

## *Are Children Moral Agents? On Children's Moral Status*

### *¿Son los niños agentes morales? Sobre el estatus moral de la infancia*

MAR CABEZAS

*Universidad de Salamanca (España)*

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#### ABSTRACT

This article explores the moral status of children and the ethical implications of recognizing children some sort of agency in light of the recognition in the 1989 UN CRC of children as subjects of rights, and not only as objects of protection. First, I defend that children fulfill the conditions to be considered moral agents, not just moral patients. To do so, I combine psychology studies on children's moral development and philosophical argumentation on how children meet the conditions of moral awareness, self-awareness, and rationality to be categorized as moral agents. Second, I analyze the conceptual and normative challenges that would arise from expanding the moral status of children from patients to agents. Thus, I analyze and respond to counterarguments, firstly concerning the criterion of rationality and the possible erasure of the boundary between adulthood and childhood, and secondly, in a normative sense, I respond to the possible challenges related to the demand for moral responsibility of children and the justification of protection of them if they are considered moral agents. Finally, I conclude that adapting their moral status to their real capacities does not imply the adultization of childhood, nor should it erase the boundary with adulthood, nor should it be understood as an excuse to reduce responsibilities and duties of protection towards children.

#### KEYWORDS

RESPONSIBILITY; ADULTHOOD; CHILDHOOD; MORAL AWARENESS; AUTONOMY.

#### RESUMEN

Este artículo explora el estatus moral de los niños y las implicaciones éticas de reconocerles algún tipo de agencia a la luz del reconocimiento en la Convención sobre los Derechos del Niño de 1989 de los niños como sujetos de derechos, y no sólo como objetos de protección. En primer lugar, defiendo que los niños cumplen las condiciones para ser considerados agentes morales, no sólo pacientes morales. Para ello, combino estudios psicológicos sobre el desarrollo moral infantil y argumentación filosófica sobre cómo los niños cumplen las condiciones de conciencia moral, autoconciencia y racionalidad para ser categorizados como agentes morales. En segundo lugar, analizo los desafíos conceptuales y normativos que surgirían de ampliar el estatus moral de los niños de pacientes a agentes. Así, analizo y respondo a contraargumentos, en primer lugar, en relación con el criterio de racionalidad y la posible eliminación de la frontera entre la adultez y la niñez, y, en segundo lugar, en un sentido normativo, respondo a los

posibles desafíos relacionados con la demanda de responsabilidad moral de los niños y la justificación de su protección si se los considera agentes morales. Finalmente, concluyo que adaptar su estatus moral a sus capacidades reales no implica adultizar la infancia, ni borrar la frontera con la adultez, ni debe entenderse como excusa para reducir responsabilidades y deberes de protección hacia la infancia.

#### PALABRAS CLAVE

RESPONSABILIDAD; ADULTEZ; INFANCIA; CONCIENCIA MORAL; AUTONOMÍA.

### I. Introduction

Are children moral agents or just moral patients? This article starts with this research question and explores the moral status of children in the light of the development in recent years of philosophy of childhood and the tendency in terms of normative proposals focused on giving children a public voice<sup>1</sup>.

Traditionally the notion of moral agency has been reserved for adult human beings under normal conditions, leaving children in a passive or in an in-between space in terms of moral status categories.

Thus, in what follows I will address whether children are moral agents (if they meet the required conditions) and, if they do so, what the normative implications and challenges are in recognizing children as moral agents and not just patients, such as whether this would imply erasing the boundary between childhood and adulthood or changing adults' responsibilities toward children.

Exploring the moral status of children is relevant for several reasons. The ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (UN 1989) entailed a paradigm shift regarding the moral status of children for two reasons. First, children were recognized as subjects of rights, not just as objects of protection. Second, article 12 recognized children as individuals capable of articulating their own views of the world «in accordance to age and maturity» (UN 1989, art.12.1) and, consequently, urged to recognize and listen to children's voice in the public sphere, thus giving them an active role in making decisions that affect them. This can indeed be understood as an attempt to reduce social and political powerlessness during childhood.

However, this shift in the conceptualization of childhood not only generates repercussions in human rights discourse, but also and especially in moral philosophy, since it gives rise to challenges and paradoxes with respect to binomial categories such as moral agent/moral patient, or subject/object. As Freeman states, the CRC recognizes the child as «a full human being with integrity and personality and the ability to participate freely in society» (1996, p. 37).

Beyond the legal debate, recognizing them as subjects of rights implies that they are autonomous in some sense, just as recognizing their right to participate and having a voice implies recognizing some type of political agency, which presupposes moral agency. Thus, the initial question of this article revolves around the ethical implications of recognizing children some sort of agency: should children be recognized as moral agents and not just as moral patients? If agency is related to autonomy and the capacity of bearing responsibility for their actions, can children be recognized as moral agents? If so, what normative consequences does it imply, especially for the boundary between adulthood and childhood?

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Although these questions have been vividly discussed over the last decades (Moore 2015; Archard & McLeod 2002), it is eye-catching the increase of discussions on children's voice (Lundy 2007; McLeod 2015; Carnevale 2016; Melo & Schilling 2021; Mullin 2023) and especially the conceptualization of children as moral agents, particularly by other disciplines, sometimes overlooking the philosophical and ethical implications of recognizing children as moral agents, specifically regarding responsibility (Montreuil et al. 2018; Carnevale 2020). Thus, all these questions are relevant, not only for conceptual analysis, but also for practical reasons. The normative debate on children tends to fluctuate from overprotective approaches where children are viewed as vulnerable or passive beings to the tendency of adultization where children's particularities and differences compared to adults tend to be erased with the consequent risk of deprotection and neglect in terms of children's best interests.

Throughout this article, I will defend that children fulfill the conditions to be considered moral agents, and I will also highlight how this does not imply either accepting the adultization of childhood in normative terms or erasing the boundary between childhood and adulthood. Rather, I will argue how recognizing them as agents (and not just patients) is also children's best interest since it implies that they are described with a normative category that represents better their real capabilities without minimizing them. Thus, labeling them as moral agents does not erase the obligation of protection between moral agents in vulnerable conditions.

In order to do so, I will proceed as follows:

First, I will argue that children do meet the conditions to be considered moral agents, not just patients. To do so, and regarding methodology, I will combine psychology resources on children's cognitive and emotional capabilities with philosophical argumentation. Second, I will explore conceptual challenges and counterarguments of labeling children as moral agents especially regarding epistemic competence. Third, I will explore practical and normative challenges derived from accepting the previous thesis as the need to continue recognizing vulnerabilities and the need for protection in childhood, and the compatibility of this normative claim with labelling children as moral agents. Finally, I will propose some pathways to overcome the tension between recognizing children's agency and the adults' obligation of protection by suggesting contrafactual arguments when it comes to adults' agency, vulnerability and/or irrationality.

As a preliminary delimitation, I would like to clarify that I will focus on young children. Although childhood is a fuzzy and to some extent socially constructed concept (Appell 2009) that generally refers to human beings from zero to 18 years old, that is, minors in legal terms, I will not discuss here the concept of childhood<sup>2</sup> itself as that will surpass the scope of this article. Therefore, I will not discuss here dilemmas on adolescents' rights to make their own decisions. These cases are less problematic regarding the moral concepts involved in this discussion, since their psychological abilities are developed to a degree qualitatively different compared to young children. Likewise, I will not focus on newborns, babies, or toddlers, since their competences are at such premature stage that they are not the main reason of debate when discussing children's moral agency. Thus, I will focus on early childhood and young children for two main reasons. First, those years are the most problematic for assessing moral agency, as they are in-between beings in terms of psychological and cognitive development. Second, focusing on this group might help avoid the potentiality argument, compared to those adolescents who are almost adults. Thus, my aim is to focus on children's moral status *qua* children, even if they never reach adulthood.

<sup>2</sup> An exploration on this issue can be found in Hannan (2018).

Likewise, as conceptual clarifications, I understand moral status or moral standing as the fact (or the recognition) of deserving moral consideration or respect (Goodpaster 1978) or, in other words, the fact that whatever is done to you is not irrelevant in moral terms.

By moral patient I refer to a being with moral status, a being who is capable of suffering an instance of moral damage, and who deserves moral consideration or respect even if they cannot be moral agents, that is, even though they might neither be able to act in a moral way nor can they be demanded any moral responsibilities for their actions.

By moral agents I refer to those beings who are able to understand moral terms such as just, unjust, good, bad, and are able to reason in moral terms, perceive themselves as the same person throughout time, are autonomous, and are able to give reasons for their actions and decisions. In other words, a moral agent possesses moral awareness, moral responsibility, and autonomy. In this sense, examples of moral patients would typically be newborns, and depending on the positions on the moral community, sentient beings, and examples of moral agents would be adult human beings under normal conditions. As a result, an individual can be a moral patient without being a moral agent, but a moral agent is always also a moral patient. Thus, the question here is whether children can be considered moral agents, and what consequences considering children as moral agents would entail.

On its part, agency can be understood as the ability to act in line with your values and goals and influence your own environment and the people in it, or as a certain set of «cognitive, emotional and psychological features» (Cabezas & Schweiger 2016, p. 38). One might state that this definition is separated from moral responsibility or, in other words, that this definition does not imply moral agency. However, this definition already shows a clear and tacit relationship with moral agency. If you are capable of acting in favor of your values and your aims, it already implies that you possess moral awareness to recognize what those values are that you identify as your own, and a sense of self and autonomy. Defining agency as related to acting in line with your goals and values also implies that to a certain extent you perceive yourself as the source of your actions and decisions, so that you understand that you have the freedom to act in one direction or another, so that you can be demanded reasons for your action. Otherwise, that action would not be the result of agency, but reactivity. Likewise, when agency is defined in relation to having interests in participating in decision-making and concerns regarding others (Carnevale 2020), this implies possessing moral awareness and some sense of moral reciprocity and responsibility (you are not indifferent to what happens to others). Thus, addressing agency in these terms leads to ask whether children, as individuals who are recognized as subjects of rights, are also moral agents, expanding so a concept traditionally reserved for adults. In other words, there is no way of bringing children's agency into the discussion without first addressing the moral status of children as moral agents.

## II. Children as moral agents

In this section, following psychology studies, I aim to show how children do meet the conditions to be labelled as moral agents, not just as patients, in terms of moral awareness.

Traditionally, children have typically been thought to be irrational, acting from a selfish preference and a short-term perspective. Moore's study on the conceptualization of childhood shows how they have been described as passive in terms of agency, incompetent by definition or as an empty vessel (Moore 2015, pp. 51-52). This cultural

background surely led to draw a «caricatural universalized stage-based—and outdated — models of child development that characterize children’s perspectives as immature and incapable and thus not substantively meaningful» (Carnevale 2020, p. 2).

However, current studies in psychology and child development show otherwise.

Children around the age of 5 years are generally able to predict future behavior from past emotional experiences (Lagattuta 2007) as well as to choose a larger reward later instead of a smaller immediate reward (Lemmon & Moore 2007).

Taken together, Krettenauer and Mosleh’s study showed how both competencies enable younger children at the age of 5 years to make informed moral decisions based on the emotional outcomes they expect (2011). Therefore, similarly to results reported with adolescents, moral emotion expectancies were predicted to influence children’s moral decision-making (Krettenauer and Mosleh 2011), which already imply that they possess moral awareness and make moral judgments. In another study, it was shown how «moral emotion expectancies (e.g., guilt, pride) (...) increase the likelihood of moral choices, whereas non-moral emotions (e.g., happiness for achieving a desired goal) (...) to decrease children’s willingness to choose a moral course of action» (Hertz & Krettenauer 2014, p. 368), which already implies that they are moral agents as the discussion revolves around the quality of decision making, that is, what make them be *good* moral agents, not moral agency *per se*.

Regarding rationality and identity, traditional preconditions for moral agency, the already famous experiment on problem solving and self-awareness can be a good example of how children fulfill these conditions from a very young age:

Children were asked to push the cart to their mothers but in attempting to do so they had to step on the mat and in consequence, their body weight prevented the cart from moving. In the first experiment, performance on the shopping cart task was examined in children of 16 and 21 months both when the self was the obstacle and when a heavy weight was the obstacle. Results showed significant improvement with age in performance for the self-version of the task that was not matched by similar age differences in the weight task. In the second experiment, children’s performance on both the self-version of the shopping cart and on a standard mirror self-recognition task was assessed. Results showed a significant correlation independent of age for these 2 tasks. These findings provide further evidence for the notion that toddlers develop an objective awareness of the self during the 2nd year. [...]

We believe this task is a valid assessment of the understanding of self as an object. First, it is the objective physical nature of the actor’s body that impedes forward motion on the shopping cart. Therefore, efficient solution of the task implies that the actor recognizes this characteristic (Moore et al. 2007, pp. 157-171).

If ‘rational’ is defined as the capacity to think and act intelligently, meaning «the maximum use of the means to achieve the objectives in the shortest possible time, with the least expenditure of resources» (Broncano 1995, p. 303), then children should be considered rational, for they are able to do this. In a similar vein, Sousa affirms that «a state is cognitively rational if it is arrived at in such a way as to be probably adequate to some actual state of the world that it purports to represent» (1990, p. 164), while Damasio understands that «the purpose of reasoning is to decide, and that the essence of deciding is to select a response option, that is, to choose a non-verbal action, a word, a phrase or some combination of all of the above, among the many possible at that moment, in context with a specific situation» (Damasio 2005, p. 165), which is something children can do. Thus, although, faced with the same problem, different people can find diverse ways of action to be the most effective, this is not a reason to deny that children are capable of adapting means to ends to achieve their aims.

On its part, if reason is characterized as «the typically human capacities for reflection and language and, consequently, to use the adjective “rational” as a synonym for “possessor of the intellectual and linguistic capacities typical of the human species”» (Mosterín 1978, p. 17), then one might conclude that children beyond 3-4 years old could be considered rational agents, since, a) at that age they are able to speak and articulate their thoughts and views through language, conversations, paintings, and other forms of child expression, and, b) this definition does not imply to develop those capacities to their fullest.

In Lourenço's terms, young children seem to be «intuitive moral philosophers» (1997) as they «construct moral judgments even before they have acquired interpretive theory of mind understanding; even the 5-year-olds partly justified their moral evaluations and emotion attributions following transgressions with moral rationales» (Malti et al. 2010, p. 287).

On children's moral awareness, as Lane's research also highlights, «preschoolers consider others' psychological perspectives when making moral judgments» (2010, p. 873). This is congruent with previous studies (Núñez & Harris 1998; Wellman, Larkey & Somerville 1979). As Lane states in relation to Núñez and Harris's work (1998), they found that:

[Children as young as 3 years] deemed that those who intentionally violated rules were naughtier than those who accidentally violated rules. Links between children's perspective-taking capacities and their moral judgments have also been demonstrated with tasks more traditionally used to gauge cognitive perspective taking (Lane et al. 2010, p. 873).

Also, in relation to Ittyerah and Mahindra's work (1990) and Baird and Astington's (2004), it has been found that:

5- and 6-year-olds' cognitive perspective taking (...) was related to the severity with which they judged the actions of a deceitful story protagonist [and that] 4- and 5-year-olds evaluate the actions of story characters who performed identical activities but each with a different motive (one with a 'good' motive, and the other with a 'bad' motive) (Lane et al. 2010, p. 873).

Being able to understand those nuances shows again that children possess moral awareness, are able to think about different lines of action and their moral meaning. Likewise, what is interesting in philosophical terms is not only the quality and/or the level of sophistication of those moral judgments, but the fact that children are able to make moral judgments, which already implies that they are moral agents and therefore should be considered as such.

Also in terms of moral awareness, «children's performance on a false-belief task (a more contemporary measure of cognitive perspective taking) was significantly correlated with their evaluations of the 'goodness' or 'badness' of the characters' actions, respectively» (Lane et al. 2010, p. 873), which implies they are able to see the world in terms of good/bad, which is key form moral agency.

All this is congruent with the fact that «indications of moral awareness can be observed even in very young children, such as claims for fairness or concern about the victims of transgressions» (Woolgar et al. 2001, p.115).

Although previously briefly mentioned regarding the cart-mat experiment, in terms of self-awareness, it is not banal to remark how empirical research shows that from the age of 5 to adolescence children possess group consciousness (Axford 2012),

that is, children see themselves as «a group differentiated from the group of adults, and as a group whose rights are neglected and rejected» (Mayall 2002, p. 21). This is important for moral agency because it implies that they possess identity awareness, they are aware of themselves, they perceive themselves as the same through time and they are able to make an analogy with the others. In other words, if you are able to differentiate between your group and the outgroup, it means that you possess a theory of mind, an idea of group identity, and that you are able to see yourself as part of a *we* in contrast with *the others*.

Regarding self-conscious emotions, closely related to moral awareness, such as shame, embarrassment, pride or guilt, first appearance of embarrassment and self-awareness is found in children between 15 and 24 months while by the age of 2-3 children already manifest pride, guilt, and shame (Mascolo & Fischer 1995; Lewis et al. 1989). Likewise, 3-year-olds are able to understand the situational antecedents of emotion and discriminate between happiness, anger, and sadness (Cutting & Dunn 1999; Harris 1989).

In the same vein, Gallant's research (2020, pp. 153-154) suggests how «preschoolers can reason about others' feelings well before they master hidden emotions and other types of Theory of Mind». Following, Harris, de Rosnay and Pons' scaling (2005), as Gallant's research also highlighted: these studies:

[These studies] established that children's emotion understanding develops through three developmental periods between the ages of three and 11 years: (1) Children develop an understanding of the external causes/cues of emotions and their visible expression from 3 to 5 years, (2) children comprehend the mentalistic aspects of emotions and their associations with internal states between 5 and 7 years, and (3) children understand mixed emotions, the link between morality and emotions, and how emotions may be regulated by cognition between 7 and 11 years (Gallant et al. 2020, pp.153-154).

This research is key for a children's accurate portrayal regarding the development of affective theory of mind, which, in turn, is key for moral awareness and moral agency.

Also, in relation to children's possession of a theory of mind, which is key for agency, «the evidence on children's interest in the inner states of others alerts us to the possibility that young children may be sensitive to the reactions and opinions of those in their peer group to an extent not fully appreciated until recently» (Dunn 1996, p. 514).

Another study worth noting (Peterson & Siegal, 2002) suggested how social relationships and friendship have a greater weight than cognition and age in the elaboration of moral judgments, establishing so links among young children's peer relations, their moral understanding in terms of the ability to distinguish lies from mistakes, and their theory of mind development. This study showed how having a mutual constant friendship made a significant independent contribution to the explanation of individual differences in mindreading, over and above age and verbal maturity:

Our results clearly point to links among peer relations, children's social cognition (in the form of mindreading) and moral understanding. Preschoolers who were both (1) rejected by their peer group as whole and (2) devoid of stable mutual friendships scored poorly on theory of mind tasks, and lagged behind their popular and befriended classmates in mastering the moral distinction between lies and mistakes. Possibly, these children's low levels of success on each of these separate indices of social-cognitive understanding resulted from their lack of social opportunities to play and converse with

peers and friends, limiting their opportunities to share imagined mental states through pretending, or to ponder and argue over instances of telling lies, practicing deception or expressing beliefs that were inadvertently false (Peterson & Siegal 2002, p. 120).

In relation to these findings, it is also relevant in terms of moral agency and awareness how «even children who failed conventional tests of mind reading (false belief test) engaged in deception of family members» (Dunn 1996, p. 509), especially when placed in emotionally charged situations like quarrels with siblings or parental reprimand.

Moreover, and although moral agency does not imply being a good moral agent, it is worth noting that «98% of children made at least one prosocial decision across the three dilemmas» (Lane et al. 2010, p. 881) proposed in the study, and that:

Children of all age groups strongly favoured moral over immoral choices across all scenarios, rendering emotion outcomes that weaken the tendency to act morally counterfactual. (...) Thus, the tendency that children between the ages of 5 and 11 years increasingly consider counterfactual emotions in the process of moral decision-making is not limited to childhood but continues well into adolescence (Hertz & Krettenauer 2014, p. 371).

This was also already demonstrated by Krettenauer and Mosleh (2011). Likewise, and although moral agency does not imply perfection but a minimum sufficient threshold in terms of moral awareness, «younger children at the age of 5 years [are able] to make informed moral decisions based on the emotional outcomes they expect. Therefore, moral emotion expectancies were predicted to influence children's moral decision-making similarly to findings reported with adolescents» (Hertz & Krettenauer 2014, p. 368).

Finally, a study on the links between moral judgments, prosocial behavior, and emotion attributions in a sample of 59 5-year-old, 123 7-year-old, and 130 9-year-old children showed how:

Children who frequently engage in aggressive behaviour display a high degree of understanding the other's mind (...). This understanding may allow them to strategically attain their own goals. Knowing how others think and feel might also be important for prosocial behaviour, because it may help children think about and care about the other's welfare (Malti et al. 2010, p.276).

This implies that they fulfill the rationality condition as they are able to think in an abstract and strategic way, for better or worse. Malti and her colleagues have also documented that the moral judgment skills of 6- to 7-year-old children were related to their moral emotion attributions. Again, the fact that the studies revolve around whether children's moral judgments are linked or not to emotions implies that the fact that young children do make moral judgments is common ground in psychological studies. In other words, children's moral agency is not what is questioned from scientific fields, but its nature.

As a result, it is sensible to conclude that young children are *de facto* moral agents and not just passive moral patients or *potential* moral agents, as they show moral awareness, self and group identity, abstract thinking, moral reasoning and moral understanding, nuances on others' moral motivations, and social and moral emotions, that is moral competences. This, as with adults, does not necessarily mean that they are

good moral agents, and they must always make the best decisions to be considered as such. This is neither demanded to adults in order to be considered moral agents<sup>3</sup>.

If studies show that children have the skills to be considered moral agents, then the question now is what would be the challenges and risks at the philosophical and ethical level to be labeled as such? In the following sections I explore the challenges, especially derived from epistemic skills and moral responsibility, that would generate conceptual and normative reluctances to recognize moral agency in children.

### III. Some conceptual challenges on children's moral agency

In this section I delve into the counterarguments regarding children's status as moral agents. Thus, I will explore the main conceptual challenges, namely, describing them as rational, the risk of erasing the boundary between childhood and adulthood, and the problem of moral responsibility.

In relation to autonomy and rationality, two main characteristics of a moral agent, one might think that the fact that children cannot legitimately be excluded from the concept of rationality is different from saying that children can and should be defined themselves as rational. However, there is no reason to exclude them since it is consistent with the concept of rationality being defended. If being rational is defined as the «capacity for practical deliberation and decision-making between alternative courses of action based on reasons» (Moya 2001, p. 243) or as being able to act strategically in a cost-effective way to achieve your purposes, there is no reason to conclude that children are not rational, especially because the reasons that would lead to conclude that they are not rational (often connected to *akrasia*), are the same ones that, when applied to adults, do not lead us to deny adults' moral status. Rather, these reasons lead us to explore moral motivation and weakness of will. That is, the only reason to conclude that children are not rational would be if moral intellectualism were accepted as the only possible paradigm where rational and morally good are understood as synonyms. However, if this were the case, neither adults nor children could be labeled as rational because no one makes the best moral decisions in every single situation. Again, the distinction between amoral and immoral is important, as what is discussed here is moral agency as a dimension of human psyche, not as a synonym of being a morally good agent.

In relation now to adulthood, one might think that expanding children's moral status means that the boundary between adults and children is blurred. However, the recognition of children's moral status is consistent with their capacities regarding agency and moral awareness, and this must not be translated into an assimilation with adults. Children fulfill a minimum sufficiency threshold to be considered moral agents. Once this minimum threshold is reached, this does not mean that there cannot be different levels or types of moral agency. The fact that both are moral agents does not mean that the boundary between childhood and adulthood is completely artificial or socially constructed. Concluding so would entail ignoring child psychology research on development. Thus, the recognition of children's moral agency does not have to lead to force adultization where children's cognitive and psychological development processes are not respected or taken into consideration. Concluding so may rather show how adult-centric notions of moral status crystallize when applied to children. Children may be *evolving* moral agents, but not *potential* moral agents. The fact that your skills regarding your moral awareness become more sophisticated and enriched through time

<sup>3</sup> The opposite of a moral agent is not an immoral agent, but an amoral agent, as the discussion revolves around a moral dimension of human psyche and not the goodness in moral decisions made.

does not mean that the first stages of moral agency are equivalent to not having any type of moral awareness at all.

Likewise, concluding that the boundary between childhood and adulthood is artificially constructed can lead to a perversion of the recognition of children's current capacities for the interest of the adult if this is used as an argument to ignore the asymmetric and vulnerable scenarios in which children are in relation to adults, that is, between different moral agents.

Finally, regarding the criteria to be considered a moral agent, i.e., responsibility, philosophy recognizes two necessary and sufficient conditions for a person to be morally responsible, namely, the autonomy or control condition, and the epistemic condition, related to cognitive and mental states. The first condition is related to the degree of autonomy when deciding to perform an action. The second condition is related to whether the agent's epistemic or cognitive state is adequate to hold that person responsible for their decisions.

Although the first condition focuses on autonomy and the second one on knowledge, they are deeply connected, as autonomy is impossible without a certain level of development of cognitive skills (Mele 2010; Björnsson 2017). So, being morally responsible means possessing a certain level of awareness on the situation and its consequences, the potential lines of action, and their moral significance. As a result, someone is morally responsible if is aware of the action's moral valence, that is, if can think and evaluate the world in moral terms, is aware or is able to imagine potential consequences and alternatives of actions (Levy 2011).

Regarding the first condition, moral awareness and autonomy, and following Wolf's definition, an individual is responsible if her actions can be attributed to her real self, that is, if they reflect her values and this person has the power or the liberty to act in this direction. Thus, responsibility would be linked here to the possibility of authenticity. In her words, a person is responsible «if she is at liberty (or able) both to govern her behavior on the basis of her will and to govern her will on the basis of her valuational system» (Wolf 1990, p. 33). This approach would ground responsibility in reference to the agents' capacities for being appropriately sensitive to the rational considerations that bear on their actions. Apart from the problem about the vagueness of the concept of 'rational' or 'adequate,' one cannot ignore that, if you ask a child about her behavior, she will give you her reasons for it.

Children can do so, as they possess their own views, they have dreams for themselves, etc. As shown in the previous section, moral understanding develops across the early years. A different matter is whether they are allowed to act in line with their values. However, that limitation seems to be related to social and economic powerlessness more than to a lack of moral competence or moral awareness, as they can recognize and respond to moral considerations (Wolf 1987). If they were not able to do so, then the strategies employed to educate a child would not work, such as portraying negative scenarios, verbal threats, or emotional manipulation.

In other words, some authors might argue that children lack moral awareness and therefore moral responsibility, defending that a child «is not responsive to reasons—his behavior would be the same, no matter what reasons there were» (Fischer & Ravizza 1998, p. 37). But being irresponsive to reasons or unable to understand them is not the case of children as previously shown. If that were the case, if they were not able to change their behavior depending on the reasons we give them, then conditioning and psychological manipulations would not work as they do.

Besides, when it comes to core values and moral intuitions, adults are proven to be irresponsive to reasons (Haidt 2001; Tavris & Aronson 2007). However, this leads to

further studies on moral psychology and cognitive biases, and not to the denial of an adult's moral status as an agent. These different attitudes to the same events show how an adult-centric framework is deeply internalized, rather than the inability of children to reach a minimum sufficient threshold in terms of moral agency.

In fact, from the age of four, children begin to use a principle of proportionality to determine the correct level of punishment (Finkel et al. 1997). Another question is how susceptible children are to manipulation. Similar to this scenario, it cannot be denied that children possess some level of moral awareness, knowledge about the potential consequences and power over their own actions when a child decides not to talk to a caregiver because she considers that this person has been unfair to another one or has broken a promise, when a child rejects a participation trophy in a competition because she considers she does not deserve it, or decides to remain silent when a bully insults a mate in the classroom because the child understands that defending the victim will compromise her own status in the classroom and will put her in danger. Likewise, staying in silence in the classroom when you know the answer to avoid standing out among her peers would not be possible if children lacked moral awareness and self-consciousness, as studies on morality, conformity and the Asch paradigm in decision making show (Kundu & Cummins 2012).

One might think that children cannot be recognized as moral agents since they cannot be charged as morally responsible. If we cannot demand responsibilities to someone, then, one might say, they are not a complete moral agent.

From this point of view, children fail here in a different way compared to adult moral agents under normal circumstances who may sometimes explain and excuse their behavior. Even though these adults cause an outcome, they are not morally responsible due to a lack of knowledge that was not demandable or impossible to possess, or a lack of awareness or control of their actions. That would be the case of unforeseeable accidents, hypnosis, or somnambulism. In this view, children would lack the skills or conditions required to moral responsibility while adults may in some cases not be responsible due to a specific set of conditions, without questioning their moral status. Hence, some philosophers would conceive children as exempt agents as they are considered impaired agents who lack moral sense or/and control over their actions (Strawson 1962; Watson 2004).

However, someone possesses moral responsibility if we can make demands on their behaviors. In this sense, we cannot ignore that children in fact explain their actions, give reasons and/or excuses about why they did something, are aware of moral relevance, the transgression of a rule, etc. The fact that they argue about why the broken cup or the painted sofa were not their fault implies that they understand the concept of blameworthy and praiseworthy, similarly to an adult who is trying to explain that his action was not intentional or that s/he did not be aware (or could not be aware) of the consequences.

The fact that both agents can explain and give reasons to convince the listener about why they are not blameworthy for that case implies that they understand the moral significance of an action, that their agency was involved, that they are self-aware, and that they could have acted differently. Another issue is whether children lack enough information or whether we consider that their reasons would not be sufficient compared to the adults' sufficiency threshold.

The epistemic condition is limited during childhood. However, the lack of information and knowledge attributed to children is relational: they lack information about the possible consequences and the implications of each option *compared to* what adults know. But this does not imply that they are not moral agents who understand

themselves as responsible for their actions. This does not imply that children are not able to make moral judgments. Children can act for their own reasons. Another issue is whether, from an adult's point of view, their decisions or reasons are wrong because we know that they lack certain information or because we know that there has been an instance of manipulation. Briefly, all of this can occur in an adults' decision-making process, and this does not lead to questioning the adult's moral status. Rather, it means that, like any set of skills, the development of moral awareness is gradual, so that we can find different development thresholds, assuming that absolute knowledge is unreachable.

Thus, the difference between agents is not moral awareness, but how we value different types of ignorance. This leads to two main normative challenges that I will address in the following section, namely: if children are moral agents, what should we demand them in terms of responsibility, and should they be protected at all or that would be overprotective and unjustified among moral agents?

#### IV. Normative challenge on children's moral agency

In this section, I address the two main practical or normative challenges derived from considering children moral agents, and not just moral patients, namely, whether they should be demanded the same responsibilities as adults, and how to justify the need of protection of a group of moral agents without belittling their moral status, and without falling into forms of adultization.

The first normative question derived from the epistemic condition for moral responsibility explored in the previous section. As previously mentioned, the difference between agents is not moral awareness, but how we value different types of ignorance. Now the normative question is how should we evaluate that type of ignorance or, in other terms, if children are moral agents, does it mean that they should be demanded the same moral responsibilities for their actions as we demand to adults?

Certain lack of information in a child is excusable; it is not demandable. At the same time, topics where child ignorance is excusable and even beneficial for them become demandable in adults. In fact, if children knew adult common knowledge about certain topics, it would be harmful for their healthy development to the point that it is considered a form of child neglect (Schmitz & Tyler 2016). Nevertheless, ignorance is reprehensible when you know that you do not know, when you are aware that you lack the necessary information to make that decision, and even so you act without worrying about measuring the possible consequences of your actions. Thus, what varies is the degree of demand with respect to knowledge, that is, how much an agent must know as a minimum threshold of sufficiency, not the moral awareness of that agent.

Similar to the 19th century doctors who lacked the scientific information that we have today about germs and hygiene, children lack some information about the consequences of their decisions, which is not demandable for them to have, but that adults possess. However, this does not imply that they do not see the world in moral terms, experience dilemmas, and deliberate about what decision to make.

In the same way, if an alien came to Earth with an IQ that exceeded that of human beings and with much more scientific, physical, psychological, nutritional, and chemical knowledge, surely, by comparison, they would question our moral awareness, epistemic status, and rationality. Yet, this does not mean that human adults today are not moral agents. Rather, it means that, like any set of skills, the development of moral awareness is gradual, so that we can find different development thresholds, assuming that absolute knowledge is unreachable.

It is eye-catching, when compared to children, how cases where we excuse ignorance in adults do not lead to conclude that they are not moral agents or that they are not morally aware. We reduce the demands of responsibility because we think that it is not possible for them to act in any other way, without questioning their moral status. However, when the subject is a child, the level of demand increases and is applied in absolute terms: if you cannot be responsible in an area, it is concluded that you are no longer a moral agent. That is, as Mele states (1995), if we believe that people with certain traumatic family histories are not responsible for their actions because they really did not have the tools to act otherwise and we excuse them, without questioning their moral status, then why do we question the moral status of children when they have values, give reasons, feel indignation, guilt, and shame?

The reduction of competence areas leads to the reduction of the demands for moral responsibility, not to the reduction of moral status. In fact, we do not deny moral agency, we do not say that an adult has become a simple moral patient, because s/he has suffered brainwashing, has fallen into a cult or is a victim of psychological abuse. The fact that we do not demand moral perfectionism, heroism, or a lucidity to get out of the situation—a lucidity that is impossible given the abuse suffered—does not imply that their moral status within the moral community decreases. These adults do not become just objects of moral consideration. Rather, they continue to be moral agents who have suffered moral harm.

Similarly, children's lack of information does not mean lack of moral awareness. In this sense, it would not be coherent to treat them as if they were morally impaired subjects who lack moral awareness in an absolute sense, placing them in the same category as psychopaths or exemptional cases.

As a result, the difficulty regarding the epistemic requirement arises due to the different degrees of knowledge and the demand of perfection or a maximum threshold. Once a minimum sufficiency threshold is established, the difficulty regarding children seems to vanish. If that threshold consists of being aware of moral significance, then children do fulfill it. If the minimum threshold of sufficiency is very demanding or absolute, then adults would not fulfill it either, since we do not cover all possible knowledge. Thus, the problem again is not children's moral awareness, but what minimum threshold of knowledge is demandable at each stage.

In a nutshell, the recognition of children as moral agents does not entail an obligation to demand the same kind of responsibilities that we demand to adults. This would give rise to a situation where natural and social asymmetry would become moral vulnerability, and, therefore, we would be leaving children in a situation likely to generate moral damage, injustice, and manipulation. However, this means neither that children do not see the world in moral terms, nor that they are not aware of the different lines of actions they can take or that they lack values and opinions about how things should be.

In relation now to the second question, although both interconnected, if an expansion of children's moral status is accepted, the normative question here is whether it is legitimate to be paternalistic with a moral agent or this would imply the denial of that moral status.

The answer is affirmative. Not being paternalistic with another moral agent in many cases can lead to negligence when the person is in a risky situation and/or lack the specific competence required for that case. By way of example, if a flight attendant tells me in an emergency during a flight how I must get off the plane and limits my actions for my own safety, it does not mean that I have stopped being a moral agent. Rather, it would be a case of negligence if in certain cases the guidance of an expert was not

available, regardless of whether you are a child or an adult. Certain lack of information in a child is not only not demandable, but beneficial for them while demandable in adults. In fact, an excess at this point can lead to harm to the child, adultization, and a loss of specific goods of childhood (McLeod 2015), such as sexual innocence or a certain level of carefree. In other words, and as previously mentioned, if children knew adult common knowledge about certain topics before the proper time in terms of psychological maturity, that would be harmful for their healthy development and in fact constitutes a form of child neglect (Schmitz & Tyler 2016; Jurkovic 2014).

Similarly to the medical context, an adult patient does not stop being a moral agent even if a medical team or expert is deciding about you, as you still have a voice and the right to know what the doctor decides and what is done on you in a way that you can understand the information as a layperson on medicine. Thus, protecting other moral agents, and adapting the information to the listener or guiding their decisions under certain circumstances does not have to lead to unjustified paternalism or a reconsideration of their moral agency in absolute terms when it comes to children. Similar to how the recognition of patients' autonomy led to the need for informed consent and therefore more obligations for the doctors, the consideration of children as moral agents implies treating them with more respect as well as more obligations for the adults.

Hence, given the fact that we know that they lack information and experience, and some specific goods of childhood could be compromised, it is justified to protect them and limit some of their rights for their best interest without denying their moral agency. Think about the age of sexual consent or the right to marry. In this sense, recognizing children as moral agents is not incompatible, nor is it among adults, with recognizing that there are areas where the exercise of your autonomy is limited to protect specific goods of childhood or common goods. Therefore, the measures designed to protect children do not aim to reduce their agency. Rather, they aim to guarantee that their agency is not jeopardized in asymmetric contexts.

Therefore, when it comes to children, what is gradual is the demands on responsibility and the need for protection, not their moral status once a sufficiency minimum threshold is achieved. In fact, we recognize the different needs of protection among moral agents in vulnerable groups of adult population.

Thus, the conceptualization of children as moral agents does not imply the denial of their need for protection. Overlooking their capacities leads to unjustified paternalism, and a kind of enlightened despotism or epistemic neglect. An example of this is the complaints of children when they affirm, referring to adults, that «in theory they take us into account, but when it comes to the realization of things, they do not think about what we really need, but about what they think we need» (Unicef Spain 2014, p. 17).

In other words, the need for protection of some moral agents against others in situations of structural, cultural or biological vulnerability does not have to result in a minimization of their moral status to justify protection. In fact, this is not the case among vulnerable adults, unless one defends that adults whose autonomy is jeopardized by illiteracy, addiction or psychological conditions such as posttraumatic stress disorder lose their moral status as moral agents.

In the cases of children, the justification of protection does not rest on their lack of moral awareness, as argued in the previous sections, but on their gradual lack of information and the asymmetrical position compared to adults. That is, it is not necessary to minimize their status to protect them from danger. Rather, this asymmetry of power requires increasing the threshold of demands on adults to avoid the risk of

manipulation towards a segment of the population whose rights can be at stake. In other words, adults have the responsibility to protect children's rights and consider, given the asymmetric position, the child's best interests, but this does not imply that the child's real capacities in terms of moral awareness must be minimized or denied in order to justify the protection.

As a result, instead of belittling their moral status or falling into forms of adultizations—a strategy that would deny children's current state and simplify adults' responsibilities towards them—, adults have the responsibility to protect children's rights and consider, given the asymmetric position, the child's best interests, but this neither imply that the child's real capacities must be minimized or denied at each stage of development to justify the protection, nor that children should be assimilated to adults to be respected or seen in terms of responsibilities. Both protection and the recognition of their moral agency are part of children's best interests.

### V. Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have explored the philosophical implications of the CRC's understanding of children as subjects of rights, which tacitly implies labeling them as moral agents in ethical terms. I have also delved into the conceptual and normative counterarguments and challenges of expanding children's moral status.

The following suggestions are at the core of my conclusion.

First, children meet a minimum threshold of sufficiency to be considered moral agents, not mere moral patients. This does not mean no differences exist among moral agents. Rather, I have suggested the need to be sensitive to the nuances among beings inside the same moral category, once a sufficiency minimum threshold is achieved. In this sense, the notion of moral status does not consist of achieving an ideal, maximum or perfection threshold.

Second, I would like to highlight that understanding children as moral agents in the moral philosophy field is relevant because being categorized and labelled with a proper category that reflects your actual abilities is also at the core of children's best interests. Being categorized with a moral status that does not reflect your actual capacities would be unfair and would entail a form of neglect and a lack of moral recognition. Thus, understanding children as moral agents in the moral philosophy field is relevant for both children's rights and in order to address moral dilemmas on childhood in the most accurate possible way without falling into adultizations, reductions or assimilations with the rest of sentient beings.

As a result, I have defended that being labelled as moral agents and the promotion and respect of children's agency is not incompatible with the adults' responsibility to protect children. In a nutshell, having a voice is also children's best interests as well as being protected in asymmetric and vulnerable situations is a part of moral agents' rights.

Expanding children's moral status would be in line with the CRC's understanding of children as subjects of rights and its commitment to children's voice and participation. However, this should not be used as a weapon to adultize children and justify new forms of deprotection and neglect. Recognizing children's moral agency does not mean treating them as adults. Rather, it means that adults' responsibilities increase in order to respect the nuances among moral agents. Thus, the fact that children are evolving moral agents in vulnerable and asymmetric situations should not be used to deny their moral awareness or as an excuse to refuse to assume our responsibilities among moral agents. Hence, I would like to conclude by highlighting how the adultization of childhood is in fact a way of neglecting their specific vulnerabilities and

needs. In this sense, recognizing their moral agency and awareness does not necessarily lead to the assimilation of childhood to adulthood.

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Mar Cabezas es Profesora Titular de Filosofía Moral en la Universidad de Salamanca.

*Líneas de investigación:*

Ética de la infancia y filosofía de las emociones.

*Publicaciones recientes:*

Cabezas, M. (2022), *La infancia invisible: cuestiones ético-políticas sobre los niños*. Madrid: Tecnos.

Cabezas, M. (2024), «Ethical implications of epigenetic studies: On ghost damage», *Ethics and Bioethics (in Central Europe)*, 14(1-2), pp. 61-71.

*Email:* marcabezas@usal.es