Recognizing Children as Agents: Taylor's Hermeneutical Ontology and the Philosophy of Childhood

Submitted by

Franco A. Carnevale, RN, PhD (Psych), PhD (Phil)
Principal Investigator
VOICE: Views On Interdisciplinary Childhood Ethics
Website: https://www.mcgill.ca/voice/

Full Professor, Ingram School of Nursing
Associate Member, Department of Pediatrics
Affiliate Member, Biomedical Ethics Unit
Adjunct Professor, Counseling Psychology
McGill University

Clinical Ethicist (Child, Adolescent and Family Services); Chair, Pediatric Ethics Committee
Douglas Mental Health University Institute

Chair, Clinical Ethics Committee
Shriner's Hospitals for Children (Canada)

Clinical Ethics Consultant
The Lighthouse, Children and Families (pediatric hospice)

Associate Member, Pediatric Critical Care
Montreal Children's Hospital

Postal Address
Franco Carnevale
McGill University, 680 Sherbrooke St. West, Suite 1836
Montréal (Quebec) Canada H3A 2M7

Email: franco.carnevale@mcgill.ca

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Abstract

Within his earliest contributions to the human sciences, Charles Taylor challenged dominant behavioral views by advancing a hermeneutical conception of human agency. For Taylor, persons continually navigate their meaningful worlds and make sense of things and act in light of background *horizons of significance* and *social imaginaries*. Yet, conceptions of children have lagged as dominant outlooks construe young people as immature and incapable – perpetuating behavioral approaches to controlling their actions rather than hermeneutic ones that recognize them as agents. Working with Taylor's ideas, I discuss a Childhood Ethics ontological approach to understanding children and childhood. Specifically, I: (a) draw on Taylor's critique of naturalistic approaches to the human sciences to highlight problems that underlie universalist claims about all childhoods; (b) relate Taylor's articulation of human agency, centered on *strong evaluation* and *human linguistic capacity*, to the Philosophy of Childhood and Childhood Studies to address current questions regarding our understanding of agency within childhood; and (c) describe a hermeneutic ontology that can inform the development of empirical research, policy-making and practices that relate to children. I close with an outline of priority questions that can orient future investigations within this area of inquiry.

Key words: agency, Charles Taylor, childhood ethics, childhood studies, children, philosophy of childhood

Word Count: 6847 words

Introduction

These three narratives, drawn from my professional work, illustrate the range, complexity and importance of some of the moral concerns experienced by children.[1]

> Nine-year-old William was admitted to hospital for the treatment of problems related to end-stage cancer. Although he has lived with cancer since he was two years old, his condition is now considered 'terminal'. He is receiving chemotherapy to slow the growth of his tumors. Current treatment is expected to prolong his life for a few more weeks or months. One night he told his nurse that 'I do the chemo because my parents want me to'. He explained that he did not want to be in hospital, and he did not like how the chemotherapy made him feel. He also said that he knows the cancer is serious and that he

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[1] Names and other details have been modified to protect confidentiality. The terms children (and childhood) refer to persons below the age of majority. Although 'children' may not seem to adequately include older young people or youth, this term is used here to maintain congruence with terms used in Childhood Studies and within the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989).

may die soon. He added that he did not want the nurse to tell his parents about any of this because he thought it would make them cry, which he wanted to prevent.

Jeffrey, a 10-year-old, has told his teacher that one of his classmates – a close friend – is nervous and scared about coming to school. Another classmate has been making fun of him and taking things from him in front of his classmates and everyone laughs at him. Jeffrey wants to help his friend but does not know what to do. He has been having trouble sleeping because he is overwhelmed with worry about his friend. He told the teacher not to tell anyone; including not to speak to his friend nor confront the 'bully', fearing it would make things worse.

Anna is 13 years old. Her family has been reported to youth protection services because she has been touched by her mother's boyfriend's son in ways that have distressed her. In a discussion with a social worker in a community clinic, Anna revealed that her home life is causing her a lot of stress. She feels anxious all the time. She cries frequently and feels scared in her sleep – worried she might be mistreated again. Anna has also made clear that she wants to remain at home with her mother. She loves her mother and feels safest and happiest when she is with her, and thinks her mother is happiest when she is with Anna.

The distresses expressed within these narratives reveal longstanding problems regarding the recognition of children as morally capable agents. These problems are rooted in dominant 'developmental' conceptions of children. I aim to redress these problems by drawing on Taylor's ontological conception of human agency and relating this work to the recognition of children as agents. I begin with a brief overview of related philosophical questions in Childhood Studies, which I frame within the Philosophy of Childhood,[2] and follow with a detailed examination of Taylor's ideas that can help address these questions. I continue with a description of specific ways in which Taylor's work can inform advancements in Childhood Studies and close with an outline of questions that should be addressed in future investigations. This paper makes distinctive contributions by (a) examining how Taylor's philosophy can help advance

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[2] In this article, Philosophy of Childhood is referred to as a disciplinary stream within the interdisciplinary field of Childhood Studies. I aim to help advance the latter by drawing on Taylor's ideas to help advance the former.

conceptions of children's agency within the Philosophy of Childhood[3] and (b) demonstrating how Taylor's ideas can be operationalized in practice (e.g., empirical research, children's services).[4]

Children are widely regarded as 'immature' or 'incapable' of meaningful participation in discussions or decisions regarding morally complex matters. Some 'grownups' – whether parents or professional service providers – may justify children's exclusion from such discussions by claiming they are protecting them (i.e., from potentially distressing information or from children's own 'bad' decisions), whereas others may regard these as 'adult' matters that they should take care of for them.

Childhood Studies research has highlighted that children's exclusion from meaningful participation in discussions and decisions that affect them is rooted in dominant stage-based developmental conceptions of young people as 'human becomings', who are not yet regarded as full human beings (Lee 2001; Wall 2010). Children's particularities are characterized as immaturities within universalized developmental models that construe young people as deficient, when compared to adults.[5]

This universalized view of children as immature or incapable is rooted in a natural sciences paradigm that dominates the human sciences (Greene and Hogan 2005). This paradigm presumes that human communities or populations can be 'sampled' and investigated to generate knowledge that can explain and/or predict human actions and experiences, which can be

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[3] To date, no other author has explicitly drawn on Taylor's work to help advance Childhood Studies, as far as I know.

[4] While Taylor has developed an expansive corpus of philosophical ideas that have significant implications for human sciences research and human services practice, investigations of how this work can be applied in practice remain under-developed.

[5] Matthews (2008) argued that Piagetian-type stage theories of development convey a deficit conception of childhood, which undervalues the strong capacities that children can have (e.g., ability to learn a second language). For a discussion of conceptions of children's development that redress these concerns, see Carnevale et al. (2021).

generalized to the actions and experiences of larger communities or populations. Drawing on practices within the natural sciences, this approach to the human sciences is premised on a conception of persons as research 'objects' that are (a) essentially similar whereby data generated from a sample can be generalized to a larger population and (b) composed of dissociable parts that can be analyzed with reductionistic methods and that this research can be conducted objectively without imposition of the researcher's own 'biases' toward children.

It is therefore understandable that research on children's lives would create explanatory models that structure childhood in terms of age-based stages of im/maturity and development, whereby all children are believed to think, feel and act like other similarly-aged children sampled by researchers – defining 'normal' childhoods. Children who differ from these norms are then considered either developmentally delayed (if they do not meet the threshold for 'normality') or gifted (if they exceed this threshold). All children are portrayed as incomplete 'human becomings', along a continuum of undeveloped-ness.

Despite compelling bodies of research within the field of Childhood Studies that demonstrate significant flaws within this universalized stage-based construal of 'normal' development (e.g., samples drew primarily on white boys/men living within privileged social contexts; imposition of ideological presumptions regarding a fully developed person), these views still dominate policy-making and practices relating to children (Greene and Hogan, 2005). Moreover, this dominant paradigm disregards children's experiences – how they think and feel – as a meaningful focus of concern or end in itself, rather than a means that can impact their (more valued) development to adulthood. Childhood Studies scholars, including scholars within the Philosophy of Childhood, have denounced this paradigm, arguing for more humanized conceptions of children that recognize their agency (Greene and Hogan 2005).

The dominant conception of children is congruent with the rise of universalized behavioural models in the human sciences that Charles Taylor criticized in the beginnings of his philosophical work (Taylor 1964). Taylor argued that these models expressed an alignment of the human sciences with the natural sciences, construing human life within objectivist outlooks. According to Taylor, this universalized objectification failed to recognize that subjective interpretation and agency underlies human experiences and actions. These dominant approaches are ontologically flawed (i.e., in misrepresenting the essential 'nature' of human life) and dehumanizing (i.e., in not recognizing humans as self-interpreting agents).

Questions within the Philosophy of Childhood

The Philosophy of Childhood has examined questions about children's development, autonomy, rights, citizenship, and moral status, among other topics (Gheaus, Calder and De Wispelaere 2019). A significant focus within this field has investigated whether children can be considered autonomous, defined as the ability to govern oneself. Persistent questions relate to whether younger children can have the capacities required for autonomy - questioning whether they can have stable concerns as well as adequate knowledge, experience, cognitive maturity, or critical reflection. Other autonomy-based questions relate to age thresholds in various domains of self-governance, how to balance children's autonomy and well-being, as well as the roles of adults on how 'rearing' affects the development of autonomy (Hannan 2019). Working out whether or within which conditions children can be considered autonomous is important for determining if children can be entitled to make decisions about their health care or education, where to live, vote, high-risk activities (e.g., consume tobacco, cannabis), work for pay, religious practices, or forming intimate relationships with adults and other children - among other reasons (Hannan 2019).

As questions regarding children and autonomy are further examined, many scholars have found it necessary to concentrate on children's agency: advancing theory, research methods, policy and practice that promote the recognition of children as agents (Esser et al. 2016).[6] Indeed, this has been a major focus within Childhood Studies. Broadly, children's agency refers to their active contribution to the shaping of their social worlds and society (Esser et al. 2016). Although agency is a central focus within Childhood Studies, the concept remains underdeveloped, lacking a clear conceptualisation that outlines its features and demonstrates how it can be operationalized in research and practice (Esser et al. 2016). It is unclear whether children require any particular capacities (e.g. cognitive, relational, physical) to be recognized as agents. Agency is sometimes associated with autonomy, although the similarities and differences between these concepts remain under-examined. Given these lacunae, I draw on Taylor's work to help advance our understanding of agency within childhood.

Taylor's hermeneutical human sciences and agency[7]

Taylor has referred to his overall philosophical project as an articulation of a philosophical anthropology: the elaboration of an ontology of human life, rooted in a hermeneutical orientation for the human sciences (Taylor 1985a). He contested behavioural conceptions of human action in Anglo-American psychology, arguing that objectivist psychology emerged out of a naturalist hegemony that dominated the human sciences, systematically displacing subjectivist conceptions of human life (Taylor 1964).[8] Behavioural

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[6] Adapting Taylor's Politics of Recognition (1992), recognition implies an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the agency claims of a person or a group of persons.

[7] Although I understand that this section includes familiar ground for readers who know Taylor's work, this discussion is important in order to (a) articulate my analysis of Taylor's work that is specifically relevant for advancing the Philosophy of Childhood and (b) introduce Taylor's ideas to readers within the Philosophy of Childhood where his work is largely unknown.

[8] Below, I draw on Taylor's critique of naturalism in the human sciences as a basis for contesting the use of universalized stage-based conceptions of childhood.

research regarded human action as shaped by environmental factors, which could reinforce or extinguish various behaviours. This reductive model side-stepped consciousness. It was presumed that behaviour could be detached from corresponding purpose and intentionality.

In contrast, Taylor argued for a conception of the human sciences centered on understanding. Human understanding involves self-understanding because a person is 'a self-interpreting animal' (Taylor 1985b). Human agents' self-understandings inescapably involve moral discriminations, which can be better understood within an underlying moral ontology of human life (Taylor 1989, 41). Taylor contested dominant deontological or utilitarian outlooks, as he related human agency to largely implicit background beliefs held by persons. Human agents stand against background 'horizons of significance' (Taylor 1991, 38). Although an agent will formulate individual preferences and enact 'personal' choices and actions, these cannot be dissociated from the meaningful context within which the agent resides.[9] Human preferences, choices, and actions are rooted in a moral order shaped by socio-cultural-historical contexts.

This socio-cultural-historical focus is further developed in Taylor's concept of 'social imaginaries', which provides a 'toile de fond' for understanding moral frameworks, norms, and practices in light of corresponding societal processes (Taylor 2004). Taylor has defined a social imaginary as

> the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations (Taylor 2004, 23).

Social imaginaries are shared by a large group, referring to a group of people's common understanding of their social surroundings, and the group's common practices and shared legitimacy. Social imaginaries refer to how a group of people (or a society) understands itself as

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[9] Agency does not imply 'individualistic autonomy' because the views of others are morally significant for agents.

well as its practices. According to Taylor, hermeneutical analysis has to grasp the social imaginary or imaginaries corresponding with the object(s) being examined.

A society's horizons of significance and social imaginaries serve as its own moral framework for orienting 'the good'. The elaboration of such a framework involves processes of qualitative distinctions, reflectively discerning which actions or modes of life are incomparably higher (Taylor 1989).[10] Qualitative distinctions involve a language of thick description;[11] i.e., a language that is culturally attuned and articulates the significance of various views and actions within a culture in light of local distinctions of worth (Taylor 1985a).

The incomparable higher moral ground implies an alignment with goods or ends that command awe, respect, and admiration. Social communities form some converging viewpoints on such goods or ends. Taylor refers to the process of making qualitative distinctions in light of incomparable goods as 'strong evaluation' (Taylor 1985d, 1989). Strong evaluation involves distinguishing higher desires from lower ones and discerning the morally meaningful stakes implied by the highly desired alternatives confronted by an agent. Strong evaluation entails reflection, responsibility and an ongoing expression and constitution of self-identity (Taylor 1985d). Conditions of worth or value conveyed by one's culture are incorporated in some ongoing way into one's self-understanding.

Retrieving the moral ontology that underlies life within particular communities is necessary for a more complete understanding of human agency. Understanding one's respective horizons of significance and social imaginaries – which are constitutive of human agency - helps agents understand where they stand in relation to the good. Human agents are self-interpreting,

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[10] Among the incomparable goods, stands the 'hypergood'; the incomparably most important standpoint from which all other goods are judged (Taylor 1989, 63).
[11] Adapted from Geertz (1973), thick description involves a thorough analysis of the socio-cultural context.

involving an interpretation of oneself in light of a moral topography: I understand myself in relation to my surrounding systems of worth. The human agent's identity and corresponding sense of worth is indissociable from their meaningful horizon (Taylor 1989).

Taylor has highlighted the importance of language within his characterization of human agency. Building on his earlier critique of hegemonic linguistic conceptions that emphasize the designative (i.e., descriptive) purpose of language[12] (Taylor 1985c), he articulated the constitutive power of language through his distinctive analysis of what he calls the 'human linguistic capacity' (Taylor 2016). Drawing on Hamann, Herder and Humboldt, Taylor describes language as holistic, meaning creating and expressive – socially contextualizing human thoughts and experiences. Language enables shared attention through an emotion-infused 'communion'.[13]

Human identity is linguistically constituted, as the self develops within the constitution of a common world of joint attention. Language constitutes feelings, moral discriminations, norms, social 'footings'[14] and ways of being through expressions of human meanings.[15] Meanings are felt. So, feelings can help reveal the meaning that a thing holds for a person or group - how something can impede or further valued purposes. Culture provides an ultimate grounding upon which persons find terms for meanings, how they feel, and how novel meanings are formulated.

Language is enacted, which can creatively generate new expressions that may create new meanings and new ways of being. Speech is an important way to enact language and meanings, which is expressive as well as constitutive of linguistic thought - mobilizing words that can create communion (Taylor 2016, 98). Speech acts emit suitable words, bodily actions, stance,

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[12] Taylor refers to this designative view of language as enframing, instrumental, representational, and atomistic – focused on encoding and communicating information - drawn from the philosophies of Hobbes, Locke, and Condillac.

[13] This further develops Taylor's relationally-embedded conception of human agency.

[14] Taylor uses 'footings' to describe how persons stand in relation to one another, which exist in a broader social space with common understandings and social order (Taylor 2016, 266).

[15] Human meanings can relate to important goals, purposes, and the moral discernment of what is better or worse.

gesture, and tone, among other features - enacted in alignment with other embodied expressive actions (e.g., gesture, music, dance, poetry).

Taylor describes how linguistic capacity starts out in early life by drawing on 'basic' words that convey desire or aversion (e.g., want/don't want, like/hate, pleasure/pain, comfort/discomfort, glad/sad, anger/joy) – developing terms over time with increasing complexity, nuance, and distinctions that alter the shape of meanings (e.g., remorse, indignation, pride/shame) (Taylor 2016, 200).[16] Taylor describes how children are inducted into language as they are inculcated within their local cultural world of named and enacted human meanings, within relations of intense communion – through which they sort out where they stand within the views of others. As children master the local language, they can then generate their own linguistic innovations.[17]

Indeed, within his latest work on language (Taylor 2016), Taylor has presented his most explicit discussion of children - albeit within brief illustrative examples rather than a fully-developed examination of language and agency within childhood. Although his ideas on childhood described here foster valuable insights, some of his arguments are problematic. Taylor's characterization of childhood within this work sometimes replicates contested conceptions of children described above. For example, Taylor apparently endorses Piaget's stage-based conception of children's development, citing Piaget's notion of children's 'egocentrism' and characterizing children linguistic inculcation in terms of stages (Taylor 2016, 66). Moreover, Taylor presents a somewhat 'top-down' construal of children's communion with parents and other adults describing the relationship as richly sensed by adults and dimly sensed

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[16] These linguistic distinctions can help orient and enrich communication practices with children.
[17] Taylor has highlighted that linguistic capacity can be impeded if communication with others is impaired (Taylor 2016, 52). This has important implications for children/persons with communication differences, as these can impact their socio-cultural inclusion.

by children (Taylor 2016, 58). When children's verbal expression capacities and apparent relational awareness are construed as undeveloped - when compared to adults (implying immaturity) - this risks perpetuating an informational encoding view of language within childhood rather than language as meaning creating and expressive. Children can understand meanings and experiences in their own ways, within a socio-cultural context, which are no less important demonstrations of agency as those among adults (Greene and Hogan 2005; Wall 2010). Additionally, more current views of child development (e.g., using transactional models) demonstrate how children develop within bi-directional interactions in their relational environment – as active co-constitutors of 'communion'. Indeed, children can create meanings (e.g., through speech, art, play, and other forms of enactment) and bring new understandings to light for adults which may be concealed by adult linguistic practices (Wall 2010).

In short, human agents grasp things in light of background horizons of significance and social imaginaries – as one's surrounding community shapes the goods or values that orient one's 'moral imaginaries';[18] i.e., local conceptions of good/bad, right/wrong or just/unjust. Drawing on their linguistic capacities, human agents continually discern the moral significance of phenomena through strong evaluation (Taylor 1991).

Turning to hermeneutical analysis, Taylor has articulated a three-fold analytical framework for conducting hermeneutical investigations within the human sciences (Taylor 1985e). First, an object or a field of objects needs to be identified, relating to the thing(s) in which clarity is sought. What thing(s) are we trying to understand? Second, it is important to distinguish the underlying clarity, sense or coherence that we are seeking from the presenting expression(s) of the former. The meaning underlying a particular text (i.e., the intended message)

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[18] I adapted 'moral imaginaries' from Taylor's social imaginaries.

should not be confused with the text itself (i.e., what was actually written or stated). The latter is a particular embodiment of that meaning. Taylor refers to this as the distinction between meaning and its expression. Third, the subject for whom the message is meaningful has to be specified. An object or a text does not have meaning in itself – it is meaningful to some subject or a group of subjects. For example, the interpretation of religious texts does not imply the discerning of an absolute ultimate sense. Rather, this involves a clarification of how this is meaningful to a particular person or group of persons.

Moreover, human expression (i.e., written, spoken, action) conveys meaning – meaning that can only be understood through interpretation. Understanding through interpretation involves a 'hermeneutical circle'[19] – within an analysis of 'part-whole' relations, attempting to understand the sense underlying the whole through a serial reading of parts (Taylor 1985e).

Drawing on this 'curation' of selected ideas from Taylor's work, I demonstrate in the next section how these can (a) help advance conceptions of agency within the Philosophy of Childhood and Childhood Studies, and (b) inform empirical investigations of children's agency through hermeneutical inquiry

Taylor and the Philosophy of Childhood: A new ontology for Childhood Studies

I lead a Childhood Studies research team called VOICE (i.e., Views On Interdisciplinary Childhood Ethics). We have worked with Taylor's ideas to help redress the childhood-related problems outlined above in three ways. We have (a) drawn on Taylor's critique of naturalistic approaches to human sciences to demonstrate problems that underlie universalistic claims about all childhoods, generalized from highly selective samples that are analyzed with objectivist frames; (b) related Taylor's conceptualization of human agency to Childhood Studies to address

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[19] For example, the term 'shame' cannot be understood without examining situations that can be shameful or humiliating, which also relates to other contrasting notions such as pride and honor.

persistent questions regarding our understanding of agency within childhood; and (c) developed

a hermeneutic ontology for Childhood Studies, rooted in Taylor's work, to orient the

advancement of analytical methods and knowledge generation regarding children and childhood

(e.g., to inform the development of hermeneutical approaches for empirical research, policy-

making and practices that relate to children).[20] We have articulated this work as an ontological

shift from universalized stage-based developmental models to a hermeneutical agential

conception of children and childhood. We refer to this ontology, which is thoroughly rooted in

Taylor's ideas, as Childhood Ethics. (Carnevale et al. 2021).

Taylor's critique of naturalistic approaches within the human sciences is applicable to the

dominant universalized stage-based paradigm that construes children as immature and incapable,

which has focused attention on ways to shape their behaviors without meaningful recognition of

what children think and feel (Carnevale et al. 2021). His conception of human agency provides a

richly developed framework for reimagining the human sciences in general and children and

childhood in particular.

Advancing the recognition of children as agents requires demonstrations of their strong

evaluations to reveal that they too navigate meaningful stakes in their daily encounters. For

example, within the narratives presented above, when a nurse, teacher, and social worker related

with the three children as agents expressing morally meaningful concerns, they elicited

children's expressions of strong evaluation of how to reconcile highly-valued but conflicting

goods (i.e., concern for their own wellbeing as well as their parents'; striving to protect a friend

while also respecting their privacy). Drawing on Taylor's conception of human linguistic

capacity, recognizing children's agency requires relational and analytical methods that help elicit

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[20] These approaches stand in sharp contrast to currently dominant ones centered on immaturity/incapacity, where children's voices are attributed little agential recognition, if any.

children's voices (verbal and nonverbal) and orient interpretations of these voices as agential expression, respectively. Moreover, ethical models for practice are needed to help discern the 'due weight'[21] that should be accorded to children's agential expression, to determine how their agency should be recognized as morally meaningful within their daily encounters.

Understanding children's strong evaluations within research or practice requires an operational framework that is rooted in Taylor's ideas on agency and hermeneutical inquiry (Carnevale 2013; Montreuil and Carnevale 2018). Our VOICE Childhood Ethics team has examined the moral dimensions of children's everyday lives empirically, by focusing on children's 'moral experiences'. Drawing on Taylor's work, we developed a conception of moral experience that reveals the meaningful considerations that children discern in their encounters. '[M]oral experience encompasses a person's sense that values that (they)[22] deem important are being realised or thwarted in everyday life. This includes a person's interpretations of a lived encounter, or a set of lived encounters, that fall on spectrums of right-wrong, good-bad or just-unjust' (Hunt and Carnevale 2011, 659). This concept can be used to orient practices for those who work with children as well as empirical research. Accounts of moral experiences can be regarded as agential expression, demonstrating children's strong evaluation in action.

In our investigations of children's moral experiences, we draw exclusively on qualitative research methods (e.g., participant observation, informal interviewing) to elicit enacted expressions in their own voices, while embedded within children's familiar relational contexts, rather than controlled experimental measurement methods used in dominant naturalistic

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[21] The term 'due weight' is adapted from article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child regarding children's participation rights (United Nations 1989).
[22] 'They' is used here to replace "he/she" in the original citation.

approaches, which impose the researcher's own language frames onto children's expressions and actions (Greene and Hogan 2005).

Understanding children's moral experiences, to better grasp their agential expression and corresponding strong evaluation, requires particular voice elicitation and hermeneutical interpretation methods. Voice elicitation methods refers here to strategies used to foster children's communication through expressive language; that is, facilitating articulation of their strong evaluation of higher order stakes that they are striving to discern.[23] This can require (a) relational accommodations, (b) expressive assistance, as well as (c) empathic attunement. Relational accommodations involve the building of respectful, trustworthy social spaces. This draws on Taylor's view of language as shared attention within a 'communion', which contrasts sharply from dominant 'encoding' approaches to children that treat communication encounters as data collection or information gathering or as information imparting. Expressive assistance refers to the use of communication aids for children who communicate differently as well as relational interlocutors (e.g., parents) who can help interpret reciprocal communication with a child who may be difficult to understand). This helps ensure that all children are recognized as 'language animal' human agents (Taylor 2016) - with linguistic capacities - even when their expressions are not readily intelligible by others. The latter refers to young children, children with speech 'impairments' or mental function differences ('cognitive impairments'), or particular mental health problems (e.g., autism spectrum disorders. Empathic attunement helps ensure the inquirer's listening orientation is optimally aligned with the child's imagined world. This is adapted from Taylor's 'rapprochement' as an authentic engagement toward truly trying to understand an 'other' (Taylor 1992).[24]

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[23] For a detailed discussion of these voice elicitation methods, see Carnevale (2020).
[24] See Carnevale (2019) for a detailed discussion of how Taylor's 'rapprochement' can be applied in practice.

Hermeneutical interpretation methods refer to strategies used to clarify what things mean for the agent and how their meaningfulness may be rooted in and expressive of broader systems of signification (e.g., horizons of significance and social imaginaries). These 'human meanings' (Taylor 2016, 91) can be traced through analyses of local imaginaries and practices, drawn from conversations with persons in communion with a child, community or cultural interlocutors, as well as relevant key texts (e.g., community services policy statements, posted signs/statements, rules/regulations).[25]

Our research has examined the moral experiences of children within everyday life at school, children living with various kinds of illnesses or disabilities, as well as children living within Indigenous communities or abroad within low-resource settings – including children as young as three years (Carnevale et al. 2021). This work has shown that children can describe their aspirations (e.g., protect themselves, their friends and their family members; promote their current and future flourishing; advocate for fairness for themselves and for others), and highlight which aspirations are particularly meaningful or worthy for them or for others (i.e., distinctions of worth). Children can appreciate the relative salience of their respective aspirations and have moral concerns when their aspirations are thwarted. Also, they continually mobilize their personal capacities, as well as the resources available to them, to reconcile their concerns and optimize the realization of their aspirations.

Finally, what 'due weight' should be accorded to children's agential expressions? It is widely recognized that all actions that affect children should be centered on the promotion of their 'best interests' (United Nations 1989). Best interests is generally defined as the course of action that will help ensure the greatest proportion of benefits in relation to burdens for a specific

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[25] For a detailed discussion of hermeneutical interpretation methods, see Carnevale (2013, 2019).

child. Best interests should be appraised and promoted by all persons with a duty of care toward

a child, while parents are generally regarded as the ultimate arbiter (with some limited

exceptions involving youth protection or court involvement).[26] In many disputes regarding

children, 'responsible adults' may argue about their respective views on what is best for a child,

disagreeing on what they think are the child's best interests, frequently without meaningfully

consulting with the child – discounting children's voices as morally insignificant. Drawing on

the recognition of children as human agents, the best interests of a child should be defined in

terms of the individualized interests of 'this child here and now'. Understanding a specific

child's best interests can be optimized by using the voice elicitation and hermeneutical

interpretation methods described above, recognizing children's expressions as agential

expression and therefore meaningful expressions of their respective interests. This would

advance a more complete and personalized understanding of the risks and benefits that can be

borne by that child, which should be given significant weight in the determination of their 'best'

interests.[27]

Revisiting William, Jeffrey, and Anna: Understanding their moral experiences[28]

Recognizing William, Jeffrey, and Anna as agents requires an understanding of their

respective moral experiences, which can demonstrate their agential aspirations and concerns and

reveal the conflicting goods involved in their strong evaluations of potential actions they

consider. These moral experiences can be better understood through the voice elicitation and

hermeneutical interpretation methods described above. We are aware of these situations because

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[26] In some jurisdictions, some young people who are legal minors are 'allowed' to make decisions for themselves depending on the risks involved (e.g., consenting to contraception or some medical treatments).
[27] For further discussion of how best interests can be operationalized within a Taylor-based Childhood Ethics ontology, see Carnevale et al. (2021).
[28] Space constraints limit the scope and depth of analysis of these narratives that can be presented here. For a detailed examination of William's narrative, see Carnevale et al. (2021).

these children trusted – to some degree – the nurse, teacher, and social worker that worked with them. The latter seemed to effectively form a sense of communion with these children, likely by demonstrating respect for their voices and experiences – by regarding them as agents.

All three situations involve children's struggles to discern a good course of action as they strive to reconcile conflicting goods (i.e., concern for their own and others' wellbeing), through strong evaluation. Children and adults tried to sort out the right ways to protect people they are concerned about (e.g., children, friends, parents), while respecting privacy agreements that helped create safe trusting spaces. If the nurse, teacher and social worker operated within the dominant instrumentalist/encoding linguistic perspective and a universalized naturalistic conception of children as immature and incapable, they might turn to common views of the terms 'best interests' and 'protection' used within children's services - 'enframed' by adult-centered determinations of what is best and protective for children - discounting children's expressed concerns and preferences as morally insignificant (if any are expressed within these sometimes patronizing relationships).[29]

In contrast, if the nurse, teacher and social worker practiced within a Childhood Ethics ontological orientation, rooted in Taylor's ideas, they would mobilize the voice elicitation and hermeneutical interpretation methods required to demonstrate their recognition of these children as linguistically-capable (and constituted) human agents whose voices and experiences are embedded within their morally meaningful social contexts. Meanings underlying enacted expressions – by children and others within these social spaces – can be revealed by interpretive methods adapted from hermeneutic ethnography (Montreuil and Carnevale 2018), to enable a

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[29] That is, although children's expressions may sometimes draw attentive responses from adults, these are commonly framed as acts of compassionate support rather than a recognition of their voices as agential expressions that should weigh heavily in how adults relate with them (Carnevale et al. 2021).

deep exploration of local cultural significations (i.e., related horizons of significance and social imaginaries). For example, all three situations involve ways in which children's bodies are treated (e.g., chemotherapy, bullying, sexual maltreatment). The degree of respect attributed to the treatment of children's bodies and the relative authority children are accorded in matters affecting their bodies can vary widely across contexts.[30] In turn, this may affect how moral concerns are articulated within the three situations.

These adults would have to be mindful of the dominant social imaginaries that define their professional ethical duties, which include the protection of children in light of their best interests. However, they can draw on the agentially-oriented view of best interests discussed above and acknowledge that children have a meaningful stake in defining how they can feel protected - informing a fuller account of their potentially imperiled interests. They could also examine the moral significance of shared secrets and privacy involved in the children's disclosures of their experiences – which aspirations and concerns are at stake within these secrets?[31] In turn, these adults can find ways to respectfully discuss their protective concerns with these children (i.e., creating a shared attention communion) and create ways to move forward that optimally reconcile all of their respective concerns through rapprochement (as described above).

Future Directions

This paper presents an articulation of children's agency within a Childhood Ethics ontology, informed by Taylor's hermeneutical philosophical work. This can help advance ideas within the Philosophy of Childhood and Childhood Studies. While this Childhood Ethics

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[30] For example, corporal punishment of children may be legitimized within some contexts where they have little say about the treatment of their bodies.
[31] This can reveal associated interests that could further inform understandings of their best interests.

ontology helps clarify how children's agency can be better imagined and recognized in practice and research, some pre-existing questions persist and some new ones emerge. These questions also highlight important areas in which Taylor's philosophy requires further development. Future examinations of these residual questions can be bolstered by building on this Taylor-based ontology for children's agency.[32] Residual questions regarding children's agency include:

a) How should this conception of children's agency be related to ongoing philosophical investigations regarding children's autonomy? How are children's agency and autonomy related and how should they be distinguished? Can children be agents and/or autonomous while also dependent on others to promote their best interests? Stoljar (2011) has demonstrated how Taylor's work on agency corresponds with relational accounts of autonomy (i.e., among adults), highlighting ways that his ideas can help address this question.

b) What implications should be drawn regarding children's formal decision-making capacities to be legally authorised to engage in some activities (e.g., voting, driving, consenting to health care)? Does recognition of children's agency entail a full accommodation of their decisional preferences? How should children's agency and decisional capacity be related? Should agency entail a capacity to bear responsibility for one's actions? While Taylor has strongly advanced the recognition of persons as human agents, legal and other formal implications of this recognition within his work requires further elucidation.

c) What are the necessary conditions for agential recognition in childhood? Do children require any particular capacities (e.g., cognitive, relational, physical) to be recognised as agents? Are newborns agents? Are children with severe cognitive 'impairments' agents? Taylor's (2016) latest work on language articulates how linguistic capacities are crucial features of human

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[32] These questions also point to some of the concerns revealed within the narratives presented in this paper.

agency, which develop throughout childhood. Although this work provides a philosophical

foundation for examining these questions, it remains unclear what Taylor would consider the

minimal capacities required for agency.

d) How does this work affect our understanding of children's private worlds, and the

respect that should be accorded to their privacy and confidentiality?[33] It is unclear how Taylor's

work on agency relates specifically to conceptions of privacy and confidentiality.

e) How should children participate in policymaking and practice decisions that affect

other people? What political weight should be accorded to their views?[34] Taylor's expansive

political philosophy has not explicitly examined the political dimensions of children's agency.

This last combination of questions points to the quasi-total exclusion of children from

meaningful participation in family, school, community and societal discussions and decisions,

which was particularly evident in policy-making during the COVID-19 pandemic response

(Campbell and Carnevale 2020). Youth groups and children's rights advocates have been calling

for a stronger recognition of children's right to participate in decisions that concern them,

beyond their own individual stakes. The elicitation and interpretation of children's voices within

these contexts can be oriented by the Taylor-based agency ontology presented in this paper, as

future investigations examine how children's agency can and should be recognized and attributed

'due weight' within these broader social spaces.

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[33] This question highlights a significantly neglected dimension of children's agency, which emerged throughout the opening narratives (Noiseux et al. 2019).

[34] Agency does not refer exclusively to self-interests. Children, as agents, have demonstrated concerns regarding the wellbeing of others.

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