment and adapting to that context or environment. Habituation is distinct from 'governing oneself'. It is distinct from developing one's own *authorship* over actions, or one's critical attitude about the world. Growing older involves learning how to *meet expectations*, but this does not mean we have *constituted our own will*. Rather, we have learned to manifest what *appears* to be the exercise of a constituted will, mirroring what we have learned from the apparent exercise of others' wills. On this analysis, the adult habituated to their society may be as vulnerable to instinct as Schapiro claims the child to be. It is the critical attitude that matters for authorising one's actions and governing oneself; this may manifest in adults, but it does not necessarily. Where the critical attitude is present in the child or the adult, they can be understood as liberated.

One might object, identifying a child's lack of understanding of social norms with some lack of incompetence, perhaps due to lack of experience. In saying 'social norms', or 'socially accepted norms',

I refer to those shared beliefs about appropriate behaviours (for instance, table etiquette, or actions deemed morally right or wrong) held as true or followed by the majority of or dominant agents in a social context. For something to be a norm, it does not require all people in that context to believe it; it is enough that it sufficiently permeates the culture, dominant conceptions, and therefore the structures within that society.

Lack of familiarity with social norms, I argue, need not be framed as a lack of competence. Adulthood is not necessarily liberating *precisely because of* the nature of what is involved in this process of habituation. Often our ‘own will’ involves adaptation to existing structures that we have learned to interpret as authoritative. There are therefore many aspects of adulthood that can be understood as the *opposite* of liberating. Something like the economic ‘independence’ achieved in adulthood may at first glance be interpreted as part of ‘governing oneself’. However, this economic ‘governing of self’ can be interpreted alternatively as adapting to a system of wage slavery that one has habituated to and normalised throughout their upbringing. The child has not yet habituated to their society and is therefore in a unique epistemic position to critique the world that they have not yet adapted to. The purpose of describing this phenomenon is not to reject the role that adults can play in raising children, but to reflect on the nature and extent of that authority. This is also not a denial that many adults are competent critical thinkers, challenging the contexts to which they are habituated. It simply allows us to emphasise that children are in a unique position to critically reflect on their social context. If there is a difference in status between children and adults, this is due to children’s lack of habituation to the world. This lack of habituation is not a deficiency and does not justify children’s exclusion.

It would be a mistake to lump this discussion with an argument against the process of learning and development. A human being is learning and developing throughout their lifetime. Rather, I emphasise that the learning associated with development, whilst often facilitating the acquisition of new skills, often comes at the cost of some other skills, dimming or snuffing out some competencies and ways of thinking that already exist or have potential to develop. Persisting belief in the supposed bounds of what it is to be a child makes it very difficult to challenge certain norms. It is appropriate to routinely assess habituated beliefs, norms, and practices against the offerings of the child.

Recall that the nature of one’s ‘status’ matters in the political sphere. Voting denotes a social and political status; one is recognised as a citizen in equal standing with every other citizen. Voting rights therefore institutionally formalise a kind of equal status between people, facilitating its impacting other

spheres of social and political life. Again, to be disenfranchised is to signify political inferiority relative to those who are enfranchised. This asymmetry relationship permeates through all aspects of social interaction, culminating in deficit conceptions and notions of inferiority directed at those excluded. A voting age implies a difference in status that justifies exclusion when there is no difference to substantiate this, other than age. This constitutes ageism towards children. As I have argued, there is no difference in status or kind between children and adults such that justifies children's exclusion.

So far, we have established that the distinctions between adults and children are not as clear as we might have initially thought, that conceptions about childhood and children have changed over time and are subject to change again, and that children are not different in kind or status from adults in ways that justify children's exclusion. Consistently with emerging strengths-based conceptions about children that more accurately reflect children's ways of being, children's enfranchisement is justified.

Chapter 2

COMPETENCY AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

A child does not know that it is harder to remove the moon from the heavens than a picture from a wall!

(Lem 1981, 145)

On a strengths-based conception about childhood, children are better understood as human *beings*, who are not merely shaped by the world but participate in shaping it. This involves a shift away from deficit conceptions, according to which children are regarded as human *becomings*, being shaped to fill the roles already laid out for them. I favour the strengths-based conception. Making an argument for children's competencies is key to making this case. In this chapter, I provide evidence and argument to substantiate the claim that children's exclusion is arbitrary. Children meet *existing* and *desirable* standards for political inclusion. I also develop my argument for a broader understanding of competency and development, demonstrating how children's perspectives can contribute to good political decision-making in a system where this involves an openness to change rather than merely perpetuating the status quo.

One might wonder why competency standards should be considered good grounds for political eligibility at all. Enfranchisement rights could alternatively be based on some notion of rights or human rights theory, for instance. However, such an argument would not persuade those who regard children as unsuitable for inclusion primarily because of their perceived incompetency relative to adults (for a critique of this point, see Munn 2018; Hinze 2019). A persuasive case for children's inclusion therefore will show that children successfully meet existing and desirable standards for political participation. The strengths-based conception about children that I argue for, unlike the deficit conception, allows us to see children's perspectives in this way. Age-based distinctions that prohibit children's inclusion blind us to seeing these strengths.

2.1: Age and Political Participation

Age-based distinctions in law have a powerful bearing over the structure of people's lives and the kinds of activities in which they can participate. These distinctions prescribe the opportunities available and responsibilities attributed to people in society, including whether one can stay at home alone, apply for a driver's or pilot's licence, or consent to sexual relations. The age at which one can legally vote varies across legal systems but is most commonly 18-years, though ranges from 16-years in some jurisdictions to 20-years or 21-years in some others. The political sphere is an appropriate context in which to discuss age-distinctions. In this sphere, ageism towards children is clear, given the nature of the legal requirements for voting, which in terms of competency are extremely minimal.

Children are not the only social group to have experienced disenfranchisement. In New Zealand's first political elections, Māori could *technically* vote, though property ownership restrictions disproportionately affected and in practice excluded many Māori (Constitution Act 1852). In 1893, New Zealand became the first nation where women were eligible to vote. Aboriginal Australians were denied voting eligibility until the 1960's (Electoral Act 1962). Onerous institutional barriers to enfranchisement applied to African Americans until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. In all these cases (there are many others), the ramifications of these exclusionary practices still hold today. Restrictions on political eligibility continue to apply to those incarcerated in prison; those in certain kinds of medical care; non-citizens and non-permanent residents – and those yet to reach the age of majority.

There have been recent moves for children and young people's political inclusion. In New Zealand, the Children's Commissioner advocates lowering the voting age to 16-years and shares this goal with the youth-led *Make it 16* campaign. In the literature, some have argued for an age of majority as young as 6-years (Runciman in Weaver 2018). Others have argued against a minimum voting age at all, arguing for eligibility through a procedural test (Munn 2012a, 2014; Cook 2013). Including children would mean that children and young people could challenge issues about which they already protest and that directly affect them, such as climate change and gun violence in schools (see Wood and Munn 2018). Despite these recent moves and arguments, there remains opposition to lowering the voting age, including the 2020 ruling against lowering the voting age to 16-years in New Zealand (Wellington Higher Courts 2020). Children's and young people's political exclusion persists, even though their inclusion would be straightforward to implement.

2.2: Feasibility of Including Children

Children's inclusion is feasible to implement and can be incorporated as part of existing processes. Competency-testing is not required. Competency-testing is the kind of process favoured in an epistocracy, in which political decision-making is restricted to citizens possessing relevant levels of knowledge or expertise. A competency test could resemble an IQ test that prospective voters are required to sit, with those passing the test or demonstrating an adequate level of competency being eligible for participation. Just as one must pass a test to obtain a driver's licence, a prospective voter could be required to pass a test to be eligible to participate. This test could feasibly be available to anyone regardless of age, with those passing the test being included whilst those who do not pass being excluded.

Competency testing has been criticised as arbitrary, prejudicial, discriminatory, and elitist (see Hinze 2019, 290). The challenges involved in trying to establish someone's reasoning abilities, understanding of election context, or the significance of political issues would risk discriminatory practice not unlike the literacy assessments used in the 20th century to exclude African American voters in the United States, prior to the passing of the Civil Rights Act 1964 and Voting Rights Act 1965. Competency testing risks corruption, abuse of power, and prejudicial bias by those who design and administer the test towards groups against which there is prejudice and discrimination, or who are disproportionately affected due to demographic reasons, socioeconomic disadvantage, or lack of conformity to dominant cultural views.

One might argue that very minimal, procedural competency testing is appropriate (Munn 2012a, 2014; Cook 2013). We can invoke thick and thin conceptions of political competence (Cook 2013, 450-456). A thick notion of political competence is *substantive* and would test for comprehensive knowledge about political parties and institutions and perhaps an understanding of such ideals as freedom and justice (ibid). A thinner notion could involve a *procedural* test of 'minimal electoral competence', excluding only those who could not, say, write out their personal details, sign a form, or tick a box (ibid). Competency-testing therefore need not be onerous. A person could register when they can 'form and express the intent to participate' (Hinze 2019, 299) at whatever time they like, through some process of registration (Cook 2013). Compared to a minimum voting age, Philip Cook argues, even though procedural testing may have *some* negative impact on children's self-esteem, it would be *less harmful* (ibid, 455). However, although a minimal competency test is preferable to a maximal one, it does not escape criticism.

Even a minimal competency standard faces the charge of discrimination. Someone with a learning or physical disability may be unfairly compromised in making the appropriate mark or selection in their competency assessment, however minimal procedural requirements may be. One can imagine cases where one is turned away, shamed, or humiliated for failing to pass the minimal competency test. Even anonymous eligibility-testing would still have potentially long-term negative impact on self-esteem for reasons that may be to do with limitations of the voting system itself rather than of the relevant person. If we could ensure that the minimal standard was absent of discriminatory practice, we might be inclined to favour it, but it is not at all clear how this could be done.

One proposed way to get around this is through a mix of competency testing and global inclusion. Passing a capacity test could be required for those under the age of majority to participate, whilst voting rights remain available to all those who have reached the age of majority (Munn 2012a). Those who have not reached this age could attempt a minimal competency test to determine whether they meet the relevant standard. This would overcome concerns about permanent exclusion for failing to meet competency criteria (ibid). However, this does not escape the potential costs of procedural testing already discussed.

The best option is abolishing the voting age without imposing requirements for testing. This is not only straightforward but also escapes charges of arbitrariness and discrimination. Children, or any citizen or permanent resident, can be automatically included in the relevant electorate. One might object that many children will make mistakes, marking their ballot incorrectly, for instance, by selecting two options where only one is permitted, making their vote void. This is of little concern. Void votes, whether made by children or adults, simply do not count. One might nonetheless raise concern with children selecting a ‘bad’ option or an option that they did not intend to select. In such a case, we can understand these votes cast as at worst random; the distribution of random votes across options is likely to be equally distributed, on average (Munn 2018, 606-608). The mistakes one might be most concerned with children making would also not be made uniquely by children; they are already made by those already enfranchised.

Children’s inclusion also provides an opportunity to reflect on the nature of political methods more generally. The voting system itself could work differently and need not involve, simply, the marking or indicating a preference for a specific candidate or party. It could instead involve selecting a preferred hierarchy of issues according to which resources are allocated. Democracy could even

occur *without* voting in regular elections, involving generating registered preferences upon enrolment, alterable at any time (Munn 2019). Voting could also be more responsive to different participatory needs. If we really want to overcome arbitrary practices, alternatives that are responsive to different modes of participation should be encouraged, such as those that help overcome ableist practices, and methods that are responsive to diverse learning needs. The benefits to making such changes would be far-reaching, accruing not only to children but also to those already enfranchised for whom current practices present a barrier or do not accommodate.

It is worth speculating on the possible implications of this discussion in compulsory voting contexts. There is inevitable arbitrariness in a compulsory voting age, and as such I do not argue for it. Nonetheless, I propose how it could be made consistent with my argument. Without an age of majority, it is unclear how compulsory voting could feasibly work (consider newborns, for example). Although this thesis rejects arbitrary age-distinctions, an age from which voting is compulsory is nonetheless appropriate in a compulsory voting context. This is still consistent with my argument against a minimum voting age, since in the compulsory voting context, what I propose it is not *inherently exclusionary*. Even if voting is compulsory from a set age, one still has the option to vote beforehand, even if one has not reached the relevant age. This is similar to the political context in Brazil, where voting is compulsory for those within an age bracket (18-70-years), whilst optional for those outside it, as long as they have reached 16-years. My view is distinct in that one can vote at *any* age, if one is interested and able to do so.

Even if we regard age-based distinctions as *arbitrary*, we might nonetheless attempt to justify them for reasons of *efficiency*. However, efficiency alone is not a persuasive justification for a practice. Other efficient but arbitrary standards could be used to determine eligibility. Suppose eligibility was determined by height, a point also raised by Jakob Hinze (2019, 292). Suppose that only those 5-foot and taller are permitted to vote. Just as it is simple to administer age restrictions, it would also be relatively simple to administer height restrictions. Whilst one could argue that age has some statistical correlation with perceived (adult-centric) notions of political competency, the same could be said of height. Nonetheless, such a system, just like the age-distinction, would also involve the arbitrary exclusion of otherwise eligible candidates. Efficiency is not a reason to maintain an arbitrary, exclusionary system. To overcome arbitrariness and establish standards that justify inclusion, we need standards that map onto

the domain in question. Efficiency is nonetheless a virtue, and my arguments still allow for an efficient system – one that does not arbitrarily discriminate on the basis of age.

Again, *age* is not what matters for political participation. Just as 60-year-old voting for the first time requires guidance on the process of voting, so would a child. It does not mean that neither should vote just because they are unfamiliar with the process, or because they require initial support to facilitate their participation. Neither need have their competency ‘tested’. As such, children can feasibly be included in existing systems, and the proposed changes to political participation outlined would benefit adults and children alike. Granted, what is being tested for by many of the procedural tests proposed is the very ability to participate. Still, these tests do not escape charges of discrimination and arbitrariness. The implication of age-distinctions is ageism; the implication of procedural testing is discrimination. These potential costs outweigh the benefits of the kind of efficiency that is facilitated by a voting age or procedural test.

Interests and Participation

One might argue that children and young people simply do not express adequate interest in politics and therefore there is little point in their having the right to political participation (Chan and Clayton 2006, 542). However, children’s political activity and activism suggests that there are plenty of young people who are interested in participating. Even if it *were* the case that children are uninterested in participation, this does not justify withholding the right to participation, since those already enfranchised are not required to *be interested in* politics to participate.

Being interested in politics is different from *having interests* in political outcomes. Many subjects *have interests* in political decisions who nonetheless cannot actively participate in current democratic methods. This includes infants, the severely cognitively impaired, those in permanently vegetative states, animals, and the environment. Although these subjects are unable to participate in political decision-making, they still are affected by and therefore have interests in political decisions. There are complications if we say that having interests in political outcomes grants the right to participate. There seems little point in one having the right to vote if one cannot act on it. One option is surrogate voting, where a selected representative casts a vote on behalf of someone who cannot participate. It is beyond

the scope of this paper to extensively explore surrogate voting. I nonetheless make some brief comments about what my account might mean for those who have interests in the outcomes of political decision-making but nonetheless lack the ability to participate in current methods.

An argument for anyone to have the institutional right to participate, even if they cannot act on it, could in theory be extremely inclusive. It is worth questioning the extent to which this is an issue. If someone cannot exercise the institutional right, there is *no reason to be concerned* with them having it. A right to exercise freedom of speech is not *prohibited* to those who have not developed or cannot develop language ability. They simply do not exercise it. One-month-old infants cannot walk, but they are not *excluded or prohibited* from walking. They just cannot perform the task yet. The same goes for political participation; many could feasibly have the institutional right to participate, even if they cannot exercise it. The prohibition is unnecessary; the institutional right is acted on if and when the subject expresses the interest and ability to pursue that activity. Age alone will not determine one's developing this interest and ability.

Global inclusion would plausibly extend beyond human beings. It is unclear why humans alone should have their interests represented (see Goodin 2007 for work on all-affected interests). Many animals have competencies that match or exceed those of infants, very young children, the severely cognitively impaired, and those in permanently vegetative states. Theoretically speaking, every animal could have their interests represented, unless humans are understood to be unique in ways that justify the exclusion of other species. Humans are arguably unique in virtue of the kinds of societies they operate in, differing from non-human societies both in extent and complexity. It is true that complex social practices exist in non-human societies. We might even consider some of those practices democratic. Still, it seems that meerkats could not make much sense of our voting system, much as we would struggle to participate in meerkat decision-making about foraging. Political activity of this kind is just not something we *share in common* with non-human animals, though possibly we share it with unencountered extraterrestrial species.

We can imagine more inclusive methods of participation. We might imagine ways to include meerkats in shared decision making, or ways in which to elicit a baby's preference, for instance, by inferring their immediate likes and dislikes. I do not disagree that this is a possible method of political inclusion, and it is fair to question why we should focus on existing practices rather than create new ones, if we commit fully to challenging arbitrary practices and boundaries. A failure to include those who we consider unable to participate may signify the failing or narrowness of the political system itself. For

one who possesses a conception of themselves and their interests as inextricably connected to the environment, present modes of participation may nonetheless not be in tension with the interests of beings who are unable to participate. This concept is not new by any means; many Māori, for instance, view their environment as intrinsically connected to their identity and do not consider themselves separate from it. This thesis lacks space to commit the attention that this subject deserves, so I leave that important discussion for another paper. The focus here is children's eligibility in existing political processes, whilst leaving open and encouraging different ways to imagine the political landscape.

2.3: Existing Standards for Political Participation

Age-based standards for political participation are arbitrary and constitute ageism towards children. However, appealing to arbitrariness alone is unpersuasive. An arbitrary standard applied to everybody in the same way is still, in some sense, fair. To develop a more persuasive case for children's inclusion, we need to show how this arbitrariness supports a case for abolishing the voting age. To illustrate the nature and severity of this arbitrariness, I show how children meet and exceed existing participation standards.

Children's competence or supposed lack thereof is the main reason that children's disenfranchisement is believed to be justified (for critique of this point, see Munn 2018; Hinze 2019). Reaching the age of majority is regarded as a kind of symbolic signifier that one has reached an appropriate level of competency to participate. However, children and young people, it is argued, lack various cognitive abilities required for participation such as critical thinking, political knowledge, and maturity (see Wood and Munn 2018 for a critique). This includes supposed inferior abilities to access and understand information, appreciate the significance of situations and consequences, make their own decisions and meet their own desires, and a lack of stability of belief (Archard 2018). Children are also regarded as easily subject to coercion by others in their lives, including teachers, parents, and friends. Finding support for the widespread belief in children's lack of competency does not require intensive research. As Richard Farson puts it, '[i]f one were trying to eliminate all of the demeaning references to children in literature it becomes immediately clear just how impossible the task of book burning would become' (1974, 87).

Concerns about whether children successfully meet competency standards for political participation should dissipate in the face of existing requirements. Existing standards for political participation

are very minimal, requiring the ability to indicate preferences for parties or candidates on a ballot, an activity that most children are able to do. Voters are not required to have the ability to read or possess language fluency. As Nicholas Munn explains, *ideal* conceptions of capacity are invoked to defend current exclusionary practices, even though modern democratic states only employ *minimal* capacity requirements (2018, 604). In the political domain, children's exclusion is therefore based on expectations that exceed standards actually applicable to those already enfranchised. This is highlighted further when explored in light of children's treatment in other domains.

Inconsistent Treatment Across Domains

Children's political exclusion is inconsistent with their treatment in other domains. In New Zealand, children at 10-years in New Zealand can be held criminally liable, including for murder, provided that they understand 'the act or omission was wrong or that it was contrary to law' (Crimes Act 1961, s 22). In the criminal system, a young person judged 'capable' will face more severe penalties than one deemed 'incapable' (Munn 2016, 60). Children's views are taken into account regarding their own medical treatment (*ibid*). Autonomous agents have the right to refuse medical treatment, unless the patient is judged incompetent to make the relevant decision. However, regardless of competency, one is only eligible to vote if one has reached the age of majority.

Existing standards for political participation for those already enfranchised are far lower than those standards applied to children in the medical and criminal domains. Of course, we can understand all domains as 'political' in some way, but here I refer specifically to voting in discussing the political domain. If there are significant differences between these domains, this differential treatment may be warranted. It is true that there are substantial consequences in allocating responsibility in these other domains (Munn 2016, 58). The medical treatment one receives bears on one's lifelong health and can be the difference between life and death. Punishment and response to criminal activity can significantly impact someone's life opportunities and long-term prospects. For political participation, if one believes that a single vote does not matter all that much, consequences can be considered comparatively insignificant. On this view, the stakes involved for an individual in the medical and criminal domains arguably support *more stringent* requirements for those domains than in the political context (*ibid*). However, the opposite is true.

One might argue that the competency standard should be *higher* for politics than for these other domains. In the medical domain, one's choices impact *oneself* and those with whom one shares close relationships. In the criminal domain, the impact of one's behaviour depends on the crime, but is often restricted to a small social sphere relative to the general population. In political decision-making, decisions can impact the entire population or significant proportions of it. Surely, it matters for political decision-making that one can appreciate the impact of one's decision, since it affects not only oneself but others on a large scale. Although this might be a *desirable* feature for a political participant to possess, it is not required that adults demonstrate this capacity or vote in ways that demonstrate an ability to appreciate the consequences of one's decision. In fact, many of those currently included intentionally make decisions that undermine the voting system, either by casting uninformed votes or deliberately voting for 'bad' candidates with poor policy options. Age-based distinctions do not succeed in overcoming this issue.

The qualitative differences between the medical and criminal domains and the political domain may be sufficiently different to justify differential treatment of children across these domains. However, the standards applied to persons *within those domains* should not be arbitrary. In the case of enfranchisement, children meet existing standards but are nonetheless denied these rights to political participation. Age-based distinctions as they apply to enfranchisement are arbitrary and constitute ageism towards children, and as such, should be abolished.

Arguments against children's enfranchisement due to their supposed lack of competency are also vulnerable to the objection that this would exclude other members of the population (see Lau 2012). The elderly experience cognitive decline associated with normal aging, and as such children may possess greater competencies than some elderly persons (Andrews-Hanna et al 2007). There is a trade-off of sorts between the amount of information we can process quickly and accurately compared to the advantages from experience acquired over a lifetime. Communication between brain cells and 'arborisation' are less effective over time, though experience can assist decision-making even if information may be processed more slowly. Older people are less prepared to change strategies where there is a change in circumstance (Denburg et al 2007). This helps to explain why some older people are less ready to adapt to problems with innovative solutions, preferring 'tried and tested' methods, than young people. Brain health is nonetheless impacted by lifestyle factors and the extent of cognitive decline from pure aging, *independently* of lifestyle factors or brain disease, is unclear. We can maintain that the

elderly provide valuable insights for solving some problems, whilst acknowledging that their skills may not be optimal for solving *every* problem. Different political participants provide different decision-making skills. Furthermore, adults simply may not be in an epistemic or temporal position to make certain judgments or express the same degree of concern to motivate action as children, even when they have the same information available.

2.4: Desirable Standards for Political Participation

Children meet existing standards for political participation but also many *desirable* standards as well. I make this case with reference to considerations regarding decision-making capacities, development, and social competency. Children's inclusion contributes to good political decision-making, especially when this involves an openness to change rather than merely perpetuating the status quo.

Collective Competence

If we take it that there are 'better' and 'worse' political decisions, the collective competency of the electorate matters. According to Condorcet's Jury Theorem, as long as individuals are *better than average* at making correct decisions, the people as a collective are *very likely* to reach correct decisions (see List and Goodin 2001; Swift 2006, 213-217). If individuals are *worse than average* at making correct decisions, the people as a collective are *very unlikely* to reach correct decisions. People need not be experts on issues, they need only be overall better rather than worse at making correct decisions. Including children may therefore *improve* collective competence, as long as the electorate remains, on average, better than average at making correct decisions. Consistently with the theorem, this could occur even if children are judged 'incompetent'. As long as the *majority* of voters are better than average at making correct decisions, adding less competent voters will still improve outcomes, regardless of the set age (Cook 2013, 449; Hinze 2019, 288-29). Still, children make up a significant proportion of the population. In New Zealand, there are over 1.1 million people under 18-years, making up 23% of the total population (Children's Commissioner 2020, 4). Children's inclusion could therefore have a significant impact on collective competency. A persuasive case for children's inclusion will show that children meet existing and desirable participation standards and as such will contribute towards a collectively competent electorate. I make this case throughout the rest of this chapter.

2.4.1: Competency and Decision-Making

‘Competency’ refers to the possession of skills across a range of domains, including cognitive, social, emotional, spatial, musical, or other abilities. In the philosophical literature, the terms ‘competency’ and ‘capacity’ are often used interchangeably, and I will use them as such (Hawkins and Charland 2020). The education literature spells out a more specific usage of these terms (see Hipkins 2013), but I will stick with the usage in the philosophical domain.² Different competencies are required for different activities and not all competencies are required for voting. Being a competent voter does not require one to be a master physicist or poet, for instance. Still, any competency can be informative for political decision-making.

Decision-making is central to political competency. A ‘decisional capacity’ is the ability to make decisions or choose between options, to engage in reasoning to make a selection (Hawkins and Charland 2020). Different considerations matter in making decisions about what games to play, whether to go to school, who to marry, or casting a vote. In the political context, the ‘decisional capacity’ is the ability to make decisions in or about the political sphere. This could be about what representative to elect, what policy is preferred, or what community projects to invest in. When it comes to political decision-making, we might care about decisions that are best for the environment, decisions that distribute wealth most equitably, or policies that support business growth. We perhaps want to balance all these considerations.

Whether we judge someone to be competent may turn on whether we have a *minimal* or *maximal* understanding of competency (Matthews and Mullin 2018). Consider capacities for rationality. Minimal or weak rationality would involve very basic decision-making abilities whilst maximal or strong rationality would require the capacity for more complex decision-making based on comprehensive knowledge and experience (Archard 2004, 89). In a political context, the capacities involved in marking a ballot are quite minimal whereas the capacities involved in understanding policies, alternatives, and their implications are much more demanding.

² According to Martha Nussbaum’s ‘capabilities approach’, two things are required for someone to have a capability (2000, 84-85). A person firstly needs ‘internal capabilities’, a person’s own developed states required for performing certain activities. Secondly, appropriate external conditions must be met for one to act on these capabilities. Both conditions must be met. I do not use Nussbaum’s framing but note an opportunity to connect the arguments of this paper with her approach in future work.

Children may easily meet minimal competency requirements; concerns are more likely to be expressed about whether they meet more maximal requirements. One might think that children fail to appreciate the significance of their vote, in the sense of understanding how it affects themselves and other people. Children are also regarded as lacking information, experience, cognitive maturity, critical reflection abilities, and the stable beliefs considered important for good decision-making (Levinson 1999; Ross 1998). However, these concerns are unfairly charged against children. Many adults plausibly do not ‘appreciate the significance’ of their vote, voting naïvely, selfishly or with a lack of empathy or understanding about the impact of their decision on others. We should also question the importance of stable attitudes in a time when available information, evidence and technology change so frequently. In such a context, a lack of stability of belief can be understood as a strength. Children have extensive access to information to support their decision-making, often possessing strong competency in navigating technology compared to many adults (Holloway and Valentine 2003). Experience and cognitive maturity can be advantageous but are also associated with lack of adaptability, with younger people more likely than older people to change strategy when practices no longer seem effective, whilst older people are more likely to continue to employ tried and tested methods (Denburg et al 2007). Children and young people’s greater flexibility to propose new ideas would likely be beneficial in addressing issues for which many believe timely and innovative solutions are required, such as climate change. These critical thinking abilities clearly translate in children’s involvement in political activities that are critical of the status quo.

Children also possess competencies which one might be used to associating solely with adults. According to Laura Purdy, acting according to one’s own or others’ interests requires, on top of basic reasoning abilities, ‘a *good stock* of general background knowledge as well as certain *hard-earned* character traits’ (1992, 215, my emphasis). Purdy argues that children do not possess either of these things. This is clearly not true. Many children have a good stock of general knowledge, including literature, science and mathematics knowledge, possibly acquired through education at school or at home. For many adults, the knowledge acquired in early school or home life ceases to be front of mind. Of course, they have likely acquired general knowledge of a different kind, which is no less valuable. However, it is not true that general knowledge acquired later in life is better or more useful for decision-making than general knowledge held at a younger age. It is arbitrary to say that one stock of knowledge is better than another, just because it is held at a different stage of life. A child may also have developed hard-earned character traits exemplified, for instance, in their dedication to various activities like practising piano, playing in their football team, or showing regular support to their friends and family. Applying

this to the present discussion, children have the ability to show commitment to good decision-making in the political sphere. This does not justify the political exclusion of those already enfranchised who lack a ‘good stock’ of knowledge or ‘hard-earned character traits’, but appealing to a lack of such traits to exclude children constitutes ageism towards children.

There is evidence of even very young children engaging not only in short-term decision-making but long-term decision-making as well. In the ‘marshmallow task’, children can eat a marshmallow immediately or save it for a later time (Mischel 1974; Shoda et al 1990). Whether children demonstrate ‘delayed gratification’ depends on children’s considerations about the reliability of their environment in a rational decision-making process (Kidd et al 2013). As such, a child’s ability to wait reflects ‘reasoned beliefs about whether waiting would ultimately pay off’ and how stable the world is (ibid). Children and adults alike who believe that the world is not a stable place are less likely to show delayed gratification, influenced by circumstantial considerations such as financial stability. Since resources are less reliable where there is financial insecurity, waiting comes with a risk, given that one cannot rely on resources being there later on (Watts et al 2018). Whether waiting and exercising ‘self-control’ is a mark of competent decision-making depends on what makes sense to us in our relevant environment. Making long-term or short-term decisions can each be expressions of competent decision-making, depending on one’s circumstances. Children who do not demonstrate delayed gratification need not be framed according to deficit conceptions about abilities they purportedly lack. The child’s behaviour may manifest according to what is, upon reflection, a well-reasoned position, in line with the strengths-based conception.

2.4.2: Development

In this section, I provide a brief overview of children’s development, providing further evidence that children meet competencies desirable for political participation. I apply a critical lens to this evidence, assessing the nature of the frame through which we view children’s development in the first place. Human development is complex, influenced by biological and environmental factors – one’s genetics, background, experiences, culture and relationships – and their interactions with one another. Understandings about development differ across cultures and as such, particular developmental theories will not reflect the beliefs of every cultural group (Bird and Drewery 2004). It is important to keep this in mind throughout this discussion.

Developmental psychology studies the changes that occur in people over time (Matthews 2009, 168). Developmental stage theory proposes that development occurs ‘in age-related stages of clearly identifiable *structural* change’ (Matthews and Mullin 2018) and evidence of stage theory has been found in sources as early as the Middle Ages (Shahar 1990, 21-31). Jean Piaget was notably significant in being the first to develop a more sophisticated stage theory and his writings became paradigmatic for 20th century conceptions about childhood (see Piaget 1929, 1965; Matthews and Mullin 2018). Piaget proposed that childhood exists in four age-defined stages according to which each child develops: the sensorimotor stage (0-2-years), the preoperational stage (2-7-years), the concrete-operational stage (7-11-years), and the formal-operational stage (11-years onward).

The notion of defined stages of development determined by biology and age has been highly disputed (Green 2017, 37-38). Human development is far more complex than an individual passing through neatly defined stages. Evidence for many competencies been found in children earlier than Piaget proposed. A good example of this is critical and abstract thinking. Although Piaget did not think that the capacity to think abstractly was found until 11-years onward, children at the preoperational stage demonstrate abstract, philosophical thinking, including epistemological inquiry (Matthews 1994, 2009; Green 2017). The literature documents the positive impact of children’s engaging in collaborative philosophical method on their abilities in critical reasoning, logic, reading comprehension, and social and emotional intelligence, among others (Barrow 2015; Lipman 2008; Topping and Trickey 2004, 2014). Children engaging in philosophy often make connections to the practical (including social and political) implications of the discussions in which they participate. Many children who have practised philosophical enquiry will have critical abilities exceeding those of adults who have not practised critical thinking. If critical thinking is valuable for political participation, some children will have very strong abilities whilst some adults will not.

It is not enough to know someone’s age to know whether they have a certain competency. One’s environment must also support the ability to cultivate the relevant competency. This more closely reflects Lev Vygotsky’s theory of cognitive development as heavily dependent on social interaction (see Green 2017, 41-43). Whilst Piaget’s view of cognitive development was considered to apply universally, Vygotsky emphasised how this varies depending on culture and context. As such, Piaget’s focus on individual development is only part of the developmental puzzle.

An emphasis on *individual* development, whilst prevalent in Western literature, is not the only developmental framework. For Māori, the individual is understood in the context of strong connections to community, ancestors, and genealogy. The child is part of a family and community network and as such the appropriate developmental unit goes beyond the individual (Bird and Drewery 2004, 28-33). Features of development such as social and emotional abilities, motor skills, and cognitive thinking are understood as holistically connected as part of these networks. This marks a significant shift in emphasis away from the individual as the sole locus of development, strengthening our understanding of competency acquisition through the social connections and networks that people exist in.

2.4.3: Social Competency

Political decision-making involves making choices that impact oneself and others. Social and emotional competency, including abilities for empathy and prosocial behaviour, are also desirable standards for political participants to meet. The roots of these competencies are evident in very young children. People's understanding themselves as situated in social standing with others has its origins in infancy (see Wagner 2019). Infants understand that others can perceive, hold attention, have goals and intentions, and possess ignorant or false beliefs (ibid). Infants at 9-months show more patience when an adult is *unable* rather than unwilling to provide them with a toy (Behne et al 2005). If understanding oneself as living in a context with others matters for political competency, one's capacity for this is present from the outset. This can be acted on in the political context from when one expresses the interest and ability to participate.

It is one thing to have an innate ability, quite another to act on it. Empirical evidence supports that children demonstrate altruistic, prosocial behaviour and consider other people's interests, with helping behaviour seen in children as young as 14-months (Warneken and Tomasello 2007; Martin et al 2016). From early childhood, children's prosocial responses clearly manifest where tasks involve a clear goal such as picking up a dropped item or warning others when an item does not align with meeting their goal (Martin and Olson 2013). Children also consider consequences that may follow from helping. They do not simply follow rules or respond to explicit requests but make their own judgments, considering multiple factors in helping and communicating with others. Very young children demonstrate 'paternalistic helping', that is, denying assistance to others in achieving their communicated goals, where meeting those goals would have longer-term negative consequences (Sibicky et al 1995; Martin et al 2016). Children demonstrate an ability for critical, autonomous reflection,

making judgments without blindly following requests. These are useful skills for political decision-making.

Again, social competencies do not develop in a vacuum. One's environment and relationships also influence competency acquisition. Whether one can act autonomously, for instance, depends on whether the relationships one has with others support autonomy development (Matthews and Mullin 2018; Nedelsky 1989). Children's autonomy is supported where relevant information is available, there are clear reasons for requests, interest is expressed in children's feelings and views, and structured choices are provided (see Mullin 2014; Matthews and Mullin 2018). A political system that houses these features is likely to be more easily navigable not only for children but also for those already included.

It is not only social context but *expectations about development* within that context that inform whether someone is understood to have achieved development in the first place. Suppose that Flin has a biological age of 40-Earth-years. Flin has so far lived their life on planet Glorb, a planet very different from and with laws and customs very different to any on Earth. All Glorb inhabitants have minimal interaction with one another and spend most of their lives alone. Flin thrives on planet Glorb and is regarded as 'competent' and 'developed' according to Glorb-based standards. One day, Flin arrives on planet Earth, instantly exposed to a large, cosmopolitan city. Unaware of Flin's origins, inhabitants of this city believe him to be a citizen of their state. However, whilst Flin may have adapted to life very well on Glorb, he lacks the capacities considered important for communicating and engaging in daily life in a large city on Earth. Society would likely judge Flin as highly incompetent, failing to reach expected developmental and social standards. Flin's age has no bearing on his competency to participate in adult-associated social and political activities. In a given context, expectations about developmental standards frame the bounds of what competencies can be acquired, whether someone is perceived as competent, as well as the notion of what a competency is at all. A child who was informed about and expressed an active interest in that city's political issues would be a far more appropriate candidate for voting eligibility than Flin but is nonetheless excluded due to age.

If one maintains that age is importantly *correlated* with the development of competencies desirable for political participation, it remains unclear what 'age-related competency' inclusion should be based on. Contemporary research finds that the prefrontal cortex and therefore such abilities as self-control and long-term planning are not fully developed until early adulthood, approximately 25-years (Aamodt

and Wang 2012). If prefrontal cortex development is what matters for political decision-making, the age of majority could be increased rather than lowered or abolished. Furthermore, changes to the brain do not simply stop at a particular point; these changes continue over a lifetime and are influenced by one's experiences and circumstances. My argument against a minimum voting age avoids the issue of exactly where to draw the line or establish what competencies constitute eligibility for political decision-making.

One also might want to claim a clear difference between children of different ages. I do not deny that there are observable patterns across age groups. My argument goes deeper than this, pulling apart the very patterns we observe across age groups to critically analyse what can account for these observations. The point is not that all children always meet a certain competency standard, but that age-based standards preclude us from ascertaining a more accurate and complex picture of the child (or person) in question. Deeper still, the significance we place on observed differences is itself changeable.

Framing the child-adult distinction as a developmental spectrum according to which children are inherently 'less developed' or *lacking* relative to adults misrepresents the nature of childhood and development and therefore our ability to recognise children's competencies. Children are not an inherently lacking social category but persons with circumstances as contextual and unique as anyone else. Age-based requirements for political eligibility fail to accommodate this point. In an environment that ceases to reinforce oversimplistic and inaccurate ideas about competency development, for children and people more generally, these competencies could be cultivated more readily to further enhance the collective competency of the citizenry.

2.5: Broadening Understandings of Competency

The issue lies with how we *conceptualise* competencies. What makes the difference for a persuasive case for including children is how we *understand* or *interpret* those competencies and the behaviours that children manifest. A philosophy of childhood perspective that questions what it is to be a child and the taken-for-granted conceptions about childhood is key to this exploration, creating space to see and develop a case for a broader understanding of competency itself.

Developmental stage theory perpetuates a 'deficit conception' of childhood, providing a narrow account for how we conceptualise or engage in relationships with children and one another (Matthews

2009; Matthews and Mullin 2018). This deficit conception emphasises what children *lack* in competency, conceptualising them as ‘unfinished adults’ (in Gheaus 2015). Emerging work in the philosophy of childhood resists the notion that children are characterised by what they *do not have*. On a strengths-based conception, children are not simply *prepared for* or *shaped by* the world but participate in the shaping of it. Children are not simply defective adults; children and adults are equally complex as one another (Gopnik 2009, 9-11). Neuroscience shows the complex nature of infants’ and children’s brains, more highly connected with more neural pathways than those of adults (ibid). Children’s abilities in various areas exceed those of adults, accounting for their strong abilities to learn languages, demonstrate creativity, apply imagination and artistic abilities, and pose original philosophical questions relevant to their own lives.

A developmental approach according to which one only ‘fully’ cultivates competencies upon reaching adulthood is limited. It reinforces an oversimplistic and inaccurate notion of a ‘developmental trajectory’ along which a person’s development is ever-improving (in Wagner 2019, 675). Although people develop different capacities over time, this does not mean that they are ‘ever-improving’ the further they move on from childhood. Development is far more complex than this and whilst some features or competencies may be acquired, improve or develop, others may stagnate, decline or be lost. A developmental approach in line with the deficit conception is also overly focused on the notion of ‘normally developing children’. Adults interacting with and caring for children may focus on how to do this in a way that ensures they develop into a preconceived idea of a mature adult, rather than attending to the unique needs about what development may involve for an individual child. A deficit conception therefore limits our abilities to be open to the possibilities imagined by the child. It also imposes limits on the kinds of relationships that adults and children believe they can have with one another, in compromising opportunities for effective communication and deliberation, including in the exchange of ideas.

Shulamith Firestone speaks this point with the following thought experiment (1970, 103, my emphasis):

[If a human adult] were to arrive on a strange planet to find the inhabitants building fires on their roofs, he might assume an explanation; but his conclusions, based on his dissimilar past, might cause the others some amusement. Every person in his first trip to a foreign country, where he knows neither the people nor the language, *experiences childhood*.

Similarly, children are regularly confronted by experiences that although are judged as normal by adults habituated to societal processes, nonetheless seem quite strange to children. Children's understandings about the world might lead us to conclusions about their incompetency, even though their conclusions reasonably follow from the information they have available and the connections they make based on the processes they see.

I introduced the notion of *habituation* to a social context or environment in Chapter 1. To reiterate and develop that point, habituation, as I use the term, is adjustment over time to a social context and adaptation to the features of and expectations in that context. Habituation to a context over time, more likely to be the case for adults than children, is not necessarily a mark of competency. One might have habituated to a process that when critically reflected upon, makes little sense. A child may be taught, for instance, that fairness involves equal allocation of resources according to need. Their confusion in learning about the inequality and inequity that persists in capitalist societies is not telling of a lack of competency on their part but to the contrary; they observe the inconsistency between taught theory and social practice. The discrepancy between the values that the child is taught when considered against the world in which they live makes the world a very confusing place to be. Questions and critique from children about the world are not necessarily a mark of their incompetency but rather a request for information about how a situation or social arrangement makes sense, since according to the child's reasoning, things do not add up. Adults might say to children that they 'will learn some day'. However, habituation to a context of the kind many adults have to their societies can blind one as to whether something is sensible or a good idea, putting into question the value we place on such 'learning'. Engaging with or allowing children space to unpack their unfamiliarity, rather than perceiving and dismissing it as incompetency, might help us see a way out of certain sub-optimal social and political practices. Of course, many adults critique the societies that they are part of and have habituated to. They also critique societies and contexts of others that they have not habituated to.

What matters for our purposes is the way that we regard someone who is *not accustomed* to a social context or state of affairs. It matters whether that involves an attitude of *teaching them* how to accustom to that context, or whether that involves an attitude of *learning from* those not yet accustomed to that context. It is about the attitude held towards those who have not adapted to circumstances, an approach about what we are willing to discover, and what limits we do or do not place on that potential

for discovery. When our attitude towards children is not centred on the limits of what can be discovered from them but involves a broader openness to learning from them, we are well-placed to regard their political input as a strength.

So, to return to the framing quote of this chapter, if a child really does not know that it is harder to remove the moon from the heavens than a picture from a wall, why does that matter? We can firstly reflect on whether the child's belief is due to their social environment; they have not yet been taught about the nature of the moon, and so do not yet know how the universe works. An adult who never learned about the planetary system could plausibly have the same belief, and the child should not be discriminated against for the lack of understanding permitted by their environment rather than necessitated by their age. However, we should also reflect on whether the child's belief is an issue at all. If one believes that the moon is so moveable, this may facilitate the emergence of some creative theory which may, if developed, contribute to a great piece of literature, or motivate a breakthrough in scientific theory. Where good political decision-making involves an openness to change, a revision to our conceptions about children facilitates practical benefits. Children's lack of habituation to social systems can help expose limitations to those systems, whilst attention to their reasoning allows their own competencies and innovations to develop.

Children meet existing and desirable standards for political participation. However, our dominant understandings of competency might themselves be inadequately expansive to recognise competencies in children. As such, I argue for a broader understanding of competency and development. This would allow children's lack of habituation to social mechanisms to be understood as a strength. The difficulty with seeing this, as I explore in the next chapter, has to do with prevailing *stereotypes* about children as are associated with the deficit conception about childhood, framing the child as *inherently* lacking in competency. By actively challenging these stereotypes and questioning our conceptual understandings of what it means to be a child, we are able to clearly see children's competencies and therefore take seriously the case for their enfranchisement.

Chapter 3

STEREOTYPES AND CHANGING CONCEPTIONS

When you tell them that you have made a new friend ... They never say to you, 'What does his voice sound like? What games does he love best? Does he collect butterflies?' Instead, they demand: 'How old is he? How many brothers has he? How much does he weigh? How much money does his father make?' Only from these figures do they think they have learned anything about him.
(de Saint-Exupéry 1943, 23-24)

A broader understanding of competency allows us to see children's competency through their lack of habituation to the world, consistently with the strengths-based conception about childhood. Still, the hold of the deficit conception continues to have a strong influence in society. Modern deficit conceptions about children as being prepared for and shaped for adulthood inaccurately imply that children and adults exist on a developmental spectrum according to which the child is regarded as inherently lacking. In this chapter, I argue that deficit conceptions are based on and reinforced by inaccurate, exaggerated, and misleading stereotypes about children and adults alike.

The inaccurate stereotypes about children to which I refer are those that overstate children's immaturity, vulnerability, dependence, and innocence. The deficit conception is informed by these inaccurate stereotypes and continues to shape social structures, as reflected in our social institutions, beliefs, and as internalised by children. As such, inaccurate stereotypes that are inconsistent with the strengths-based conception continue to hold strong. There exists a conflict between the strengths-based conception, which more accurately reflects children's ways of being, and existing political structures. Age-based distinctions reinforce these stereotypes, leading us to believe that there are good reasons for excluding children when there are not. In actively challenging these stereotypes, that is, questioning the conceptual understanding of what it means to be a child at all, we see children's competencies and therefore their appropriate eligibility for political participation. This allows us to overcome deficit conceptions that define the child as inherently lacking.

The ways that stereotypes are employed as a method of categorising social kinds is at issue. Stereotypes cloud judgment, compromising our abilities to understand the unique circumstances of a person. This interferes with our abilities to build quality social relationships that, beyond enfranchisement alone, support good political decision-making. The arguments of this chapter can therefore apply

not only to overcoming stereotypical understandings about children but also for any group about which there are such stereotypes.

A complex development of circumstances takes place. Abolishing the voting age contributes to overcoming the deficit conception of children in politics. Children's inclusion then allows our understandings about childhood to develop further in line with a strengths-based conception. This further supports an environment in which children increasingly manifest these competencies for political decision-making, however that may look. As such, we not only acknowledge children's existing competencies, but make more room and opportunity for behaviours consistent with the strengths-based conception to increasingly manifest and emerge. Over time, this would strengthen further the case for children's inclusion, since regard for and treatment of children would be more consistent with an environment in which they can exercise their political competencies. This would have flow-on impacts, as those already included continue to change their attitudes towards children over time. This moves us towards a political context in which collaborative political relationships with children can be built, such relationships that, in addition to voting, are also important for political decision-making.

The age of majority as a standard of political participation inherently excludes children. Where there is inherent exclusion of this kind, we need to assess what it is about the subject that serves to justify exclusion. Age is no such feature; it is an arbitrary way to make distinctions about political eligibility. When stereotypes about children that perpetuate notions of their inherent inferiority are actively challenged, the implausibility of children's exclusion becomes clearer still.

3.1: Stereotypes

Stereotypes are generic understandings or generalised beliefs about a social kind or category. They have an evolutionary function in allowing us to make efficient judgments about people, social kinds or other categories in the world (Hutchison and Martin 2016). Stereotypes are to some extent unavoidable to how people think, given the ways that human cognitive capacities function (Gelman 2003; Gendler 2011). They help to structure information and allow for the sharing of concepts and representations between people and therefore are quite central to the ways we think about and engage with others. Stereotypes influence the evolution of culture because of the role they play in our accessing and transmitting information. Stereotypes and generalisations can be understood as prescriptive rather

than merely descriptive, prescribing and reinforcing ways for a person to be and expectations of how they should behave (Leslie and Lerner 2016). Because stereotypes can be internalised, they can be believed to apply to a group by members or non-members of the group that those stereotypes are associated with.

Stereotypes can be understood as referring to widely-held reliable or unreliable and distorting associations between one or more *attributes* and a *social group* (Fricker 2007, 30-32).³ I use the terms ‘accurate’ and ‘inaccurate’ in place of ‘reliable’ and ‘unreliable’. If the association is true, the generalisation is accurate. If the association is false, the generalisation is inaccurate. The impact of stereotypes depends on whether the attribute is favourable or unfavourable in a given context. Being associated with skill at maths is generally favourable. Being associated with immaturity tends to be unfavourable. One might believe that a given stereotype applies to all, or many, or most members of the social category in question.

Despite their evolutionary and cognitive function, stereotypes or generics can be unhelpful in contemporary societies, reinforcing an inaccurate picture of people and the world. The stereotype that people of colour commit more crime than white people has far-reaching impact. Police are more likely to seek out those that they perceive to satisfy the stereotype and apply leniency to those who do not. Incarceration statistics reflect this. The criminal justice system in New Zealand was set up by and to the advantage of colonial settlers to the disadvantage of indigenous Māori. Law enforcement treated Māori as a collective and homogenous ‘other’ defined by characteristics that were inherently contrary to law (*Wi Parata* 1877). These events continue to impact Māori. In New Zealand, over half of the prison population is Māori even though Māori make up only 15% of the population (Just Speak 2020). During a first police encounter, Māori are more likely than Pākehā to have a police proceeding and be charged.

Political inclusion is not enough to overcome the hold of inaccurate stereotypes. Widespread, inaccurate, and misleading stereotypes continue to be held about people who have been historically disenfranchised but are now eligible to vote. These stereotypes historically posed a barrier to inclusion for women, indigenous persons, and people of colour. Arguments for inclusion remind us that once

³ Miranda Fricker discusses stereotypes as they are relevant to epistemic injustice. I do not directly discuss the epistemic injustice literature, though I acknowledge opportunities to connect my discussion with Fricker’s account. Rather, I raise Fricker for her useful articulation of what constitutes stereotypes more generally.

people are included, overcoming the hold of inaccurate and misleading stereotypes requires us to continue to actively challenge those stereotypes. Political inclusion may *impact* but does not *fully inform* our conceptualisations about people and must happen in tandem with a process of active work in the mind.

There are inaccurate, exaggerated, and misleading stereotypes about children and adults. Contemporary conceptions about childhood and the political exclusion children face are informed and reinforced by these stereotypes. The belief that children possess properties stereotypically associated with being ‘childish’ characterises the modern, deficit conception of childhood and contrasts with beliefs about adulthood (Archard 2004, 91). The stereotypes associated with children and adults can generally be applied on a spectrum: towards one end are the generic properties associated with children, and towards the other are those associated with adults. On the children’s end of the spectrum are the ‘childish’ traits such as immaturity, innocence, underdevelopment, and dependence. The adult end correspondingly includes maturity, non-innocence, development, and independence. We might think there is some accuracy here. Take dependence and independence. Most children are economically dependent on caregivers who, in their greater independence, provide economic support to them. Whilst these stereotypes may represent the world to some extent, the meaning we associate with these stereotypes is often misleading.

Properties associated with adults are exaggerated and over-idealised. Here, we are reminded of the idealised nature of Schapiro’s argument that adults can ‘govern themselves’ whereas children cannot. Adults are not strictly independent; they live within complex systems made up of economically and socially interdependent structures. Depending on their situation, they rely on employers, business owners, customers, social welfare, or some other feature of society to meet their needs. People are never strictly independent. Even a hermit relies on their environment and others’ non-intervention. As such, there is both an *exaggerated, idealised* expectation of adults as well as an *underestimation* of children. A voting age perpetuates generalised and stereotypical age-based understandings about children and adults alike. If the adult is something idealised, children are not unique in failing to meet idealised ‘adult’ standards, for adults cannot meet these standards either. Just as sexism is typically understood as prejudice against women, there are still contexts in which men experience disadvantage because of gendered associations. Similarly, the far-reaching implications of inaccurate age-based stereotypes affect not only children but adults as well.

One might avoid *idealising* the features associated with adults but nonetheless maintain that, more or less, these generic understandings provide an accurate representation of the way things are. Even if adults are not strictly independent, children can be understood as *far more* dependent and immature than adults (Gheaus 2015, 2-5). Adults' increased biological and cognitive development as well as their experience facilitates adults to engage in more 'mature' behaviours, such as demonstrating emotional maturity, or securing employment and obtaining an income. Accepting this, Anca Gheaus argues, need not mean a degradation of children in standing to adults (ibid). She claims that concepts such as 'progress' and 'regress' of a person are not helpful once we understand that children and adults are each intrinsically valuable kinds of human beings, albeit in different ways. However, it is disputable whether the features to which this intrinsic value is ascribed are really so distinct for children and adults. More work is required to capture why these stereotypical notions have come to dominate our understandings.

Consider the contexts in which stereotypes about children develop. Children are educated to assume and occupy a place in the adult world. Through the processes of education and socialisation, children 'grow into' or learn to become an adult member of society. Children are judged according to the stereotypes about children that they supposedly conform to, and stereotypes about adults that they are not believed to meet. Children are *expected* to gain competencies for an adult world, treated as 'citizens-in-training' or 'citizens-to-be'. Again, this constitutes a deficit conception of childhood. The adult world dominates the child's world, thereby consuming the imagined possibilities seen by the child. This in turn makes it challenging for children to be understood as anything outside of the stereotypes they supposedly conform to.

Stereotypes about a social kind imply that the property in question is an *intrinsic, essential, or inherent* aspect of a social kind's nature. Sally Haslanger explores assertions of 'generics' or 'generic claims' (which I refer to as 'stereotypes' or 'stereotypical understandings'), the ways that these manifest and how they are understood (2011). She proposes that the generic claim can be interpreted as evidence for that property's occurrence in the social kind, albeit due to *changeable social factors* (ibid, 179). Therefore, even if observed cases align with the generic, this does not necessarily mean that the generic claim represents the social kind's essential nature. Haslanger argues that we may have reason against using the generic if it perpetuates oppression in some form. Broadening understandings is not enough to relieve us of the hold of generic understandings; we also need to identify how social dynamics are

responsible for perpetuating these understandings in the first place. That the use of a generic perpetuates oppression does not necessarily mean that the use of the generic claim signals *devious* motives. Rather, the perpetuation of oppression may be an implication of the ways that we communicate with one another (ibid, 203).

Let us apply this point to children. The use of the generic claim ‘Children are immature’ may imply that ‘immaturity’ is an essential part of the members of the social kind ‘children’. Take the stereotype that children are behaviourally ‘immature’, indicating that children have not yet achieved a standard of behaviour required to participate in social and political activities, and have growing to do before they reach the ‘maturity’ required to participate. It may be the case that a child is *biologically* immature, but the child’s behaviour need not be understood as such. The understanding of children’s behaviour as immature may be due to changeable social factors. We may observe immature behaviour in children, but this behaviour would not necessarily manifest or be observed as such in alternative social arrangements, or be interpreted as such on different conceptions about childhood. As I have argued in this paper so far, interpretations of children’s behaviour as inherently immature are attributable to inaccurate deficit conceptions about children. If this generic understanding of children as inherently immature constitutes perpetuating an oppression against children, and I have argued with reference to children’s exclusion in the political sphere that it does, then there is reason against using this generic claim to refer to children. The use of this generic does not necessarily signify an intention to oppress children, but their oppression may unintentionally result from the ways we use language. Maturity in one sense – biological – frames the bounds of the understanding of the child more generally. However, biological maturity is distinct from behavioural maturity. As these notions of maturity unravel, we see that they are not intertwined, and have no necessary relation.

Rather than understanding stereotypes in the stronger sense, according to which the relevant property is an essential feature of the subject, one might prefer the weaker sense, whereby the stereotype is a signal towards a property that a subject may possess. However, this does not undermine the claims here. Overreliance on such an association or signal is still *misleading* in pointing the mind in the direction towards something that does not necessarily apply to a great extent or even at all. The same problem arises, whether the stereotype is regarded as an essential characteristic of the subject or a signal towards what the subject possesses.

The feature identified as a stereotype tends to be overemphasised, constituting a misleading *oversimplification* of the subject. In oversimplifying a subject, stereotypes and generalisations contribute towards objectifying that subject. In drawing on stereotypes to frame perceptions, a person limits their own ability to understand and access an authentic representation of another person. Overreliance on generic standards in trying to relate with others therefore clouds judgment, compromising our abilities to understand other people at all. Stereotypes put the power in perceivers, especially socially powerful perceivers, to categorise individuals. This reinforces institutions and organisations that in turn perpetuate inaccurate understandings about people, given the extent to which they influence the structure of people's lives. This is the case for enfranchisement laws that exclude and constitute ageism towards children.

The stereotype that children are immature overemphasises this trait in children, leading to misleading and oversimplifying understandings about them. Not only are other features of the child overshadowed by the stereotype, but the stereotype 'immature' itself frames the other traits of the child in the mind of those who believe the stereotype. It is therefore challenging for the perceiver to see beyond the stereotype. Believing that all children are immature limits and compromises one's ability to understand the particular child and the features possessed by or relevant to them. A child's argument or perspective on an issue is clouded by the perceiver's conception that the child is, regardless of their other features, *inherently* immature or signifying immaturity. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains how stereotypes 'make one story become the only story' (2009). We are thereby limited in our capacities to determine when someone does not fit the story told by the stereotype.

As such, the child's argument is always viewed through the framing of their immaturity. Suppose that a child is persistent about a point of political significance. In allowing the stereotype 'immature' to frame our understanding of the child's argument or behaviour, the child is regarded as stubborn or ill-informed on that particular point, whilst an adult may be admired, because of their 'maturity', for their strong-will and decisiveness. It also implies that a child displaying, for instance, 'mature' behaviours, is nonetheless viewed through a lens of immaturity. Stereotypes frame the bounds of the behaviours we deem possible for an agent to manifest at all. As such, the 'maturity' displayed may even be regarded as having ironic or comedic effect. This prompts us to ask what sense can be made of the adjective 'childish' in describing certain behaviours. 'Immature' behaviours such as tantrums and poor etiquette are not unique to the child and may not even be manifested by particular children.

One might object that this does not always occur; we often accept children's arguments or reasons as competent. However, in the political system, inclusion *represents* that one is a suitable political participant. Children's exclusion itself therefore represents their inherent unsuitability for political participation. Even if there are contexts where children are treated as competent, their exclusion from voting means that in this context, they are not regarded as such. Political participation is a context where inaccurate stereotypes about children, stereotypes associated with deficit conceptions, hold strong.

3.1.1: Expectations and Exceptions

A person's beliefs and behaviours are influenced by expectations they perceive others to hold about them. A child may perceive themselves as politically informed and behave as such, yet social institutions pose a barrier to this, excluding the child from voting. In being treated by their political system as unsuitable for political inclusion, the child may over time come to hide or cease to manifest behaviour that demonstrates their political competency and dedication, even internalising beliefs that they are not suitable for political participation after all. The expectations one perceives others to have, supported and reinforced by social structures and institutions, can be internalised.

Definitions and descriptions of social kinds prescribe normative standards and expectations of behaviour. Describing someone as a 'friend' implies normative standards for how that person should behave compared to someone who is not a friend. In the same way, the stereotypes associated with the terms 'child' and 'adult' also have normative implications. Children are described as *immature*, *underdeveloped* and *dependent*, whilst adults are described as *mature*, *developed* and *independent*. Describing someone as 'child' involves therefore different normative expectations about behaviour than does describing someone as an 'adult'.

An especially interesting portrayal of this phenomenon is found in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (1922). This example is notably fictional and somewhat dated, but nonetheless it helps communicate an important point about ageism and social roles. Benjamin Button, born with the appearance of an elderly man, ages 'in reverse'. Benjamin experiences aging and development differently to everyone around him, struggling to conform to and therefore meet societal expectations. Despite sharing the same chronological age with schoolchildren, Benjamin's body is frail and he cannot keep up with them. He is subsequently excluded from playing with his chronological-age-peers. He is categorised by others according to their beliefs about how he *should* behave. When he reaches

chronological 57-years, he receives commission as brigadier-general, commanding an infantry brigade. His youthful appearance due to his aging ‘in reverse’ results in him not being taken seriously in his position of authority, despite having already had military experience as captain, major, and lieutenant-colonel. Benjamin’s internal experience is constantly at odds with how others perceive him.

Society imposed limits on what it was willing to tolerate as acceptable ways for Benjamin to behave. He was expected to conform to stereotypes and yet he did not fit those stereotypes at all. In the brigadier-general example, stereotypes about what it means to have a youthful appearance brought about this treatment; people did not engage in actively challenging stereotypes associated with youth to see Benjamin’s suitability for the position. As such, in trying to categorise Benjamin as a member of a social kind, society limited what he could experience and become. This occurs with children, when the descriptors associated with ‘child’ are those that imply the child to be something inherently lacking.

Relying on a stereotype as representing an essential or indicating characteristic of a social kind makes it difficult or impossible to see when an individual does not fit that stereotype. Generalisations about social kinds therefore limit our abilities to imagine exceptions and possibilities about those who we associate with a given stereotype. Any person *may* be an exception to the stereotype, but the prevalence of the stereotype limits our ability to see when this occurs. This amounts to structural prejudice; institutions that by their very arrangement and practice reinforce inaccurate stereotypes, often with arbitrary and oppressive effect. Age-based distinctions that exclude children from political participation are such an example. Our background understanding limits what we see, because of our focus on conformity to preconceived understandings (see Chappell 2011). In continuing to use and impose inaccurate stereotypes about and upon children, one likely applies those stereotypes where they do not align with the unique instance of child encountered.

One might say that where there are exceptions to a rule, that does not mean the rule fails to apply *generally*. However, exceptions should not be taken so lightly. Defending the age-based distinction by appealing to generalised stereotypes about children rather than taking seriously the exception begs the question against those who challenge the stereotype itself. Where there are exceptions to any general rule, even where these are apparently minor or infrequent, the authority of that rule ought to be questioned. What appears to be a minor deviation from a rule can be remarkably significant, even revolutionary. Albert Einstein’s general theory of relativity has radically different implications from Isaac Newton’s universal gravity. The supporting evidence for the former might have seemed insignificant,

a key difference being the observed difference in Mercury's predicted trajectory of *less than half-a-second* per year (Rovelli 2017, 67-69). Seemingly minor exceptions when interrogated can spark radical revision to theory and understanding. Political philosophy is best when it questions general rules where exceptions are identified. As far as this paper is concerned, an openness to the exception does not mean that *every* individual will put your beliefs into question, but that *any* person *might* put your beliefs into question. The very attitude that exceptional cases are only exceptional limits the possibility of observing further such cases or understanding why those exceptions manifest.

3.1.2: Actively Challenging Stereotypes

There is a sort of trade-off between the *efficiency* of employing stereotypes against the *energy exerted* in regulating potentially inaccurate categorisations (Gendler 2011, 37). Still, categorisations seem to matter for our ability to understand people *at all*. Stereotypes may cloud our judgment to some extent, but it is also difficult to imagine how we engage with people without them. Imagine the following thought experiment. We wake up tomorrow in a world where every person looks exactly the same, is the same size and height, and even has the same tone of voice. We do not know anyone's race, gender, or age by looking at them or hearing the sound of their voice. (This is also a notable characteristic of many online interactions, though it is beyond scope to address this point here.⁴) How would we understand anybody in this world? The shortcuts facilitated by stereotypes do not clearly translate here. Without the usual features that cue what stereotype a person is associated with, we would have to work much harder to gain an understanding about that person. The understandings obtained might be more accurate in some ways, even if shortcuts to understanding features associated with group membership are no longer available.

The point of the thought experiment is not to argue for sameness. Group connection and histories matter to people and their identities. Rather, the point of the thought experiment is to encourage reflection on how we *respond* to stereotypes when we encounter them, and how much we rely on them in categorising people. People are far more complex than categorisations based on identity or stereotypes suggest, and it is worthwhile to consider what remains of a person once stereotypes are taken out of the picture.

⁴ Thanks to Nicholas Munn for pointing this out.

This is why an active challenging approach to stereotypes is fundamental. One must actively engage in breaking down stereotypes to ascertain the perspective from which another speaks. This involves regular, critical reflection upon the extent to which the stereotypes we hold about the relevant social category facilitate or cloud a more accurate understanding about a person. This includes a critical assessment of what the stereotype *means to us*; whether the stereotype involves an *explanation* of the behaviour in question; whether it accurately represents an essential or signifying feature of the individual; whether it could be explained by changeable social factors; or whether it is associated with a deficit or strengths-based conception. Angela Davis' notion of 'surprise' is relevant here (2016, 102-103). In considering social categories, we need to allow for surprise, but also allow for that surprise to be productive, allowing us not only to understand members of a category but to question the nature of the category itself.

Part of this process also involves considering *how we value* the features associated with stereotypes. Again, what matters is not simply whether we see confirmation of the stereotype manifested but how we respond to that manifestation. Suppose children really are, in each and every case, more dependent than adults. Dependence is no reason to exclude people from political decision-making. Political decisions still impact dependent people, and dependent people can still perform the relevant participatory function. It may be this very dependence that facilitates the insights informed by a lack of habituation to the world. As such, actively challenging stereotypes in the case of children involves a critical analysis of the values we place on independence and dependence, and whether strengths and deficits neatly map onto these concepts. An argument for children's inclusion is therefore most effective where it is supported by an active challenging of stereotypes and their associated meanings.

3.2: Applications to The Political Context

3.2.1: Disagreement: Epistemic 'Inferiors' and 'Superiors'

Inclusion of different groups, whilst facilitated by understanding, also brings disagreement to the forefront, as new perspectives are added to the political landscape. Considerations in the disagreement literature are directly relevant to the ways in which stereotypes about children function. These considerations help in providing a framework for actively challenging stereotypes. Inaccurate stereotypes about children and adults are understood according to a spectrum that implies the inherent inferiority and superiority of some age-groups over others. Similarly, the voting age implies that those included

in politics are inherently superior political participants to those who are excluded, who are implied as inherently inferior political participants. This compromises our ability to see that children are appropriate candidates for political inclusion.

Considerations in the disagreement literature directly apply here. According to the disagreement literature, the weight a person gives to another's view depends on their relative epistemic status to someone else in a relevant context. The literature distinguishes between epistemic *peers*, *superiors*, and *inferiors* (Frances and Matheson 2018). This refers to a person's epistemic authority in relation to another's. Consider the question, 'Is belief *B* true?' If Delia is more likely to answer this correctly than Vincent, then Delia is *epistemically superior* to Vincent. If Vincent is less likely to answer this question correctly than Delia, then Vincent is *epistemically inferior* to Delia. If Delia is equally likely as Vincent to answer this question correctly, the two are *epistemic peers*. Usually, we take more seriously the testimony of those judged to be our epistemic superiors, weigh the testimony of our epistemic peers as much as our own, whilst doubting our epistemic inferiors.

Children are often regarded as epistemically inferior to adults. However, a child, like an adult, may be another person's epistemic superior, inferior or peer, on any given issue. One might maintain that even if children are epistemically superior on some points, adults are *overall* epistemically superior to children in virtue of, say, wisdom acquired over the course of their lifetime. On this view, adults would be framed as overall epistemically superior to children. However, *even if* this were true, this does not mean children's testimony should be ignored in favour of the adults' position.

Epistemic superiors have reason to listen to epistemic inferiors. If children really *were* epistemically inferior relative to adults in general, adults would still have reason to take their contributions seriously. Priest shows how epistemic inferiors can still give us reasons to revise our beliefs, as long as they are *competent* (2016, 266-268). According to Priest, '*A* is competent in subject matter *S* when it is more likely that *A* forms true beliefs about *S* than false ones' (ibid, 266). She considers an experienced doctor disagreeing with an inexperienced medical student, arguing that a 'superior' in such a position still has epistemic reason to seriously consider the beliefs of an epistemic 'inferior'. The medical student's testimony should not be rejected just because she lacks the same experience and qualification as the doctor. The input of the competent 'epistemic inferior' still warrants serious consideration.

It is illuminating to apply Priest's point to the case of children. Suppose that Delia is an expert about topic *T*, whereas Vincent is not. However, Vincent has information *I* about *T*, available only to him because of his unique experience and perspective. Delia, despite her general expertise, does not

have information *I*. Assume, for the sake of argument, that information *I* is true. Delia does not trust that Vincent possesses any true information relevant to *T*. However, *I* is part of a way of explaining *T*. Imagine now that Delia is a decades-long-serving politician and Vincent is a 7-year-old student. If children are competent, and throughout this paper I have built a case that they are, then adults have reason to take their contributions seriously. A child may have information about a topic because of their perspective as a child, their lack of habituation to social structures, or simply because of their unique life experience as an individual. This information *I* would be illuminating on a political issue like topic *T*. Overcoming deficit conceptions would increase the likelihood that information *I* is taken seriously in decision-making about *T*. Enfranchisement is important for one's political perspective to be taken seriously, to level the standards against which one's competency and suitability for political participation is judged.

The authority of another's position depends not simply on the nature of the evidence cited. Granted, disagreement about a point does not mean there is no truth to the matter; one party to the disagreement may simply be wrong. However, epistemic inferiority and superiority have little significance if we lack *trust* in those with whom we disagree (Hardwig 1991). Marginalised groups often lack trust in social institutions and may perceive certain institutions as failing to reach objective truth, since objectivity requires *trust* that is rationally grounded *between people* (Scheman 2001 in Grasswick 2018). If children experience marginalisation and lack trust in social and political institutions – and given that their political activity often involves challenging social and political circumstances, it is reasonable to suppose that many do – then they may not regard policies affecting them, with which they disagree, as objectively authoritative. The very notion of a 'correct' or good decision is compromised where there is lack of trust, if we take it that objectivity requires trust that is rationally grounded between people. A conceptualisation of children that overcomes notions of their inherent political inferiority according to deficit conceptions, allowing space for their contributions on political issues to hold weight, fosters a climate in which trust and communication can occur at all. A strengths-based conception about childhood is consistent with establishing these lines of trust and communication. A deficit conception is not.

3.2.2: Collaborative Social Relationships

Collaborative social relationships, in tandem with enfranchisement, are important for effective political decision-making. Where we have quality relationships with others, we are better placed to appreciate the significance of the decisions we make, including those that impact our fellow citizens in the political sphere. Actively challenging stereotypes is key to building collaborative social relationships with others. Whilst group membership matters to many people and their identity, regarding the individual as not simply a *generic member* but rather a *unique instance* of a social kind matters for understanding a particular person and building a relationship with them in turn. Actively challenging stereotypes involves practising an attitude of openness to seeing the inherent difference in all people, even though we may never discover this about every person. This enables the building of interpersonal understandings that go *beyond* the inaccurate stereotypes that inform the structure of institutions that perpetuate oppressive conditions. Hannah Arendt explains how there is something unifying in the inherent difference of people (1998, 8):

[p]lurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.

That *difference is the root of equality* supports political inclusion, regardless of age or social group association. It supports inclusion in an intrinsic, symbolic sense, but also because the relationships it facilitates can contribute to good political decision-making, relationships in which we can *collaborate and deliberate with* rather than merely 'listen to' the child. Age does not bear on this difference or the significance we attribute to it; one maintains this significance regardless of age.

Actively challenging stereotypes facilitates a greater openness to diverse perspectives. This allows for understandings unique not only to groups but to individual experience to be shared. The practice of actively challenging stereotypes is as much a process of looking inward to discover one's own inherent uniqueness in order to optimise one's ability to see this in others. In understanding one's own difference and history as the source of one's own understanding, one is also better placed to see this uniqueness in other people. In the case of race relations, this may involve a European settler looking into their own heritage and background to better understand their relationship to their current context. In the case of adult-child relationships, this might involve an adult critically reflecting on the ways in which their experience and society have informed the perspectives that they hold on an issue, questioning the extent to which these are informed by a habituation to social processes, and whether other perspectives might be justified. Regular and critical questioning of the associations we typically make

about people facilitates an openness to diverse perspectives, this openness forming the basis of quality social relationships.

Inaccurate, exaggerated and misleading stereotypes limit our ability to see the features actually possessed by children and people in general. Stereotypes about children reflect this, framing the child as *inherently lacking* in relation to the adult. The notion that children who possess the appropriate abilities for political participation are only an *exception* reinforces these inaccurate stereotypes, perpetuating the exclusionary structures that these stereotypes shape. The practice of actively challenging these stereotypes – that is, regularly questioning and critiquing the conceptual understanding of what it means to be a member of a social category at all – helps to overcome these inaccurate understandings. The next chapter assesses some practical concerns with including children against the theoretical justifications established thus far.

Chapter 4

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT INCLUDING CHILDREN

'What are you doing here, honey? You're not even old enough to know how bad life gets.'

'Obviously, Doctor, you've never been a 13-year-old girl.'

(Coppola 1999)

Despite the theoretical justifications established for children's inclusion so far, one might hold practical concerns about whether children's inclusion would be a good thing for children or society. It is one thing to establish theoretical justifications for children's inclusion, quite another to say that this should be encouraged. The defender of excluding children must accept that they defend a system that arbitrarily excludes children who meet the same competency standards as those already enfranchised. As such, objecting to children's inclusion must be made on other grounds.

One might propose that children's inclusion would result in bad consequences for children or society, compromising the 'goods of childhood' or children's 'innocence'. I propose that these concerns are informed by inaccurate understandings about childhood, understandings that actually contribute towards these feared harms to children, and as such should be challenged. We might also fear that children will be vulnerable to undue political influence or pressure, or that their inclusion into existing processes compromises those already included. These concerns do not serve to justify children's exclusion; they are more appropriately directed at addressing the limitations of existing political systems. The benefits of inclusion, I argue, not only outweigh but also serve to counter these concerns and accrue to both children and wider society. The impact that enfranchisement would have on children is an empirical matter requiring evidence; we can nonetheless speculate.

4.1: Compromising Childhood?

Childhood is often referred to as intrinsically valuable (Brennan 2014; Gheaus 2014). There are various supposed goods that are described as unique to or most often experienced during childhood. Those most frequently cited include freedom from responsibilities and work, freedom from burdensome thoughts about the harsh realities of the world, plentiful free time for play and enjoyment, and

an ‘innocence’ that is said to characterise youth. These conditions of childhood facilitate various experiences in children’s lives, including the devoting of time to leisure activities or having unique opportunities to exercise certain skills and creative abilities. Some of the most celebrated artists in history were inspired by and collected artwork by children, artworks which children would likely not have produced if they did not have the time to devote to it (Fineberg 1997).

Many of these features of childhood are widely regarded as good for children. Samantha Brennan suggests this is true simply by raising ‘whether one would, if one could, simply give children a pill to have them grow up’ (Brennan 2014, 37). Childhood is not simply something to escape from as quickly as possible to enter adulthood and many would say that time for children to ‘just be children’ is important (Gheaus 2015, 5). Children, it is said, lack awareness about, experience of, and responsibility for the demands of society. This enables a distinct worldview and unique opportunity to engage in certain activities. These ‘goods of childhood’, although are not prohibited to adults, are often less accessible to them. Of course, any of the cited goods could be available to adults, provided that their environment or circumstances facilitated it. However, for many adults, responsibilities increase over time, and as such engaging in creative pursuits becomes increasingly difficult as immediate needs like paying bills and work and family obligations need to be met. Children and adults have an asymmetry of experience.

These goods of childhood are said to be compromised if children are enfranchised. It is often suggested that childhood ought to be apolitical and that children ought to lack this kind of responsibility (see Mattheis 2020, 10). Including children, it is feared, would impose an unnecessary and even harmful burden upon them. However, this argument involves an oversimplification about childhood. Seeing childhood in this way and focusing intently on preserving the ‘goods of childhood’ involves a privileged or at least isolated perspective that fails to accurately reflect many experiences of childhood.

Associating childhood with freedom from responsibility and adulthood with burdens imposes a narrow understanding of the lived experiences of children and adults alike. It is a mistake to consider responsibilities, burdens, and little time for creativity and play as unique to adulthood. Many children have significant responsibilities that keep them from a strictly carefree life dominated by leisure. Claiming that an ideal of childhood is that children do not work, an attitude widely-held in many Western societies, overlooks the day-to-day experiences of many children in other societies as well as *within* Western societies. The work undertaken by children is not regarded as negatively impacting the child

in every case. Many children also play a central caregiving role in supporting and providing for their families. Even for children without these responsibilities, it is an oversimplification and misunderstanding of childhood to view children's lives as dominated by leisure. Children are not free from reflecting about significant worldly and existential issues (Topping and Trickey 2004; Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al 2020). Young children with terminal illness come to terms with the idea of their death and make an active effort to avoid discussing their illness with others, including close family members (Bluebond-Langner 1978). Children, including those 10-years and younger, take their own lives (Mental Health Foundation 2020) and New Zealand's child and youth suicide rate is the highest in the 'developed' world (Unicef 2017, 22). Many children have been exposed to the suicide and suicide attempts of friends and family members.

The focus on children's 'innocence' involves a romanticisation of childhood as well as a lack of recognition of children's actual experiences. This over-infantilisation view of the child is consistent with the deficit conception about childhood, focused on what the child lacks. Consider the ways in which 'innocence' is often associated with children, referring to a kind of purity or naivety. Building on the examples above, emphasis on children's innocence overlooks that children, for instance, have a sexuality, which may manifest as an interest in or concern about sex. Perpetuating notions of children's 'sexual innocence' can itself be sexually attractive to some adults or other children. This contributes to a confused environment in which children have sexual feelings that they are encouraged not to have, whilst in turn being sexualised by others in their society. Moving away from a deficit conception overcomes these simplistic notions of children's innocence. A move towards a strengths-based perspective facilitates opportunities to abandon this confusing environment to better understand children's mental lives, including what they perceive as useful for their own sexual education.

Innocence is not necessarily connected to age. Age is not the relevant factor for determining whether innocence and freedom from responsibility are present in one's life. Some go through childhood and adulthood with very few experiences that would be described as difficult. Others have some significant, life-changing events, including when they are very young, and these events can have an immense impact on the rest of their lives. Many children can therefore have what are understood as far more challenging experiences than some adults (see Perry 2017). A baby that is regularly abused can have a far more burdensome life than a 40-year-old who has lived under sheltered and comfortable conditions. Child neglect and abuse have a significant impact on the child and their life thereafter, the impact often especially severe when this treatment begins in early childhood (van der Kolk 2014, 140-

142). Physical and sexual abuse of children is strongly correlated with their repeated suicide attempts and self-harm and those at risk of these behaviours often experienced neglect or abandonment in childhood (ibid). Some children live in highly policed and violent areas, others have witnessed the murder of their own parents. Other children have been convicted of murder. To regard these experiences and events as ‘unique’ or not characteristic of the ‘real’ experience of childhood further compromises our ability to understand the actual experiences of children. Again, even if something *does* manifest as an exception, the appropriate response is not to dismiss it as proving the general rule. The idealised conception of childhood is unhelpful if we are intent on actually understanding childhood.

We might acknowledge that innocence is absent from many children’s lives, yet still uphold it as an *ideal* of childhood. One might argue that a better approach than normalising and accepting that children have difficult childhoods is seeking to minimise and eliminate the occurrence of those difficult situations. Rather than accepting that children work, have onerous responsibilities, or difficult experiences, we should direct our attention to *freeing* children from these experiences. We can accept this in the case of neglect and abuse of children. However, there are many other aspects of childhood where notions of ‘freeing’ children in this way are simply unrealistic. At the very least, the existential issues that children grapple with cannot be overcome by clinging to ideals about what childhood *should be*. As such, ideals are unlikely to be fully realised and obscure the reality of many children’s lived experiences. This is not necessarily a problem with having ideals but with how we respond to cases that do not meet the ideal. Expressing an interest in improving children’s welfare whilst clinging to inaccurate notions about the simplistic and leisurely world that children are perceived to be living in is a bit like caring about addressing climate change but using incorrect or inaccurate information about the climate and environment as the basis for one’s climate response. Neither approach helps address the problem one intends to solve. Good political decision-making is compromised when we restrict theorising to those whose lives most closely represent the ideal rather than those who live further away from it. If there are experiences of childhood we would like to address, accepting all experiences of childhood as genuine representations of childhood better places us to address these issues than does yearning for idealised conceptions.

Idealised and inaccurate conceptions impact adults as well. Adults do not meet the idealised standards of independence, maturity, or development that are often associated with them. Acknowledging this can help to overcome unrealistic expectations that impose weighty burdens on adults, including their own expectations about themselves as independent and self-sufficient. Dependence and reliance

on others are not restricted to children. A conceptualisation of children and adults as totally divergent groups with easily separable interests or characteristics such as ‘innocence’ or ‘responsibility’ is not an accurate or helpful conclusion to reach for any party involved. Such an understanding may encourage social practices within which adults, like children, have more opportunities to engage in creative pursuits rather than devote so many of their waking hours to what is often unfulfilling employment. This discussion therefore challenges us to question the very concepts and structures to which our notions of ‘adult’ and ‘child’ are attached. If the conceptions about children and adults are changeable, so too are the contexts and structures in which they live, potentially with far-reaching effect.

One might express concern that children’s political inclusion will not ease these issues. If a child has difficult experiences, it is not clear why political inclusion an appropriate response, as opposed to some other response. Consider again suicide statistics and children’s grappling with existential issues. It may seem more appropriate to invest in mental health services than to be concerned with children’s political participation. Firstly, an argument for children’s inclusion is not inconsistent with investing in mental health services. Secondly, this point ignores the symbolic power of enfranchisement and the impact this has on the kind of treatment one deems appropriate to engage in with another in the first place. In levelling the channels through which adults and children communicate in the political sphere, as facilitated by inclusion, this itself enables, for instance, more child-centric mental health services. Recall that notions of children’s innocence contribute to the perception that the child’s life is pure and carefree. As a result, children’s mental health is often overlooked. Their mental health needs are often neglected and disorders go undiagnosed. If we are to uphold notions that there are ‘goods of childhood’, opportunities to discover what children see as the burdens in their lives and what would need to be in place to overcome these would actually facilitate these very goods to be upheld. Enfranchisement facilitates channels through which this communication can occur.

Alternatively, one might suggest that children should not be involved in making decisions about ‘adult issues’. On this view, there are matters which should simply be ‘off-limits’ for children, such as sexual consent policy. However, such a view ignores the points made here that children’s experiences are not distinct from ‘adult issues’. If our criticism is that children should not be involved in making decisions about matters that they do not know about, an anti-ageist perspective requires that such a concern applies to anyone, regardless of age. Such a criticism would therefore pose a fundamental challenge to the ways that democracies function in the first place, compelling us to question why

people in general should be involved in making decisions if they know nothing about the subject matter. The criticism itself does not justify children's exclusion in the existing system.

4.2: Undue Influence

One might express concern about the risk of undue influence or pressure on children if they are enfranchised. This might manifest as a kind of exploitation of children's increased vulnerability relative to others in the form of pressure from parents, caregivers, teachers, other adults, or other children in the child's life about how to vote or direct their political attention and resources.

It is interesting how our concerns here rest with children or those manipulated rather than adults or those doing the manipulating. The risk of pressure itself does not justify exclusion; we must also look to where the pressure comes from. Such a concern requires just as much reflection about how adults, holding power in the current political climate, take responsibility for their behaviour (Hinze 2019, 300). Pressure of this kind towards anyone, adult or child, is a point of concern. It is not a present requirement that one votes through well-considered deliberation, and one can vote regardless of religious, political or social influence (Munn 2016, 609). Members of religious groups are permitted guidance from religious leaders in casting their vote. As Nicholas Munn argues, discriminating against children 'for doing what the devout, the ideologically compelled, and the unconfident do freely would not be defensible' (ibid). I add, given the extensive influence of mainstream media, largely controlled by global elites, we may as well say that anyone subject to influence from these platforms should also be excluded; that would affect most if not all the population. These concerns do not serve to justify children's exclusion; they are more appropriately addressed towards the functioning of existing political systems.

Even if pressure of this kind towards anyone is a matter of concern, one might maintain that children are *more* vulnerable to this kind of pressure. Although vulnerability may not be an *essential* feature of being a child (see Gopnik 2009, 11), the reinforced notions of children's vulnerability still have social force and influence upon children's experiences and abilities to participate. There are limits to the thinking we can do without evidence and it cannot simply be said that pressure will not even-tuate.

Earlier enfranchisement movements should make us wary of arguing this point. Arguments against women's enfranchisement included that women would face manipulation and pressure to vote

in certain ways as imposed by the men in their lives. Men, it was claimed, had a *responsibility towards* women, including to ensure their reproductive fitness, this being considered inconsistent with women's inclusion (Koren 2019). At one point, women's inclusion seemed to some like a very bad idea. Now, thoughts of women's exclusion conjure up dystopian visions rather than a direction for acceptable political change. Of course, children are not the same as women, even if children need not be understood according to deficit conceptions. Still, this example encourages us to challenge assumptions about social kinds. Debunking certain myths about childhood, including beliefs that an active involvement in social and political activities is 'bad for children's development', is likely to provide further support for the strengths-based conception and the case for children's inclusion.

Exclusion is not justified on the basis that upon inclusion, the currently excluded, lacking familiarity with the process, would be more prone to pressure and manipulation. Not only children but adults are vulnerable to manipulation; adults' vulnerability here is hidden under the guise of contemporary media practice and as such is far more difficult to see. Inclusion does not instantly remove political and social barriers, but the existence of those barriers does not justify exclusion. Rather, it is a call to highlight that other work must be done.

4.3: Impact on Those Already Included

Children's inclusion, it is feared, might have a negative impact on those already enfranchised. Their inclusion might decrease the impact of the votes of those already included or decrease the value of the idea of voting at all, given that it would increase the size of the voting pool (for a critique of this point, see Munn 2018, 609). This concern is not a compelling reason for exclusion and does not square when considered in light of earlier suffrage and enfranchisement movements. Members of different groups have been added to the voting pool over time, in recognition that their political exclusion was arbitrary, regardless of whether this decreased the weight of the votes of those already included. Their enfranchisement mattered in recognising their equal status and ability to influence political outcomes. In fact, a very objective of inclusion is to decrease the impact of the votes of those already included; the vote matters to one so that one may influence outcomes, not maintain the status quo.

4.4: Developing Participation Habits

Concerns have also been expressed that providing children with equal opportunities to participate may hinder their abilities to acquire and refine these competencies later on (Purdy 1992, 215-216). This, it is feared, would pose a harm to society in terms of the quality of decision-making, as well as to children's development. Respecting the autonomy of the person the child becomes in future may require preventing their free actions and choice in the present (Feinberg 1980, 127).

This concern does not square with the evidence, at least not in the political sphere. Starting political participation early helps to develop political maturity and enhances voter turnout, instilling long-term voting habits (see Munn 2012b; Echeveria and Hannam 2017). In excluding children from political participation, not only do we presume that those under 18-years lack the capacity to vote, we also deny them the 'opportunity to show otherwise' (Wood and Munn 2018). The reinforcing nature of social structures is relevant here. If children are assumed ill-suited or unable to perform a task, this attitude closes off opportunities that children could have to prove their ability to perform that task. The more accommodating the environment for exercising one's habits, the more likely one can practise and therefore develop those habits. In the case of children, the more accommodating their environment to political participation, the more likely they are to develop habits and draw on their strengths to contribute to political decision-making (Makaiau 2017, 20). Such an environment facilitates children's idea generation, enabled by their lack of habituation to existing circumstances. Familiarity with and habituation to existing structures is less likely to constrain children's decision-making than it does for older members of the population, especially advantageous where innovative solutions are required. This does not deny that adults can be very imaginative, but children's lack of habituation to the world provides its own perspective of uniqueness.

Children are also likely to highlight issues that adults do not. New Zealand's Youth Parliament declared a climate emergency before the New Zealand Parliament. One might express concern that the stakes of inclusion are very high; we need to be very sure that children's inclusion would be a good thing before being persuaded that it should be implemented. However, the stakes are arguably very high if we do not make the change, especially for issues for which we seek innovative solutions. If one cares, for instance, about addressing climate change, more urgent attention would likely be placed on this matter if children's views held greater weight in political decision-making.

There is a case to be made for the ‘experimental value’ of childhood.⁵ Childhood and youth provide opportunity to experiment with different beliefs and ways of life. As such, we might be hesitant to associate the child with commitment to particular beliefs or actions. We might prefer not to hold a young person accountable if, for example, having been raised in a fascist environment, they hold fascist beliefs. However, it is not clear the point at which we can say that someone is appropriately accountable for their beliefs or actions, and again, an age-based distinction would be arbitrary here. I therefore argue that both childhood and adulthood are appropriately understood as experimental. Many people throughout life, whether adult or child, change their commitments and beliefs. A person has not necessarily a fixed identity but is one learning and developing throughout life. Excluding children on the grounds of the experimental value of their phase of life does not hold weight in light of the experimental value to be placed on *all* phases of life.

One might object that there comes a point where a life cannot be considered experimental. This might be the case for persons very stubborn in their beliefs, or those nearing the end of life. Consider a very elderly man who, on his deathbed, comes to change his fascist beliefs. It seems implausible to say that his near lifelong belief is appropriately understood as an ‘experiment’. This suggests that the more pressing issue is how we associate commitment to a belief or action with accountability. We can reflect on what is involved in holding someone accountable at all, and if someone *is* held accountable, whether a retributive, rehabilitative, or deliberative approach is most appropriate. However, I lack scope to give this discussion appropriate attention and leave it for another time.

This chapter has addressed and dispelled practical fears and concerns about children’s inclusion. The notions of the ‘goods of childhood’ and ‘children’s innocence’ are based on and reinforce inaccurate understandings about the lived realities of many children. In fact, these understandings actually contribute towards these feared harms to children, and therefore should be challenged. Appealing to the risk of undue pressure or influence on children places the onus on those who would impose the pressure, not on children. This concern does not serve to justify children’s exclusion; it is more appropriately addressed towards the functioning of existing political systems. Fears about children’s inclusion are generally motivated by preserving the status quo, though it is necessary to question to what

⁵ Thank you to Nicholas Agar for raising this point.

extent the status quo is worth preserving, and what benefits may accrue if circumstances were otherwise. Many of these concerns are not to be addressed at children's political inclusion but are more appropriately directed at addressing the limitations of existing political systems. Children's inclusion facilitates an environment in which the strengths they bring to political decision-making can manifest.

Still, change to children's political status through their inclusion would likely have flow-on impacts elsewhere. Change in conceptions in one domain would likely impact our thinking about children in other domains. This is the subject of the next and final chapter, in which I briefly speculate on the possible implications of my discussion elsewhere.

Chapter 5

WIDER IMPLICATIONS

'Try to realise what it was like to have a viviparous mother... Try to imagine what "living with one's family" meant.'

They tried; but obviously without the smallest success.

'And do you know what a "home" was?'

They shook their heads.

(Huxley 1932, 36)

The practical implications of children's inclusion are potentially far-reaching. Conceptions about children and childhood, as Ariès emphasised, are not fixed. The regard for and treatment of children in society have changed before and are subject to change again. The arguments of this paper and proposed support for a strengths-based conception of childhood will also, of course, be influenced by other social and technological developments. We might claim that certain flow-on implications are not *intended* or *desired* and do not necessarily follow from changes to political participation. However, we must equip ourselves. Change in one way can influence change elsewhere, even if not foreseen or intended.

A revised, critical understanding of childhood and politics need not do away with all our current social and institutional arrangements as they apply to children. As such, the possible impact that children's inclusion would have on other domains is not to be feared. However, such an approach does encourage responsiveness to changing circumstances and reflection on the values that motivate the directions that societies move in. I briefly explore this with reference to the domains of family arrangements, genetic engineering, health, sexual consent and choice, and the information age. This speculation is admittedly brief. Although I cannot do justice to all the issues raised here, I acknowledge the significance of these issues, and suggest some important opportunities for future research.

5.1: Family and Living Arrangements

Children's political inclusion impacts our thinking about children's roles in relation to their family and living arrangements. Considerations here are not limited to children's leverage in negotiations about whether to, for instance, eat ice cream every night for dinner. They also extend to more fundamental aspects of family *structure*. A strengths-based conception of the child, according to which a child is understood as actively shaping their world rather than merely being shaped by it, compels reflection on whether a child could choose to live outside their family living arrangements and opt for an option preferable to them available elsewhere.

Children already engage in decision-making about their family and living arrangements. In divorce proceedings, children are consulted about custodial arrangements and their preferences are increasingly taken into consideration. Children have also directed their own legal cases for living and custody arrangements. At 12-years, Gregory Kingsley, following years of neglect from his biological parents, made a legal case for adoptive parents. His arguments in making his case were 'rational' and 'persuasive' and serve as an example of a child's agency being recognised in family court (Matthews and Mullin 2018). Children clearly have their own positions, sometimes very strongly, about their family situation and in some cases are willing to make changes to their circumstances.

It is inevitable to question the appropriate authority of children's contributions. One might fear supposed risks to giving significant weight to children's views. One could go so far as to say that children's agency may compromise family ties themselves. However, we need not jump to this concern. This is therefore not an argument for dissolving the family or bringing about the World State in Huxley's *Brave New World*, in which familial ties as we know them cease to exist. Although children's political inclusion may make them more likely to *challenge* decisions they disagree with, giving weight to children's views does not necessitate an environment in which parents and caregivers cease to have relationships with children in which they provide advice or guidance. Children's political inclusion does not involve the destruction of the family unit, just as women's inclusion did not amount to a destruction of social relationships, even if understandings about gender roles are reconceptualised. Giving weight to others' views does not necessarily mean destruction of our shared ways of life, even if it does invite or accept the risk of disruption to them. We should not therefore jump to conclusions that children's inclusion means the destruction of parent-child or teacher-child relationships, even if the details of those roles and relationships changes. There are still, after all, social roles that function with all adults having the right to vote: teacher to student, parent to adult offspring, employers to

employees, and many others. One might object that these social roles involve power imbalances that are not reflective of the symbolic equality of status underlying democratic participation that I argue for. However, one cannot forget that people do not vote absent of context; people vote from the position of the roles that they occupy. The vote is not separated from the person who casts it. The symbolic status represents only that one role is not inferior to another: social relationships are, ideally speaking, representative of different skills and significances rather than superiority-inferiority relations.

This point also raises our attention to the limits of the family, particularly the nuclear family. The family can be an important locus of connection for people, but that is not always the case, or at least it is not always sufficient. Drawing on supports and resources beyond the nuclear family can in fact strengthen the family unit. A strengths-based conception about the child that allows for the contributions of children's own perceived needs in their upbringing would release excessive burdens on parents and caregivers and stigma involved in accessing support beyond the immediate family. Consistently with the discussions in this paper, this involves resisting excessive and idealised expectations of parents which affect adults and children alike.

Discussion about the appropriate centre of control in the family also extends to considerations in genetic engineering, gene editing, and selection. The issue turns on the reasonable extent of parental and procreative liberty. Genetic engineering is often considered to present opportunities for humans to show mastery over the world and their own nature. Michael Sandel discusses William May's distinction between accepting and transforming love. As Sandel explains, '[a]ccepting love affirms the being of the child, whereas transforming love seeks the well-being of the child. Each aspect corrects the excesses of the other' (2004). A love focused on transformation seems more consistent with a deficit conception of the child that focused on how the child should be *shaped* and *prepared* for its adulthood. A love focused on acceptance that does not seek total mastery over the child seems more consistent with a strengths-based conception of the child, affirming the child as a *being* rather than merely *becoming*. Applying the accepting-transforming considerations to the voting age itself, abolishing the voting age would be more justified according to an accepting rather than a transforming view, since in the latter case, children must be moulded before they are ready to participate. Our attitudes to genetic engineering therefore directly address one of the questions at the heart of this paper: whether the child is to be considered as shaped by or involved in actively shaping their world.

Accepting love and transforming love can be balanced against one another. This *balancing out* of accepting and transforming love involves shaping the child to some extent. Upbringing a child necessarily involves some degree of shaping, since one does not grow up in a vacuum. Again, the emphasis is on the *extent* or *degree* of the transforming here. In the political sphere, the adult's ability to shape the world still matters, but their perspectives do not constitute *absolute authority* over what that looks like for the child. A strengths-based conception of the child that focuses on the child's own ability to shape the world need not reject genetic engineering outright, but would likely reject genetic enhancement that was too strongly centred on transforming love. On the strengths-based view, there is less justification for enhancement that is motivated by conforming a child to a *preconceived* idea of the good life. It does however remain open that enhancement that is directed towards enhancing people's imaginative capacities may be justified on a strengths-based view, consistently with my arguments for the assets that children bring to political decision-making. Still, the nature of the child and their environment is ever-changing, influenced by availability of information and technological development. Children have information readily available and may not rely on adults for information in ways that they have needed to in the past. It is hard to see how a cognitively enhanced child so advanced that it has the mental capacities beyond what humans manifest today would map onto the modern *or* the emerging conceptions of the child. In such a case, a reconceptualisation of the ways that children are regarded and treated would be readily justified once again, but that is a topic for a different paper.

5.2: Health

There is a wealth of literature about whether children should be able to make decisions about their own healthcare and treatment. Issues range from a child choosing not to take a temporary dose of antibiotics medication, such as eye drops to prevent infection and long-term damage, to terminally ill children who want to end their life and veto their parents' insistence that they live in accordance with their religious belief. Children's capacity in this domain is often regarded as occurring in different stages. Younger children are said to be able to 'participate meaningfully' in their healthcare treatment, though unlike adolescents, supposedly appear less competent than adults in reasoning and understanding treatment information (Weithorn and Campbell 1982, 1589). We might appeal to the therapeutic value of consent as providing a *practical argument* for soliciting children's consent. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, my argument goes deeper than practicality. It argues for the competency children

have to make decisions about their own lives. The stakes involved in healthcare matters, as well as the diverse range of healthcare issues that manifest, make this discussion by no means straightforward.

One might maintain that there are many decisions we should be uncomfortable with children making. Consider a child refusing to take medication for an ear infection. The parent has been advised that a week-long course of medicine will get rid of the infection that otherwise will lead to serious lifelong complications. The parent insists that the child takes the medication whilst the child refuses. For many, this will be a clear case where the adult is a competent decision-maker and the child is not, though involuntary treatment is admittedly a contentious point. There seems to be some hypocrisy here. Adults, of course, make decisions that are not in their own or others' interests all the time. We are nonetheless more inclined to intervene with children where we disagree with their decisions than adults. Adults tend to have more experience, be aware of the risks involved in dangerous situations, be biologically more developed to manage substances, and less prone to influence or manipulation. Children tend to more of their lives to live, meaning there is a risk of potentially onerous long-term consequences. However, even if one rejects that the child is the most competent decision-maker in this case, their perspectives are not to be dismissed. On a strengths-based conception of childhood, children's rejection of the medication can be an opportunity for reflection on the nature of medical practice and the ways in which we can collaborate with children to better accommodate their healthcare preferences and needs. This is consistent with a collaborative patient-health professional approach to healthcare. Many readers will likely plead the limits of negotiation here: when it comes down to a disagreement of the kind described above, the adult will win out over the child. The onus here is on the one holding that position to identify *in what sense* this is the case, given the distinctions between adults and children that I have challenged in this paper. A relational account (similar to that proposed by Schroeder, discussed in Chapter 1) is likely the most plausible route, though care must be taken to ensure this does not bleed into the more dangerous pretences of 'protection'.

There are also implications of the arguments in this paper for transgender persons. Does children's political inclusion mean that a child of 8-years is justified in proceeding with their gender transition? Decisions about transitioning go beyond how to dress or the way in which a person wants to be referred by name or pronouns. There are also decisions to be made about hormone therapy, or having surgery so that one's body aligns with one's gender identity. There are many factors at play.

Considerations involved in adults undergoing a transition may not be considered easily applicable to children. Concerns include whether the child holds appropriately reliable or stable beliefs to make such a decision, fears being that they will one day come to regret their transition. One might prefer to advocate for a society that normalises and allows for more diverse ways of presenting oneself, regardless of gender. However, this is deemed inadequate by those who simply do not feel themselves in their own body. In challenge to those who argue that children lack the required understanding about themselves or a grasp over the nature of the issues involved in making such a decision, emerging evidence supports that transgender children are not confused about their gender identity and understand what it means to associate with a gender (Olson et al 2015, 467). It is also worth reflecting on whether this decision is as high-risk for the child's future as some might say. If there is a special concern here, it must involve justification that explains how gender transitioning is fundamentally different from a child deciding to pursue football, but deciding later on, once it is too late to develop musical proficiency for a professional career, that they wished they had pursued violin instead. The decisions we make in any sphere, not just our decisions about gender, impact our life outlook.

Attitudes in many domains depend on the accessibility of technology and the corresponding risks involved. Objections to or concerns with children transitioning would likely not be so strong if technology progressed or was socially and economically accessible to the extent that transition surgeries were not complex or costly. Often when we imagine scenarios where technological or accessibility obstacles are removed, our attitudes change. Of course, resources are limited and technology is not as advanced or widely available at this point in time for transitioning to be affordable or easily accessible to everyone who desires it. Still, the degree of importance that members of society place on the justifiability of transitioning drives whether technology is developed and used in this way, not to mention the allocation of resources. A strengths-based understanding of the child that takes their views into account on this point might bring forward arguments for technology development and resource distribution in such a direction. Contextual factors considered, it is consistent with the arguments of this paper that children are capable of making the choice to transition for themselves or participate in policy decisions about transitioning.

5.3: Sexual Consent and Choice

Children's enfranchisement has possible implications in the context of sexual consent and choice. Age of consent laws vary worldwide. Some jurisdictions permit sexual intercourse for those as young

as 12-years, others 14-years, 16-years or 18-years, and in some cases, 21-years (World Population Review 2021). If there is an adequately significant difference between the sexual and political domains, the arguments for equal status do not necessarily apply to abolish an age for sexual consent. However, for reasons discussed in Chapter 4, there are issues with ignoring that children have a sexuality and their own ideas about sex. Many children, including young children, have sexual urges (Archard 2004, 49).

The social order informs our attitudes about sex. In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, it is not unusual for young children to engage in 'erotic play' with one another (1932, 32). The children are still described as 'children', even though they are not part of the same kind of family unit, nor do they participate in the same institutional structures as children do today. World State leaders and citizens express confusion about the prudish ways of the past; children of the World State are not raised in nuclear family arrangements, these being regarded by World State citizens as primitive. To describe this possible future is not to argue for it, of course.

If conceptions about childhood are subject to change, and our critical reflection about our contexts is a significant influence upon these conceptions, we need to reflect on what kinds of environments we want to encourage. To be able to engage in sexual consent, I may need to have comprehensive knowledge of my own sexuality, those of my prospective sexual partners, and understandings about the extent of an individual's control over their own body. An important factor is also whether one can appreciate the possible consequences of having sex. One might have sex at 13-years, accepting the possibility of becoming pregnant. Suppose this person does become pregnant, and is initially very happy and comfortable with their decision to keep the child. As one raises the child, one may face economic challenges and come to believe that their decision to keep the child has placed them in very difficult circumstances. However, we should be careful before describing this situation as representing a 'myopic' decision made by this person. The concerns we have here are more appropriately attributed to the lack of supports available and limitations imposed or faced due to socioeconomic factors. Granted, part of appreciating the consequences of behaviour is acknowledging the impact that environmental factors will likely have on the decision made. Still, it is not clear why socioeconomic considerations should be the central concern for someone making a decision about whether to keep a child. A society that moved in the direction of improved social welfare might regard the 13-year-old's decision as not risking her being in a difficult situation after all, and would plausibly impact the very notion of what it means to appreciate the possible consequences of sex.

Children are generally regarded as lacking adequate emotional maturity to be able to consent to sexual intercourse. This position is not accepted by everyone. Stephen Kershner discusses sexual relations between adults and children, arguing that we cannot be sure about how sex between children and adults affects children, since adults' knowledge about the sexuality of children is lacking (2015, xi). However, even if there is a lack of access to knowledge about children's perception of their sexuality that adults can have, this lack of knowledge is not enough to justify liberal sexual relations across age groups. Although it is important to acknowledge that children have a sexuality, there is a notable difference between the political and sexual domains. The fear of harms from children's political inclusion, as I have argued, is largely unfounded. However, the same is not true for the sexual domain. The long-term negative consequences that can stem from children's sexual encounters should be at the forefront of our thinking (van der Kolk 2014, 140-142). This makes it appropriate for standards of sexual consent and choice to be higher than political participation standards, even if we grant that children's perspectives about their sexual world matter in terms of the education they receive.

This prompts reflection on the extent of children's influence over sex and sex policy in the political domain. A strengths-based conception of children would encourage open dialogue and education about sex. We might say that today, that there is high exposure to sexualised material, and as such there is already a great exposure to or comfort with sexuality among young people. However, the framing around discussions about sex (at least as far as children are concerned) often implies that it is something to be held in secret, rather than something about which an informed position can be openly developed. This latter approach is best facilitated by an environment in which there is understanding that children do have a sexuality and plausibly want to participate in learning about sex. Education in this case would likely emphasise appreciating the significance of the act and sexual consent principles to make sure that sexual encounters, where they do occur, are less likely to risk the aforementioned harms.

5.4: Implications for the Information Age

The arguments of this paper have important implications in the context of the information age. Information is more readily and widely available than ever before; children can easily access information from entertainment to news, including fake news, as well as depictions of graphic violence and sexual content. Children are very often competent users of technology. Children in schools increasingly receive fake news education, education that many adults have not encountered (see Henley 2020).

Their ability to learn quickly facilitates their expertise in manipulating technology in a way that exceeds the abilities of many adults (Holloway and Valentine 2003), though of course, there are plenty of adults who are competent in the use of technology. Children are not simply aimless observers affected by this rapidly changing landscape; they are active participants deeply connected as part of it.

The extent of information availability and children's competency in using it supports their political inclusion. If children have the same (in some cases, greater) access to information and abilities to discern that information in comparison with adults, it seems that they are in no worse a position to be informed about politics and political issues. One might argue, in the interests of protecting children from harmful, explicit, or graphic information, that censorship is preferable to enabling the wide availability and exposure of that information. However, not only does this ignore the prevalence of technology, it also overlooks many children's abilities to manipulate technology, despite the controls one might attempt to enforce. Instead of regarding children's skills in this domain as a threat to existing systems or children themselves, it is better to embrace how children's technological competency could ground a renegotiation of relationships between adults and children (ibid). Consistently with the strengths-based conception, a better approach is to consider that children's exposure to this information provides an opportunity to engage with children in critiquing this information, as well as to work with their technological abilities in ways that can be useful in the political sphere. This does not mean that only those competent with technology are justified in shaping the directions that technology and information management move in, but there is much to be learned from those who are knowledgeable. In the information age, both children and adults have knowledge in this space.

There is one last topic to which I connect the arguments of this paper: artificial intelligence. Parallels can be drawn with the power asymmetry that I challenge between adults and children and the human-artificial intelligence relationship that may emerge. Consider the following thought experiment. Suppose that artificial intelligence is much more intelligent than human beings, regarding all organic beings as their inferiors. In this scenario, artificial intelligence may regard human beings as incompetent to make their own decisions and treat all human beings paternalistically. Many would maintain that despite the skills of artificial intelligence, humans do have competency, at the very least, to make decisions about their own lives. As such, many humans would not accept the authority imposed by artificial intelligence and would likely challenge this, to violent extremes if necessary. Just because one is *perceived* as incompetent does not necessarily mean that one fails to perceive oneself as competent,

nor does it preclude one from challenging one's 'masters'. Adults' own risked inferiority status, and what they might deem as an appropriate response to this, suggests the challenges involved where one's self-perception does not align with the treatment from one's 'superiors'. It is not a stretch to imagine that this is the case for children and their standing in relation to adults.

Allowing the existing political divide between children and those with political power to continue risks further divide in generational relations and interests. Children and young people's increased political engagement in response to and dissatisfaction with existing power structures suggests that such a divide may manifest. This generational gap could be widened further still, for instance, in a context where life extension technologies are available. A strengths-based approach applied to children in the political sphere, through their enfranchisement, helps to provide a solution to this social and political risk.

The practical implications of children's inclusion are potentially far-reaching, though the possible impact that children's inclusion would have on other domains is not necessarily to be feared. Still, we are far more likely to be equipped for these changes if we make an active effort to understand the actual experiences of children rather than persist with deficit conceptions that reinforce structures that discriminate against children and constitute ageism towards them. This will better equip us to incorporate children's strengths as part of political decision-making rather than increase the risk of a deepening generational divide.

Conclusions

This paper has argued for a reconceptualisation of childhood, favouring emerging strengths-based conceptions over deficit conceptions about children. Children are not merely human *becomings* to be shaped in preparation for adulthood. They are human *beings*, actively involved in the shaping of the world. The strengths-based conception supports a case for children's political inclusion. Children's perspectives can contribute to good political decision-making, especially in a system where this is understood as involving an openness to changing social circumstances rather than merely perpetuation of the status quo. The strengths-based conception also highlights the arbitrariness of age-based distinctions as these apply to voting in modern democracies. Age is an arbitrary basis on which to determine voting eligibility and children are not different in kind from adults in ways that justify their exclusion. As such, age-based distinctions as they apply to voting are arbitrary and constitute ageism towards children. Therefore, the voting age should be abolished.

Including children in existing political systems and methods is feasible to implement and competency-testing is not required. Children already meet existing standards for political participation. That they succeed also in meeting many desirable standards for participation further supports their case for inclusion. This is supported by evidence of children's competencies, as well as a critical understanding and reframing of those competencies. In rejecting a deficit conception about childhood that focuses on what children *lack* in relation to adults, I favour a strengths-based conception that more accurately reflects the nature of the child and enables us to see the skills that children bring to political decision-making. In this exercise, I have emphasised how different conceptions *frame* our understandings about competency in the first place. Children's lack of habituation to existing structures constitutes a strength, further supporting the case for their inclusion.

In accepting a strengths-based understanding about childhood, we cannot ignore the hold that inaccurate, misleading, and exaggerated stereotypes about children as informed by deficit conceptions about childhood continue to have. These stereotypes inform and reinforce the structures that dominate and shape our lives. As such, the strengths-based conception is at tension with existing social and political structures. Age-based demarcations inform and reinforce these stereotypes, compromising our abilities to see the unique qualities of social kinds, clouding our abilities to ascertain accurate understandings about people's competencies and nature. An argument for children's inclusion is most effective where it is supported by the practice of *actively challenging stereotypes*. This facilitates the understanding that children are not part of an inherently inferior or lacking social category, but are instead

complex individuals able to actively *shape their world* rather than merely be *shaped by it*. Accordingly, we are better placed to build quality social relationships that, like voting, matter for political outcomes.

Practical concerns about including children have been addressed and challenged. Fears that inclusion would compromise the perceived ‘goods of childhood’ involve an inaccurate understanding about the nature of children and childhood. Benefits accrue to children and wider society where these inaccurate understandings are overcome. The risk of undue influence and pressure is not unique to children and our concerns here highlight already prevalent issues existing in the political landscape. By including children, they are able to develop political participation habits, increasing the opportunities for idea generation informed by their lack of habituation to emerge.

A reconceptualisation of childhood also has implications beyond political participation. This paper has explored those implications in the domains of family arrangements, genetic engineering, health, sexual consent and choice, and the information age. A revised, critical understanding of childhood need not do away with all our current social and institutional arrangements as they apply to children, but it does support responsiveness to changing circumstances whilst commanding us to reflect on the values that motivate the directions that societies move in. The conclusions of this paper therefore alert us to many important areas worthy of our attention through future research.

Ultimately, there are many important avenues for political participation, of which voting is just one. Acknowledging that children are justified in voting does not limit us to political participation as it is presently. Children’s inclusion, in giving weight to children’s political contributions, represents an openness to a changing political landscape as informed by the input of all people, regardless of age. Still, this paper has provided a framework for establishing on what terms citizens are justifiably involved in political decision-making *at all*.

So, what is a child? By now it should be clear that the ways in which we answer this question will depend on the relevant conception about childhood that we hold. I have argued against a deficit conception about childhood in favour of a strengths-based conception. This latter conception enables us to see how the nature of the child is far more complex than earlier conceptions have suggested. A strengths-based approach facilitates our active challenging of the stereotypes that cloud our judgments about children and people in general. People are far more complex than stereotypes about them imply. As such, asking what it is to be a child is a bit like asking what it is to be a woman, or a person of

colour, or a member of some other social kind. The answer is far more nuanced than any single definition can suggest and will only become increasingly complex over time as new understandings enabled by the strengths-based conception emerge. This complexity warns us against making arbitrary distinctions on the basis of age.

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