

## Radical children

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### ABSTRACT

Epigraphs are often remarks torn out of context, and mine is no different. Hy Sabiloff in 'The Child's Sight' is celebrating "the bliss of my senses"; he emphasizes the literal seeing and saying. I, however, intend his lines to suggest that children can get it right, can see the truth in a less literal sense. I want to argue, or more modestly, remind the reader, that in some important respects some children are less mystified than their teachers; and I shall try to indicate a few of the morals to be drawn from this observation. My reflections are in one way variations upon the well-worn theme of student radicalism wilting into middle-aged conformity, but I am concerned with much younger children and more with the factual than the evaluative aspects of the case. I should say, though, that the facts in question are of that rather abstracted kind dealt with in philosophy and the philosophical hinterlands of the human sciences, the sort that are too often thought not to be facts at all but merely matters of 'interpretation'.

The child's wisdom is in saying

They say what they see when they see it.

### Introduction

Epigraphs are often remarks torn out of context, and mine is no different. Hy Sabiloff in 'The Child's Sight'<sup>1</sup> is celebrating "the bliss of my senses"; he emphasizes the literal seeing and saying. I, however, intend his lines to suggest that children can get it right, can see the truth in a less literal sense. I want to argue, or more modestly, remind the reader, that in some important respects some children are less mystified than their teachers; and I shall try to indicate a few of the morals to be drawn from this observation. My reflections are in one way variations upon the well-worn theme of student radicalism wilting into middle-aged conformity, but I am concerned with much younger children and more with the factual than the evaluative aspects of the case. I should say, though, that the facts in question are of that rather abstracted kind dealt with in philosophy and the philosophical hinterlands of the human sciences, the sort that are too often thought not to be facts at all but merely matters of 'interpretation'.

### The absurd

Since I am making no claims to have undertaken empirical research on my topic but am only appealing to what we all know, and since that is all too often not in fact the way things are, let me

begin with one thing I am fairly sure about since it is autobiographical. It concerns a central issue in morality and moral philosophy - the authority of a moral code. I must have been nine or ten years old when I first came across Dostoyevsky's famous thought "If God is dead, everything is permitted", and it struck me then as quite obviously true. Indeed I can now see a large part of my adolescence as a desperate attempt not to admit this obvious truth, but I do not suppose my readers are as interested in my life story as I am. The point is that while Dostoyevsky's remark may be neither the whole truth nor, philosophically, the most apt way to express the partial truth, it is near enough for practical purposes. It captures the fact that "there is no grounding for the larger part, and that the more strenuously contested, of our moral or social-political thought, the moral principles have no authority beyond that which I choose to give them, and thus, strictly speaking, no authority at all. (Brandon, 1980)" And this perception is enough to lead one on to a feeling of meaninglessness, to a grasp of the absurdity of human existence, or again to a kind of cynicism. These developments may not be inevitable, nor desirable, but they serve to indicate the importance of the issue, and thus the importance of both adults and children getting it right. The fact that morals are man-made, that they do not have the weight of "something out there" (cf. Zeldin) to back them up like our chemical, geographical, or psychological knowledge, is an awkward one; it undermines the self-image of most moral systems; but it is one, I am claiming, that can be grasped by some children.

## Atheism

It is obvious that the claims I have just made in the context of Dostoyevsky's remark are premised upon the truth of the antecedent of that remark, upon atheism in other words. This essay will raise too many contentious issues to allow me to tackle the existence of god as well in an acceptable way, but a couple of unacceptable remarks are perhaps in order. First, a final appeal to autobiography, at the time in question atheism seemed equally obviously true. One had read enough stories of Valhalla and Olympus to see that Methuselah<sup>2</sup> and parthenogenesis belonged in the same bracket, and Thrones and Dominations and the Trinity they worshipped seemed a lot less real, if no less unconnected with one's daily round, than the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. So much for why I was able to infer the baselessness of moral authority. My second claim now is that my childhood intellectual gut- reaction was right. As a philosopher I know that one cannot dismiss theism just like that since a great deal has been said for it, but intellectually, as Hanson (1967) used to argue, one can. No-one wastes their time arguing for or against the existence of animate bodies of radio-waves, or Tolkien's hobbits, basically because there has never been a reason to suppose they exist. Religion is different only in that a lot of people can be found to talk about it, and that fact certainly cries out for explanation, but the religion's own explanation is the last one would embrace - as the de Goncourt brothers wrote in their journal, "if there is a God, atheism must strike Him as less of an insult than religion" (de Goncourt, p. 135). While this seems to me an important truth it is not one I wish to defend at greater length on this occasion since my main concerns are with the status of the social world, to which I shall now turn.

## Naked emperors

I have suggested that some children perceive the factitiousness of moral authority. There are two other related issues that I should like to focus on - the authority of people, and adult hypocrisy.

It is a common charge against children that they do not respect authority. They do not see why they should stand reverentially through National Anthems or praise songs for queen or president; they giggle at the weird appearance of judges or bishops; they make fun of the Principal; they resent enforced deference, saying 'Miss' or 'Sir' to teachers, standing up for adults who happen to enter the room, and so on. Now the behaviour and attitudes I am pointing to are a very mixed bag and many instances will no doubt fail to exemplify the claims I make - claims made in the hope that we can bypass the philosophical problems of how we should best characterize what people are doing or

thinking - but I make them as conjectures about what, sometimes at least, is going on. What I want to suggest is that some children do see these things as charades; they see the ordinary humdrum people occupying these various roles and don't see why they need play along with this adult make-believe. It is usual in England to see goose-stepping as ridiculous, but to some children any kind of military marching is equally absurd - if you're going from A to B you can walk, you don't need to pretend to be a robot. Not for them the stirring spectacle, the discipline with its connotations of courage and patriotism, that it apparently evokes from television commentators; changing the guard at Buckingham Palace is quite obviously something they do for the tourists, as indeed Christopher Robin and Atlee proved. In other contexts children can see that sacramental actions are not magic, which is to say that they are just ordinary actions; the symbolism is something we have to add, and which we can refrain from adding. I am not suggesting that this reductive standpoint is the best way to view our world, only that in adopting it some children are at least implicitly grasping the extent to which our social life is a matter of our construction, and that, despite the difficulties in articulating the matter precisely, they have got hold of a truth.

In claiming that at least some times children can see that the emperor has no clothes on, I seem to be coming into conflict with one of the basic claims of Bourdieu's sociology of education - "there is no power relation, however mechanical and ruthless, which does not additionally exert a symbolic effect" (Bourdieu and Passeron, p. 10). Violence claims, and is endowed with, legitimacy. This frightening thesis may well be as true as sociological generalizations ever are; my qualification of it is that in some cases children's lack of respect for what adults take seriously reflects a partial insight into what Bourdieu thinks the objective truth of the matter - that the adults are actually investing the situation with the seriousness they suppose it possesses, that they are thus misperceiving what is going on. If I am right we need an explanation of the fact that so few children are able to sustain or even generalize this insight, that is, of why Bourdieu is right about most adults. Social psychologists have often emphasized the importance of expressed agreement in maintaining beliefs; I would suggest here that it is the notable absence of agreement with the reductive viewpoint in most sources that children come into contact with that weakens and finally all but destroys this sociological insight. The conspiracy of silence may be broken in Falstaff's speeches or Berger's invitation to sociology, but these are not the usual environment of most kids.

I have assumed above that Bourdieu is right about most adults, and most children come to that. But this may well be questioned. On the one hand, as a profound student of Bourdieu's own society reminds us, conformity is no simple matter: "there is conformity to traditional attitudes and values, but also to fashionable new ideas; there is the conformity that shows the cohesiveness of a society and that which results from insecurity in competitive situations; and there is a great deal of difference between conformity in public, under the pressure of group influences, and conformity in private, in ways of thinking and feeling" (Zeldin, p. 393). On the other, we must not forget the continual resistance of Bourdieu's dominated groups to their domination - to take a local though extreme example, Schuler claims that "daily resistance to slavery was the rule, not the exception, and that most slaves at one time or another performed acts that reminded themselves and their masters that enslavement had not entirely robbed them of their autonomy as human beings" (Schuler, p. 73)<sup>3</sup>.

Within the sociology of education too, voices are being raised to stress the various modes of resistance to the norms and beliefs of the dominant ideology open to pupils and their teachers. For instance, Giroux (1980) invokes the work of Willis among secondary schoolchildren in whose language, dress, and behaviour Willis discerns "elements of a profound critique of the dominant ideology ... in our society" (Willis, p. 129). But as Giroux indicates this critique is not so profound after all since it fails to address the basic facts of the division of labour and distribution of power in that society, playing out rebellion simply in peripheral parts of the culture, parts that can fairly easily be appropriated and defused by the disseminators of 'pop' culture. My point is that some children can attain a vantage point for a more profound critique of the state of their society (and end up, perhaps, as unemployable sociologists or philosophers). But even such potentially reliable positions often

crumble, and Willis' skin-heads end up sullen but usually silent unskilled labourers. In both cases we need an account of why potentially destructive insights are not followed through; I have suggested the general lack of endorsement as one potent factor.

In fairness to Bourdieu we should note that he at least does not assume that the dominant group always gets its way, ideologically, in dominated groups - the latter tend to end up with their own distinctive life styles, norms, beliefs, and so on (generated in his terms by their own habitus), but also with a strong presumption that these things are disreputable or at least of lesser value in the cultural market place. For people in such a situation, resentment, occasional protest deviations, and a verbal lack of commitment in some matters, come naturally; but actual behaviour continues to be almost entirely conformist. 'Mature' behaviour in the office or factory involves going along with boring and de humanizing processes, and this judgment is not the management's alone.

## Hypocrisy

Besides not taking adults seriously when they demand it, children are frequently found to accuse adults of not being fair, of not practising what they preach. Again I wish to suggest that this is not always merely a diversionary tactic but an importantly true accusation. It points, I believe, to a tension within roost adult moral thinking. I have tried elsewhere (Brandon, 1979) to characterize this tension and suggest its roots and for our purposes it is perhaps enough to say that it is a tension between the principles we invoke to justify actions morally and the detail of those actual actions. It arises because the principles are highly general, no respecters of persons, whereas we do, and must, distinguish between many different categories of person and accord them different treatment. What we find then is that actions which do discriminate cannot really be given an adequate justification in terms of the principles. As adults we try to fudge the issue as much as we can and hope that people won't notice or will be too unconcerned to worry when, for instance, we exclude women while appealing to principles that don't mention sex at all, or when we exclude inherited wealth from a discussion of the justice of taxation, or when we simply assume that individuals may own land or radio companies or slaves while using principles that suggest no such suppositions and may indeed point towards the opposite conclusion. In adult discussion the field is usually marked out in advance; moral principles are then used to decide issues within a particular field, but are not used to justify the markings of the field itself. It is a feature of children's - and philosophers' - discussions that the principles are given much more of the authority they claim, and are turned upon the contingent structuring of the field itself. So it was obvious to Plato, as it is to some children, that boys and girls should exercise together, that family riches should not be allowed to interfere with their education, and that both should be eligible for the highest responsibilities.

If I am right what we have here is probably another instance where what is in one's interests affects what one is prepared to believe about the world and how one is prepared to think and argue. Adults for the most part are deeply involved "with the things of this world" and it does not appear to them worthwhile to question their arrangements in this wholesale way. Children are not so involved, their existence is in many respects 'marginal' (a term I owe to Mayer's (1970) illuminating introduction), and so they can afford to reflect in a detached way about the situations they find. Adults supply the precepts readily enough; the children are not so blinded by supposed interests not to use them damningly against those same adults. There are of course other components of the child's marginality that may both encourage these unrealistic solutions and reflect their lack of realism. Whatever our verdict on Freudian theory, children are not usually consciously aware of the complexities of adult sexuality, to take but one instance, so that, perhaps, their simple solutions, like Plato's, may be too simplistic. But even in these cases the point remains that, in their usual moralizing, adults are too simplistic; and in general I think it salutary to try to learn here from what children do with our moralizing rather than dismiss it.<sup>4</sup>

My position here has implications, I believe, for “moral education”. One influential theory of “moral development”, Kohlberg’s, operates whole-heartedly with morality’s self-image in which universal principles come at the peak of moral enlightenment. But as I have suggested, this self-image is delusive; universalistic principles might be appropriate for angels but we cannot live by them. As Mackie (1977) stresses, it brings morality into disrepute to have such impossibilities paraded before us since both children and adults can see that such exhortations are neither possible nor adhered to by those that preach them. The mistaken belief that a system of universalistic principles can work, and is what all right-minded people aim at, gives a lot of discussions of moral education an objectionable air of self-righteous superiority. Too often it is assumed that the person guiding the discussion (a partial concession to subjectivism) must be on the right side of the fence; the children are to understand and appreciate, even if it is allowed that they need not actually espouse, adult viewpoints. While a lot of children’s prejudices are even nastier than many adults’, I do not think we should encourage the assumption of unquestioned superiority here, because if I am right the adult’s moral thinking is itself structurally flawed.

It is notorious that Marx believed that the proletariat is less prone to ideological distortions than other classes. I am suggesting something similar in the case of children. The falsehood of Marx’s belief should give the reader pause in regarding my speculations as much more than that; still I think I have the better case.

### Concluding remarks

Whatever the author of the injunction “be ye therefore as little children” may have meant, I am suggesting that instead of discounting radical children we can and should use their insights to reveal some of our own misperceptions. There is a lot of can’t about teachers and pupils learning from each other; I have tried to suggest a few respects in which something can be found in the notion. In moral education in particular there are lessons to be learnt from what some children do. As far as understanding education goes, I have suggested that what theories of cultural reproduction must explain is not simply the inculcation of an adult ideology but also, in some cases at least, the replacement of partial insight by this same ideology. For this purpose I suggest we appeal to the combined force of the absence of confirmation from the usual reliable sources and of the increasing involvement of growing children in their particular social setting which gives them interests that help to distort perceptions of the real relations of men.

Let me close by saying that I am not to be understood as wanting a wholesale reversion to childhood. My own imaginings at nine or ten would have put de Sade to shame, and I am now too enamoured of some of the products of adult skill to enjoy a flower-power world of home-grown yams and herb tea. The point is that when kids think differently from ourselves, and in particular when they think subversively, teachers can learn from what is going on, and theorists should be able to explain it.

### Notes

1. For which I am grateful to the anthology edited by Hayden Carruth where it appears on p. 354.
2. As a small but for me forceful instance of teachers perpetuating error, I recall one very amiable teacher’s not putting down my attempt to demythologize the absurd ages of the Old Testament characters. I can see her problem - since it was a Church of England junior school she could hardly admit that it was a simple lie, but then it is difficult to give a convincing non-literal interpretation of such specific if perverse claims.
3. Schuler’s paper also demonstrates the important point that one should not rely uncritically on the oppressor’s verdict for picking out acts of resistance. Eating earth may have been seen by whites as attempted suicide but Schuler offers two other interpretations, neither of which would make it a kind

of resistance. Teachers hardly need reminding that when a child says he didn't mean it he may not have meant it.

4. And of course adults are hypocritical. Since it bears on some of the issues I discuss, I cannot forbear quoting part of a magnificent letter R. H. Tawney (1935) wrote on the occasion of the Chief Whip of the British Labour Party being knighted. Speaking of the Labour Party, he wrote "It has told the workers again and again that their strength is in solidarity, and that they must advance together, or not at all. Are they likely to believe it, if they see one of the honorary officers of the party created to fight their battles accepting a knighthood from a Government the very initiation of which has been repeatedly denounced by his col leagues as an odious piece of treachery to the workers' cause? It has declared that it is committed to an uncompromising struggle with the plutocracy and all its works. Then why stick in its hair the very feathers which the plutocracy, in its more imbecile moments, loves to wear in its own ... ?" I am indebted for the reference to an article by John Saville in the Times Higher Education Supplement, 5 December 1980.

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