

Only Persons Grow Moral :  
Student Personhood, Moral Growth, and the Purpose of School

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## **Abstract**

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The purpose of this dissertation is to better understand the formative import of the relationships between adults and the young in their corresponding roles as teachers and students between the first year of kindergarten and the last grade of high school (K-12 education). My approach to this issue is twofold: First, I argue that it is imperative that educators effectively recognize the personhood of students within K-12 schools. Second, I define schools as formative communities organized for the purpose of furthering the moral growth of students.

These arguments will be supported by a theoretical framework articulated around the concepts of the personhood of students, the interpersonal stance in education, moral growth, and schools as formative communities. I propose a characterization of these four interrelated concepts based on an analysis of Stephen Darwall's philosophical work on respect, dignity, and the second-person standpoint; Aristotelian virtue ethics and character education; and John

Dewey's philosophy of education, especially in his conceptions of growth, community, participation, and the moral nature and aims of education.

I conclude by theorizing schools as communities organized towards the fundamental purpose of fostering the moral growth of students, and argue that this purpose requires engaging students to fully participate of school life *as persons*. In studying some of the most basic questions about K-12 schooling from the perspective of philosophy of education, it is my intent to produce a framework that is conceptually well-grounded and clear enough to provide practical guidance for school teachers and leaders.

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Dedicated to all the students with whom I have worked



*Since life means growth, a living creature lives as truly and positively at one stage as at another, with the same intrinsic fullness and the same absolute claims. Hence education means the enterprise of supplying the conditions which insure growth, or adequacy of life, irrespective of age.*

John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*

(1980, p. 56)

*All education which develops power to share effectively in social life is moral. It forms a character which not only does the particular deed socially necessary but one which is interested in that continuous readjustment which is essential to growth. Interest in learning from all the contacts of life is the essential moral interest.*

John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*

(1980, p. 370)

*The moral responsibility of the school, and of those who conduct it, is to society. The school is fundamentally an institution erected by society to do a certain specific work, - to exercise a certain specific function in maintaining the life and advancing the welfare of society.*

John Dewey, *Moral Principles in Education*

(1975, p. 7)

## INTRODUCTION

Schools are a place of intergenerational encounter. From kindergarten to the twelfth-grade, children and adolescents attend school and interact with adults who are (usually) not their parents. These two distinct groups, students and teachers, engage with each other in ways that are both typical of and unique to schools. The interest that motivates my dissertation lies within this fundamental interaction and the relations built upon it: I find it necessary to question the way educators see and understand their students, how this understanding informs the ways teachers relate to their students, and the effect these relationships have on formal education between the first year of kindergarten and the last one of high school (K-12 education). The purpose of this dissertation is twofold. First, I argue that it is imperative that educators effectively recognize the personhood of students within K-12 schools. Second, I define schools as formative communities organized for the purpose of furthering the moral growth of students. Thus, I theorize schools as communities with the fundamental purpose of fostering the moral growth of students and argue that this purpose requires inviting them, the students, to fully participate of school life *as persons*. The guiding questions for my dissertation are therefore as follows:

1. In what sense are K-12 students persons?
2. Why is it critically important for schools to acknowledge the personhood of students?
3. How might K-12 schools understand and implement this commitment to the personhood of students?

To answer these questions, I explain what it means to recognize students as persons, why educators should engage them as such, and how this attitude should shape the way we conceive and organize school life. Based on these answers I propose a conceptualization of schools as formative communities and conclude by addressing the need of properly actualizing the formative value of everyday school life experiences.

This inquiry is both a philosophical endeavor and a practical pursuit. In studying some of the most basic questions about K-12 schooling from the perspective of philosophy of education, it is my intent to produce a theoretical framework that is conceptually well-grounded and clear enough to provide practical guidance for school teaching and administration. As a former K-12 school teacher and administrator myself, it is my intent to provide a shared language and sense of purpose to my colleagues as we navigate the choppy waters of the classroom, the school yard, and the boardroom. My own experience as a K-12 educator brought me to the starting point of my inquiries on the philosophy of education: The realization that only through a sufficient understanding of the fundamental notions that lie at the base of our practice can we aspire to honor the implicit challenges of education. Furthermore, only by sharing these understandings and revising them under ever-changing social conditions can educators come to succeed in building schools fit for the actualization of our call to educate.

This work, then, is intended first and foremost for the K-12 educators, both teachers and school leaders, that make education a reality. By clearly determining the nature of students as persons and exploring the implications of this understanding for K-12 education, I aim to propose an understanding of schooling and its purpose. This clarity will hopefully help educators succeed in this work.

## **Inquiry Motivation**

Most schools define their educational aims using language that implies the transformation, for the better, of the young persons under their care. Indeed, the stated goals and aims of schools are just as diverse as the wide universe of educational projects, but they usually share at least these ambitions. Schools often purport to produce changes in students that go far beyond the development of academic skills, and by declaring that such transformation should produce qualitative improvement in their personal lives (i.e., emotionally, socially, morally, etc.) they invoke a commitment to students as ‘whole persons’.<sup>1</sup> Current discourses on educational aims, not surprisingly, are often the object of heated and worthy debates about what could and should be the nature and extent of these objectives. However, a common thread in these objectives seems to be a commitment of schools to pursue lofty goals of personal transformation.

Under this apparent common ground, however, a misunderstanding hides in plain sight. If we, as educators, say we want to transform the life of students in ways that actualize their value as whole, complex human beings (as opposed to mere repositories of knowledge or

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<sup>1</sup> To illustrate this point, a few examples of schools’ mission statements obtained through a quick online search can be helpful. A private school in Manhattan aims to challenge its students “to develop intellectual independence, creativity and curiosity and a sense of responsibility toward others both within the School and in the community at large” (The Dalton School, 2022). A small public school district in Upstate New York aims to “cultivate passionate learners and informed global citizens who actively influence their world” (Ardsley Union Free School District, 2022). Further afield, an elite public school in the United Kingdom includes in its educational aims “Supporting pastoral care that nurtures physical and mental health, emotional maturity and spiritual richness”, and “Fostering self-confidence, enthusiasm, perseverance, tolerance and integrity” (Eton College, 2022). A private, all-girls, Catholic school in Latin America aims to “Train women of integrity, with the skills to lead the sustainable transformation of the environment in an innovative way, within a framework of Christian values that welcomes diversity and encourages inclusion” (Marymount College, 2022). While this sample is clearly limited, it illustrates the coincidences of the language used in mission statements to define the educational goals frequently spoused in K-12 education.

expert test-takers), why do we tend to address children and adolescents in ways that reduce them to the passive targets of our efforts? Is it not contradictory to proclaim we want to develop their whole human potential, but espouse school practices in which they are called mostly to compliance, imitation, and repetition? Why do we fall so easily into narrowly focused discussions about the things we hope to give or do to our students, so that they are better equipped to operate in the world, as we see it? In short, how can formal K-12 education aspire for students to flourish as active and engaged persons, but address them as passive objects on whom education is bestowed? Behind these loosely articulated concerns and intuitions lies a real preoccupation, which requires further honing, about the risks of improperly conceiving the status of students within formal education and the effect this conception has on the way we address students and think of schools. My intent is to draw both from philosophical work and my own experience to address this problem from a theoretical standpoint that allows for a better understanding of its implications and empowers educators to pursue better practices.

The motivation behind this dissertation, then, springs from the broad concern explained above and looks to address it from a particular perspective: the need for school communities to have an explicit, shared, and effective understanding of the moral status of K-12 students as persons. Adopting this point of view will require educators to engage students in a way that allows the realization of their formative goals, particularly as it pertains to the moral growth of children and adolescents. The need of such an understanding becomes evident in the contradiction of wanting to educate students *as persons* when practice reveals a tendency to treat them as objects of a series of heteronomous interventions, and whose personhood will only become relevant at a point that lies beyond school life.

## Thesis and Significance

Students in K-12 schools are generally between 4 and 18 years of age. As a rule, they are below the age at which people are recognized (legally and culturally) as autonomous adults and thus they are frequently not treated as persons (even if nominally they are called so). This attitude, in which personhood is relativized to age, is usually grounded in an identification of personhood with an idealized form of rational agency.

This view of personhood also tends to become pervasive because it is assumed to be the justification for socially accepted practices of paternalism. We recognize as legitimate that children are placed under the authority of adults so that others, particularly but not exclusively their parents, can make decisions in pursuit of their well-being and in ways that would be considered intolerable interferences in the life of adults. These sorts of interventions are commonly justified because children are vulnerable in ways that adults are not (Benporath, 2003), they lack the means to pursue their own well-being (a welfare approach; Franklin-Hall, 2013, p. 225), or they are not presumed to have the attributes of rational autonomous agency that are generally accepted to characterize mature adults (an agency approach; Franklin-Hall, 2013, p. 227). An uncritical approach to paternalism grounded in the way adults typically address the actions of young people can therefore result in us treating children as incomplete, merely potential persons (e.g., Gutmann, 1980; Schapiro, 1999, 2003).

I find this uncritical treatment of K-12 students that results in the relativization of their personhood within school to be deeply problematic. I will argue that, for K-12 schools to effectively contribute to the growth of their students, they must address them from an interpersonal stance, which entails the proper recognition of their personhood. Moreover,

addressing young people *as persons* and engaging them as the protagonists of their own education is fundamental to their becoming mature moral agents. From this perspective it is possible to argue that, while many instances of social life contribute to the moral growth of the young, schools are privileged spaces to foster this aim.

Once this claim is sufficiently substantiated, it will be possible both to present a richer view of what schools should be and are able to do, and to assert the intrinsic value of schools based on the good they can produce both for individual persons and for society at large. Such a view of schools will guide a better understanding of how they should be organized and how educators can help bring out the formative potential of everyday occurrences of school life.

### **Contents and Structure**

The project of this dissertation is indeed ambitious. It requires, in the first place, a philosophy of personhood that recognizes and incorporates children and adolescents while responding to their needs. Part One will be devoted to this theory, for which I draw mainly from the scholarship of the Kantian philosopher Stephen Darwall. I begin by presenting what I call deficit models of childhood: views of childhood that rely on a comparison between children and adults in which the latter are seen as being in a finished state for which the former aspire. I then contrast the deficit model to views that conceive childhood in its own terms, and thus vindicate its importance as an inherently valuable stage of life. By rejecting accounts of personhood that condition the moral status of persons to the possession of an ideal form of rational autonomy or to other equivalent criteria, I adopt a humanist approach to personhood that includes childhood. This approach allows me to argue for the equal moral status of young persons who can actively take part of moral life, especially in the role of K-12 student.

My argument also requires a theory of the interpersonal stance and a corresponding understanding of moral growth, to which Part Two is devoted.

In Chapter 3 I discuss the vital importance of effectively recognizing the moral status of children within K-12 schools. For this purpose, I argue that teachers and children should relate to each other based on their mutual recognition as persons, an attitude that I call the interpersonal stance. I begin this argument with a theoretical introduction to the difference between the objective and the interpersonal stance, which I consequently apply to an examination of each of these modes of engagement in K-12 schools. Having rejected the objective stance as educationally worthy, I explore how the interpersonal stance and Darwall's second-personal understanding of moral life are related to each other, and explain how this view requires adopting an interpersonal stance towards K-12 students.

In Chapter 4 I propose a detailed characterization of moral growth as a fundamental human interest of young persons who aspire to become increasingly competent moral agents. My understanding of moral growth draws from Aristotelian virtue ethics and character education. Thinking about character in these terms allows me to further qualify Darwall's ideas on the second-personal standpoint by looking at what it means to grow in a moral sense. Such a view of moral growth explains how and why taking students seriously is a necessary part of their moral education. To illustrate how students can be properly addressed as moral agents within school life, I bring the concepts of personhood, the interpersonal stance, and moral growth together to discuss ways of holding students responsible as an expression of respect towards their dignity that contributes to their moral growth.



Part Three will be focused on presenting a definition of schools as formative communities, which will warrant a series of normative conclusions that can be applied in different schools, while being respectful of their distinct priorities and commitments. Chapter 5 lays the ground through a relatively extensive exegetical analysis of John Dewey's ideas on life, education, and growth, and how they apply to moral education and schools. In Chapter 6 I complete my argument by defining schools as formative communities, and thus vindicating the unique role and value of schools based on their aim of fostering the moral growth of young persons.

### **Method of Inquiry**

In general terms, my research proposes to produce conceptual tools to better understand the attitudes educators and schools should adopt towards their students and thus produce a framework to organize K-12 education towards the moral growth of students. The method I follow for my inquiry is, fundamentally, a systematic conceptual analysis of relevant literature, from which I articulate a theoretical framework that allows me to propose and defend an argument about the sense in which K-12 school-age students are persons and why it is critically important that schools effectively acknowledge them as such. Although it is not my intention to criticize current schooling practices based on empirical data, I use examples of situations that occur in school life, drawn both from my own experience and from the literature, to illustrate my arguments and the relevance of theoretical reflection applied to practical issues of schooling.

In this same spirit, it is not my intention to engage in pure exegetical criticism of the texts that provide the theoretical foundation for my research. I will analyze these texts from the

perspective of K-12 schooling and therefore bring to the fore the way in which their insights inform each other. I argue that bringing the practical and theoretical perspectives together allows for a better understanding of children-adult relations in schooling, and that otherwise the importance of these relations remains unexplained and obfuscate the work of educators. In other words, my reasons for proceeding in this way are twofold: My inquiry will allow me to provide a conceptually rich language to describe and explain pressing issues of education, thus bringing philosophical scholarship to bear upon current educational practices, and to propose a philosophically sound definition of schooling and its purpose that supports practical recommendations for the educational practice of schools.

This analysis is structured around three main bodies of thought: Stephen Darwall's work on respect, dignity, and the second-person standpoint; Aristotelian virtue ethics and character education; and John Dewey's philosophy of education, especially in his conceptions of growth, community, participation, and the moral nature and aims of education. Based on the conceptual analysis of these texts and of philosophical literature that will come into conversation with them, I intend to produce an argument regarding the purpose of schools. The fundamentals of this argument rely on Darwall's understanding of personal dignity and the importance of its reciprocal and effective recognition as the fundamental fact of moral life; Aristotle's view on character in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (2011) and the idea of human excellences (or virtues) as constantly developed through the decision-making process of a person who gradually actualizes their own ethical self through their practical engagement with the world; and Dewey's definitions of growth and education, particularly through his

characterization of how the young come to be educated by their active participation in the life of the school, a community purposefully designed for their moral growth.

Although I realize that these philosophers belong to different philosophical traditions and are not frequently brought into dialogue to articulate a single discourse, I believe that their work can come together to inform a better understanding of K-12 education. By bringing Darwall's language about the dignity of persons and the respect it deserves to bear upon children and adolescents between 4 and 18 years of age, it becomes possible to apply the Aristotelian insights on the actualization of character to young persons who act out of reasons and are capable to engage in morally relevant discourse. I bring this view of the self-actualization of character together with the language of reason-giving and second-personal morality to inform Dewey's understanding of moral growth and the purpose of schooling. It is not my intent to deny the different moral psychologies that have traditionally been associated with Aristotle, Dewey, and Darwall, but to apply their insights to reveal the unique formative nature of the relationship between teachers and students and thus help to realize the full potential of K-12 education.

By using a conceptual framework built on an analysis of these theories, I propose a perspective on how enacting the moral equality of students and educators within a school community is a fundamental part of the formative processes that justify K-12 education.

## **PART ONE: THE PERSONHOOD OF CHILDREN**

### **Chapter 1: The Moral Status of Children**

There are four fundamental and interconnected concepts around which I develop the theoretical framework that makes up my dissertation: the personhood of children, the interpersonal stance, moral growth, and the school as a formative community. The concept of personhood and how it applies to childhood (in general) and students within the school setting (in particular) is the starting point for my argument.<sup>2</sup> The opening chapters of this dissertation are therefore aimed at developing this concept, first by discussing the moral status of children (including adolescents) in Chapter 1 and then by using that discussion to develop a rich characterization of children as persons in Chapter 2.

With this plan in mind, I begin by presenting two different views of childhood and positioning each of them within current philosophical literature on the moral status of children. The first perspective is a deficit-based view that espouses a definition of childhood based on what children lack when compared to ideally conceived mature adults. The second view, to the contrary, approaches childhood as a stage of life that has value in and of itself. I develop this second perspective by drawing from the literature on the intrinsic goods of childhood, the rights of young people, and the dignity of persons.

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<sup>2</sup> Thinking about the personhood of children and adolescents within schools, it is important that K-12 students typically share two relevant characteristics to this investigation: they are mostly under the age at which they are considered to be adults, both in a legal and a cultural sense, and they occupy a particular place in the structure of school life that is characterized by paternalistic attitudes towards them. While in many ways it is difficult to think of high school seniors as equal to kindergarteners, these defining characteristics of their role as students reveals a shared status which relates directly to how their personhood is actualized within the school. Consequently, I will address K-12 school-age students as a whole.

In support of a conception of childhood on its own terms, I argue for the necessity of recognizing children as moral status-holders endowed with the dignity of persons who deserve to be respected accordingly. To this effect, and even though the concept of moral status will be the focus of further discussion later in this chapter, I propose to keep in mind the definition proposed by Agnieszka Jaworska and Julie Tannenbaum (2019) according to which “At the most general level, an entity is said to have moral status if and only if it or its interest matters morally for its own sake, rather than for the sake of some other entity or value” (p. 67). Moral status, then, is the status of someone (or something) that in and of itself deserves to be taken into consideration, so that how an agent reacts to its interests will result in moral rights or wrongs.

Following the moral philosophy of Stephen Darwall and his definition of dignity, I find that a close examination of respect and the different ways in which it can be professed towards persons *qua* persons reveals the reasons to claim that children have the same moral status as adults and are, in this sense, their moral equals. Furthermore, the discussion of Darwall’s kinds of respect allows me to introduce concepts that are key to understanding the essential attitudes for the effective enactments of respect towards young persons, which will be the focus of the following chapters. To further substantiate my support for a perspective of childhood that fully recognizes the personhood of children, I close this chapter by referring to humanist perspectives on the moral status of persons that behoove us to follow our inclination to treat all humans as persons, instead of looking for criteria that works as requisites for moral consideration. By adopting this inclusive perspective, I move forward to discuss what an

appropriate response for the dignity of children looks like, and thus begin a revision of the understanding of autonomy as a central interest of personal growth.<sup>3</sup>

### 1.1. Is Childhood a Predicament or a Valuable Stage of Life?

To consider how educators should think of and engage with school-age students, roughly between 4 and 18 years of age, a review of current philosophical literature on the personhood of children is in order. The issue is deceptively simple: an educator is unlikely to find any account that fails to recognize the humanity of children, and we usually think of these two conditions (being human and being a person) to be so closely related as to be effectively equivalent. While I ultimately endorse a view very close to this one, the route to it must be travelled carefully in light of both educational practices and the extant philosophical literature.

Indeed, our practices towards children seem to contradict this initial idea: in education, for example, it is common to address students as the passive targets of a heteronomous intervention.<sup>4</sup> As adults, we find it both necessary and just to intervene in the decision-making processes of children in ways that we would not accept in the case of adults. The reluctance to

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<sup>3</sup> In Chapter 2 I address the issues of paternalism and autonomy, which arise as significant challenges to my conception of children as full moral status-holders who deserve to be treated as persons. I explore how paternalism towards young persons can be justified without relativizing their moral status and exercised as a form of respect towards children. As per the issue of autonomy, I discuss the implications of seeing it as an important quality of persons and not as a criterion for recognizing personhood itself.

<sup>4</sup> Plato's *Laches* offers a striking early example of this attitude: two successful men discuss with a small group of experts (including Socrates) the education of their sons, who silently witness the conversation. Although the matter is for their benefit, the contribution of the young men to the dialogue is reduced to one line in which they identify Socrates. Not surprisingly, the discussion ends with Socrates indicating that the education in question is, first and foremost, that of those who are arguing. They, however, remain in charge of looking out for the interests of "the boys" (Plato, 1997). For more contemporary examples of this phenomenon that are relevant to the theoretical framework of this dissertation, see John Dewey's characterization of traditional education in the first section of *Experience and Education* (2015), or his description of educative practices that misconstrue the purpose of education in chapters five and six of *Democracy and Education* (1980). Examples can also be found, from a different perspective, in the pedagogical methods proper of a mimetic tradition of teaching as discussed by Phillip Jackson (1986).

act paternalistically towards adults, and also why we don't usually speak about the education of adults in the same way as that of children, will often be explained as an expression of respect for their personhood.<sup>5</sup> The conflicting ideas that children are persons *and* also valid targets of interventions that one person could not justly direct towards another, evidence an unexamined practical understanding of what we mean by "person". The resulting attitudes seem to require holding together apparently conflicting commonsense claims about the moral status of children: that, just as adults do, the young deserve full moral consideration from others (the equal consideration thesis); that they can and should be treated differently to adults (the unequal treatment thesis); and that parents, and by extension other adults who act in their behalf, have ample although not absolute authority over them (the limited parental rights thesis) (Brennan & Noggle, 1997, pp. 3-5).

Educators invested in properly addressing young people seem to be caught in a dilemma about the personhood of their charges: either they are persons, and therefore deserve to be taken seriously as moral agents just as adults are, or they are provisional or not-quite-full persons, making it just to treat them as subject to the authority of others in ways that would not hold for adults. This is only a dilemma if we accept the conception of a person as depending on the rational agency of an autonomous individual that is self-legislating, the author of their own behavior based on a stable set of maxims.<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, one horn of the dilemma would correspond to the unequal treatment thesis, mentioned above, and require an attitude

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on different takes on paternalism in terms of respect, see Sheintul (2023). Note, however, that Sheintul usually does not speak of disrespect to personhood but to agency, thus anticipating the confusion of terms that I will address presently.

<sup>6</sup> I use the singular "they" as a gender-neutral third-personal single pronoun instead of "he or she", as per the APA 7<sup>th</sup> edition style guidelines.

in which children are reduced to passive objects of adult interventions. The other horn, which would endorse the equal consideration thesis and rely on our moral intuition to treat children with respect, could require adults to abstain of the many interventions their well-being necessitates due to their immaturity.<sup>7</sup>

This dilemma proves false, however, when approached from a different perspective regarding the basis of the moral status of a person, the justification of paternalistic interferences, and the importance of autonomous agency.<sup>8</sup> If the moral status of a person does not depend on idealized characteristics of adulthood, then it is possible to recognize the personhood of children, justify the way adults address them, and elucidate the role of rational autonomy in the moral development of young persons. There is no dilemma if, looking from the right perspective, we realize that it is possible to respect children as persons *and* intervene in their decision making as an expression of this respect.

The scholarly literature on the moral status of children can be characterized by different approaches to this apparent dilemma about their personhood. A common approach, which I discuss in more detail below, is informed by a conception of children as immature and therefore incomplete. These scholars adopt a deficit-based understanding of childhood as a transition stage of instrumental value aimed toward mature adult life, which justifies the unequal status of children. The young are defined by what they lack, and thus conceived as potential persons whose full humanity can only be actualized in adulthood. This deficit-based

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<sup>7</sup> Brennan and Noggle's limited parental rights thesis would be an example of this approach, in which the inequality between children and adults is sustained but restrained due to moral considerations due to children themselves.

<sup>8</sup> As explained before, the former will be developed presently in Chapter 1, while the latter issues will be addressed in Chapter 2.



understanding of childhood aligns with a Kantian identification of personhood with rational and autonomous agency that sits well with the ideals of liberal political theory.

Other approaches understand childhood on its own terms, and thus allow for a view of children as the moral equals of adults. This perspective includes scholarship which conceives of childhood as having intrinsic value, of children as bearers of rights, and as being endowed with a certain dignity that requires others to respect them for their actual (as opposed to prospective) personhood. In this context, I discuss Stephen Darwall's moral philosophy arguing that a dignity-based approach to personhood is the most promising in the case of K-12 students.

### ***1.1.1. Deficit-Based Accounts of Childhood***

The deficit-based view of childhood is characterized by the notion that children, as opposed to adults, are in the process of developing certain essential human skills and dispositions that define what it is to be a person. Adulthood is a finished state and therefore childhood is a predicament, a stage of diminished but potential personhood, whose chief purpose is to develop the moral and political agency of the (adult) person (Franklin-Hall, 2013; Gutmann, 1980; Schapiro, 1999, 2003; Tress, 1997). The value of childhood, from this perspective, is exclusively instrumental: being a child is only worthy insofar as it contributes to the development of a mature, autonomous adult.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Brennan (2014, p.9) and Gheaus (2015b, p. 6) explain this position by formulating a thought experiment: if the value of childhood is truly exclusively instrumental and there was an "adulthood pill" that could be taken to drive someone from childhood to adulthood in an instant, resulting in the same kind of adult they would be if childhood had kept its natural course, taking the pill would necessarily be warranted.

This approach is present both in ancient philosophy and in modern thought. Looking for a unified conception of children within Aristotle's extended work, Daryl Tress (1997) introduces the idea of childhood as an unfinished state of the human condition which is brought from potential to actuality through successive biological, ethical, and political developments (pp. 66, 80) inspired and directed by their elders. A fundamental principle of Aristotle's work is the separation and hierarchical organization of theoretical, practical, and productive sciences, which are irreducible and non-transferable. This being true, and even if Aristotle mentions children in works that belong to different areas of knowledge (Tress bases his analysis in *Generation of Animals*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and *Politics*), a comprehensive and composite account of childhood is possible because the human child "(...) must be regarded as a substance that is and comes to be, growing and developing to completion as a human adult" (Tress, 1997, p. 65). There is a unifying thread to this process of actualization:

The common defining feature is that the child is 'unfinished' relative to a human *telos*. In the biology, the child is viewed as unfinished in his or her growth as a human animal; in the ethics, unfinished in the training in virtue; in the politics, unfinished in the education for adult life as a responsible citizen. (Tress, 1997, p. 66).

Humanity can only be realized in its ideal state of flourishing (*eudaimonia*) if each stage successfully actualizes the human potential of the child, who becomes a fully developed human animal through *genesis* ("The natural and non-arbitrary coming-to-be of a substance", Tress, p. 69), an ethical decision-maker in the *oikos* (the household), and a functional citizen through participation of the civic institutions and laws of the *polis* (the city as a moral and political community).

Two aspects of Tress's Aristotelian account of childhood are directly relevant to my project: first, that the child is seen as incomplete because of a lack of certain features and

abilities that he has the potential to develop in order to fulfill the ‘promise’ of humanity.

Secondly, it is important to note that what excludes children from the moral world, and thus a major focus of the ethical and political stages of their development, is their inability to decide (in the Aristotelian sense of the word). The purpose of being a child is to develop the ability to decide rationally and a stable disposition to do so according to virtue.

For Aristotle (2011) a human being is an origin, a begetter of actions as it is of children (1113b18-20). Children, however, are not begetters of actions and so do not share fully in the human condition. To do so, an individual must be able to adopt rational decisions based on sufficient life experience and a knowledge of the good and the bad—something children cannot do, as they act guided by either temper or appetite (Aristotle, 2011, 1111a25). Since decision-making is voluntary and does not depend on what is pleasurable or painful, Aristotle concludes that children are non-rational, and incapable of decision-making in this sense. Thus, according to Aristotle, they find themselves outside of the realm of morality (Aristotle, 2011, 1111b5 and ff). Moral education requires actualizing the characteristics necessary to flourish as a human being through biology, habit, and reason. This is the purpose of childhood, and its value depends exclusively on its pursuit.

Tamar Schapiro (1999, 2003) has articulated a similarly instrumental and very influential view of children based on Immanuel Kant’s political and moral philosophy. According to Schapiro (2003), an adult is “the *source* of her beliefs and actions in the sense that she *authorizes them*” (p. 588). Since children have not yet developed a fully reflective consciousness, they cannot hold a normative relationship of authorship towards their actions nor be morally responsible for their outcomes (p. 586). In this view, children do not share with

adults the status of full “moral and political citizens” (p. 578) and therefore do not stand in fully reciprocal relation to them. Childhood constitutes an obstacle to moral action, a liminal condition of emerging personhood and therefore a predicament (Schapiro, 1999, p. 728). It is a transit state in which reason, autonomy, and therefore personhood, are absent but expected.

Since childhood is a predicament to overcome, this purpose informs the duties of the elder towards the young, as “Our end as adults cannot be to control children; it must be to make them free to control themselves” (Schapiro, 1999, p. 736). The value of childhood is entirely instrumental, as it is defined by its purpose to develop the conditions for mature moral agency. Within this framework children can be granted, at most, the status of provisional agents who develop agency through play. Playing, in this sense, provides a space for *pretended* autonomy in which the young can try out different normative perspectives as they gradually begin to develop a moral constitution of their own.

Deficit-based accounts of childhood that result from comparing children and adults have therefore a direct effect on how the personhood of children is conceived: whether a person is an individual who is capable to act of reasons of one’s own (Schapiro, 2003) or a fully developed human being capable of flourishing through virtue (Tress, 1997), children would be at least temporarily excluded from sharing an equal status with adults. Growing up would be a process of acquiring or developing personhood.

The Aristotelian and the Kantian view are substantially different in many ways, but relevant to my project in their coincidence regarding the status of children. In fact, the Kantian identification of personhood with rational autonomous agency establishes the core of current deficit-based views of childhood. These views fit with the classic liberal definition of a citizen as

a mature individual who freely and deliberately consents to participate in a community of equals.<sup>10</sup> Such an understanding of citizenship explains the exclusion of children from active participation in political life and justifies paternalism towards them as “potentially rational beings” (Gutmann, 1980, p. 338) whose future consent can be legitimately presupposed based on the fundamental human interest in developing the capacity for autonomous agency (Gutmann, 1980, p. 339). Interventions affecting both young children and adolescents would be justified not by an identical lack of agency in them but because they both are in an early stage of life with a preparatory purpose, a “normal period of preparation for assuming full authority over the direction of one's life” (Franklin-Hall, 2013, p. 235).<sup>11</sup> Schapiro, Gutmann, and Franklin-Hall see childhood's value as entirely dependent on the development of the moral and political agency of an adult and the dilemma of ‘young personhood’ is resolved in the negative: children are *not yet* persons as they lack the capacity of an autonomous rational agent, childhood has an instrumental value directed at the development of an ideal of adulthood, and paternalism is required by the need to develop the conditions for life authorship (Schapiro, 2003, p. 586; Franklin-Hall, 2013, p. 241).

Deficit-based views of childhood seem to be, at least in the Kantian sense, concerned with the welfare of children in terms of recognizing the need to provide for those goods they are not capable of procuring for themselves and fostering the development of the abilities that

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<sup>10</sup> A particularly influential view of personhood in modern liberal political theory is articulated by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (1999, see pp. 358 and ff.). Also, for another Kantian account that identifies being a person with being an autonomous agent, see Korsgaard (2009, pp. 18-20). Korsgaard's account of practical identity also draws from an Aristotelian view of self-actualization that I will discuss further in Chapter 4.

<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the deficit-based approach offers a way to understand how students, from kindergartners to high school seniors, share a status of diminished personhood within the school. This dissertation is, in part, an exploration of why I reject this explanation.

will allow for the free exercise of their moral agency. They remain, however, grounded in the idea that childhood is defined by what it lacks, and thus fail to recognize any independent value it might have as a stage of life. Furthermore, it presupposes that children do not act in any morally relevant way but merely pretend to do so. I find this take of the moral life of children as a mere simulacrum to be suspect, and profoundly counterintuitive. From this position, the first positive step I take to test these intuitions and propose an alternative account of the personhood of children is the review of literature that values childhood on its own terms.

### ***1.1.2. Childhood on its Own Terms***

The deficit-based approach is not the only way to think about the personhood of children: Philosophers and educators also see childhood as a stage that is valuable in itself. To do this, they vindicate accounts of personhood that do not rely on full autonomous agency.

**The Intrinsic Goods of Childhood.** An important aspect of this literature is concerned with the intrinsic value of childhood because of its inherent goods. Authors who adopt this perspective (Archard, 1993; Brennan, 2014; Gheaus, 2015a, 2015b; Macleod, 2015, 2018) define the intrinsic goods of childhood as those that are characteristically present in childhood and “the value of which doesn’t follow from their contribution to the goods of adult life” (Brennan, 2014, p. 8). Furthermore, their proper enjoyment cannot be delayed until a later stage: with the gradual acquisition of mature agency comes the acquisition of certain rights and responsibilities that can conflict with the enjoyment of the goods of childhood and frustrate the developmental advantages that come with them (Macleod, 2015).

As per what exactly the intrinsic goods of childhood *are*, there is no definitive list but a consensus about their defining characteristics. Generally speaking, these are goods that are

present during childhood in ways that fade or change in later stages and that offer a developmental advantage for overall human flourishing (Macleod, 2015, pp. 59-60). They are characteristic (but not exclusive) of childhood, and their value does not depend on their contribution to the development of rational agency or other goods usually identified with adulthood (Brennan, 2014, p. 8; Gheaus, 2015, p. 36; Macleod, 2018, p. 79). As examples of these goods, Gheaus (2015) mentions imagination, flexibility, and the ability to learn, all of which are valuable abilities that children possess abundantly and that contribute towards a major feature of humanity: the ability to conceive of change. Macleod, in turn, (2015) mentions innocence, characterized as a wide receptivity that “permits various childhood choices and new discoveries to be accompanied by a sense of wonderment and joy” (p. 59), and a remarkable kind of imagination which allows for “rich and intense emotional experiences” (p. 60) and underlies the creative power of play.

One clarification is relevant at this point: Asserting the intrinsic value of childhood and its goods does not necessarily require the view that overall value is lost in the move from childhood to adulthood.<sup>12</sup> I agree with the idea that this transition is better viewed as a transit from one valuable stage of life to another, which makes viewing children as unfinished adults just as wrong as seeing adults as defective children (Gheaus, 2015b, pp. 2, 20). What is key for my project is how the perspective on the intrinsic goods of childhood refrains from identifying agency with personhood. Instead, it introduces a wider view of what it is to be a person: “a person is more than the set of desires and beliefs constituting the will expressed in choices.

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<sup>12</sup> Although some authors, like Dwyer (2011), argue that this is the case.

Relevant factors include self-determination, self-fulfillment, virtuous character, and a person's "real" self" (Archard, 1993, p. 351). By introducing a wide set of qualities to determine the moral status of persons (an approach I will discuss further in 1.2.) and recognizing that children exhibit these qualities alongside a gradual acquisition of practical reason, literature on the intrinsic goods of childhood rejects fully autonomous agency as the measure of the status of children as persons (Gheaus, 2015a, pp. 41-42). The child is, in this picture, "an independent source of opinions about matters affecting its own interests" (Archard, 2015, p. 11) who acts reasonably with "simple agency" (Noggle, 2002, pp. 5-6).

The stark distinction between childhood and adulthood implicit in deficit-based approaches is further undermined once we realize that the capacities that characterize mature agency admit of degree, are differently present in each person, and therefore it is impossible to identify a clear autonomy threshold to separate both stages (Archard, 2015). By recognizing that, in practice, there is no such thing as a perfectly rational agent, that the fundamental value of human life is constant along its different stages, and that there are goods of childhood that have unique value along this continuum, I lay a foundation to disavow the deficit-based views of childhood described above. The idea of childhood as exclusively instrumental fails in ways that are empirically evident, and thus the way is open to find better ways of thinking about children.

**Personhood, Children, and the Language of Rights.** A separate but related literature bases the personhood of children in their capacity to bear rights (Archard, 2002; Ben-Porath, 2003; Brennan, 2002; Brennan & Noggle, 1997; Brighouse, 2002, 2003). Persons, they argue, are characterized by having substantial interests that merit protection through rights (Brennan,



2002, p. 9) and thus personhood is defined as the social standing made manifest by the endowment of rights (Ben-Porath, 2003, p. 129). Children are persons who bear rights, and they do so as a particular kind of right-bearer characterized by their vulnerability (Ben-Porath, 2003), dependence, and ability to grow out of these conditions (Brighouse, 2003). In this view, autonomy is also possessed in degrees: children are both immature decision-makers *and* persons with interests that merit protection, which means that childhood is not an impediment but one of many unique and significant stages of human life (Ben-Porath, 2003, pp. 128, 133).

According to this literature, the rights a person has are defined by the interests they are meant to protect. Clearly, a child is endowed with the basic human rights that attach to every person *qua* person (Brennan & Noggle, 1997), which serve to protect the legitimate claims they have pursuant to their subsistence and wellbeing, independently of whether they can or cannot articulate or defend specific demands based on them (Brennan, 2002). Children also have an interest in developing second-order rights which attach to other relevant characteristics they might come to have (Brennan & Noggle, 1997), including the development of children's ability to act in accordance with their own judgement (Brighouse, 2002). This very important right to autonomy comes from the fact that the young have a vital interest in developing the relevant capacities for agency (Brighouse, 2003, p. 701). In this scenario, children seek to move from rights intended to primarily protect their welfare interest to rights intended to primarily protect their choices (Brennan, 2002, p. 11). Children's vulnerability and dependence, and the obligation to foster their ability to exercise agency rights, work together to justify a purpose-full brand of paternalism that does not challenge their personhood.

**Respect and the Dignity of Children.** A third relevant approach is to look into the literature for accounts of personhood based on the dignity of persons and the respect this dignity requires. The relevant core issues of this scholarship are the grounds of a person's dignity, what respect for someone's dignity entails (Darwall, 1977, 2004, 2006, 2015), and how these considerations apply to children (Baumann and Bleisch, 2015; Coleman, 2002; Giesinger, 2012; Noggle, 1999; Roth et al., 2020).

As per the first question, Stephen Darwall's understanding of dignity provides a relatively straightforward account about its grounds: "The dignity of persons [...] is the second personal standing of an equal: the authority to make claims and demands of one another as equal free and rational agents" (Darwall, 2004, p. 43). I will discuss in length Darwall's qualification of the standing of an equal as second-personal in Chapter 3; for now, it is sufficient to note that he characterizes a person's dignity by saying that it is (i) the authority to make claims and demands of one another as an equal, and that (ii) this authority comes from the fact of being an "equal free and rational agent." Note that in this exegesis I have separated the two conditions mentioned by Darwall while repeating the term "equal". I think this repetition is necessary, as I consider each condition to require something different. It is one thing to say a person is endowed with dignity because she is the origin of claims and that she can expect other persons to acknowledge those claims to be binding, just as she should acknowledge theirs. It is different to assert that the reason why she can expect this (equal) recognition is because both she and the others share the same kind of free and rational agency. Accepting this latter condition would coincide with the definition of person-as-autonomous-agent, in the

sense explained by Schapiro (2003, p. 586), and thus the deficit-based view of childhood would also imply the conclusion that children do not share the dignity of persons.

The conditioning of personhood on the basis of an idealized form of adult rational agency, and the consequent exclusion of children from the moral status of persons, further show the inadequacy of approaching childhood from this perspective. What is more, an exploration of Darwall's treatment of dignity within the context of his wider discussion of respect also provides argument to reject this condition. A discussion in these terms is warranted because the concepts of dignity and respect are deeply intertwined in Darwall's thought, especially when it comes to his seminal work on the distinction between different kinds of respect. I believe that thoroughly adopting Darwall's definition of respect requires the conclusion that all children, independently of their level of maturity as rational agents, are deserving of such consideration and therefore endowed with the dignity of persons. In other words, recognizing that children deserve our respect, that is, duly taking them into consideration when deciding how to act when our actions affect them, implies that we recognize them as sources of legitimate normative claims that bind us for their own sake. This recognition of the moral status of children implies a recognition of their dignity that is essential to the conceptualization of their personhood.

In "Two Kinds of Respect" Darwall (1977) addresses the challenges of talking about respect in an indistinct manner and thus introduces his distinction between different forms of respect. His overall purpose is to explain why, and in what sense, we can simultaneously say that we respect all people equally, and also that in some respects we respect some more than others. With this aim he distinguishes between two kinds of respect: recognition respect and

appraisal respect. Recognition respect for persons is the form of respect that has a person's dignity as its object, and is the one that first comes to mind as a key to appreciating the personhood of children. Darwall defines it as "respect for the moral requirements that are placed on one by the existence of other persons" (Darwall, 1977, p. 45), so that "to respect something in this sense is to *give it standing in one's relations to it*" (Darwall, 2004, p. 49). Appraisal respect for a person, on the other hand, has as its object a person's character and is "a positive appraisal of an individual made with regard to those features which are excellences of persons" (Darwall, 1977, p. 45). Each of these forms of respect has different objects and can be directed towards persons *qua* persons or in other capacities (Darwall, 1977, pp. 38-39). I will focus on both forms of respect when directed towards persons in this capacity.<sup>13</sup>

To appreciate the importance of Darwall's distinction between the two forms of respect towards persons on an understanding of childhood, it is important to reiterate how it relies on a distinction between their respective objects. Recognition respect for persons responds directly to their *dignity*, an attribute inherent to personhood that one ought to consider when acting in ways that affect someone else, and arguably oneself (Darwall, 1977, p. 40). Appraisal respect, in turn, is an expression of esteem for the features that constitute someone's *character*. Darwall conceives of character as comprised of personal excellences, that is, stable dispositions to act out of reasons and accompanied by the higher-level disposition to act out of the best possible ones: "Thus, the conception of character which is relevant to appraisal respect

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<sup>13</sup> An example of this distinction is the different kinds of recognition respect I can profess towards someone who is a Colonel in the Army. I can profess recognition respect for them both as a person *and* as an officer in the armed forces. In terms of respect as a person the object of my recognition is their dignity, while as a Colonel I recognize their rank. Both of these are expressions of recognition respect, but each has a particular object and produces different obligations. The latter kind of recognition respect lies without the scope of this project.

includes both rather more specific dispositions to act for certain reasons and the higher-level disposition to do that which one takes to be supported by the best reasons” (Darwall, 1977, p. 44).<sup>14</sup>

The distinction between these objects of respect for persons, dignity and character, explains why it is possible for us to equally respect every person, in one sense, while at the same time respecting some individuals more than others, in a different one.<sup>15</sup> Think about the way we think of two tennis players, one whose style of play we find courteous and uplifting, generally improving the level of their game and of the sport as a whole, and another one whose competitiveness we find rude and abrasive, typically manifesting in behaviors that we judge to be borderline unsporting. In one sense, it is fair to say we respect them equally as persons, i.e., we recognize in them the same dignity that bounds us to treat them in a certain way, both within and without the game court. In another sense, it is also fair to say that we respect the former player more than the latter, and we will be probably justified in doing so by our appraisal of their character as evidenced in the game.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This understanding of character will be fundamental in Chapter 4, when discussing the moral growth of students.

<sup>15</sup> Note also that Darwall’s definition of dignity as the object of recognition respect for persons, that is, the feature that requires taking another person into consideration when deciding how to act towards them, is essentially equivalent to the concept of moral status that I introduced in the opening of this chapter.

<sup>16</sup> Remember that just as in the case of recognition respect (discussed above in the example of the Colonel), Darwall admits that appraisal respect can also be directed to someone *qua* person (in which case the object of respect is their character), or on a different basis. In this example, we could also talk of our appraisal respect towards the athletes *qua* tennis players, i.e., regarding their skill in the game. This would be a different form of appraisal respect that does not include a moral valuation, has an object different than character, and lies without the scope of the present discussion. To make the example clearer, I personally recognize Novak Djokovic is a good tennis player, which means I respect his game (appraisal respect *qua* tennis player). I don’t respect him in terms of his character because of the way he behaves (appraisal respect *qua* person), although I recognize that all I see of him is his professional conduct (which I find sufficient to form an idea about his character, although I might be wrong on this generalization). This negative appraisal of his character does not imply that I do not recognize him as a person deserving of the considerations that go with that quality (recognition respect *qua* person).

If we were to accept full rational agency as a condition for respect, all of the above considerations would not be applicable to children. In this light, I find that the distinction between kinds of respect towards persons and its respective objects to be clarifying. While the idea of excluding children from moral consideration is hard to accept, these forms of respect allow for a nuanced understanding about the personhood of children. It is both possible and desirable to recognize children as persons whose dignity imposes certain moral requirements on others (recognition respect), while at the same time we acknowledge the interest of young persons to further their moral growth towards the excellences of character that support appraisal respect. A person's dignity is, first and foremost, the fundamental reason that justifies (recognition) respect towards them: "To say that persons as such are entitled to respect is to say that they are entitled to have other persons take seriously and weigh appropriately the fact that they are persons in deliberating about what to do" (Darwall, 1977, p. 38). Not only do I fail to find reasons to think that such consideration should not be extended to children based solely in the fact that they generally do not comply with an abstract ideal of fully rational autonomy, but I do find that our intuitions and moral practices strongly point in the direction of recognizing the dignity of children. What is more, I realize that the need to appropriately respond to children's dignity as corresponds to their moral status requires, among other things, effectively acknowledging their interest in developing the ability to better exercise their autonomy and thus become increasingly worthy of appraisal respect.<sup>17</sup> In simple terms, failing

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<sup>17</sup> In this sense, an effective recognition of personal dignity early in life also provides the grounds for self-respect, someone's awareness of his or her own standing as an equal endowed with valid claims toward others, and the respect such claims require. For an account of self-respect in early childhood that is grounded on developmental psychology and which refers to Darwall's understanding of respect, see Ryan (2023).

to addressing children as persons is deeply problematic, as it negates due consideration to their moral status and contradict any expectation of helping them grow as moral agents.

For these reasons, I now move to further substantiate my conclusions regarding the moral status of young persons by discussing theoretical approaches that share my skepticism of subjecting the moral status of persons to narrowly defined criteria.

## **1.2. The Moral Status of Children**

In the previous section of this chapter I contrasted two different approaches to the personhood of children dominant in current philosophical literature. I began with a deficit-based approach that sees childhood as a predicament whose value is instrumental to the development of mature moral agency. Children, in this perspective, are not persons; they are, at best, potential persons deserving of protection as they strive towards the benchmarks of personhood. The second perspective, inspired by recent literature that seeks to conceive childhood in its own terms, characterizes childhood as a stage of life with intrinsic value, and the child as an independent source of binding moral claims. Just as in the case of adults, failing to recognize and honor these claims would result in moral wrongs.

While I favor the latter perspective over the former, it is not without its challenges, most notably that it requires abandoning the widespread idea of personhood as equivalent to rational autonomy. This is a problem that still requires attention, as I have argued that vindicating the personhood of children is directly related to the recognition of their dignity; it is a matter of their moral status as persons who count, morally, for themselves. The stakes are high: Why would the immaturity of children deprive them of their dignity as persons? Why would not being fully rational or fully autonomous place them outside the scope of moral

concern? I have already explained my position against this exclusion based on the requirements of respect and the way I think they apply to children. Now, I want to give further reason for rejecting the condition of “equal free and rational agent” as related to the dignity of persons by looking directly at what it means to have the moral status of a person.

### ***1.2.1. Moral Status and Equality.***

As anticipated in the opening of this chapter, Jaworska and Tannenbaum’s (2019) introduce the issue of moral status by saying that an entity has it “if and only if it or its interest matters morally for its own sake, rather than for the sake of some other entity or value” (p. 67). James G. Dwyer (2011) elaborates further by defining moral status as a characteristic that human agents recognize on others and “by virtue of which they matter morally for their own sake, so that we must pay attention to their interests or integrity when we consider actions that might affect them, regardless of whether other beings are concerned about them” (p. 9).

These definitions of moral status coincide with Darwall’s idea of dignity as the object of recognition respect for persons, and reveal the major consequences of recognizing moral status: A status-holder has integrity and a series of interests, both of which deserve protection, so that they provide external agents with normative reasons to act in certain ways towards them. In this way, having a moral status determines the nature of the obligations and the attitudes that are morally allowed to other agents towards the status-holder and, when formalized, the legal rights that protects their interests.

In summary, since “entities that have moral status matter morally for their own sake” (Floris, 2023, p. 34), moral status-holders are the independent source of normative claims and, in consequence, the object of directed duties towards them. These directed duties are moral



obligations towards someone (or something), so that moral status-holders have certain rights whose neglect constitutes a moral wrong. In this sense, and going back to Darwall's definition, having dignity is to be endowed with moral status and to be a legitimate object of respect. In practice, to profess recognition respect towards someone is to recognize their moral status and to act accordingly.

A distinction is necessary at this point: having moral status is not necessarily the same as having an *equal* moral status. Moral status is a fact about the moral relevance of an entity. Talking about equal moral status, however, would require that moral status admit of degrees, so that two status-holders could matter morally for their own sake but in different manners and to different effect. The former is a matter of who (or what) counts, morally speaking. The latter is about how do they count, and therefore what constitutes a right and a wrong towards them. The distinction is important because, among other things, differences in moral status would provide for a way to resolve situations in which the interests of two entities are in conflict, so that honoring the interests of one implies a moral trespass against the other. The holder of the higher-degree moral status would "win" such moral ties.

Since the focus of this inquiry is on the personhood of children, I do not pretend to thoroughly examine the (very complicated) issues around moral status, moral equality, and its implications. However, the issue of equal moral status is important to the definition of the personhood of children because supporters of the deficit-based view of childhood could claim that the young are not devoid of moral status, just excluded from the one reserved to fully rational agents (or, in that framework, persons). To this point, in exploring the implications of moral equality for theories of justice, Giacomo Floris notes that not having equal moral status

does not necessarily implies having *no* moral status, nor being relegated to such an inferior one that it neglects the protection of important rights (Floris, 2023, p. 46). As I realize there are indeed examples of beings that require moral consideration by themselves without having the same status as humans, I am persuaded by Floris's explanation. However, I still think that thinking of children as not-persons is highly problematic as it implies either the denial of independent moral status or relegation to a lesser one, both of which carries difficult consequences. For example, the rights of an adult would trump those of a child in cases where there is a conflict of interests: "a commitment to adults and children's moral inequality entails that moral ties *do not* go to children" (Floris, 2023, p. 47). Evacuating children first from a sinking ship could have no moral support if there is no guarantee that all passengers will have time to be evacuated.

The counter-intuitive nature of this example indicates why the connection between being a person and having a certain moral status is important to moral philosophy and to the philosophy of children. Sophie Grace Chappell (2014) explains the critical significance of this connection in unambiguous terms:

Any ethical outlook much like ours will take as central some primary moral constituency (PMC): some class of creatures who all alike, and all equally, share in the highest level of moral rights and privileges. Most philosophical ethicists use 'person' to mean at least 'member of the primary moral constituency' (whatever else they may also mean by 'person'). (p. 132).

Chappell recognizes that there might be more to say about personhood than belonging to what she calls the primary moral constituency, but asserts that belonging to the primary moral constituency is what we mean when we say that someone is a person. I fully agree with this valuation. Indeed, I struggle to see any meaning in the idea of 'person' if it is not directly

related to recognizing a certain (privileged) moral status, and it is my intent to bring these considerations to bear upon our conception of children. To follow the qualification of childhood as a predicament in which children are not-yet persons would exclude them from this status, even if it would still recognize some form of moral relevance, and thus bring into the picture all the issues I have addressed above. Simply said, given the connection of being a person with having a certain moral status, thinking of childhood as a predicament (characterized by potential personhood, at best) implies that children would be excluded from the primary moral constituency and would not be endowed with the full set of “moral rights and privileges” persons have.<sup>18</sup>

As anticipated, I find this position to be both counterintuitive and loaded with practical consequences. Consider, as a dramatic example, the opening lines of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Its preamble, which lays the basis for all of its considerations, starts with the unambiguous declaration that “(...) recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world” (United Nations [UN], 1948). While the use of the term ‘dignity’ in this context cannot be supposed to have the same content as Darwall’s term of art, the idea of recognizing inherent “equal and inalienable rights” to *all* members of the human family (especially as the most fundamental basis for freedom, justice, and peace) begs the question,

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<sup>18</sup> Jaworska and Tannenbaum (2019) express this idea by introducing the concept of full moral status (FMS), which they characterize as including certain stringent protections, such as “a claim-right not to be killed” and, importantly for children, the right to avoid “the detrimental effects of others acting on the basis of utilitarian calculations” (pp. 67-68).

once again, of why the dignity of persons (as per Darwall) and the sort of respect it entails should be conditioned on rational, autonomous agency.<sup>19</sup>

Having rejected the requisite of full rational agency as a condition for acknowledging in children the dignity of persons in Chapter 1.1., it would be possible to look for alternative criteria for the moral status of a person. What I have proposed (implicitly, so far) is to follow Chappell (2014) and others in questioning the very idea of a criterion for personhood.

### ***1.2.2. Criterialism, Humanism, and the Dignity of Children***

While some authors reject autonomy as the sole criterion for full moral status, they remain committed to identifying criteria to determine personhood. They believe that some morally relevant feature must be established to support the recognition of moral status, and are committed to the search for such criteria. Since many criterialists seem to favor the premise of requiring a morally relevant fact as the cause for morally relevant consequences, they often reject any approach that grants moral status based on what they consider a merely biological fact, such as being human. Such criteria would be “unacceptably anthropocentric and arbitrary” (Jaworska and Tannenbaum, 2019, p. 71), and thus constitute a form of speciesism akin to racism or ultra-nationalism. In this view, reserving full moral status on the basis of a biological fact would result in a form of unjust profiling devoid of moral merit.

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<sup>19</sup> Importantly to this example, the universal Declaration of Human Rights seldom makes differences between children and adults, thus implying that the “human family” is equally composed by members of the human species, without differences based on race, nationality, religion, or age. The few mentions to childhood, as in articles 16 (about liberty of marriage for adults) and 26 (regarding parental rights on the education of their children) seem to respond to particular interests of children without excluding them from the dignity of persons. In this vein, in 1959 the General Assembly of the UN adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, in which further details are given on the particular protection required by children’s rights in response to their specific conditions and interests (United Nations [UN], 1959).

For Dwyer (2011), “humanness is really a proxy for other things to which we react intuitively, and a not very good proxy” (p. 129), so that species membership works as a front that covers other moral relevant features. Looking to properly respond to those features themselves, advocates for a multicriterial view advocate for considering, at least, the typical attributes recognized in the literature to recognize full moral status. These attributes would include, among others, the fact of being alive, having sentience, being able to form relations with other moral agents, and possessing higher cognitive capacities such as rational moral autonomy (pp. 62, 118).<sup>20</sup> Jaworska and Tannenbaum (2019) opt for a different criterion, which they describe as an incomplete realization of sophisticated cognitive capacities (pp. 74-75). This criterion includes immature and underdeveloped individuals who have this sort of capacity, independently of whether they presently have or will develop it in practice.

Contrary to this strategy to look for an alternative criterion for personhood that does not really so heavily in an idealized form of rationality, as exemplified above, I have argued for an approach that tracks the fundamental moral intuition underlying most everyday ethical practices and which supports expressions such as the one quoted in the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: that when we encounter another human being, we unconditionally owe them the respect commanded by the dignity of a person. Chappell (2014) rightly argues that practical moral life requires this approach, since “we do not look for sentience or rationality or self-awareness in a creature as a test to decide whether or not that creature counts as a person. It’s the other way round” (p. 137). In this depiction of moral life, I

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<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Dwyer uses his multi-criterial approach to argue for the moral superiority of children over adults so that, using Floris’ (2023) language, moral ties should always break in favor of children.

immediately feel the “pull” of recognition respect when I encounter another person, be it a child or an adult, and this starting point is only qualified when I question myself on how to properly react to their dignity.<sup>21</sup> Persons are persons because of their belonging to the human family, and so their dignity is a function of their nature, not of what they can do.

According to Chappell, criterialism inverts the explanatory order of moral experience because it confuses ideal features of personhood, to which it is worthy to aspire, with criteria to determine personhood itself: “Behavioural properties like rationality, self-awareness, emotionality are not tests for, but part of the ideal of, personhood. To treat someone as a person is to engage him as *the kind of person* [emphasis added] to which that ideal applies” (Chappell, 2014, p. 2014). It is true that rational autonomy, the capacity to feel empathy, a continued and stable sense of self, etc., are important features of being a person that are justifiably valued as part of the human experience, but they are not to be construed as benchmarks that condition the moral status of any given individual.

The humanist approach, as opposed to the criterialist, values being of a certain kind (that is, human), so that:

Our treatment of any human being should be conditioned by the background of expectations, hopes, and aspirations that spell out what we know, from experience, humans in general can be. *Eudaimonia* in its broad outlines is the same for all human beings; and requires, as a general rule, that we must give all human beings the space to achieve *eudaimonia*—whether or not they predictably will achieve *eudaimonia*. To deny this space to any individual human being is to exclude that individual from the moral community of persons. And that is a serious injustice (Chappell, 2014, p. 153).

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<sup>21</sup> As a matter of fact, interactions in which this perception of the other-as-person is broken are often problematic. While working with teenagers I often noticed that, when using social media, they would behave towards their peers in ways they would never allow for themselves in face-to-face interactions. Building the habit of reminding themselves that there is always a person behind the screen proved fundamental in helping them navigate their on-line (moral) lives. The fact that adults often need this reminder is sadly obvious.

In my view, children are a prime (although certainly not the only) example of someone who deserves the attribution of full moral status because they are human and can flourish accordingly.<sup>22</sup> Given the inherent fragility and diversity of human life, no one can justly be expected to reach an ideal state of development that is neither clearly defined nor guaranteed before they are considered persons deserving the respect of others.<sup>23</sup>

Countering the negative characterization of speciesism, Chappell is clear in explaining that humanism considers being human a sufficient *but not necessary* condition to be included in the primary moral constituency. The distinction is important: the fact that all humans partake of the full moral status of a person does not mean that other beings can't do so, and thus the exclusivist characterization of speciesism is rejected. Along these lines, Eva Kittay (2008) turns the tables on speciesism with the insight that "what makes racism and pernicious nationalism moral evils is the special way they depend on "property" sortals [individual properties as an adequate basis for moral considerations]" (p. 149). I find this to be a major point in favor of humanism, as it reveals how:

What is pernicious, and what has the most destructive consequences, occurs when a group defines itself as the sole possessor of a set of properties, properties which, in turn, define it and which give members of the group, as the possessors of those properties, the authority to appropriate goods, power, and other privileges (p. 150).

Rational and autonomous agency is precisely a sortal property of the kind problematized by Kittay. Recognizing moral status based on our shared humanity, as opposed to having and displaying certain prized features, is therefore the opposite of unjust exclusion. It is inclusive,

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<sup>22</sup> Other examples include cognitively impaired persons, and the elderly.

<sup>23</sup> Another important consequence of adopting a humanist approach to personhood is that it helps in avoiding the conditioning of children, and young people in general, as the object of utilitarian calculations. For an example that reflects on the importance of this issue, see Johnson (2003).

based on a recognition of inherent value that is morally relevant and requires no further conditions.<sup>24</sup> Kittay's analysis explains the phenomenological intuition that it is wrong to exclude children from the moral status of a person based on the fact that they do not match an ideal form of autonomy that is presupposed to exist in adults because of generalizations about their age.<sup>25</sup>

Adopting this humanist perspective regarding the moral status of persons, therefore, includes children as members of the primary moral constituency alongside their elders. By properly valuing fundamental aspect of human life, such as mature rational agency, humanism further reveals how problematic it is to confuse such ideal sortal properties with criteria for recognizing someone's dignity. Remember that, for Darwall, having the dignity of a person and having the moral status proper of personhood are effectively the same. Because of this, when I reject his conditioning of the dignity of persons to complete rational agency, I am arguing that children are entitled of respect *qua* persons. As humanists do, I accept that they have the full moral status of persons just because they are human: Not because of what they can (actually or potentially) do, but for being of the morally relevant kind they are.

Dignity "is not just a set of requirements with respect to persons; it is also the authority persons have to require compliance with these requirements by holding one another accountable for doing so" (Darwall, 2006, p. 14). Since I have argued for children as members of

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<sup>24</sup> Alice Crary (2016) develops a similar argument about the moral importance of being of a certain kind as sufficient to be of moral concern and includes animals along with humans in the spectrum of moral consideration.

<sup>25</sup> On the flip side of this practice, families are an example of groups that operate on valuable moral considerations based on forms of belonging (Kittay, 2008, pp. 151-152). Everyday school practices can also work as a similar example: once children come to school as students, their teachers immediately recognize in them a status that is loaded with moral considerations and consequences. To explicit the contents and consequences of this status is, in part, the aim of this project.



the primary moral constituency who matter for their own sake, I claim that they have the authority to place moral requirements on others. It is in this sense that children are moral equals to adults, even if their specific interests and needs give a particular content to how we enact that respect.

Now, once the dignity of children as full moral status-holder is established, a further step becomes necessary. Darwall importantly qualifies recognition respect as the “disposition to weigh *appropriately* [emphasis added] some feature or fact in one’s deliberations” (Darwall, 1977, p. 39). Properly reacting to a person’s dignity should require addressing each individual in their current conditions, and thus fostering the most fundamental properties for human flourishing at a young age will be an aspect of this appropriate response. To finalize a definition of children as persons, then, I still have to address directly the issues of autonomy and paternalism: If children are indeed full moral status holders who matter for their own sake, have the authority to produce morally binding claims on others, and deserve the kind of respect reserved for those endowed with the dignity of persons, why do adults interfere in their decision-making in ways that would not be tolerated if directed towards other adults? What is autonomy, if not the benchmark to recognize the dignity of a person but as a human ideal worth striving for? Addressing these questions is the final step before bringing all the concepts developed so far to bear upon my definition of the personhood of children.

## Chapter 2: Children as Persons

In Chapter 1 I discussed the importance of thinking of childhood as an intrinsically valuable stage of life. By thinking of childhood on its own terms, and not comparatively to a fixed standard of adulthood, I argued that children are endowed with the dignity of persons and entitled to the corresponding respect. I concluded that children are the moral equals of adults and, as such, are the independent sources of legitimate normative claims. Also, I reached the practical conclusion that children have particular interests that are intrinsically valuable, proper to their age, and sufficient to define the duties other agents have towards them. When formalized, these duties give content to the rights of children, both in their present stage of life and as persons who legitimately aspire to grow into adulthood.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a richer characterization of the personhood of children. To do so, I begin with an examination of paternalism by discussing how, because we commonly justify adult interference in the decision-making of children, we tend to surreptitiously assume that children are not persons. It is important to make this assumption explicit in an effort to debunk it. My position is that paternalistic interventions need not entail a denial of children's moral personhood, nor that the personhood of children need not entail an outright rejection of paternalism towards them. I argue that a better understanding of paternalism is needed to understand why and how it constitutes a legitimate form of respect for the inherent dignity of children. Based on this argument, I discuss the importance of developing the rational autonomous agency of young people as one of their central interests *qua* persons.

## 2.1. Paternalism Towards Young Persons

### 2.1.1. A Definition of Paternalism

I have argued that children are persons, the moral equal of adults, and that other agents are morally bound to respect them. Simultaneously, I acknowledge that adults often intervene in the decision-making processes of children in ways we usually don't allow in the case of adults. This sort of interference, usually directed towards children and adolescents, is a typical example of paternalism. As per Gerald Dworkin's (1972) seminal definition, paternalism is "the interference with a person's liberty of action justified by reasons referring exclusively to the welfare, good, happiness, needs, interests or values of the person being coerced" (p. 65).<sup>26</sup> Since the essence of paternalism flows from the confluence of "some sort of interference, some sort of disregard for will, and some sort of benevolent reason" (Grill, 2019, p. 124), paternalism can be characterized by an interference of one agent, which affects the will of another, motivated by the intention of producing good or avoiding harm to the person who is interfered with.

Paternalistic interventions that fit this definition are indeed common in the case of the young. For example, we usually think it is fine for parents to set a bedtime for their children; that teachers can select the place students sit in a classroom, and that society can prevent young people from voting. There emerges, however, a problem: How is it that children are persons who deserve respect as the moral equals of adults when adults can legitimately interfere in their decision-making in ways that would not be acceptable in the case of adults?

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<sup>26</sup> For other formulations close to this definition, see Dworkin (2020), pp. 1-2; Grill (2019), p. 127; Mullin (2014), p. 414; and Sheintul (2023).

I propose to answer this question via a reconsideration of paternalism. Since I have adopted a humanist view of personhood, I can accept that children (as many adults) are not fully rational, autonomous agents and they are nonetheless persons. Furthermore, I can also acknowledge that the paternalistic treatment of children can indeed be justified, which does not imply it always is.<sup>27</sup> In short, I argue that by properly understanding paternalism it is possible to justify its practice in childhood without contradicting the principle that children have an equal moral status to adults, while better appreciating the importance of autonomy, both present and future, in their education.

### ***2.1.2. Paternalism and the Personhood of Children***

The assumptions regarding paternalism and the moral status of children stem from the common usage of the term paternalism as related to the liberty principle that lies at the foundation of liberal democracies.<sup>28</sup> This ubiquitous idea appears in the foundation of our modern political thinking as a principle formulated by John Stuart Mill. According to Mill (2003), “the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection ... His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant” (p. 80). If we follow this principle, an agent’s exercise of their liberty can be the object of just interference *if and only if* it is aimed at protecting others from undue harm created by the exercise of that agency. According to Mill's formulation, we would be justified in preventing an individual from pushing another person out of a high window. We

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<sup>27</sup> The need to clarify this issue is evidenced by accounts that consider paternalistic attitudes towards children to be justified *per se*, as such attitudes can only be wrong when in violation of the rights of those who can be presupposed to possess ‘adult capacities’ (e.g., see Carey, 2017, pp. 583-584, 587)

<sup>28</sup> Not coincidentally, this seems to be an example of uncritical assumption similar to the one that has happened with the Kantian identification of personhood and rational agency.

would not be justified, however, to stop that same person from jumping out of the same high place. This dramatic example illustrates the kind of interference rejected by Mill: Interference with another person's autonomy for their own good.

In practice, however, this example is very much complicated if the protagonist is a child. We would certainly stop the child from pushing someone else out the window. Also, we would probably stop the child from jumping out. We would probably justify our obligation to stop the child from jumping out the window based on a duty to protect children because, in part, of their inability to gauge the consequences of their decision. Such a commonsense view is to be found in both legal systems and social practices: Mill (2003) explicitly excluded children and "young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood" (p. 81) from the application of the principle of liberty, accepting that their immaturity requires heteronomous care.

It is important to explicit that this exclusion from the liberty principle, even in the terms used by Mill, does not exclude children from having the dignity of persons. The logic behind such exclusion would have to be that, if personhood was defined by rational autonomous agency, the vulnerability of children would require interferences in their decision-making processes that severely limit their liberty because of their immaturity. In this scenario, immaturity would then be defined as a lack of rationality that negatively affects autonomy. If

this were the case, then to justify paternalistic treatment towards children would reveal their reduced moral status.<sup>29</sup>

I argue that this is not the case because it assumes the rejected criterialist conditioning of personhood and its corresponding dignity on an idealized form of free and rational autonomy. All the arguments I presented in Chapter 1 to reject this condition apply here to explain why paternalistic treatment need not contradict the personhood of children.

When discussing the importance of autonomous rational agency as an interest of children, both future and present, I implied that respecting the dignity of persons includes recognition that each person is, generally speaking, the best judge of their own good, and that being the author of their own choices is an essential part of that good. This being the case, it is important to understand how and when paternalism towards children is justified. Since I am not arguing that paternalistic interventions are never warranted towards children because of their personhood, I need to complete my argument by looking at the justification of paternalism towards children.

### ***2.1.3. A Justification of (Purposeful) Paternalism Towards Young Persons***

In the previous section I argued that, since personhood is not a matter of rational autonomous agency, paternalism towards children does not contradict the recognition of their personhood. Also, I claim that valuing rational agency does not contradict the possibility of addressing children paternalistically. Nevertheless, and since autonomy is an important human

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<sup>29</sup> This is roughly the position of Schapiro (1999, 2033), as discussed in Chapter 1.1.1. above. It is also at the core of Carey's (2017) rationale for a blanket justification of paternalism towards children based on their lack of "adult capacities" to choose in their own best interest (pp. 585, 587).

good that children have a particular interest in developing, it is still important to justify paternalism towards the young: Why is it fine to address children paternalistically in ways that we would generally not accept if directed towards adults?

As discussed earlier, there seems to be no overall objection to interfering with the actions of children when they would harm third parties (as there would not be in the case of adults, either). What remains to be seen is why it is also justified to interfere in the decisions of young persons that only affect them and are motivated by an interest in their own well-being. Think, for example, on the case of the window discussed above: Why is it that we feel we should stop a child from jumping out of a window, but tend to allow the idea that stopping an adult from doing the same is a morally complicated issue?<sup>30</sup> It is important to reiterate that by vindicating the personhood of children, arguing for the moral need to respect their dignity, and valuing autonomy as an ideal human condition, I am not implying that it is always wrong to interfere in their decision-making. I don't accept such position, which would imply that adults (and especially caretakers) would always be prevented from overcoming their will or otherwise be condemned to be morally wrong. To the contrary, I accept the commonsense belief that such interferences are generally warranted because of the immaturity of children. To support this assumption, it is necessary to discuss why such interventions are warranted and what conception of immaturity works within this framework.

It is important to recall that a central aspect of seeing childhood on its own terms is understanding that children have interests that are both legitimate and particular to childhood.

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<sup>30</sup> Whether or not the adults should be interfered with allows for much more debate. This wider discussion of liberty and its implications is not within the scope of this dissertation.

These interests give content to the rights of children, and in that way define our duties towards them. As explained in 1.1.2., children are persons who are living through an inherently valuable stage of life that is characterized, among other things, by their vulnerability, dependence, and the ability to grow up.<sup>31</sup> A justification of paternalism towards children becomes apparent: if the young are indeed in a condition of vulnerability that requires adult intervention to satisfy their interests, then a degree of intervention in their decision-making seems necessary.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, such an intervention would constitute an expression of respect towards children as it constitutes an appropriate response to who they are and to the normative claims they produce.

Along these lines I have argued that the interests of children have at least two functions: they give content to their rights, which in turn inform the duties that adults have towards children. In this scenario, adult interference to guarantee the well-being of children is the fulfilment of a moral obligation, not a form of moral trespass. The condition is that the purpose behind the intervention is effectively directed at satisfying the legitimate interests of children. In this sense, thinking about the paternalistic interventions in the life of children means that their legitimate interests do one more thing: they give content to their rights, inform the duties adults have towards them, *and* define the limits of justified paternalism by giving it a purpose. In this formulation, there is no blanket justification for paternalism towards children as if just

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<sup>31</sup> See Ben-Porath, 2003, and Brighouse, 2003.

<sup>32</sup> Grill (2019) discusses how the average characteristics of children's decision-making gives stronger reasons to act paternalistically towards them than those we usually have regarding adults (pp. 126-127).



the fact of being young would necessarily imply that their autonomous decision-making deserves no moral consideration.

My point is that the instances in which paternalistic interventions are justified are substantiated by the interests of children. This position has important practical consequences. Think, for example, of parents who have decided on an 8:00 p.m. bedtime for their children to go to sleep. I cannot say, based on this information, whether they are right or not in setting that bedtime. What I can say is that whether or not they are justified in doing so requires reflection and that such reflection must be informed by a consideration of the interest of their children and their circumstances. What is more, this reflection will probably have to be ongoing: children, and their interests, do change over time.

This general point can be developed further using Darwall on respect for persons. As per Darwall's (1977) definition of respect for persons *qua* persons, "To say that persons as such are entitled to respect is to say that they are entitled to have other persons take seriously and weigh *appropriately* [emphasis added] the fact that they are persons in deliberating about what to do" (p. 38). The key here is, I suggest, the term *appropriately*. Darwall says that "To respect something in this way is just to regard it as something to be reckoned with (in the appropriate way) and to act accordingly." (1977, p. 39). To respect someone demands that, when deciding how to act towards someone else, a person shows due consideration to the interests of the other and responds appropriately to them. If we have seen that children have interests that are particular to childhood and valuable both in and of themselves and by way of their contribution to their life experience as a whole, then responding to those specific interests is indeed a

morally necessary exercise of respect.<sup>33</sup> In the bedtime example parents will be right in questioning whether or not 8:00 p.m. remains a valid bedtime during the school year and during summer holidays, or if it should be the same for the three-year-old toddler and their sibling, a 16 year-old teenager.

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to analyze at length the nature and extent of all of the characteristic interests of childhood. It is necessary to insist, however, that there is no reason for this respect to be limited to the appropriate valuation of the immediate interest children have, as any living being, to survive. It must also look at those interests that aim at human flourishing and that can be (partially or completely) relative to their future. In other words, children have the rights that attach to all persons *qua* persons, which protect both the immediate interests they have as children and also future-oriented interests, like those of developing the skills and abilities that will allow them to thrive as adult human beings.<sup>34</sup> In this sense, growing up as a person includes moving from the protection of fundamental welfare interests to the protection of their own choices.<sup>35</sup>

A significant advantage of being aware of the intrinsic value of childhood is that such a perspective invites us to consider the unique opportunities that are present at this time of life.

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<sup>33</sup> Sheintul (2023) discusses motive-based paternalism, according to which paternalism is right or wrong depending on the interferer's beliefs about the agency of the interfered party (p. 99). In this framework, she argues for a less-robust view of paternalism according to which paternalism is only wrong if it is motivated by disrespectful beliefs regarding the agency of the object of the intervention (pp. 98, 107). Within the framework I propose, this language could be used to assert that properly understanding the agency of children is a show of respect that can justify paternalism towards them. Interestingly, Sheintul argues that disrespectful belief about agency can be formed in many ways, including essentializing weakness of will as being characteristic of a group (pp. 107-111).

<sup>34</sup> For the distinction between basic human rights and second-order rights as they apply to children, see Brennan & Noggle, 1997, and Brighouse, 2002. For the distinction between children's present interests and interests for the good of their future self, see Archard, 2015, and Grill, 2019, p. 129.

<sup>35</sup> To this point, see Brennan, 2002, and Brighouse, 2003. Also, for an influential account of the nature of future-oriented rights of children, especially as they have to do with the exercise of autonomy rights, see Feinberg, (2014).

In the upcoming section, I discuss the development of rational autonomous agency as one of the fundamental interests that characterize childhood. This next step gives further content to the justification of what I am calling purposeful paternalism.

## **2.2. The Importance of Autonomy**

So far, I have argued that it is possible to consider children as persons, and at the same time accept that advancing their interests requires paternalistic interventions that could not be justly visited upon adults. That is why setting up an early bedtime for a six-year-old who is adjusting to rising early for school after a long summer break can be a justified show of respect towards them, while unilaterally attempting to do the same for your spouse will probably, and fairly, get you in trouble.

Since respect, in its recognition sense, requires properly considering the personhood of others when deciding how to act towards them, such purposeful interventions constitute an expression of respect towards them and their needs. Rational autonomous agency, therefore, is an important consideration when understanding the personhood of children, both as a present and a future interest whose protection *and* cultivation require attention. Given that rational autonomous agency is one of the most complicated and widely discussed issues in moral philosophy, I will limit my discussion to an examination of it in relation to this topic.

### **2.2.1. The Will of Children**

An important reason to step away from a deficit-based view of childhood is the fact, mentioned in Chapter 1, that children *do* act out of reasons in ways that reflect their own will. This fact, which is observable in practice but often overlooked in theory, is directly related to the personhood of children. As mentioned in Chapter 1.1.2., one of the major difficulties to

accepting rational autonomous agency as a benchmark for the moral status of persons is the threshold problem, that is, the question of how to determine in practice who is rational enough to be considered a member of the primary moral constituency.<sup>36</sup> The crux of this problem is that thresholds rely on generalizations when, in practice, individuals exhibit capacities in different degrees.

In “Paternalism Towards Children”, Kalle Grill (2019) reviews the major features of current philosophical debate on paternalism and discusses how its questions apply to considerations about childhood. To this effect, he challenges the generalizations behind the ideal standard of mature agency in two ways: by focusing on children’s abilities and by looking at the behavior of adults (p. 126). About the former, he cites ample evidence on how children frequently demonstrate abilities proper of rational agency, such as the capacity to articulate goals and sustain a stable disposition to achieve them, articulate their motives as reasons for action, and participate of moral debate about their actions and those of others. In terms of the latter, he cites recent studies on the difficulty of determining the preferences of adults or the stable dispositions to achieve them. As experience indicates, then, while children are not generally characterized as rational autonomous agents, we often find instances where they act rationally and independently. Similarly, while adults are supposed to be rational autonomous agents, we can find examples that show not every adult is necessarily so. Irrespective of whether we are adults or children, none of us is completely or constantly rational and none of us is completely or constantly autonomous: I might restrain all day from eating ice cream, being

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<sup>36</sup> See Archard (2015), pp. 7, 10-11.

aware of its effects on my diet. If, however, my roommate makes the slightest suggestion about dessert at 10:00 p.m., I might find myself rummaging the freezer soon after.<sup>37</sup>

Simultaneously, not all children are the same in terms of decision-making, and it would be contrary to experience to claim that they were. Some young children do act based on reasons of their own (however much we can or cannot endorse their reasons as sufficient, valid, or good).<sup>38</sup> For these reasons, I endorse Grill (2019) when he claims that children and adults are frequently not so different in terms of “rationality, autonomy or settled preferences (...) It is, therefore, far from clear that most adults have the “unified regulative perspective” that Schapiro, with Kant, presumes that we have” (p. 126). It is more accurate to acknowledge that personal autonomy can be possessed in degrees and vary in time.

In this sense, I follow Amy Mullin (2014) in her effort to better understand the capacities of children as the basis to produce standards that parents can follow to justify interfering in their children’s lives. Within this context it is important to adopt a concept of autonomy that includes children. Autonomy would be thus characterized by the ability to care for some outcomes more than others in a relatively stable way and the ability to exercise self-control relative to one’s preferences and goals. As for ‘preferences and goals’; these include “the wide range of things, activities, people, experiences and relationships that can matter to us, whether or not we have consciously reflected on the matter and whether or not we can articulate our goals” (Mullin, 2014, p. 416).

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<sup>37</sup> This is not a new problem in moral philosophy. To the contrary, it lies at the heart of Aristotle’s insight when discussing the problems of *akrasia* and self-control (Aristotle, 2011, 1145b22 and ss).

<sup>38</sup> For an interesting discussion on the difference between self-governance and good governance that contributes to a relevant notion of autonomy, see O’Shea (2015).

This is the sense in which I understand the claims cited in Chapter 1.1.2. according to which young persons, when conceived in their own terms, are correctly recognized as the effective source of reasons to act in particular ways, and thus persons who act with agency. Children are thus capable of self-control in pursuit of goals like these and can be considered to have a sense of autonomy without denying their interest in improving in the abilities that inform it. Coming back to previous examples, when a child wants to be successful at school but at the same time likes to stay up watching TV, it is fine to help them understand that getting enough sleep is fundamental to showing up at school in the best possible capacity. In this way, establishing a bedtime is not a capricious imposition, but a way of supporting their interests and possibly part of an exercise in self-determination. In brief, it can be granted that children may not usually have the ability of many adults to consider their goals, evaluate them against each other and in terms of their long-term well-being, and consistently pursue them through effective decisions. This does not mean, however, that they do not have a will of their own.

The considerations I discussed in Chapter 1 to argue for the moral status of children are therefore relevant to the present discussion, because children's willful activity supports their characterization as persons endowed with dignity. Having rejected rational autonomy as a condition for personhood it is possible to recognize that the moral status of a person is related to the ability of "experiencing oneself as being actively involved in the world by adopting a perspective" (Baumann & Bleisch, 2015, p. 154). Another dimension of the personhood of children is therefore established, because "persons are persons, and have dignity, due to the fact that they are in a specific way active rather than passive. This characteristic trait of being active is accompanied by having and developing a perspective of one's own" (Baumann &

Bleisch, 2015, p. 146). The importance of this insight cannot be overlooked: the fact that children are active in the world is central to their actualization as persons because it is by this participation that they develop their own personal perspectives in both an epistemic and an evaluative dimension.<sup>39</sup> They do so in the epistemic sense as they form a view on the world and strive to understand it as a stable system, and in the evaluative as they care, judge, and consequently try to engage both people and things (Baumann & Bleisch, 2015, p. 148).

In summary, children are persons as independent sources of normative claims who partake of the world in such a way that they are constantly actualizing their own capacity as autonomous moral agents. Understanding rational autonomous agency and how it applies to childhood explains further why the interest of children to participate in moral life must be protected both by its present value and with their future in view.

### ***2.2.2. Autonomy as a Fundamental Human Interest***

Even though I have rejected autonomy as the criterion for personhood, I nonetheless appreciate its value as a fundamental part of the human experience. Being the author of one's life is indeed an essential part of living a good life, and one that can only come to be through the everyday choices that aggregate into each person's life story.<sup>40</sup> Bringing all previous considerations together, I propose two ideas.

The first one is that children actively participate in the world. Thus, life is not something that happens only in adulthood, when a person can be presumed to be mature enough to make

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<sup>39</sup> I will further discuss the importance of the active participation of young persons in moral life and its effect on the moral growth of students within schools in Part Two.

<sup>40</sup> This view is a starting point of Aristotelian virtue ethics, which has been expanded and developed profusely in modern ethical normative theory. The Aristotelian roots of my perspective are explained explicitly in Chapter 4.

every decision as a completely rationally and independently informed agent (if such a thing is even possible). The second one is that one of the most important interests of children *qua* persons is precisely their ongoing interest in further developing the competence to be the best possible authors of their own lives.

To deny the first point is to assert that childhood is not a part of life itself, but only a preparatory stage for it. This position entails highly counterintuitive conclusions: If childhood was a predicament to overcome, then the solution to the thought experiment of the adulthood pill referenced in Chapter 1 would be to take the pill.<sup>41</sup> Also, in a more practically pressing sense, we would be hard-pressed to find any value of its own in a life that was restricted, for whatever reason, to childhood. Finally, and as explained by the threshold problem, we would be faced with the almost impossible practical task of defining the precise moment in which the conditions for life authority become sufficiently present. Furthermore, we would be challenged by the cases of adult-made decisions that can hardly be considered to be exemplars of rational decision-making.

As per the second point, that the development of rational autonomous agency is a central interest of children, I find it uncontroversial to claim that to live a good life, it is a fundamental human interest to discern which ends are worth pursuing, which means are better fitted to achieve these ends, and to effectively use this discernment to provide reasons for our

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<sup>41</sup> In this thought experiment, there is a miracle pill the produces instant growth, so that if a child takes it, they will instantly become the adult they would have naturally become over time (see Brennan, 2014, p. 9; and Gheaus, 2015b, p. 6.).



actions. In this sense, the Kantian ideal of an agent that acts out of reasons of its own, and thus has authority over their own life, is certainly worth pursuing.

Going back to the literature I have cited so far, I realize this is the argument that underlies Chappell's (2014) qualification of autonomy as "a crucial part of our concept of a person" (p. 143) but not a test for personhood, as she calls us not to mistake an ideal quality to pursue as a person with a benchmark for being one. Being human implies being of a certain kind that characteristically can aspire to be a free and rational agent. There is value in developing this property, but (as moral practice shows) this does not mean that we check someone's rationality before we treat them as persons. Persons deserve respect *a priori*, and part of this respect is honoring the interest they have in developing and exercising their rational autonomy.

The importance of rational autonomous agency is thus made evident by the discussion of paternalism as it applies to children. Since a basic characteristic of paternalistic interventions is that they affect the autonomous exercise of someone's will, and I have argued that children have a qualified autonomy that can be justly interfered with if this intervention serves a purpose by promoting the interests of the child, then the justification of paternalism towards children must also be seen in reference to autonomy as a present and future interest of children. When thinking about the purpose of paternalist interventions towards children, one of the major interests that can be involved in justifying instances of it is indeed the further development of their autonomy. Here, I agree with Mullin (2014) who argues that the development of children's autonomy must be taken as a major consideration when evaluating the justification of paternalism unless it is justified "by a larger good connected to the child's

well-being” (p. 419). As exemplified by the example of setting a bedtime that I mention above, I do not pretend to give a definitive answer of what kind of interventions will be in the best interest of children. What I argue is that any justification of paternalism must be indeed informed by the interests of children, because respecting their dignity requires so. Furthermore, I argue that developing rational autonomy is a central interest of children as they grow as moral agents, and thus requires to be taken into consideration when deciding how to act towards them. It is in this sense in which I interpret Mullin’s recommendation as per the importance of recognizing children’s autonomy both as a present and future interest.

The intuitive idea that children’s decisions might be interfered with when necessary to protect their immediate well-being, and also respected and fostered to contribute to their human interest to grow as autonomous agents, can therefore be accepted as a valid, complex attitude. Since the scope of this dissertation has to do with students in K-12 education, my analysis will focus on young persons within the corresponding age groups (roughly 4 to 18 years of age) and the kinds of interventions that are typical of the school environment.

### ***2.2.3. Immaturity as a Condition for Growth***

Having revised why paternalism poses no real objection to the personhood of children, and how autonomy should be valued as a central interest of children, both at their present stage and for their future, the implications of thinking of children as persons become increasingly clear. To deepen our sense of what it means to recognize children’s personhood it is pertinent to discuss the concept of immaturity. I do so by drawing upon John Dewey’s philosophy of education, in which he espouses a conception of immaturity different to the common understanding of the term. Dewey’s conception of immaturity allows me to introduce

another concept central to my overall argument and that will be discussed in upcoming chapters: the concept of growth.

Immaturity has indeed been mentioned before as the condition that necessitates intervention in children's decision-making, i.e., it invites their paternalistic treatment by adults. In this context, immaturity has a negative connotation, indicating children's incapacity to provide for their own needs and their shortcomings as decision-makers (when compared to the idealized rationality of adults). In this sense, immaturity is a limiting condition that either negates or severely limits children's autonomy.<sup>42</sup> There is, however, a different view to consider: Looking at immaturity from a value-based perspective of childhood, and taking into consideration the importance of developing autonomy as a lifelong human interest, makes it possible for us to appreciate immaturity as an essential condition for growth and improvement by which children are especially privileged. It is in this sense that I refer to John Dewey's positive definition of immaturity, which ties in with his conception of education as growth.<sup>43</sup>

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey presents a view of children whose education is only possible through their active and deliberate participation in the world. All individuals can ideally undergo a constant process of growth which constitutes the true goal of education, and which depends on their ability to participate with others in the construction of their shared context. What characterizes the child's participation in joint activity is a valuable condition of

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<sup>42</sup> Such is the case, for example, when Brennan and Noggle (1997) argue that immaturity justifies both the unequal treatment of children (as compared to adults) and parental authority, thus providing parents with a particular set of stewardship rights that are bound by the child's own personhood (p. 13). Their explanation aims to address the problems posed by the apparently conflicting claims about childhood mentioned in Chapter 1.1. (the equal consideration thesis, the unequal treatment thesis, and the limited parental rights thesis).

<sup>43</sup> This Deweyan concept of growth will be at the center of the upcoming discussion of moral growth and school life (Parts 2 and 3, respectively).

immaturity, constituted by two powers (or goods): dependence and plasticity. Dependence, the fact that the child needs others to survive and gain access to the social world, maintains and fosters their capacity to be socially active and engaged. Plasticity is the specific adaptability of an immature person that produces the ability to learn from experience and develop new dispositions. Together, these powers produce the human ability to become socially connected and to grow within these interactions (Dewey, 1980, p. 49).

It is important to note that here dependence is not the opposite of autonomy: autonomy, as I have defined it, is the possibility to act out of reasons in pursuit of one's own goals and preferences, while dependence is the (inherently human) condition that draws the child into social life. Dependence is compatible with autonomy, and has a positive connotation: "From a social standpoint, dependence denotes a power rather than a weakness; it involves interdependence. There is always a danger that increased personal independence will decrease the social capacity of an individual" (Dewey, 1980, p. 49). Another key aspect of this point is that Dewey does not consider immaturity and the powers that conform to it to be exclusively valuable for children. They are, on the contrary, goods of childhood that Dewey vindicates as important throughout life for two reasons: the fact that immaturity in this sense is equivalent to the power of growth, which he considers to be one with life (Dewey, 1980, p. 47), and the positive effect that a prolonged sense of interdependence has on society as a whole by promoting social progress through enhanced collaboration among its members (Dewey, 1980, p. 50).

Immaturity, then, justifies the need for paternalism without contradicting the capacity of children to act out of reasons, nor the value of them growing as increasingly autonomous

agents. Dewey does not use the language of personhood, moral status, and rational agency, on which I rely throughout my argument. Nevertheless, I find his philosophy supports my claims on these issues because on his reliance on the joint activity and responsibility of children and adults as the fundamental fact of education. According to Dewey, education requires that adults, through means that I discuss later, enlist the interest of the young in everyday activities. This sort of purposeful involvement requires the ability of the child to foresee consequences and commit to them, which implies their innate capacity and disposition to act out of reasons in pursuit of goals (Dewey, 1980, pp. 131, 133). Furthermore, this educative participation is aimed to replacing external imposition by the freedom of intelligent self-control (Dewey, 2015, pp. 64, 67). In this sense, I can bring Dewey into conversation with Darwall's language of autonomous reason-giving: I propose a reading of Dewey's definition of education in which he is calling for us to effectively recognize children's status as persons, and therefore their immature agency and the interest they have to grow as autonomous agents. What Dewey's view on immaturity clarifies even further is that this growth is not towards isolation, but to a better competence in moral agency within society. Dewey, in short, is calling for the education of the young to be an expression of respect (as per Darwall) towards the nature, current developmental stage, and vital interests of children.

Moral growth will be at the center of the analysis in the following chapters. However, understanding immaturity as a condition for growth is of immediate importance for two reasons: it further illustrate why immaturity does not exclude children from acting in the world, and it highlights the moral relevance of their actions. These considerations, along with Darwall's

distinction of recognition and appraisal respect, help to better appreciate the importance of autonomy during childhood.

Recall that in Darwall's (1977, 2004) distinction the object of appraisal respect is character. If we accept his notion of character as constituted by the stable disposition to act out of reasons, accompanied by the higher-level disposition to act out of the best possible ones, the future-oriented interest of children in developing moral autonomy can also be expressed in terms of respect.<sup>44</sup> In this sense, having asserted the importance of autonomy as a human interest I claim that a fundamental interest of children is the development of character, which is nothing less than the interest in growing as rational and autonomous moral agents (Darwall, 1977, pp. 43-44). Since moral autonomy requires the development of character, respecting children as persons requires honoring their vital interest to grow into the kind of agents that progressively deserve appraisal respect through active and purposeful engagement in the world.

### **2.3. Conclusion: The Personhood of Children**

The discussion of the moral status of children and what it implies allows for the development of a nuanced account of the personhood of children. In short, childhood is an intrinsically valuable stage of life, not a predicament characterized by what it lacks when compared to an idealized form of adulthood. Indeed, it is characterized by its own goods which

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<sup>44</sup> Remember that, by including the requirement for the higher-level disposition to act out of the best possible reasons, Darwall includes a normative component to character that implies it is conformed by human excellences. This qualification will be the object of further discussion in the following chapters.

contribute to the overall value of life. These goods must be enjoyed during childhood if they are to produce an impact and thus inform later stages of life.

Once the value of childhood is acknowledged, it is a short step to accepting that children have particular interests that merit both recognition and protection. These interests are both present and future, as they relate to future enjoyment and fulfillment. The interests of children are important in at least three respects: they inform the content of duties other agents have towards them, they are formally protected through rights, and they also serve to establish the limits of just heteronomous interventions that affect them. Paternalism towards children, then, is legitimate to the degree to which it is responsive to their interests.

The issue of paternalism is relevant because children do have a will that merits being taken into consideration. They act purposefully in ways that are morally relevant, both because they inform the duties others have towards them (as mentioned before), but also because they have a self-actualizing effect: it is by acting that children become increasingly competent as autonomous agents.

It is with all these considerations in mind that I conclude that children are persons, that is, independent sources of normative claims who count morally for their own sake. Accordingly, they have the full dignity of persons and are the moral equal of adults. Respect for children requires appropriately responding to their dignity, which includes fostering their growth as moral agents through the development of their character.

## **PART TWO: ADDRESSING STUDENTS AS PERSONS AND MORAL GROWTH**

### **Chapter 3: The Interpersonal Stance in Education**

Part One of this dissertation focused on establishing the personhood of children, which required establishing that they have moral status and portraying what is involved in acknowledging their dignity. This was my first step in developing a philosophy intended to frame and guide school practices in K-12 education. In Part Two, I examine how school administrators and educators can address K-12 students as persons, with a view to advancing their moral growth. My next step is to argue for the importance of addressing K-12 students interpersonally.

In this chapter, I move from thinking about children to thinking about students between kindergarten and the 12<sup>th</sup> grade (or its equivalents). This move is not just a semantic one. So far, I have been considering children as young persons in an age group that can be roughly defined as “school-age”. In this chapter I think about youth in the context of schooling, seeking to apply the considerations of personhood to K-12 students specifically. This requires both thinking about the roles young persons occupy at school and critically examining the interactions between teachers (adults) and students (children) in the context of schools. My question is as follows: If we accept that children are equal in moral status to adults, how are adults and children to interact with each other when they come together within schools as teachers and students?



I have struggled with this question throughout my own career as a K-12 educator and school Head. As a teacher in middle and high school, I was very aware of my responsibility to facilitate student learning and support my students in their academic endeavors. Simultaneously, I was also aware of the many other responsibilities that ensued from my authority within the school, as a teacher and often as the only adult in the room. I constantly made decisions that affected my students personally, and it was clear to me that my interactions with them were mediated by a difference in authority, on the one hand, and an equality in our dignity, on the other. For instance, I had the authority to assign homework to my students, and I was also responsible for considering their personal circumstances while doing so. I would avoid assigning homework on a day that would interfere with religious holidays, and look for ways to accommodate the needs of individual students who had other pressing commitments at particular times.

Simply said, both me and my students knew that in terms of our respective roles we were not in the same boat. Yet, I knew (and I'm pretty sure they did as well) that we were all persons who deserved mutual respect and consideration. Furthermore, because the educational goals of schools are not exclusively academic, I felt the need to better understand how the combination of our inequality *and* our shared personhood should shape my role and my responsibilities toward my students.

The need for greater clarity on the issues only became more pressing once I became Head of a K-12 school. As Head, I had to navigate these same issues in my relations with a large group of teachers and students in very different stages of life. Sometimes I would interact with very young students who were beginning preschool, and some other times with seniors getting

ready to begin college. My position as Head stayed the same, but the ways in which I could exercise that authority in an appropriate, respectful ways varied significantly from one interaction to another. If I saw an 8-year-old cutting in line at the cafeteria, or if I was informed that one of their family members had had an accident and I had to call them to my office to share the bad news, the way I addressed each of these situations would be different if the same things happened with a 16-year-old. Both would require for me to act with the tact corresponding to my particular position of authority within the school community, and also inform my reaction by what would be best for each student at their particular moment of life. Furthermore, most of my work was not directly with the students, but with the teachers who had a more immediate work relation with them. The position of a school leader requires helping teachers realize, at all levels of school life, the principles and purposes that articulate a school community. This requires both addressing the teachers as professionals and as persons who deserve respect, but also helping them express these common principles in ways that are appropriate for the students at each grade level.<sup>45</sup>

In what follows, I argue that students and adults within the school should relate to each other, first and foremost, as persons. To do this, I establish the difference between an objective and an interpersonal stance and explore the problematic nature of adopting an objective stance in K-12 education. As an alternative, I argue for the adoption of a stance based on the mutual and reciprocal recognition between moral equals, which I will refer to as an interpersonal

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<sup>45</sup> Parents are also an important group with whom educators relate in school life. Since the focus of this inquiry has to do with the formative relations formed between teachers (including administrators) and students in everyday interactions, I will not discuss the relationship between parents and teachers.

stance. By interpersonal stance, I mean the attitude a person adopts when addressing someone else as an equal who deserves the same considerations they themselves are entitled to. I will develop an understanding of the interpersonal stance based on Stephen Darwall's moral philosophy, specifically his view of the second-personal nature of moral life and the second-personal standpoint. I build on Darwall's account by developing the idea that students are capable of being addressed from a second-personal standpoint and therefore of being engaged interpersonally.

### **3.1. The Objective and the Interpersonal Stance**

Recognizing young people between 4 and 18 years of age as persons poses a challenge for K-12 educators. If we acknowledge that children and adolescents are persons, K-12 students in school will belong to the primary moral constituency and are, in that very important sense, the moral equals of their teachers. At the same time, schools rely on an institutional inequality imposed by the different roles of teachers and students: schools are places of intergenerational encounter in which the young learn and grow in the company and under the guidance of adults who are (at the least) better acquainted with the ways of the world.<sup>46</sup> The issue that arises is that, once the personhood of students is acknowledged, the awareness of their moral equality within the context of the school cannot be ignored. The moral equality of teachers and students should inform the organization and communication of school life.

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<sup>46</sup> I purposefully use a very broad description of school dynamics to recognize that there are many different and valid school structures, in which the role of both teachers and students are conceived differently. Nevertheless, I find that this broad description of intergenerational encounter is generally true.

When properly understood, however, the moral equality of teachers and students is not the problem it appears to be. Ideally, rather than challenging their respective institutional roles it should serve as the cornerstone of the school's defining purpose, namely to serve as a uniquely a privileged space for the pursuit of formative ends.<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, what it reveals is the contradiction at the heart of both wanting to properly educate students as persons while at the same time adopting practices that reduce them to the objects of interventions whose personhood will only become relevant at a point that lies beyond school life.

My overall argument is that moral growth is a fundamental interest of persons *qua* persons. Since only person grow moral, I claim that addressing young persons *as* persons is an educational necessity. To substantiate this claim, it is necessary to look at the difference between a person who engages another as an object of an intervention, and a person who engages another as their moral equal. For my inquiry I will refer to these forms of engagement as the objective and the interpersonal stance, respectively. To further develop these concepts, I draw from the writings of P.F. Strawson (2008) and Kate Manne (2014) and apply them to the scenario of K-12 school life.

While the scope of what Strawson and Manne are addressing in their papers is different to my own preoccupation in this chapter, both philosophers are in dialogue with one another on the matter of this distinction and its ethical significance. Strawson introduces the distinction between the two possible attitudes ("the objective stance" and "the interpersonal stance") in his seminal paper, "Freedom and Resentment" (2008), and Manne (2014) expands on it in her

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<sup>47</sup> Part Three develops this idea by speaking of schools as formative communities.

more recent paper, “Internalism about Reasons: Sad but True?”. I interact with both texts because sometimes the features of each attitude are better elucidated or illustrated in one more than the other. While Strawson helps me advance my argument by introducing the concept of the objective stance, Manne helps me by giving further contents to the implications of adopting either the interpersonal or the objective stance towards someone. I will build upon these notions by including Darwall’s considerations on the second-personal standpoint and applying these enriched concepts to the moral life of schools and K-12 students.

According to Strawson, to adopt an objective stance towards someone is to address the other as the object of an intervention, i.e., the recipient of treatment upon which purposeful action is taken and thus is “managed or handled or cured or trained” (Strawson, 2008. p. 9). According to Manne on Strawson, addressing someone interpersonally requires seeing them fundamentally as an equal, someone entitled to their own decisions and over whom we don’t have any comprehensive authority. To address someone thusly requires reasoning with them as a “sovereign creature” (Manne, 2014, p. 95).

Simply put, addressing someone interpersonally is to treat that someone as a person. In my reading of Strawson’s and Manne’s view, this formulation relies on an implicit call for equality, and thus the substance of this claim lies in what it means to be a person. Strawson’s and Manne’s comments about children are based on a criterialist view of personhood that excludes children of the moral status of adults. Because of young persons’ perceived lack of rational autonomous agency, children should be addressed from an objective stance, and this

approach would be necessary for education.<sup>48</sup> This argument regarding the importance of the objective stance in education deserves further analysis.

Manne argues that the reasons out of which a person acts are analogous to the advice offered to an agent by a qualified and well-disposed ideal advisor (Manne, 2014, p. 91). Since a person would, by definition, provide and evaluate their own reasons, they should also be capable of discussing with others the value of the reasons they produce. Therefore, as long as a person is capable of providing their own reasons to act, they will be both the author of their actions and a valid interlocutor who can receive and evaluate reasons provided by others to inform their conduct. If someone does not have a subjective set of dispositional elements that would track with the reasons someone else can provide, then that someone cannot be addressed interpersonally; it is not possible to “reason *with* them” (Manne, 2014, pp. 91, 96) and to build with them “the sense that this thing is worth doing” (Manne, 2014, p. 107). In such a situation, Manne concludes that the only alternative is to adopt an objective stance in which reasons are either imposed or abandoned (Manne, 2014, pp. 97, 111).

According to Manne, education has no choice but to assume an objective stance when interacting with young people: “And we may adopt the objective stance when we are dealing with young children as well. Here, we view our charges as in need of patience and also training – or, perhaps better, an education” (Manne, 2014. p. 95). While it is difficult to assess what exactly Manne means by “young children”, her characterization seems to include K-12 students. Manne does not delve into the distinction between training and education, but from her

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<sup>48</sup> For a discussion on why and to what effect Strawson considers it necessary to address children from the objective stance due to their lack of rational agency and moral underdevelopment, see An, 2020, p. 195.

explanation it is possible to draw at least two conclusions. First of all, Manne considers that the purpose of education is to provide the young with the reason-giving abilities with which she characterizes mature moral life, so that the instrumental value of childhood is ratified. Secondly, the role of students is to be the object of heteronomous interventions aimed at providing such abilities and skills.

From this perspective, K-12 education would consist of exercises of imitation that are quite different from the transformative process that requires seeing students as persons with whom it is possible and worthy to engage interpersonally.

### **3.2. The Objective Stance in Schools**

Based on my characterization of young persons as members of the moral community who have a vital interest in improving their moral agency, I find it problematic to think of school students in ways that would require adopting an objective stance as the default position for K-12 education. In practice, however, we easily fall back into such an approach even when our stated goals suggest the opposite. To illustrate how this is the case, it is helpful to think about different ways in which schools can address their students as the target of “educational” interventions. With this in mind, I propose three examples of different ways in which students can be addressed from the objective stance in K-12 education: cases in which students are treated as clients, products, or problems.

Students are conceived as clients within a model in which they are defined by the lack of a certain number of desirable traits and abilities, and education is the way to equip them with specific goods and skills that are deemed worthy by those who sponsor their education. Any commitment or obligation of the school towards its students goes only as far as the

procurement of these goods demands. This model can be further complicated by the fact that the actual clients might be third parties, usually parents, who want things done to their children, pushing any interest originating within the child further out of the picture. Schools that market themselves based on a definition of excellence that is supported exclusively by “objective” standards, such as standardized score tests, can easily fall into this model. Such schools define their value as providers of specific goods, which limits the scope of their interest in the child. Examples of this are schools that, in practice, narrowly define the scope of their efforts in terms of achieving goals such as college admissions or the development of bilingual skills (particularly in communities in which English is not the predominant first language). While these are certainly worthy goals, pursuing them to the exclusion of other aspects of human development might satisfy the immediate interest of parents, but to the detriment of many other important needs of their children.

Students can also be seen as products, in which case the end of the educative process is to guarantee that the student complies with a pre-established standard. It is a similar approach to thinking of students as clients who will receive some educational goods, insofar as the “educative” goals are predetermined without much interest in the students themselves and address a very discreet dimension of their being, but they differ in that the school’s attention is not directed towards what the student receives, but in how much the ideal model is prized and actualized. The school here is not committed to the student but to a certain standard that constitutes its focus, and it will work with the student only insofar as they will (or can) come to embody the standard. A school that shapes its student body to fit a certain set of expectations that satisfy said standards through deliberate practices (ranging from selective admissions



criteria to counseling-out policies when certain benchmarks are missed) could be considered to follow this approach. The school, on this model, places its own reputation as the end to which students' achievement is instrumental. An extreme example of this approach can be found in recently publicized events of harsh treatment of very young students within the classroom when they are considered to fall short of the purported excellence standards of a given school.<sup>49</sup> Less drastic examples might lie behind strict and mindless enforcement of disciplinary rules, like when a teacher shouts at a student for walking too fast in an empty hallway, with no further reason than maintaining a characteristic ethos of order and restraint.

Lastly, students can simply be seen as problems when schooling is conceived as a process that corrects undesirable states in which, for any reason, children are found. The most pressing examples are those models of education in which the school is institutionally committed to enacting a transition from a perceived negative state into a preferred one, usually mandated by a predominant third party. The school is certainly not interested in students themselves, but in adjusting them to a dominant model that lies without them. In this extreme case, the identity and the personhood of the student are relevant in a negative sense, as they are usually a fundamental part of the "problem" to be solved. A historical example of this mode might be found in colonial systems of education whose purpose was to enforce a hegemonically mandated standard of education.<sup>50</sup> Traces of this mentality can still be seen in some

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<sup>49</sup> See, as a reference, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/nyregion/100000004159212/success-academy-teacher-rip-and-redo-video.html?searchResultPosition=1>

<sup>50</sup> A dramatic example of these practices that extend well into the modern days can be found in the boarding schools established in the United States and Canada for the "education" of indigenous youth (see Reyhner, 2018).

educational discourses around the globe, and other examples can also be found in the many iterations of so-called “reform schools”.

The former classification of how objective attitudes can look in scenarios of formal education when the student is reduced to a client to whom limited services are to be provided, a product that instrumentally upholds the goals or reputation of an institution, or a problem to be solved and thus a valid object of treatment, is not exhaustive. Other forms of addressing the student from an objective stance, producing other problematic models of schooling, are certainly possible. These three categories I propose are a heuristic, as preoccupations that drive one approach might certainly be said to be present in others (i.e., a student that does not comply with an ideal standard might, very well, be considered a problem). Nonetheless, this taxonomy illustrates the normalcy of schools adopting the objective stance, which effectively reduces students to a fraction of who they truly are; that is, persons undergoing a process of growth.

In this subsection I have sought to demonstrate how an unstated deficit conception of childhood can underlie and inform notions about students as the object of well-intentioned pedagogical interventions. This shows how implicit and unexamined assumptions about students not having the full status of persons, and therefore not being the moral equals of teachers, shape school practices and have an effect on what is taken to be the purpose of schooling.

### **3.3. The Second-Personal Standpoint: Moral Life and the Interpersonal Stance**

If we accept that young people have the full moral status of persons, addressing them from the objective stance ignores their dignity. To accept that children and adolescents are

persons is to accept that they provide an independent source of normative claims upon others. As a consequence, respecting children and adolescents as person obligates other agents to respond appropriately. From this perspective, it becomes unintelligible that the education of students seemingly occurs by reducing them to an immature target that warrants paternalistic interventions. Adopting this perspective requires the rejected view in which childhood's value is exclusively instrumental to the development of adult competence and, absurd as it is, implies that we train children for autonomy by reducing them to passivity or imitation. It is necessary therefore to examine what it means to address students from the interpersonal stance, and how this address is both possible and desirable given the conditions of immaturity that generally characterizes their stage of life. I use Darwall's work on the second-personal standpoint as the theoretical ground for this project.

A person adopts an interpersonal stance when addressing another as an equal, recognizing that the other person deserves the same considerations they themselves are entitled to. In *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*, Darwall (2006) develops a second-personal view of moral life which places the person-to-person address characteristic of the interpersonal stance at the very center of moral experience. Drawing from Darwall's thought on this matter allows me to bring into focus the educational importance of addressing students interpersonally within schools.<sup>51</sup>

According to Darwall, moral life has a distinctive second-personal character because it relies on the authority every person has to produce legitimate claims on the actions of others.

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<sup>51</sup> The distinction between recognition and appraisal respect, introduced by Darwall in 1977 and discussed in Chapter 1, is of great help to understand this second-personal view of moral life.

When an agent recognizes this authority in another, they will have categorical reasons to act accordingly. Darwall argues that every rational agent has this kind of authority and the ability to recognize it in others, and therefore moral life is made of normative relationships between persons. These moral relationships are articulated around the mutual recognition of their authority to lay legitimate claims on each other, and of the second-personal reasons this recognition produces (Stern, 2014, p. 322). Second-personal reasons produced in this way are morally binding, so that a person who fails in recognizing these as reasons to act would also fail in properly addressing the dignity of others (Korsgaard, 2007, p. 22).<sup>52</sup>

Darwall's second-personal standpoint has seldom been applied to children or school students.<sup>53</sup> I argue that accepting the personhood of young students between 4 and 18 years of age effectively requires engaging with them from a second-personal standpoint. Darwall's perspective, as explained in Chapter 1, seems to be more restrictive than this. In consequence, I must go beyond his formulation of second-personal moral life to include students in the moral community and support their address from an interpersonal stance.<sup>54</sup>

As explained above, a fundamental part of Darwall's second-personal view of moral requirements is that when one person recognizes another, they have second-personal reasons to respect the other's status as a moral equal. In this scenario, the one 'doing the respecting' is in a direct relation of mutual accountability with another person endowed with dignity, i.e., a

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<sup>52</sup> Christine Korsgaard (2007) offers an introduction to Darwall's arguments and discusses their place in the Kantian tradition through a detailed analysis of Darwall's assessment of Kant's (1993) arguments in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and *Critique of Practical Reason*.

<sup>53</sup> I am currently unaware of any such application in the field of K-12 education.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Stern (2014) briefly discusses the problem of justifying moral duties towards non-rational animals (p. 331). This debate is not directly related to my inquiry, but illustrates some other challenges posed in the literature to the conditions set by Darwall in his account of second personal ethics.

person to whom respect is owed (and vice versa). The second-personal moral relationship thus described relies on four interconnected concepts: the authority of a person to make demands on the behavior of others, the claims that such authority enables a person to make, the second-personal reasons to act in a certain way that such claims provoke and that require an acknowledgment of the person's authority to make them, and the responsibility towards a person (and a community) to accept these claims and thus be held accountable by them (Darwall, 2004, p. 45; 2006, pp. 11-15).<sup>55</sup> To my understanding, it is because of the person's capacity to act out of reasons and thus be responsible for their actions (as an author) that Darwall places the young beyond the second-personal standpoint, and thus outside of moral life.

This problem arises from Darwall's adoption of the criterialist view of persons as rational autonomous agents. Following the Kantian tradition, he assumes that those who participate in second-personal moral life are competent adults, and therefore:

To enter intelligibly into the second-person stance and make claims on and demands of one another at all, I argue, you and I must presuppose that we share a common second-personal authority, competence, and responsibility simply as free and rational agents. (Darwall, 2006, p. 5)

In these terms, competence needs to be discussed to determine the capacity of the young to address and be addressed, second-personally.<sup>56</sup> My question is: To what extent are young

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<sup>55</sup> David Shoemaker (2007) discusses at length the limits of the moral community in Darwall's framework. I disagree with Shoemaker's assessment inasmuch as it excludes children from moral life based on their immaturity. I distance myself from this position both because I find the condition of being human sufficient for a person to have the authority to make demands on the behavior of others (see Chapter 1.2.2.) and for the reasons I explain presently.

<sup>56</sup> Chapter 2 is centered around a related but distinct discussion of competence as it affects paternalism, its justification, and its impact on the personhood of children.

persons, and particularly K-12 students, competent to author their actions and therefore responsible for them?

Darwall (2006) reiterates his position when he claims that the “second-personal address seeks to direct a person through her own free choice and in a way that recognizes her status as a free and rational agent” (p. 49). If a person’s actions cannot be said to originate from their free rational choice, then they could not be the valid target of a second-personal address. Addressing someone interpersonally is reason-giving, so seeing children as not competent to act out of their own reasons is precisely what brings Strawson, Manne, and potentially Darwall, to require an objective stance towards the young and, by extension, to K-12 students. As long as they are considered deficient agents due to their immaturity, it follows that they cannot be engaged interpersonally.<sup>57</sup>

Darwall (2006) defines the second-personal standpoint as “The perspective you and I take up when we can make and acknowledge claims on one another’s conduct and will” (p. 3). The core of moral life resides, from his perspective, in the fact that persons are in a relationship of mutual accountability based on the recognition of their reciprocal authority to lay legitimate claims on one another. These claims are essentially normative and therefore produce moral obligations that bind persons to one another. Following Darwall, “When we are morally obligated, we are not morally free to act otherwise; members of the moral community have the authority to hold us responsible if we do” (p. 27). A person will be morally blameworthy if he fails to acknowledge and act upon the claims that someone else has the authority to produce,

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<sup>57</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 1.1., any perceived involvement would only be provisional, a form of preparatory playacting for the true engagement of adult life (see Schapiro, 1999).

and thus legitimately expects to be observed. Correspondingly, he will be entitled to feel wronged (and react accordingly) if the other person fails to acknowledge claims of his authorship.<sup>58</sup>

Darwall (2006) draws two conclusions: First of all, any account of the distinctive normativity of moral obligations must capture this second-personal element, or it will be deficient (p. 27). Also, this second-personal aspect helps explain why moral obligations purport to be categorical and overriding, so when a person fails to fulfill their duties, they are liable to be held responsible. To the contrary, “if someone can establish that he had sufficient reason to do what he did, then he will have accounted for himself and shown thereby that blame is unwarranted” (p. 28). The second-personal standpoint, then, reveals the source and nature of the reasons a person has to relate morally to another. This is why the second-personal standpoint is key to understanding the moral weight of interpersonal address: once we accept that the other is a person, by accepting their moral status is equal to our own, we recognize that we are second-personally bound to them. Moral life, then, is this shared partaking of the world characterized by mutual recognition of other’s authority and of reciprocal accountability among persons.

It is important to be explicit that the reasons that underlie this second-personal moral life are also second-personal in nature. They are “grounded in (*de jure*) authority relations that an addresser takes to hold between him and his addressee” (Darwall, 2006, p. 4). Thus, they presuppose a relevant authority of the addresser to direct valid claims over the addressee.

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<sup>58</sup> Here is the essence of recognition respect of persons *qua* persons, in which one person effectively recognizes the other as an authoritative source of normative claims.

When a person interacts with another or simply acts in a way that might affect someone else, they have the moral obligation to take the other person into account and adjust their actions accordingly. This is why “second-personal reasons are invariably tied to a distinctively second-personal kind of *practical authority*: the authority to make a demand or claim” (Darwall, 2006, p. 11; emphasis in the original).

I reiterate this point because it relates to a central part of my overall argument. Since I have argued that young persons are part of the primary moral constituency because, among other considerations, they are “self-originating sources of claims” (Rawls, 1980, p. 543), then they have the authority to produce moral claims on others and the accompanying normative reasons to comply with them. The obligation to observe these reasons is a necessary consequence of respecting their dignity (Darwall, 2006, p. 14). I have argued that students should expect to be respected in this way. Moreover, ignoring the obligations that arise from the personhood of K-12 students constitutes a moral harm.

In this sense, it follows that Darwall’s (2006) admonition applies to them: “Disrespect is, in its nature, a violation of, and offense against, or an affront to a *dignity*; to which the appropriate response is some second-personal attitude that seeks (demands) recognition of the dignity from the violator” (p. 60). It follows that to transgress against the interests of young persons amounts to a form of disrespect towards them. Forms of such disrespect include the varieties of the objective stance I listed above, namely treating K-12 students as clients, products, or problems. Thus, I conclude that adopting an interpersonal form of address is morally imperative when interacting with the young.



Respecting students entails honoring their interests, which include both present and future considerations. Capital among the requirements of these interests is engaging them interpersonally (from person to person) to foster their moral growth through participation in moral life.<sup>59</sup> Since students are an independent source of normative claims that produce second-personal moral obligations, teachers have morally binding reasons to engage them in an educative environment, honoring their interest to grow as independent moral agents worthy of appraisal respect. How exactly does all of this look at school? And, given that the second-personal standpoint requires a reciprocal recognition of authority, what does it require from students and teachers?

### **3.4. The Interpersonal Stance in Schools**

#### ***3.4.1. An Example of Second-Personal Address in School***

So far, I have argued that Darwall's view of moral life from the second-personal standpoint includes young persons and provides the theoretical background needed to understand the nature and importance of the interpersonal stance in our interactions with K-12 students. An example helps illustrate that adults do have second-personal reasons to respect children, and to show how the interpersonal stance looks like when directed towards children.

Imagine a first grade teacher, Michael, who has an issue with one of his students, Annie, who has been misbehaving during class. "Shared Reading" is an important activity in Michael's first grade classroom. During this time, all students take turns reading aloud from a story, as the

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<sup>59</sup> Moral growth is discussed in depth in Chapter 4, and Part Three develops the idea of school life as moral life. At this point, however, it is important to recall the definition of character sketched in Chapter 1 and of its development as a constant pursuit to become increasingly deserving of appraisal respect.

rest of the class follows along in silent reading. Michael has explained why this part of class is important. Practice is key in learning to read, and practicing through a shared experience in which everyone listens to each other has additional advantages: it develops confidence in the class's reluctant readers, builds a sense of shared accomplishment among classmates, and gives Michael a necessary opportunity to evaluate how each of his students is advancing in this process. All first-graders in Michael's class are aware of these reasons, and are usually eager to participate of "Shared Reading".

Although Annie is usually attentive and focused in class, today she repeatedly interrupted her friends during their turns to read aloud. Every time Annie interrupted, Michael called her attention with a gesture to remind her why it is important to be quiet when some else is reading. Annie acknowledged Michael's gestures, but after a while continued to interrupt. Michael was frustrated by Annie's behavior and felt the need to respond to it by calling her out and reacting to her actions. Interruptions are a real problem that affects the rhythm of class. He doesn't want this to become a pattern, nor to send an ambiguous message to the class about the importance of classroom rules. Furthermore, he was puzzled by Annie's unusual behavior. Based on the mutual respect that binds Michael and Annie, Michael knows that many considerations should inform his response to her. He works with the assumption that Annie is endowed with dignity, acts out of reasons, and has an interest in improving both her reading and her agency. All of these considerations require Michael to engage Annie with respect and in terms that are proper of a motivated person who acts out of reasons.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> It is important to note that I have talked, repeatedly, of the mutual respect and reciprocal recognition between Michael and Annie. Since the focus of my argument is on the personhood of students, I have not discussed

We know that he is not justified, nor legally permitted, to physically harm Annie for breaching classroom norms. However, responding appropriately to Annie is not limited to respecting her basic human right not to be harmed. We can imagine instances in which Michael finds himself immediately raising his voice to Annie in an intimidating manner, abruptly removing her to a corner of the room where she must remain still and silent, or sending her to the principal's office. All of these reactions feel authoritarian, and are substantially different from one based on Michael and Annie's reciprocal recognition as persons.

Imagine, then, that Michael reacts to Annie's misbehavior from an interpersonal stance. In one sense, Michael will treat Annie as a reason-giving agent who authorizes her own actions and can be held accountable for them. Yet, given Annie's young age, he is aware that she might not be fully aware or able to easily articulate her reasons, she might have been acting impulsively rather than deliberately and, therefore, he would not hold her accountable for her behavior as he would with an adult. Michael can still find ways to acknowledge her actions and enact her accountability that are appropriate to her age and interests. He can begin by questioning Annie to check if she is aware of the fact that she interrupted her friends, and ask her why his repeated reminders were ineffective. While Michael might not start with a full picture, he can nonetheless work together with Annie to evaluate the situation, imagine different ways of responding to it, help her gauge the consequences of her actions, and devise ways of making up for them to the class.<sup>61</sup>

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explicitly the personhood of teachers and the need of effectively recognizing their dignity as persons within the school community. Clearly this is also an implication of thinking about school life from the second-personal standpoint, which requires its own extended analysis.

<sup>61</sup> Darwall explicitly explains how this second-personal respect can be generalized to hold not only between individuals, but between an individual and the moral community (Darwall, 2006, pp. 9, 27). As will become evident

In this particular example, I can imagine Michael approaching Annie after “Shared Reading”. Annie, who is a smart girl, knows what the conversation will be about, and after some questions from Michael acknowledges that she had trouble in class. The fact is, she says, that right before “Shared Reading” she had been in art class. During art class she felt that other kids got all the time they wanted to explain their projects, and she had not. This was especially important for Annie because she is very proud of the drawing project she has been working on for the last few weeks. By the time they began reading with Michael, she was feeling ignored and upset. She felt wronged, and felt the need to be noticed somehow. At this point, Michael would have the elements to help Annie identify how her frustration got in the way of her usual way of doing things. He can help her articulate her reasons to interrupt, evaluate the purpose and effect of such interruptions, discuss whether interrupting contributes or not to the things she wants to do and the kind of classmate she wants to be, and work on a solution from there.

In this example, it is important to highlight that despite the authority relationship between teacher and student, Michael's reasons to respond to Annie as he did stem from his awareness of their dignity as two persons who are mutually obligated to show respect to one another. This binding expectation of respect comes from the fact that Annie, as a person, matters morally for herself and thus places (second-personal) requirements on how Michael should act towards her. In this instance, the normative claims Annie has on her teacher take the form of Michael’s obligation to determine whether Annie deliberately flaunted or simply failed in her understanding of the classroom norms. He must determine this first, to the best of his

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when discussing the conceptualization of the school, I find this generalization to be of the utmost importance to understand the moral life of classrooms and schools, in which norms articulate life within a learning community.

ability, so that he can decide how he can contribute to Annie's wellbeing. For Michael to behave respectfully towards Annie, he must acknowledge her as someone who has the authority to legitimately expect as much from him as he expects of her. He must seek to determine the motivation for her actions in seeking to respond to it. This being the case, Annie has the standing to hold him personally accountable if he fails to do so, regardless of whether or not she can articulate or enforce any of these claims at her young age.

According to Darwall's definition, "*a second-personal reason is one whose validity depends on presupposed authority and accountability relations between persons and, therefore, on the possibility of the reason's being addressed person-to-person*" (2006, p. 8, emphasis in the original). In this sense, Michael would be accountable to Annie (and vice versa) because they recognize each other each as having the authority to produce binding reasons to act in a certain way.

Importantly, holding himself responsible in this way is key to his holding Annie responsible in turn. In his role as teacher, it is Michael's responsibility to find an appropriate response to hold Annie responsible, i.e., a reaction that acknowledges the authority of her actions and contributes to her interests as a growing person.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, as a teacher, he will be obliged to model this form of respect with his students to help them appreciate the moral workings of their shared experiences. The mutual recognition of Michael and Annie as members of a moral community is both the basis for the legitimacy of Michael's reaction and for his obligation to act in a way that will build up Annie as a moral agent. For this reason, such

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<sup>62</sup> For a detailed discussion of responsibility in schools as an expression of respect towards students, see Chapter 4.2.

an enactment of second-personal respect is an irreplaceable aspect of the moral growth of the young student: it is through these sorts of interactions that Annie will learn about her moral status, and the dues and duties that come from being an agent within a moral community.

### ***3.4.2. The Second-Personal Competence of Students***

If, as Darwall and others would have us believe, the young do not have the competence of a fully rational agent, and that “genuine obligations can result only from an address that presupposes an addressee’s second-personal competence” (Darwall, 2006, p. 23), then school-aged students would not be bound by moral obligations. In this sense, they would be essentially irresponsible. Any attribution of obligations or responsibility to them would be playacting; a simulacrum aimed at developing the future conditions for free moral agency.<sup>63</sup> In the example of Michael and Annie, the latter would not have committed any trespass by misbehaving, and the former would just pretend as if this was the case to model for her the intricacies of a moral life that awaits in the future. This attitude from Michael would not be required by second-personal reasons originating in Annie’s dignity, but either by his obligations to third parties (e.g., school authorities, her parents) or his personal valuation of this sort of interaction.

There are further reasons to recognize school-age students as competent to participate in second-personal moral life, and thus legitimate partners in interpersonal address. Let’s begin by remembering that, as anyone who has contact with young children or adolescents knows and as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, the young act out of reasons, pursue goals, and discuss both their actions and their justifications (even if they don’t do so exactly as most adults can).

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<sup>63</sup> Recall how Schapiro explicitly describes engaging children in moral discourse as a form of play that can contribute to “working through the predicament of childhood” (Schapiro, 1999, p. 732).

To quote David Archard, they are “an independent source of opinions about matters affecting its own interests” (Archard, 2015, p. 11). In other words, they act reasonably with “simple agency” (Noggle, 2002, pp. 5-6), and thus constantly actualize exercise their capacity as reason-giving agents. Also, as previously stated, young persons are not so different to adults in this respect: since there is no definitive ideal of stable personal autonomy to be found in practice, nor a standard to which we can resort to determine what amount of rational freedom is “enough”, we must accept the fact that rational autonomy can be possessed in degrees and vary in time.

The immaturity of children, characterized by the twin powers of dependence and plasticity (as per Dewey), requires this active, deliberate, and hopefully never-ending participation of the world. Students, in this sense, are not children exposed to a simulated moral life, but young persons living in an environment in which educative experiences are deliberately pursued. I bring these concepts together to make explicit how this conception of K-12 student relies on their competence, embraces their immaturity, and is fundamentally interpersonal. I find it important to reiterate this last point: an understanding of a truly active student cannot possibly be reached from an objective stance.

Now, this interpersonal stance on education is possible because students are capable of acting out of reasons, and can therefore take part in second-personal address by giving and receiving reasons for action. As mentioned before, second-personal address is reason-giving, and it is characterized by the kind of reasons it gives. It can be distinguished from other forms of influence that constitute coercion or goading (Darwall, 2006, p.52) because “it makes a claim on the addressee’s will” (Darwall, 2006, p. 49). Having established that children do act out of

reasons and notwithstanding that in many instances they indeed benefit from purposeful paternalistic interferences, we can see that interventions like the ones described in the example of Michael and Annie are indeed reason-giving and directed at the young person's will.<sup>64</sup>

This last point is of the utmost importance. It shows that children can interpersonally participate of reason-giving exchanges, and also that they have the ability to enter into normative discourse, revise their motivations, and evaluate the moral import of their actions. Even very young children can discuss their reasons to act, their actions themselves, and the way they perceive their consequences. Within schools, being aware of this fact is fundamental when deciding how to interact with students. As Christopher J. An (2020) says, "By letting the child speak, we are letting the child own up to her actions in a way that is reflective of their voice and will" (p. 196). Explaining, giving reasons, questioning, are all attitudes proper of an interpersonal stance that go beyond objective interventions and move us into the realm of moral reasoning (p. 197).

At the beginning of this chapter, I noted how schools are at least partly characterized by different degrees of institutional inequality in the roles of teachers and students. I have claimed that this difference is not contrary to the fundamental moral equality that underlies an interpersonal approach, a position that can be partly explained by the justification of paternalism discussed in Chapter 2. There is, however, further reasons to think so that have to

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<sup>64</sup> Darwall provides another wonderful educational example about a teacher that 'threatens' their students with a quiz to incentivize studying. This, according to Darwall (2006) constitutes reason-giving because it is done within the legitimate authority of the teacher, and thus it is not coercion but a fair way of giving students further reasons to study (p. 51). This might not apply directly to Annie's preschool classroom but, in my experience, it works wonders in middle school.



do with the importance of the shared moral reasoning proper of interpersonal address that I am presently vindicating: there is a substantial normative difference in treating students as objects of an intervention or addressing them interpersonally, even when in many ways they are under the authority of their teachers.

To this point, An (2020) helpfully presents the concept of normative competence, which he defines as “The ability to reflect and act for reasons which one recognizes, appreciates, and endorses” (p. 197). Noting that adults many times have to abide by norms that are practically outside of their control, and that this form of rule-following does not exclude them from the moral status of a free agent, he argues that persons retains ownership of their actions as long as they are “responsive to reasons which one can own up to in the sense of recognizing, appreciating, and endorsing reasons for action even in circumstances where there are no genuine alternatives for acting otherwise” (An, 2020, p. 198). Even young students who are engaged in moral reasoning can indeed participate of morally significant experiences when they are included in viewing norms as reasons, and to do so as “full-fledged members of a community” (An, 2020, p. 197). The fact that they may not have an actual choice in many aspects of school life, just as Annie does not have the authority to change the class designed by Michael, does not imply that they are subjected to mindless obedience; they are indeed acting as members of a community in which interpersonal reason-giving retains its value.

To sum up, since the normative competence of students is evidenced in their capacity to act out of reasons and enter into conversations about their reasons, they are capable of second-personal address. Furthermore, the normative difference in addressing them interpersonally relates directly to a fundamental interest that requires respect, since it

contributes directly to the development of their moral autonomy. Treating students as persons in the space in which they live most of their young lives and in which they expect to receive an education, is therefore a necessary form of respect to their dignity.

### **3.5. Taking Students Seriously**

In the preceding chapters I have argued for an account of childhood in its own terms that allowed me to reject views of childhood that cast the value of this stage of life as merely instrumental. In this sense, I rejected any argument that reduces the life of the young to a simulacrum. Arguing for the dignity of children and the respect it entails, I sought to vindicate the authority of young persons to produce, by their own nature, the sort of normative claims that support moral obligations towards them, and thus produce second-personal reasons to respect them. Finally, the revision of autonomy as a criterion for personhood and its vindication as a fundamental human interest allowed for a view in which the young act in morally significant ways and adults have a second-personal obligation to foster their moral growth. Contrary to the deficit-based interpretation, this sort of participation is precisely what the example of Michael and Annie illustrates: there is nothing fake in their engagement, even though the demands of respect require that their respective attitudes respond appropriately to who they are.<sup>65</sup>

In his seminal definition of respect towards persons *qua* persons, Darwall (1977) claims that “To say that persons as such are entitled to respect is to say that they are entitled to have other persons take seriously and weigh appropriately the fact that they are persons in

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<sup>65</sup> In Chapter 4 I develop more detailed examples to illustrate the importance of appropriately enacting responsibility for moral growth.

deliberating about what to do” (p. 38). Once it is established that children are indeed persons who deserve respect, we must ask what it is to take them seriously. This question is even more pressing when we think about what it means for young persons to be taken seriously in schools.

In this chapter, I argued that taking students seriously requires recognizing that they are not excluded from moral life because of their immaturity. Taking them seriously requires that we recognize that they act out of reasons, participate in second-personal moral life, and therefore deserve to be engaged as moral equals by their teachers. To take K-12 students seriously is to acknowledge they can participate in moral life and, accordingly, address them from a second personal stance.

Furthermore, addressing them interpersonally is the only way in which the recognition of their normative competence (their capacity to recognize, evaluate, and endorse their reasons to act) becomes effective and is enlisted in the process of their growth. It is in this sense that I claim that only persons grow morally, and thus I move into further discussion of what I mean by moral growth.

## Chapter 4: Moral Growth

In the preceding chapters, I developed an account of the personhood of children to characterize how respect towards K-12 students looks like within the context of schools. I recommended that school teachers and administrators adopt an interpersonal stance towards students as an appropriate response to the interest young persons have in developing their rational autonomous agency. Because the development of rational autonomous agency is what allows persons to better participate in moral community, I referred to this process as moral growth.

Beginning with Stephen Darwall, I have referred to moral growth as the development of the human excellences that constitute a person's character. Character, as Darwall (1977) defines it, is the disposition to act out of reasons accompanied by the higher-order disposition to act out of the best possible ones. Within Darwall's framework, moral growth is a matter of becoming increasingly deserving of appraisal respect within a moral community.

In this chapter, I further develop the concept of moral growth within the theoretical framework of my dissertation. To do so, I draw from the foundational principles of virtue ethics to give nuanced content to the notions of character and its development. Specifically, by drawing upon Aristotelian character education I propose a definition of character as the complex set of motivational dispositions that inform an agent's decision-making. Character, thus understood, can be improved in two ways: by bringing the complex dispositional set that motivates a person's actions closer to the ideal virtue, and by improving the rational process through which someone actualizes these dispositions into reasons for action. By drawing from Dewey's concept of growth as the aim of education (see Dewey 1980, pp. 60-61) I call this

process moral growth: an ongoing process by which a person improves their character, better participates of moral life, and thus continues growing as a moral agent.<sup>66</sup>

By developing this notion of moral growth, I aim to explain how someone can become increasingly deserving of appraisal respect by developing virtues such as temperance, courage, honesty, or generosity. My understanding of moral growth is distinctive in that (i) it accepts the idea the character is educable, responsive to reason, and therefore susceptible to improve through practice and reflection; (ii) it specifies the notion of character development by explicitly identifying the two components of character that can become closer to an ideal of excellence (the dispositions that inform an agent's motives and the rational process of that actualizes these motives into reasons for action); and (iii) by thinking of this process in terms of growth, it indicates that moral growth does not have a discreet end but is an end in itself: by constantly improving participation of moral life, the person is able continue growing. Such a nuanced understanding of moral growth is necessary to fully appreciate the educational importance of interpersonal address and student participation in school life.

In Chapter 2 I defined moral life, from the second-personal standpoint, as the shared partaking of the world characterized by mutual recognition of a person's authority to make demands on the behavior of others, the second-personal reasons this authority produces, and the reciprocal accountability between one person and another (or a community) to act according to them. By thinking of moral growth as the self-actualization of a person's character through their active participation in moral life, I aim to explain how students grow morally by

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<sup>66</sup> In Chapter 5 I discuss, extensively, Dewey's understanding of growth. I introduce the concept here, however, to explain the characteristic aim of moral growth as I understand it.

participating in the moral life of school. To support this claim I discuss two examples that illustrate the possibility of holding K-12 students responsible to foster their moral growth. In these examples I look at responsibility as part of the moral life of school at different age groups. Also, I introduce the concepts of answerability and attributability (Shoemaker, 2011) as two distinct forms of ascribing responsibility to show how students can be appropriately addressed interpersonally. Situations like the ones I discuss show how my definition of moral growth can be applied through the purposeful (and respectful) ascription of responsibility to students within the moral life of schools.

#### **4.1. The Moral Growth of Young Persons**

Finding an account of what constitutes moral growth is a difficult task. I have, however, covered some ground towards this goal by adopting Darwall's definition of the object of appraisal respect, according to which character is the "disposition to act for certain reasons, that is, to act and in acting to have certain reasons for acting" (Darwall, 1977, p. 43). He further qualifies his definition by saying that *good* character, which warrants appraisal respect, includes not only the disposition to act out of reasons, but also the higher order disposition to act out of the best possible ones (Darwall, 1977, p 44). Darwall's approach has merit in defining character based on the Kantian idea of an agent who acts out of reasons, and in this way authorizes their own actions. This view provides a concrete idea of what features of character are deserving of positive moral appraisal. According to Darwall, human excellences are the morally relevant dispositions of a person to act out of the best possible reasons. Good character, then, consists of a set of human excellences (or virtues) that are realized through the practical exercise of

agency. But how does the improvement of character look like? What is it that changes when we say that someone's character has changed for the better?

In his approach, Darwall brings together an Aristotelian theory of virtue with an action-centered Kantian perspective in which the value of a person's actions resides in the reasons they have for acting. This approach matches the picture I have drawn so far of the life of young persons as immature agents who act in morally important ways and are undergoing moral growth. K-12 students, as I have described them, act out of reasons, are therefore the authors of their actions, and these actions are morally significant because through them they participate of (moral) life and actualize their own character.<sup>67</sup> Think, once again, of Annie and her class interruptions while others read aloud: she had reasons to act up in class, with the help of her teacher she was able to examine those reasons and evaluate them as a person who has both individual and shared goals, and was able to adjust these attitudes and the motivations that inspired them accordingly so that in the future she will be more likely to act out of better reasons.

Due to their particular circumstances, students can be considered as 'special agents' who can engage in the rational, deliberate, and intentional pursuit of goals.<sup>68</sup> Due to their immaturity, they can also lack important elements that characterize an ideal form of rational autonomous agency, such as a stable sense of their goals or a nuanced understanding of what is

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<sup>67</sup> In Chapter 2.2.1. I discussed how children act purposefully, based on reasons which require moral consideration. This characterization supports my call to take students seriously as they participate of the moral life of schools. This "taking seriously", which I discuss in Chapter 3.5., requires addressing students as persons whose actions are actually significant within moral life (as opposed to mere imitative exercises within a simulacrum).

<sup>68</sup> I use the term special agents as coined by Noggle (2002) and previously discussed in Chapters 1 and 3.

good or just.<sup>69</sup> The positive connotation of immaturity is, however, that students are in a stage of life characterized by the plasticity to change their disposition to act in certain ways, and interdependency, which ensures that the changes they undergo will be largely determined by their social interactions with those around them (see Dewey, 1980, pp. 47-50).

The actions of children, and in particular of students within a K-12 school context, are the actions of persons motivated by reasons, and who, by way of such actions, are gradually and continuously actualizing their own mature moral characters. They are in the process of becoming a particular sort of person that we might appraise as patient, noble, generous, or kind (and therefore deserving of appraisal respect). This is why, in order to respect children (that is, to appropriately respond to their dignity as persons) it is necessary to take them and what they do seriously by engaging them interpersonally.

By introducing the concept of moral growth, I want to further expand and qualify this picture. When thinking of the moral education of an immature agent it is important to give content to the idea of character improvement. Saying that the improvement of character is achieved through the development of virtues is only a starting point; to really understand how moral growth looks like and how can educators foster it deliberately it is also important to understand in what sense the virtues are developed, how they change over time, and how these changes affect the agency of a person who has an interest in becoming better disposed to act out of the best available reasons. What is more, by talking about *growth* I am anticipating

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<sup>69</sup> As reviewed before, one of the reasons to reject free and rational agency as a benchmark for personhood is the empirically observable fact that many adults also lack, at least partially or occasionally, this ideal features of rational autonomy.



that moral growth is not a finite process aimed at a discreet goal. On the contrary, I will adopt John Dewey's conception of growth as an end in itself, in the sense that its purpose is to allow for further growth (see Dewey, 1980, pp. 46, 55, 58). Since moral growth aims at an improved capacity and disposition to better participate of moral life, it continuously lays the ground for further moral growth through engagement within a moral community. Thus understood, the concept of moral growth provides specific content to the idea of character improvement, so that it can be applied in K-12 schools.<sup>70</sup>

I propose that the principles of virtue ethics, as originally formulated by Aristotle, combined with a Kantian action-centered perspective, provide a theoretical framework to articulate a nuanced understanding of moral growth that works with the view I have been developing of K -12 students as persons who actualize their moral agency through increasingly purposeful participation in moral life. With this in mind, I now turn my attention to the scholarship on virtue ethics and character education (Curren, 2016, 2017; Kristjánsson, 2015, 2016) to articulate how persons can develop the human excellences that I have discussed as deserving of positive moral appraisal.<sup>71</sup>

#### **4.1.1. Aristotelian Virtue Ethics**

The principles of ethics articulated by Aristotle (2011) in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) provide the foundation for my understanding of moral growth. Aristotle's practical notion of

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<sup>70</sup> Dewey's concept of growth, and the effect of a shared understanding of moral growth on the educational practices of schools is the central issue of Part Three.

<sup>71</sup> I do not pretend to adopt an existing approach to Aristotelian character education, like the ones I cover in section 4.1.2., as a whole. While those approaches are of great value for this analysis, my proposal is different in many respects. The way I qualify moral growth, the conception of the personhood of students I propose, and its applications to the definition of the purpose of schools are probably the most salient examples.

character, his definition of virtue, and his nuanced insights on the self-actualization of human excellence through active participation in moral life, are all fundamental to my understanding of moral growth. This is the case, even if I cannot endorse his characterization of children as being in a preparatory stage of human life.<sup>72</sup>

Children are not at the center of Aristotle's concerns in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. He is primarily occupied with human flourishing through a form of excellent activity that he considers to exclude children. Children are incapable of voluntary action because they are moved by their appetites in a similar way as animals are (NE, 1111a25-29) and lack the capacity for rational decision-making (*prohairesis*). Not being able to decide, they are prevented from rationally determining their actions towards what is good and fine (NE, 1111b5-14 and 1139b4-6). For Aristotle, human flourishing is "a certain sort of activity in accordance with excellence" (NE, 1099b26-27) and excellence, in turn, is "(...) a disposition issuing in decision, depending on intermediacy of the kind relative to us, this being determined by rational prescription and in the way in which the wise person would determine it" (NE, 1106b36-1107a2). Because he thinks children cannot decide (in morally relevant terms), he excludes them from the pursuit of virtue.<sup>73</sup>

It is important to note that while Aristotle disqualifies children from the pursuit of virtue, he thinks that they should be led to it through a process of habituation. He argues that children will become virtuous by acting *as if* moved by virtue, even if they would not choose to

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<sup>72</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>73</sup> Since the child is not yet "a doer of the sorts of things in question", Aristotle considers that children who act in ways that correspond to virtue have not attained happiness, or human flourishing. They are just "blessed because of their prospects" (NE, 1099b30-1100a5).

perform these actions themselves. As with the Kantians, children have a provisional moral status which prevents us from justifying ourselves to them or to have them justify themselves to us. They are simply in training for moral life as an adult.

Aristotle underscores that a person cannot be said to act virtuously solely because of the nature of their actions, but because of facts about them as agents (NE, 1105a26-1105b1). The virtuous person acts knowingly, out of decisions, and from a firm and unchanging disposition (as a wise person would). This 'firm and unchanging disposition' is what constitutes the character of the agent, which is perfected by the repeated performance of just actions (NE, 1103a31-b2). For Aristotle, because children cannot have such firm and unchanging dispositions, they are not yet of the kind capable of having a character and are in that sense incomplete. They can only develop character by being educated by those of good character. While I reject Aristotle's philosophy of childhood, I nonetheless accept his thesis that our character informs the morality of our actions.

Insofar as excellent (or virtuous) adults only come to be when children grow in accordance with the conditions of virtue mentioned above (a firm disposition that issues in rational decision-making), children are future candidates for excellence and are capable of developing their character if they 'listen' to their elders (NE, 1119b13-19). What originally imitates excellence becomes the real deal through practice and habituation (NE, 1144b9-14). In my reading of Aristotle's account, however, this 'listening' is by no means passive. It is by *doing with* the adults who are in charge of their education that correct dispositions grow to coincide with the correct prescriptions of reason, so that every one of a young person's actions is self-actualizing. From this follows that these actions are of present moral import.

This is the emphasis I am interested in making: As I have argued before, the actions of the child are indeed morally relevant, both because the young are the authors of their actions and because they constitute a fundamental part of their moral education. I distance myself from Aristotle when I claim that children do act out of reasons, and thus make decisions that have present moral import (not a simulacrum of it, nor one that has merely preparatory value).

Even though Aristotle does not recognize children as ethical agents, in describing the effect of their actions in the development of their character he reveals a fundamental fact of how they actualize their moral selves. Virtue, or excellence of character, is achieved through the repeated enactment of virtuous behavior. According to Aristotle, it is through the habituation of doing what is good and right that a person develops, in time, the stable disposition to act according to virtue (NE, 1103a30-b1, 1103b21-b26). The repetition of virtuous deeds begets excellence of character. In affirming that children act out of reasons and accepting Aristotle's view on the actualization of character, I suggest that children's actions are of moral import, because through them the young become responsible of their character (NE, 1114a5-9). By acting in certain ways, a person is constantly building their own dispositions to act (or not) according to virtue. In this sense, every agent is the author of their own character. While Aristotle stresses habituation towards the good, I am emphasizing that this habitation consists in improving the contents of one's motivational set and of the rational process one uses to bring those dispositions into reasons for action. My conclusion is that, as we recognize children as developing human beings whose actions are relevant beyond their immediate effects (because they inform their character and through it all their future actions), we are also

compelled to recognize the importance of taking seriously what they do and how we engage them, and therefore we acknowledge their moral capacity.

To summarize, I reject Aristotle's exclusion of children from membership in the moral community while accepting his recognition of character as an essential part of moral agency. At the same time, I think Aristotle provides a clear insight on how character is informed through practice. Since young persons act in ways that have present moral import, they also partake of the self-actualizing nature of moral life. Based on these principles I can further substantiate my view on the need to address students as persons who act in morally significant ways is a necessary aspect of their moral growth and therefore an expression of respect.

#### ***4.1.2. Moral Growth and the Language of Character Education***

More recent theories of character education based on virtue ethics can help my argument by providing language to define moral growth within my framework. I find that this theory of moral education has insights on the way character is constituted that allow me to identify the ways in which moral growth can occur in practice. This language allows me to move from the general notion of developing virtues to a more nuanced description of what can be improved when we say that someone's character can be better. In other words, explicating the components of character makes it possible to identify what it is that I find worthy of appraisal when I profess appraisal respect (as per Darwall).

According to Kristján Kristjánsson (2015), who develops an Aristotelian model of character education, character is "a certain subset of personality that is morally evaluable and considered to provide persons with moral worth" (p. 19). This subset is made out of virtues; traits that are reason-responsive, educable, and deserving of positive moral evaluation. This

notion coincides with Darwall's approach, as it supports the idea of a person's character as the proper object of appraisal respect. Character education, based on Kristjánsson definition, would be "an umbrella term for any approach to moral education that foregrounds the cultivation of good character in this broad sense" (p. 20). Moral growth, as a particular approach to character education, requires a more specific description of how character is improved.

With this purpose in mind, it is important to look at how virtues themselves are constituted. Randall Curren describes character as a package of perceptual, motivational, cognitive, and affective attributes (Curren, 2017, p. 13) that together, in turn, produce an acquired, stable, and integrated complex attribute: virtue (Curren, 2017, p. 12). Character, as per this definition, is a complex set of motivational attributes that inform a person's actions.

Based on the definitions above, the traits that constitute *good* character are human excellences which, following Aristotle, can be defined as virtues. In this context, each virtue is a complex and stable cluster of dispositions that determines a person's behavior through a system of perception, emotion, desire, and motivation (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 14): practical motivational sets that inform the way we act. These motivational sets are not perfectly in accordance with the corresponding ideal virtues, but a collection of 'mixed traits', "clusters that, to a smaller or larger degree, resemble the idealised form but incorporate various person-specific and interrelated mental-state dispositions pertaining to the relevant domains" (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 15). An honest person, then, can be one who has a firm disposition to tell the truth, act coherently to their espoused beliefs, and generally proceed in ways that make them worthy of trust.

Because of their inherent complexity, however, human excellences will frequently (if not always) include potentially conflicting traits that are relative to a particular practical domain. For example, in the case of honesty, a particular situation might reveal a blind spot in an agent's 'honesty dispositional cluster' (as when called to tell a difficult truth about someone they love), or they might find two virtues to be in apparent conflict (as if they find that honesty compels them in a way that is not concurrent with compassion), or if they are called to act in a scenario that is completely unknown to them, or heavily regulated by heteronomous rules over which they have no control (as in the extreme case of an artist who is called to express his opinions on the work of a colleague in front of a tribunal of a totalitarian regime in which aesthetic expression can be judged in ways unforeseeable for the unwilling witness).

These examples are interesting in that it is easy to think of all of them happening any day at school. Think of a middle school boy, Arthur, who witnesses his best friend bullying another kid in their class. He has talked about this with his friend, who refuses to correct his behavior. He feels trapped between two possibilities: tell on his friend to a teacher, or become a passive bystander.

At another time, Arthur can be approached by his friend Diane, who wants to audition for the school musical. She asks for his opinion on her chances, placing Arthur in a difficult position: he has heard Diane sing, and he is sure that her skill will not be enough to get her a place in the highly-competitive theater club. He is torn between giving Diane his honest opinion, or muddling through a non-committal answer.

As per the last, extreme case, think of a group of teachers that take Arthur and Diane apart and ask them pointed questions about their opinion on who in their class seems to have

more money than usual. The teachers insist that they only want to know their opinion, but both Diane and Arthur suspect the questions are directed at finding who is responsible for a series of minor thefts that have been happening at school. They hesitate to answer as they struggle to gauge the consequences of their response.<sup>74</sup>

This conception of the motivational sets that constitute character as a collection of mixed traits that conform imperfectly with an idealized virtue set is compatible with the conception I have adopted of free and rational agency as an ideal form of human agency to which is worthy to aspire. This view allows for a process of evolution in which a motivational set can become closer to excellence, and in such way, an agent can get closer to the morally ideal exercise of rational autonomy. If a person can reflect upon the motivations that move them to act in a certain way and, through experience and reason, change for the better these motivations and the way they think about them when deciding how to act, then a person can move towards virtue in an ongoing process that does not succeed only when their motivations coincide perfectly with an ideal virtue. To use one of the examples discussed above, Arthur will need to evaluate his struggling dispositions to tell the truth about how his friend is hurting someone else against his equally valid disposition to protect those he loves. He will need to think about the weight of these dispositions, how they measure to each other, and how can they possible be honored or revised. In doing so, he will ideally learn something about his motivations, their value, and how they play out in his life. The constant process of self-actualization that allows for improved participation and further growth is a success in itself.

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<sup>74</sup> This last example is drawn from the movie *“Das Lehrerzimmer”* (The Teachers’ Lounge) by Ilker Çatak (2023).



Remember that by thinking of this process of moral improvement as growth I am indicating that its end is not the attainment of a perfect version of the ideal virtue. As anticipated above when introducing Dewey's concept of growth, which I discuss at length in Chapter 5, I adopt an understanding of growth according to which the aim of growth is growth itself. The core of this concept can be seen in action in the characterization of young persons as actively involved of moral life I have described so far: As the young interact with their community, they improve their ability to better partake of moral life. Moral growth, then, is not aimed at the production of motivational sets that are perfect embodiments of ideal model virtues, but to the ongoing process of allowing better participation of moral life and the further improvement that comes from it.

While difficult situations that arise from the application of the imperfect motivational sets that make up someone's character will remain challenging throughout life, they will be particularly so for "young moral learners" (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 16). I argue that they will also be of particular importance for them, as they are catalysts for moral growth: It is in dealing with such situations and the challenges they involve that virtues are exercised and thus improved. What this means for education is that "becoming more virtuous in a given sphere does not mean taking on a virtue wholesale but, rather, gradually moving closer to an ideal" (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 15). Character, in this view, is not a fixed state but a learned one that, although enduring in time, is always a work in progress susceptible of both improvement and

degradation because it is made out of virtues that are responsive to experience and reason, and therefore educable.<sup>75</sup>

My claim is that this movement towards virtue can be characterized as a process of moral growth in which specific components of character improve, through active participation of moral life and aimed towards an ongoing improvement of further participation and growth. I realize such a process can happen in one of two ways: either by addressing the contents of a person's character, or by improving the rational process through which these contents are realized in practice. Education must foster moral growth in both senses.<sup>76</sup>

The first avenue for moral growth I mention is to revise, improve, or expand the contents of a person's practical motivational set. Using Darwall's language, this way of improving character is evidenced in the development of a stable set of high-level dispositions populated by the best possible reasons to act. Think of Tina, a 4-year-old girl that, overwhelmed with frustration, uses her toy airplane to hit her sister in the head. After making sure that everyone is well and spirits have calmed down, Tina's mother talks to her and helps her realize that she provoked great pain to her sister. What is more, Tina will hopefully come to realize that her sister has every right to expect that no one, and especially not someone whom she loves, will cause her that kind of pain. To this effect, her mother would probably reason along the lines of "Nobody likes to be in pain. Since we all deserve to live well and happy, everyone

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<sup>75</sup> To this effect, see Curren, 2017, p. 14, and Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 19.

<sup>76</sup> This is one of the reasons why I reject developmental accounts of moral growth in favor of one that conceives the moral aspect of growth as a continuous improvement of a person's character through experience, as opposed to one that moves progressively, in a linear way, through successive stages. A second-personal account of the moral life provides a privileged perspective to see how both the contents of a person character and the rational processes that engages said contents on decision making can indeed improve through a person's self-actualizing participation in a moral community. I will further this argument later by discussing John Dewey's idea of growth.

can expect that people around them will not hurt them". If Tina accepts this basic idea, another question might follow: "What kind of person do you want to be? One that treats her sister badly, or one that understands how others feel, how your actions affect them, and can be trusted to act accordingly"? Assuming that Tina has sufficient experience to understand what this conversation means, it will foster her moral growth by providing her with a new reason to act that becomes part of her character. She will have a better dispositional set to act out of the best possible reasons, plus an increased awareness of how these reasons affect who she is as a person.

The second form of moral growth I propose is the improvement of the rational deliberative processes that accompany the discovery, understanding, and application of the motivational dispositions that informs a person's actions. Even after Tina's character has been positively transformed by the inclusion of sophisticated reasons not to use her toys as weapons, she will still need to be able to engage these reasons in practice. When faced with a situation in which she has the impulse to act in a certain way, she will have to evaluate the circumstances and her possible reactions to determine whether the reasons she has acquired hold (or not) in those particular circumstances. If she plays "tag" with her sister, so that each takes turns to grab a ball and try to hit the other by tossing it their way, she has to evaluate whether this constitutes or not the kind of infraction she discussed with her mother. She can probably conclude that throwing the ball at her sister within the game is fine, but that there are limits to the ways in which she can legitimately do it. These kind of reasoning processes in which a person considers a situation, their options relative to it, and develops the dispositions to bring the best possible reasons to inform their reactions, is also a part of character.

The models of character education proposed by Curren and Kristjánsson explain what the moral excellences that conform character are, how they become actualized in behavior, and why they can change in time. They provide an understanding of character in which each person has a stable set of dispositions that informs their reasons to act, recognizes the rational process that engages those reasons in practice, and also acknowledges that the contents of these complex motivational clusters can change as a result of the agent's experiences and deliberation. If a person's virtues can gradually move closer to an ideal, the reasons and dispositions out of which they act can certainly improve (in the sense of not only acting out of reasons but learning to act out of the best possible ones). By bringing the concepts of character education together with the language of reason-giving and the second-personal nature of moral life, I am able to explain how the actualization of character looks like in the life of young persons. The notion of interpersonal participation of moral life as fundamental for moral development allows me, in turn, to bring into the conversation the Deweyan concept of growth and outline a proposal about the moral purpose of K-12 education that I develop in Part Three.

Moral growth, in these terms, can be characterized as the ongoing process by which a persons' character improves through their involvement in moral life, either by bringing the dispositional set that motivates their actions increasingly closer to an ideal of excellence, or by improving the rational process through which they engage these dispositions into actual reasons to act. The result of moral growth thus conceived is an increased capacity to morally participate of life, and therefore an increased capacity for further moral growth.

It is important to reiterate that a young person can undergo moral growth in at least two ways: by revising, improving, or expanding the contents of their character, which is a way

of learning to act out of a stable set of high-level dispositions populated by the best possible reasons (to use Darwall's language), and by improving the deliberative processes that accompanies the discovery, understanding, and application of their motivations.<sup>77</sup> Seeing children as independent sources of legitimate moral claims capable requires acknowledging their personhood. Given that, as persons, they have an interest in growing as moral agents, and that they act out of reasons in ways that have present moral import, engaging them second personally to support their processes of moral growth results necessary. As I argue, neglecting this form of address implies adopting an objective stance towards students, as if they were an "object of social policy" (Strawson, 1962/2008, p. 9) Thus, addressing them from an objective stance would cast them as objects of a process in which their motivations are shaped through external forces, and for purposes that lie without them. Such an objective stance, which I characterized in the attitudes of treating students as clients, products, or problems, results in a grave form of disrespect: a failure to take students seriously and a failure to properly respond to their dignity. It is difficult to think of this process as flourishing, as it seems to replace education with training.

Recognizing the personhood of students, then, includes addressing them as members of a moral community. A fundamental argument of my dissertation is that within school, students should be addressed interpersonally. This kind of address involves recognizing that they act in

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<sup>77</sup> Working from another perspective, Bernard Williams (1981) argues for an internalist model for action according to which an agent has reason to act when their reason for action relates to the contents of their "*subjective motivational set*" (p. 102), which includes "such things as dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects, as they may be abstractly called, embodying commitments of the agent" (p. 105). Since Williams acknowledges that the contents of the subjective motivational set can change because of practice and deliberation (pp. 103-104, 108, 110), we could find in this model a different approach that supports a similar understanding of growth related to agency, albeit not necessarily a moral one.

morally relevant ways and that they do as equal, albeit immature, moral agents. Since they are in a stage of life characterized by their ability to revise, evaluate, and improve both their reasons and the rational process they use to inform their actions, school is a privileged space to foster their moral growth through active participation in moral life. As I shall illustrate below, addressing students interpersonally requires acknowledging the full moral weight of their actions and their consequences. It is important to do so in a way that responds *appropriately* to their immaturity, conceived as a necessary condition for growth (Dewey, 1980, pp. 46, 49). It does not require that we abandon the possibility of reasoning with the student because of their youth; rather, it requires addressing them in a way that serves their human interest in growing as a moral agent, which in an educational environment implies doing so in a way that contributes to the ongoing process of moral growth. In short, taking students seriously as moral agents, does not require addressing them without consideration of their needs and characteristics as immature agents. Quite the contrary, it means considering all of these conditions and reacting accordingly.

In the next section I discuss, through examples, the application of my characterization of moral growth in K-12 education. I find it important to show, as clearly as possible, how the application of this way of understanding moral growth is not only possible but valuable when thinking of young persons in an educative space. To do so, I address a contentious issue of school life, in which immaturity and the considerations it deserves are usually matters of debate: how to hold students responsible.

## **4.2. Respect and Responsibility: An Application**

Student responsibility is not only an issue that arises every day in schools, but it is one that is particularly relevant to my project because it involves the kind of difficult situation that results from apparently conflicting intuitions regarding the status of children. I have argued for the need to allow students participate fully in moral life, which includes being held responsible for their actions. Also, and recognizing the developing nature of their rational agency, it does not seem right simply to assert they are to be held responsible in the same way as adults in whom mature moral agency can be presupposed and expected.

In what follows, I discuss this issue in terms of how, and to what effect, students can be addressed interpersonally through the deliberate engagement of their responsibility within school life. The issue of responsibility, and specifically of the extent and manner in which it is just to hold students responsible for their actions, is particularly fertile ground in this sense. Its limits seem to coincide with the apparent dilemma of the personhood of children discussed in Chapter 1: school students can either be treated as rational autonomous agents (adults) and be made to assume responsibility for the consequences of what their actions or, given their youth, they cannot be treated as moral agents, in which case it would make no sense to hold them accountable for their actions. Adults who react to situations in which children have failed to comply with legitimate expectations either hold the children accountable as they would adults or overlook what has happened as largely unintended. The perspective I defend reveals a third alternative in which students are engaged as persons who act in morally relevant ways and whose actions, and interests, are taken seriously.

Think of Joshua, a seven-year-old second-grader, who takes the photographic camera of his homeroom teacher's, Ms. Davies, without her noticing. One of his friends does notice, however, and tells him that taking it constitutes theft, an altogether wrong deed certain to be punished. Faced with this analysis Joshua panics and proceeds, promptly, to bury the camera in the school's sandbox. The camera is soon found and brought to Ms. Davies. Clearly, this situation calls for a response on the part of the teacher. At the age of seven, Joshua's reaction is understandable - I personally find it easy to imagine how he must have felt and why that feeling got him to the 'burial'. Nevertheless, the situation needs to be addressed so that he might come to see that he was wrong both in taking the camera and burying it, and so the experience of making poor decisions and subsequently being found out can positively inform future actions. It is important to notice that by addressing the issue Joshua is being held responsible, which does not mean he has to be mechanically punished. Available alternatives are not limited to an exculpation of the boy nor a blunt intervention through punitive measures to be visited upon him.

There are indeed other constructive ways for Ms. Davies to engage Joshua in reflecting upon his responsibility in the situation and use this process to further Joshua's moral growth. To do this, the young student must be recognized as having moral agency, albeit qualified by his immaturity, lack of knowledge, and inexperience. The teacher might do this by having a conversation with Joshua on his own about how the camera is her property and therefore not his to take, and that it is important to own up to any wrongdoing. Even more, Ms. Davies might work with Joshua to devise ways to repair any damage, which might perhaps involve joining the arduous work of cleaning the camera or doing some fundraising to pay for the camera being



repaired. The immediate value of these strategies is that they will empower Joshua to grow by facing the consequences of his actions, but furthermore it would develop in him an awareness about the effect of his own decisions in the development of his character. Ms. Davies, as an educator, wants to avoid the incident from happening again but, furthermore, she wants to help Joshua *understand* that it is not right to take things that do not belong to you, develop the ability to *properly evaluate* what is right to take and what is not, and *to improve the way he thinks* about his options when he finds himself in trouble. In other words, she is helping Joshua use his experience to develop stable dispositions to act out of the best possible reasons, and to improve the rational process through which he brings these dispositions into practice. What is more, she is doing this by addressing him as an active person in a moral community who has second-personal reasons to act in a certain way towards her (and vice versa) and whose actions are self-actualizing (and thus must be taken seriously).

In summary, it is important that the adult neither ignores the situation nor renounce to his position as an adult and an educator by uncritically apportioning blame and punitive consequences. For an adult to adopt such a position could result in fear, resentment, and other forms of detrimental learning (like the need to dig deeper). On the contrary, properly holding the student responsible can be the respectful option as it recognizes a valuable opportunity to participate with the child in a process that would let him examine what went wrong. How to better do this will probably be a function of the need to improve a certain aspect of the child's character or of the deliberative processes he is using to determine his actions.

A further complication, of course, is that not all students are the same in terms of their maturity, and therefore how educators conceive their responsibility and how they frame it in

terms that allow for such development becomes fundamentally important. David Shoemaker's (2011) understanding of responsibility as answerability and attributability can help us illustrate how responsibility can be addressed in different ways to appropriately enact the larger concern of moral growth described above.<sup>78</sup> Since, according to Darwall, respect demands an appropriate second-personal response to the person who will be affected by our actions, thinking about proper and nuanced ways of attributing responsibility becomes necessary in a discussion about holding students responsible.

To this effect, Shoemaker argues that a truly comprehensive moral theory of responsibility must recognize that an agent can be held responsible both by actions and attitudes for which he can be legitimately expected to produce the evaluative judgements that underlie them as reasons, and those that are reflective of the agent's self even if he cannot reasonably answer for them. With this purpose, he differentiates between attributability, answerability, and accountability to argue that it is wrong to pretend that, in terms of responsibility, both attributability and answerability are always coextensive (Shoemaker, 2011, p. 612). I will only discuss the differences found by Shoemaker between answerability and attributability, as I find the distinction illuminating in the way educators can appropriately engage their students as responsible persons undergoing a formative process.

For Shoemaker (2011), attributability as an aspect of responsibility has to do with "actions and attitudes being properly attributable, or reflective of, the agent's self" (p. 604). He also notes how this former kind of evaluations are in essence *aretaic* appraisals (that is, relative

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<sup>78</sup> Shoemaker produces these accounts as an answer to the model of responsibility he attributes to T.M. Scanlon and is further developed, among others, by Angela Smith.

to an agent's excellence or virtue), as they are "judgements about the morally relevant aspects of an agent's character in light of the agent's attitudes or actions" (pp. 612-613). Answerability, on the other hand, has to do with "the ability to answer for one's actions and attitudes" (p. 612), that is, with the ability to produce the reasons and evaluative judgements that underlies what one does. Importantly for my argument, these distinct forms of understanding responsibility allow for different approaches to the actions of an agent: "So judgements of attributability-responsibility target the character of the agent, whereas judgements of answerability-responsibility target the deliberative, reason-tracking aspects of the agent" (p. 616).

In my use of this distinction, I consider both attributability-responsibility and answerability-responsibility to be *aretaic* appraisals that refer to the character of an agent, following the notion of character as comprehending both the complex set of dispositions to act in a certain way and the ability to bring these dispositions to bear fruits by acting out of reasons (Darwall, 1977, p. 43). In this sense, it would be more precise to qualify answerability as an appraisal of the contents of the dispositional set that informs the character of a person. Attributability, in turn, would be directed at the reasoning process that actualizes those contents in practice.

It is possible, at this point, to explain the relation between respect, responsibility, and the conceptual framework for the moral growth of students *qua* persons. I have argued before that Darwall's distinction between recognition and appraisal respect is relevant to the moral growth of school-age students. Recognition respect for persons implies an adjustment in an agent's actions and attitudes in response to someone's dignity, while appraisal respect is

expressed as a form of moral esteem that has as its object a person's character. Shoemaker defines responsibility in a way that relies on an *aretaic* evaluation of a person's character, because being responsible implies that an action or attitude can be ascribed to its author in a way that makes it appropriate to produce a moral evaluation of them as an agent. This might lead to the misguided impression that in the framework I propose distinct aspects of responsibility can correspond to either recognition or appraisal respect or, even, that responsibility must be exclusively related to the latter given the central role of moral appraisal.

To the contrary, I argue that holding a student responsible in the ways I describe always implies an exercise of recognition respect, as it requires addressing the young person as an agent whose moral life, both present and future, is important. The important thing is to do so in an appropriate way so that it contributes to their moral growth. While appraisal respect is a passive form of moral esteem, recognition respect for persons is an active and practical matter, "something we realize in our treatment of others by regulating our conduct towards them by giving adequate weight to the fact that they are persons" (Darwall, 2015, p. 3). The fact that recognition respect demands that we *appropriately* react to the dignity of another is what makes a nuanced view of responsibility so important, because of the simple and all-important fact that not everyone is the same nor any two situations are identical. Since developing a character that merits appraisal respect is a fundamental human interest of particular importance during the early stages of life, actively and adequately respecting a young person in a way that effectively fosters their moral growth gains further support as a fundamental educational aim.

The distinction between attributability and answerability as two possible approaches to responsibility is highly relevant, then, because it provides a framework to meet students where they are in terms of their moral growth. Students, as immature persons, have a character which is in the process of being shaped. To move this process along you might want to focus on the makeup of the emotional, dispositional, and perceptive motivational set of the child, as when you see the need to address a morally relevant shortcoming that arises from a concern regarding the 'contents' of someone's character. Some other times you would want to concentrate on the rational processes of deliberation through which young persons bring their values, commitments, and motivations to effectively bear upon the world. Both options are relevant to specific aspects of and opportunities for moral growth and allow for an interpersonal engagement with students that appropriately responds to their circumstances and needs.

My arguments about the personhood of students, the possibility of their participation in moral life, and the importance of this participation for their moral growth, can be applied here to support the idea that students can be held responsible for their actions. Furthermore, applying the theoretical framework I have developed means that nuanced distinctions, such as that of attributability and answerability, can make holding them responsible a purposeful exercise of respect towards their interests as growing moral agents.<sup>79</sup> Children, and certainly adolescents, can explore both the explanatory but also the justificatory dimensions of their

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<sup>79</sup> Shoemaker would disagree with this claim. He considers children incapable of giving reason-based accounts of their actions, and therefore engaging them in this kind of analysis would constitute, at most, a form of playacting with educational purposes (Shoemaker, 2011, p. 614).

actions and judgments, and helping them to do so is precisely what makes holding them responsible for their actions meaningful in terms of fostering their moral growth.

If we go back to the example of the buried camera, it makes sense to think that even if Joshua, the young boy of our example, took something valuable that wasn't his without much reflection and responded emotionally to a judgment about that action, it is worthwhile for the adults involved to communicate with him as an agent and explore the reasons that brought him to act as he did. Addressing him as capable of determining his actions and reflecting upon his decisions makes it possible to identify the elements of his reasoning, explore options for his conduct, and reach conclusions that will inform his future judgments. This is not playacting. It is an *actual* conversation about reasons that should have a proleptic effect: it enables Joshua to become more capable of determining his actions in the future.

In other words, we would be engaging the student as a person, taking seriously what they have done, and participating with them in an answerability inquiry into a question in the tenor of "What, and how, were you thinking?". Their responsibility would be established and the teacher's interactions with them would be aimed at the improvement of the deliberative processes that underlie their normative stances. The fact that the child might lack a mature and fixed set of dispositional motivations, a fully mature sense of his extended self, or some other conditions that are usually considered to be trademarks of mature moral agency does not mean that he is without the realm of moral action and reflection. On the contrary, the example shows that he is very much a part of this realm in ways that correspond to who he is *now*.

Attributability, on the other hand, would invite the evaluation of the subjective motivational set of the student, that is, the contents of their character itself. It can be worthy,

then, to talk about attributability to frame conversations that foster moral development in an important sense: we may want to achieve reflection regarding how a person's reasons to act are informed and what that says about the dispositions that constitute their character itself.

To this point, it might be clarifying to think of another similar example and in significant ways distinct from that of the buried camera. This time Abby and Ben, two seventh graders who are about 14 years-old, go through the backpacks of fellow students while they are distracted by playing soccer. In the bags, they find an expensive electronic device which they take, and promptly leave the field. When the unsuspecting players finish their match and find their device missing, someone informs them that they witnessed the seventh graders taking it. The players go looking for these seventh graders. When confronted by the owners of the device, Ben and Abby hide it deeper in their bookbags, refusing to acknowledge the incriminatory evidence. When questioned about these events by their teachers, Ben and Abby lie again with elaborate excuses.

One could say that the two cases are identical in their essential traits: young people take something that isn't theirs, and when confronted with possible consequences they actively choose to hide their involvement. Substantial differences, however, are relevant as they give a different connotation to what happened with the older students, i.e., their ages and expected maturity, much more deliberation on their part, and repeated opportunities to talk about what happened, all of which reveals a relatively sophisticated deliberative process behind their choices. All these details are indeed relevant as they point towards a different concern: as long as the deliberative process seems to be well-structured, the preoccupation now has to do with the contents of the motivational set of the students in question. Talking to teenagers, who are

sufficiently aware of what they are doing and of its possible consequences, would not achieve much if the conversation was limited to asking for explanatory reasons, or to dissect the shortcomings of their justifications. Instead, you probably need to go deeper towards an examination of what kind of reasons are available to them, what this says about their character, and how it informs who they are as persons. Differently to what we proposed when talking about responsibility as answerability, attributability, and the kind of *aretaic* appraisals it conveys would be more directed towards an inquiry into questions such as “Who are you?” and, more importantly, “Who do you want to be?”

In holding students responsible and acknowledging their relative maturity and interests, educators effectively engage them as persons whose actions are morally relevant, and who grow through their active participation as agents. Their immaturity is indeed a relevant factor, not as a condition that requires an objective stance, but as the very condition that allows for moral growth and therefore calls for us to interact with them from a second-personal or interpersonal stance. How educators perceive and relate to their students affects how they approach their educational practice, and what they see as the way in which schools should engage in moral education. My intention with these examples is to show how it is possible and desirable, in practice, to treat students as persons who act in morally relevant ways within the everyday interactions of school life. I have argued that their dignity as persons requires that they be addressed interpersonally. Moreover, addressing them interpersonally is the way to respect the interest they have in growing as moral agents. The final step in the theoretical framework of my dissertation is to see how these considerations about the personhood of



students, the interpersonal stance in schools, and the moral growth of young persons impact the purpose and nature of K-12 schooling.

## **PART THREE: THE SCHOOL**

### **Chapter 5: Dewey on Growth, Community, and the Moral Life**

I began this dissertation with an argument about the importance of recognizing, within K-12 schools, that students are persons. The recognition I propose is based, first and foremost, on an understanding of personhood that's directly related to the dignity of young people and the respect it entails. From this, I moved on to an argument about the educational importance of addressing students from an interpersonal stance based on the need of effectively recognizing the personhood of students in schools. I tied this argument to a second-personal view of moral life which includes the young, especially in the role of students. Then, I proposed an understanding of moral growth that required an interpersonal address and that vindicated moral growth as a central goal for K-12 education.

The final step is to introduce and develop the fourth concept that completes the theoretical framework of my dissertation: the school as a formative community. In this chapter I draw upon John Dewey's philosophy of education to explain in what sense schools are communities and, specifically, what kind of community a school should be to fulfill an educative purpose. This will be mostly an exegetical analysis of Dewey's thought centered around his interdependent conceptions of life, growth, and education, and aimed at the educative and moral aspects of community life. On these grounds I propose an understanding of schools as communities with a deliberate educational purpose, which I qualify as formative.

In Chapter 6 I flesh out the concept of schools as formative communities by enlisting the main concepts developed in the preceding chapters (the personhood of students, the

interpersonal stance in education, moral growth, and schools as formative communities) and argue that the chief purpose of K-12 schools is to foster the moral growth of its students. The practical argument of my dissertation is that, when properly conceived and organized, K-12 schools are ideally equipped to accomplish the fundamental educative aim of fostering the moral growth of K-12 students. In these final chapters I aim to conclude my argument by defining schools as formative communities and vindicating the formative power of schooling, where the moral growth of youth is concerned, as the source of the intrinsic value of K-12 schools.

To develop the concept of school as community I rely on of John Dewey's philosophy of education, mostly as presented in *Democracy and Education* (1980), *Moral Principles in Education* (1975), and *Experience and Education* (2015). Therein Dewey discusses how young people act in ways that are as full of purpose and meaning as the actions of mature adults, and therefore recognize them as active participants of their education.<sup>80</sup> In a sense, he accepts the personhood of children as a natural part of his philosophy of education. If we accept that students are endowed with the dignity of persons and thus deserve to be addressed accordingly, especially regarding their own education, Dewey helps us to frame and answer two remaining questions: what kind of interpersonal engagement is appropriate to address the educational interests of students, both present and future? What kind of place a school should be to facilitate this sort of engagement?

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<sup>80</sup> In the words of Gregory and Granger (2012), "Dewey saw philosophers, scientists, teachers, and school children, all, as agents of self-corrective growth, attempting to extract meaning from novel experience through intelligent thought, feeling, and action" (p. 6).

Dewey's thought will provide the theoretical support for my understanding of formative communities, student participation, and the life of students in school. These concepts will allow me to answer the questions mentioned above through a definition of schools as formative communities in which the moral growth of students is actualized by their personal involvement (i.e., involvement as persons) in school life. In what follows, I begin by discussing Dewey's conceptions of life, growth, and education. I then move to a review of Dewey on community and associated activity, after which I illustrate Dewey's philosophy of education, as presented herein, through a detailed example of a pedagogical practice. Finally, I come back to Dewey on moral growth to show how the school is a privileged environment for the pursuit of this fundamental aim.

### **5.1. Life, Growth, and Education**

Imagine the beginning of the day for a student who arrives to school. They will probably start by sharing some familiar routines: riding the school bus, walking to homeroom, maybe joining an assembly. Nonetheless, every day will be different for everyone because each person brings to school an ever-changing universe of interests and preoccupations. The student you are thinking about will be aware of many things that they want or must do, and intrigued about what else might come their way. Probably they are somewhat happy, bored, and a little worried, all at once. Sometimes the balance of emotions and expectations will tilt towards the positive and some other days it will incline to the negative, so that a certain degree of ambivalence is surely present. The ideal constant, however, is engagement: the student comes to school to *do* things. During the day, with their presence and through their actions, they will have an effect on the people and the things around them: they will listen to their friends and

their teachers; they will talk, argue, and joke with them; participate of games and class activities, and much more. In doing so they will produce ideas and experience emotions, will move things around, will actively and passively change their environment. They will also be changed, sometimes more than others, through all of those interactions: they will be exposed to new ideas, develop and hone skills, exercise their bodies, experience failure and success, revise their feelings and thoughts, challenge their attitudes, etc. Thinking about all that goes on in a school day reminds us, in other words, of a simple but important fact: students go to school to live their lives in it. As mentioned throughout my dissertation, this apparently obvious fact merits emphasis. Every student enters school just as any active adult enters the spaces in which they live their everyday lives. From the perspective of adulthood, it can be tempting to forget that what children do is serious business. It is real. It is their life, and a significant part of it goes on at school.

Indeed, the cases in which we don't imagine a picture of school life defined by student engagement are probably those in which something is significantly wrong. If a student physically arrives at school but is disengaged from what goes on around them, either because they find an environment in which they cannot be active or because they cannot find within themselves the resources (intellectual, emotional, or otherwise) to effectively act upon it, it is hard to imagine that anything of value will happen for them. It is practically impossible to think of an education for a student who comes to school but does not engage with it, surrounded but unable to participate of school life.

Fittingly, Dewey's conception of education relies on the interrelated concepts of life and growth.<sup>81</sup> These concepts require us to appreciate life as much more than a biological fact. Early on *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1980) defines life as a "self-renewing process through action upon the environment." (p. 4). I interpret him to mean that living is an active process that implies constant renewal through the interaction of individuals and their contexts. Since "a living being is one that subjugates and controls for its own continued activity the energies that would otherwise use it up" (p. 4), it is impossible to think of anyone being alive *and* separated from its environment. Life is defined by the ability of the living being to use all the conditions that surrounds them to thrive. Life renews itself, as it tends towards further life.

According to Dewey (1980) the benchmark of this renewal, for us humans, is growth: the resignification of life experience in order to further participate in life and thus keep growing (p. 82). Because being active (being alive) produces renewal, and in the case of humans brings about both personal and social transformation, the tendency towards continual growth is the defying characteristic of life and thus determines the first and most salient purpose of education: "Since growth is the characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself" (p. 58). Education pursues growth, and being alive requires a process of constant self-actualization that Dewey qualifies as educative.

This conception of education has, of course, profound implications for formal schooling. In the closing chapter of *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1980) says of the school that it "must itself be a community life in all which that implies. Social perceptions and interests can

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<sup>81</sup> Dewey seldom defines the concepts he deploys. He often builds these concepts progressively by using them iteratively in different contexts, revealing their essential characteristics and its implications only gradually.

be developed only in a genuinely social medium – one where there is give and take in the building of a common experience.” (p. 368)

Dewey’s description of school as “a community life” is based on the conception of education mentioned above; an ongoing process of growth that happens only through the active interaction between an individual and their environment, both in the material and the social sense. Such an interaction is educative if it expands and deepens future material and social interaction, i.e., if it extends the horizon for further experience. A situation is educative when it creates a “common experience” that gets built through the “give and take” that happens in the context of associated living.<sup>82</sup> The growth of “social perceptions and interests” is provided by the “social medium”: When a person’s material and social interactions with their environment result in their increased capacity to share more fully and broadly in future material and social interactions, then they are undergoing (more precisely, undertaking) an education (Dewey, 1989, p. 195). Note that “experience” is the crucial factor, as education requires active, immediate involvement in the shared activity. This material and social interaction, being a necessary aspect of life, is not limited to schools and is rarely neutral: if it is not educative, it will probably be miseducative. A person is miseducated when the material and social interaction forecloses on possible future interactions or narrows considerably their future ability to profit from experience (Dewey, 1980, p. 88; 2015, p. 25).

In summary, Dewey’s philosophy of education defines life, growth, and education, so that each term cannot be conceived without the other two: life is a process of self-renewal that

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<sup>82</sup> The concept of association, although not mentioned in the quote above, is an important Deweyan term of art. What it takes for association to exist in this sense will be discussed further in section 5.2.

happens through action of the individual upon the environment (and vice versa). As life tends to renew itself, its fundamental characteristic is growth. Growth, then, is the increased capacity to profit from future experience of the individual in the environment, so that further growth is possible. Education, in turn, is “the enterprise of supplying the conditions which insure growth, or adequacy of life, irrespective of age” (Dewey, 1980. p. 56), a process of continued growth that sustains life by constantly leading into the future.<sup>83</sup>

It is important to remember that Dewey defines education, broadly, as the means for the renewal of both individual and social life (Dewey, 1980, pp. 4-5). Life, for humans at least, is both an individual and social phenomenon that goes well beyond biological survival. In renewing themselves, individuals also renew and thus give new life to the groups they belong to.<sup>84</sup> We can thus speak of the life of a family, an institution, or even society at large. School, in this context, is introduced as an environment designed to foster educational experiences (a concept that will be developed in the following sections). Since continuation of life is not only individual but social, and it necessarily happens within a context that includes social interactions, the next step is to consider the role of community and associated activity in Dewey’s philosophy of education.

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<sup>83</sup> For an excellent exegesis on Dewey’s conception of growth, experience, and education, including an original interpretation of the ways these concepts can be embodied in different sorts of organized community life, see Villacañas de Castro, 2021.

<sup>84</sup> See Campbell (2016) for an overview of Dewey’s conceptualization of education in *Democracy of Education* that addresses both the definition of education as individual growth and the social effect of education.



## 5.2. Community and Meaning in Associated Activity

An important implication of accepting the Deweyan concepts of life, growth, and education, is that it results impossible to educate in isolation. If we are to follow Dewey, education happens through the experience of the person in their environment, and thus the environment becomes the fundamental educative mean: “We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment. Whether we permit chance environments to do the work, or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference” (Dewey, 1980, p. 23). Thoroughly thinking about the environments in which the young are educated (mainly the school) and how students come to be truly connected to them becomes necessary for anyone who has an interest in education.<sup>85</sup> To better understand how a student can participate of school life, it is important to further discuss what Dewey means by education through the environment, to clearly define associated activity in a Deweyan sense, and to discuss its relation to communication and meaning.

The starting point is that, as mentioned above, the connection between each individual and their environment clearly implies that life cannot happen in isolation. Life is both active and social; an associated activity of shared experience (Dewey, 1980, p. 93). The importance of this double condition is that, as a person develops an increasing capacity to profit from future interactions with their environment through living in association with others, they renew the group they belong to as they renew themselves within it. Education, thus, can only happen

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<sup>85</sup> Luis Villacañas de Castro (2021) introduces a distinction between education and growth in Dewey (p. 98) according to which growth is ontological while education is formal and historical. My understanding on this point is different, but Villacañas de Castro’s distinction offers an interesting approach to school as a formal environment designed to promote growth.

through associated activity and it is also “the means of this social continuity of life” (Dewey, 1980, p. 5).

Life, in this vein, is not only what happens to one individual: “We use the word “life” to denote the whole range of experience, individual and racial (...) “Life” covers customs, institutions, beliefs, victories and defeats, recreations and occupations.” (Dewey, 1980, p. 5). This idea insinuates another major purpose of education: to bring students into the inherited experience of humanity so that, within the limited time of their existence, they can participate of the human project at large, not only in name or biology but in shared experience. Education, then, is not only crucial for the individual but also to their group: “In directing the activities of the young, society determines its own future in determining that of the young ... This cumulative movement of action toward a later result is what is meant by growth” (Dewey, 1980, p. 46).

The process of directing that Dewey mentions, however, is not one of external imposition. “Directing” is not a matter of one person, one group, or a set of conventions, dictating how or why another person should act, but of inviting the order proper to a group of people who act together towards a common goal. This order comes from the sense of responsibility experienced by a person who shares a purpose with others (Dewey, 2015, p. 54). Association implies, for Dewey, that the purpose and meaning driving a joint activity are shared by those who participate of it. Interestingly, then, two individuals acting together in ways that contribute to bring about a result are not necessarily joined in associated activity: if each one of them is doing what they do out of motives that are not shared by the other, each is doing their own thing; they are very much on their own even if the effects of their actions come together

and produce something as a byproduct. What makes an activity properly associated is shared meaning: the shared purpose that gives a direction to what someone does.<sup>86</sup>

Dewey (1980) is aware of the need to understand the kind of association he has in mind when he describes what he thinks necessary to provoke it:

Setting up conditions which stimulate certain visible and tangible ways of acting is the first step. Making the individual a sharer or partner in the associated activity so that it feels its success as his success, its failure as his failure, is the completing step. (p. 18).

Here, Dewey identifies a two-step procedure. The first is to begin with sharing or partnering in the associated activity. It is this sharing or partnering in the activity that leads to the second or completing step, namely a level of investment in the activity's success or failure. If I share responsibility for the activity, then I share in its outcome.

In other words, individuals do not receive an education, they participate in it. In education, a person cannot remain passive, nor share or partner in activities in a mechanical way. The "associated activity" required for an educative experience is both active, as it requires doing something of practical import, and purposeful, as opposed to one of mechanical contribution. Further fleshing out the example sketched above, if someone is enlisted to help build a wall by mindlessly passing bricks in the way a machine would, without knowledge or care for the reasons and effect of their efforts, they are not taking part of a shared experience in the sense intended by Dewey. The same can be said of the elementary school student who mechanically repeats the multiplication tables until they are committed to memory, or the high

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<sup>86</sup> In *Experience and Nature* Dewey (1929) says that "Persons and things must alike serve as means in a common, shared consequence. This community of partaking is meaning" (p. 185). Meaning, then, is an important term of art in Deweyan philosophy, necessary to fully appreciate his understanding of associated activity and participation as discussed presently.

school senior who complies by mastering certain test-taking skills so that they can optimize their results on a standardized test for which they do not care.

A clear example of educative associated activity built upon the two steps described by Dewey is provided by Thomas James (2007) in his essay *A Dewey School Episode* (pp. 80-91). Having been forcibly severed from ordinary school life by a broken leg, he was fully reintegrated to school activity by an invitation from Chucky Ford, the man in charge of the ball room. Mr. Ford asked the injured boy to assist him in his work at “the logistical center of the school” (p. 86). He was thus invited to participate of the heart of the school’s operation, guaranteeing constant and purposeful interaction with students, teachers, and staff (the first step described by Dewey). Furthermore, his mentor at this post made sure that he was aware of the importance of what they did and feel ownership of the consequences of their work (the second step). James conveys the idea that, through the invitation to be active and to share the meaning of his activity, he was moved from the margins into a meaningful space from which he advanced his schoolwork and simultaneously received an education in economy, logistics, and pedagogy. More importantly, he experienced human kindness and the possibility to connect with others in ways that had a powerful impact in his life and, therefore, in those around him.<sup>87</sup> The sharing of meaning that conduces to associated living, in this example, is also a reminder of the educational value of every school interaction in which the mutual and effective recognition of people, their needs, and their capacities, leads to the building of a true community.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> To use the language introduced in previous chapters, I believe that the way Mr. Ford addressed young Professor James is exemplar of the interpersonal stance and its effect on moral growth.

<sup>88</sup> In “How Are Educators Teaching What Really Matters for Developing Lifelong Learning in our Students?”, Theresa Udziela (2017) provides many other excellent examples of educative experiences articulated around this two-step process in schools through service education. She describes ‘service’ as an active and purposeful activity,

This is a practical example of the value and feasibility of Dewey's theory, and one that clarifies the requirements of associated activity. It requires active participation, a common understanding of the context in which the action takes place, and a shared sense of purpose and responsibility between those who act together. Dewey (1980) writes:

To have the same ideas about things which others have, to be like-minded with them, and thus to be really members of a social group, is therefore to attach the same meanings to things and to acts which others attach. Otherwise, there is no common understanding, and no community life. But in shared activity, each person refers what he is doing to what the other is doing and *vice-versa*. (p. 35)

Shared meaning, understood as the holding in common of intention and purpose, is then the defining feature of "community life". Dewey's understanding of meaning is therefore of the utmost importance to understand his conception of "community life", which is the way in which he now refers to the associated activity that defines a social group.

Another important concept directly related to this issue is "communication". For Dewey, communication is the process through which people come to hold things in common, and thus become a community (Dewey, 1980, p. 7). Communication and meaning require each other: "Where communication exists, things in acquiring meaning, thereby acquire representatives, surrogates, signs and implicates, which are infinitely more amenable to management, more permanent and more accommodating, than events in their first state." (Dewey, 1929, p. 167). The exceptional nature of communication (Dewey, 1929, p. 166) allows for humans to completely change their relation to each other and the world: because of it, people can

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carried out for the benefit of others, that can be carried out even by the youngest of school students. Udziela explicitly advises that "for the service to be educative, it is important that children fully understand what the final result is" (p. 57). Although she does not refer to Dewey in her argument, I find the kind of experiences she describes clearly fit within this theoretical model.

intelligently use what lies around them, but furthermore can share this experience with others and through time. Communication depends first, and foremost, on the endowment of meaning as a shared and stable understanding that enriches its object by allowing a completely different interaction with it. But what is gained goes beyond intelligent and coordinate use; the major consequence is that shared meaning is the defining quality of shared activity that allows the “holding in common” required for communities to exist. Participation understood as shared activity through shared meaning appears as the fundamental bond of community life:

“Significance resides not in the bare fact of association, therefore, but in the consequences that flow from the distinctive patterns of human association ... The significant consideration is that assemblage of organic human beings transforms sequence and coexistence into participation” (Dewey, 1929, p. 175). This passage reveals the importance of the concept of participation in Dewey’s philosophy of education, as it qualifies the nature of the shared activity necessary for an educative interaction between persons and their social environment.

The shared meaning that is constitutive of community life is practical and motivating. It is not limited to a fixed, ideal coupling of object and concept.<sup>89</sup> As anticipated by the link between communication and meaning, the latter requires an active and practical engagement with the world so that “Meaning is not indeed a psychic existence; it is primarily a property of behavior, and secondarily a property of objects” (Dewey, 1929, p. 179). It requires purposeful associated activity upon the environment: “Primarily meaning is intent and intent is not personal in a private and exclusive sense ... Secondarily, meaning is the acquisition of

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<sup>89</sup> See Garrison (2013) for an in-depth discussion of the importance and nature of meaning-making from a Deweyan perspective on the unity of theory and practice.

significance by things in their status in making possible and fulfilling shared cooperation”  
(Dewey, 1929, p. 180).

The consequence is that associated activity builds a community based on the sharing of a common goal or, in Deweyan terms, a common interest, which he defines as “the depth of the grip which the foreseen end has upon one in moving to act for its realization” (Dewey, 1980, p. 137).<sup>90</sup> The ideal consequence of shared activity in the pursuit of common interests is the further expansion of the meaning of experience, because it “is the reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience” (Dewey, 1980, p. 82). Just as growth should aim at more growth, associated activity should aim at more associated activity. If human activity is not meaningful (i.e., full of meaning), then it cannot build community and further the horizons of shared experience.<sup>91</sup>

### **5.3. Education Through School Life**

#### ***5.3.1. School Life as an Educative Experience***

Examples of pedagogical practices are a good way of seeing how the communication of a shared meaning is both community-building and educative. Importantly for my argument, such an example can also show how associated living can happen within classrooms, so that school can fulfill its purpose as an educational environment.

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<sup>90</sup> A “Dewey School Episode” (James, 2007) also provides an example of the educational power of sharing an interest with another.

<sup>91</sup> In “Sympathy in John Dewey’s Theory of Community: Presenting a Challenge to Anti-Democratic Communities”, Sam Stack Jr. (2020) discusses the importance of sympathy in Dewey’s work and its relation to democracy as a way of associated living (pp. 34-37). Both of these topics are central to the idea of associated living through shared experience but lie without the scope of my inquiry.

In the case of one of the students mentioned earlier to exemplify how rote memorization does not constitute participation, a boy will be active while learning multiplication if he can come to share the logic of talking about one number times another. Multiplication tables may remain useful to codify this understanding and the empowerment that comes with it, but memorizing them does not guarantee an educative outcome. Observing the implied difference between memorization and learning, and the ways and scenarios in which the latter result may come to happen, can illustrate the concepts described before. The example of learning to multiply can reveal the nature and importance of communication according to Dewey, the nature of associated living and the role of shared meaning in it, the ways this sort of activity connects the individual with their social context, and also how this kind of association can occur at both an individual and group level.

In my case, when I was in elementary school (the third grade, if memory serves me well) I remember growing increasingly frustrated as I failed to do my homework: I could not “learn” some of the multiplication tables, no matter how hard I tried. My older sister tried everything to help, but we only had a breakthrough when she remarked, almost in passing, how the table of ten was the easiest because it just required moving the number you were working with from the “ones” position to the “tens”. In this, I recognized a concept I had worked over in class, and suddenly I could “see” what it meant to multiply something ten times over. Afterwards, the nine times table flowed easily: It was like multiplying by ten but keeping one of the times away, that is, adding one number less to the total. Talking to my sister made me understand, right there, that multiplication is a form of addition... and the problem was solved.



Note how, in this example, the conversation remained quite abstract. Learning was made possible not by making the task more concrete, but by finding a common point of shared understanding in which the meaning of the relevant abstractions was clear to both parties, and thus we were able to build more meaning upon the shared one. These are the features of an *actual* conversation among persons and illustrates clearly what communication is in a Deweyan sense (the coming to hold something in common). Associated living is thus educative inasmuch as it enriches experience by using one shared meaning to produce new ones, which in turn will allow for further shared experiences.

Such associated activity, and the communication that goes with it, can happen not only between two individuals but within social groups, including K-12 classrooms. I was able to share meaning with my sister because I had learned about place value (the value of a digit due to its position within a number) in my math class, which was purposefully designed as an environment where participation, as I am using the term, was the norm. It was difficult for my teacher to engage in individual conversations with each of us as my sister did, but she was aware of the kind of engagement she should pursue to build an educative environment. My teacher would present us with a problem, discuss possible solutions, and then explain us the concepts that she used to solve it. Then she broke us into smaller groups and gave us the task of coming up with examples that could demonstrate the principle. After a few minutes, she would break up the groups and form new ones (I now realize that the grouping was purposeful) and have us discuss new examples that would be presented to the whole class. My teacher's planning produced an environment suitable for associated activity (as per Dewey), in which a

common task was undertaken by a group and its consequences equally shared by all its members.

This method, and many others like it, remind us how there are many ways in which students can come to possess common understandings with each other, as well as their teacher, and how the school is a particular community in which this sort of associated activity is not only possible but necessary. Every member of the class was invited to share of the meaning of the tasks that were the matter of her lessons. The explanation of the teacher gave the class a common understanding to work with, and the open-ended task provided a meaningful purpose to be pursued through collaborative work. I don't pretend to argue that the implementation of this method was flawless, and I realize I recall it fondly because I was able to join the conversation. Surely some members of the class needed further support or struggled to follow and join the discussion.<sup>92</sup> What this example shows is that it is possible to conceive of a classroom that is defined by participation and thus aims to function as a community.<sup>93</sup>

As per how shared activity connects the individual with a much larger context, it is important to consider how it is at least possible (if highly unlikely) that the students in my mathematics class could have come to their understanding of place value or multiplication by themselves. However, it is substantially better to reach it through the shared experience of

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<sup>92</sup> In ““Why I am not a Painter”: Developing an Inclusive Classroom” Cara Furman (2015) provides an excellent narrative argument for the need of inclusive practices in building educative communities that honor students. As Furman’s analysis demonstrates, the inclusion of all students is a central part of any discussion about schools as communities, and requires honoring their different interests and abilities.

<sup>93</sup> Mathematics seems to be a relatively easy subject matter to produce an example in which shared meaning is unproblematic. It is valuable, however, to see how community building through participation should be a concern in every classroom. For a discussion on the challenges of discussing moral and political issues in classrooms, see “Ethics for Moral Fundamentalists” (Fesmire, 2019). Fesmire’s preoccupations seem to be very close to those in Dewey’s mind, as they vindicate the educative aim of promoting the sort of participation described above.

associated activity, not only because of the efficiency that makes the continuation of human knowledge possible, but because of the effect it has in the growth of both individuals and society. In Dewey's terms, the isolated discovery of the principles of multiplication by a solitary genius would be, literally, meaningless. Learning with someone who already understands how multiplication works is one of the many ways in which the young become part of a culture, a family, a society. Both parties are transformed by the experience and thus produce a result beyond the mathematical ability of one more kid: they further the ties that bind them together and build bridges to establish more in the future. This is how a group of people effectively turns into a community.

As explained so far, according to Dewey (1980) "Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common" (p. 7). The central common possession that constitutes community is, fundamentally, the shared understanding of aims, beliefs, aspirations, and knowledge that transforms a multitude of individuals into members of a cohesive group (see. Dewey, 1929, p. 175). Communication is the way in which new members of a community become themselves *as* they become part of the social groups they belong to, a fact that Dewey (1929) finds almost miraculous: "that the fruit of communication should be participation, sharing, is a wonder by the side of which transubstantiation fails" (p. 166).

For Dewey, then, education is necessarily a social process that requires the child actively experience belonging to diverse communities: "The principle that development of experience comes about through interaction means that education is essentially a social process. This

quality is realized in the degree in which individuals form a community group” (Dewey, 2015, p. 58).

### **5.3.2. School as Environment**

Children have a clear understanding of this feature of experience. Ask any child about the value of their games, and you will find that they might be aware of the differences between what they do and the activities of an adult (they surely know that their playing to be a nurse, a mother, or an airline pilot is ‘pretend’), but they will not see this fact as something that diminishes its merit. Furthermore, the child has a role within the family which includes specific responsibilities, privileges, and all the other charges that come with being a member of a group. Even the youngest K-12 student has a role within the institution, and through it they have an impact in their school. They can enjoy and value a form of communion with the activity of those around them, and I think they are right; if you press the point of whether what they do is relevant in a “real” sense, I realize you could sooner push a stockbroker or a software engineer into nihilism than you would an active child. Dewey explains clearly why this is the case: In doing what they do, the young are living their lives within a community and thus growing as persons. The value of the activity is present even as it lays the ground for the future (Dewey, 1980, pp. 60-61), because it is not conditioned to the achievement of a future state of maturity. As he explains it in the quote that features as the epigraph for this dissertation,

Since life means growth, a living creature lives as truly and positively at one stage as at another, with the same intrinsic fullness and the same absolute claims. Hence education means the enterprise of supplying the conditions which insure growth, or adequacy of life, irrespective of age. (Dewey, 1980, p. 56)

In bringing together the concepts of life, education, and growth, Dewey explains how by acting on the environment each person changes it and is changed in return. Furthermore, by actively

participating in the associated activity of their community, the otherwise independent persons come to share in the aims and values of this group. Through acting within the environment with shared intention and purpose, which Dewey conceptualizes as meaning, the individual becomes a member of a community.

The concept of environment deserves, then, special attention in the context of formal K-12 education. Since students go to school with the express purpose of receiving an education, this is the environment in which we expect them to live their lives. If schools are to educate, they must do so by means that involve the student as an active participant of associated activity as described above. Dewey makes a straightforward admonition in this regard:

We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment. Whether we permit chance environments to do the work, or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference (...) schools remain, of course, the typical instance of environments framed with express reference to influencing the mental and moral disposition of their members (Dewey, 1980, p. 23)

Two ideas come from this description of education through the environment. First, educating through the environment is certainly coherent with the idea that education is not something that can be done *to* a student: If being alive is the process of growing within one's environment, of purposefully changing and being changed by it, and growth is the benchmark of an effective education, then education is a matter of living actively and with purpose. Since the environment is not only physical but also social, it prominently includes the relationships we share with those with whom we hold a common sense of meaning, and thus education happens through associated living.

Secondly, school is an institution purposefully designed to produce this kind of educative environment structured around a shared meaning.<sup>94</sup> The content of this idea of “educative” as conducing to growth has been sufficiently explained, but it is always good to be reminded of the importance of an environment specifically devoted to this purpose. It is by tending to the school environment that it is possible to shape school life and thus educate.<sup>95</sup>

As discussed extensively when revising the condition that made paternalism both necessary and a just expression of respect for young persons, there are reasons why the participation of children and adolescents of many spaces of social life are qualified and limited. As an example, and even though specific circumstances can differ, it is common that the young are not allowed to vote, not expected to make medical decisions, and not held responsible under criminal law as an adult would. As explained in Part One and based on my proposed reading of Darwall’s conception of respect, these limitations do not require a relativization of the personhood of K-12 students.<sup>96</sup> To the contrary, they are an expression of respect to the dignity of young persons, who have a particular set of needs and interests and thus calls for an appropriate response.

Thinking of the school as an environment for their growth is a significant part of this response: a place in which students can be treated seriously as (immature) persons who grow through their active and meaningful participation in school life. The alternative, to think of

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<sup>94</sup> This is the sense in which I understand Stengel’s (2016) claim that “The first thing required of educators, *pace* Dewey, is that purpose be afforded the same time and attention as any tactical or strategic consideration.” (p. 228).

<sup>95</sup> Although Dewey’s work on education is frequently associated with elementary school, I find it applies to all K-12 students. For a discussion how Dewey’s thought includes secondary school, see Wraga, 2020.

<sup>96</sup> See Chapter 2.1.

school life as a simulacrum in which the young pretend to make decisions, engage in projects, pursue interests and relationships, and all the other things that constitute life, would make this growth impossible. It would require focusing on the development of skills, devoid of present meaning, as a form of training for a future that constitutes “real life”. It is, in the end, a severance of the conditions of social life within the school with those without by assuming that only adult activity has the conditions to be considered a life. Being a student in a K-12 school organized as a formative community implies adopting a specific role (student) within a community (the school) and thus be recognized as persons who acts meaningfully. This belonging allows for the experience of associated living necessary to develop mature moral agency (Dewey, 1975, p. 40).

#### **5.4. The Moral Dimension of Education**

Another important feature of Dewey’s philosophy of education is his understanding of the moral nature of education. Dewey’s vision of the moral life is grounded on the rejection of the duality that breaks the inner and outer dimensions of human activity, unduly separating motive and purpose from the means through which they are realized and the consequences that follow them. Dewey (1980) conceives action as a continuous process that includes both decision-making and its enactment (p. 357), a back and forth between mind and the world. Being active means finding a reason to act and methodically readjusting oneself to bring about a foreseen result within uncertain circumstances (p. 358). This view of life implies a rejection of moral theories in which morality is either “an inner state of mind or the outer acts and results” (p. 356). The inconsistent application of such systems leads to the establishment of an ordinary morality that seeps into community life, including the classroom, as demands for ineffectual

well-meaning and mindless rule-following (pp. 360, 367). Neither of these expectations produce any sort of educative effect, as they can only be satisfied without involving the will of the person in any significant way. They can, at best, produce a sort of moral literacy that separates discernment from actual life, and thus can hardly be considered as moral growth.<sup>97</sup>

Educative activities, to the contrary, necessarily involve a moral dimension. Growth requires developing attitudes and inclinations that impact a person's life within their community. David Hansen provides great clarity on how this sort of contribution to associated living can look like by qualifying the traits that allow for growth (in the Deweyan sense) as "moral qualities". According to Hansen (2006), these Deweyan moral qualities are: (i) open-mindedness, "the willingness to consider the new and the unfamiliar" (p. 170); (ii) wholeheartedness, the commitment of the will to join others and bring a project to fruition; (iii) responsibility, the willingness to assume the consequences of one's commitment and the desire to provoke the best possible outcome; and (iv) directedness, which Hansen describes as the "attitude that is worthwhile addressing problems rather than being resigned to them" (p. 170). In this exegesis, Hansen illustrates how Dewey describes the moral attitudes that are both the characteristic features and goals of growth. Hansen's classification is of help to better understand how Dewey conceptualizes moral growth as part of his understanding of growth and moral life: Just as the purpose of growth is further growth, the open-minded, devoted,

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<sup>97</sup> Dewey (1980) describes these lessons as "lessons about morals", a sterile learning about "what other people think about virtues and duties" (p. 364). This is also a central distinction in *Moral Principles in Education*, which he begins with a distinction between moral ideas and ideas about morals (Dewey, 1975, p. 1). Importantly, I realize this emphasis on the meaningful engagement of a person's will grounds the use of the language of reason-giving that I invoke through Darwall's moral philosophy.



responsible, and direct person is ideally equipped and disposed to further develop all these desirable moral traits.

The moral nature of growth is further explained by Dewey through the rejection of yet another duality: the artificial separation between duty and interest, which follows what he qualifies as a false understanding of the relation between interest and the self. This misunderstanding supports the idea that to act on principle is a synonym for acting disinterestedly, and thus acting out of interest implies acting for selfish reasons (as opposed to principles). Dewey rejects this formulation by claiming that a person can hardly act in a certain way unless they have an interest in doing so: a person always acts out of interest, but this does not imply selfishness.<sup>98</sup> To the contrary, Dewey's understanding of interest is clearly connected to the idea of responsibility, understood as a double attitude that includes a regard for the future consequences of actions and events (Dewey speaks of "solicitude, anxiety") and a commitment to strive for the best possible outcomes (Dewey, 1980, p. 131; Hansen, 2006, p. 171). In Chapter 2 I discuss the idea that a fundamental interest of the young is to develop the skills and abilities proper of mature, autonomous, and rational agents, and then further developed this claim through the notion of moral growth as an ongoing process by which a person improves their character, better participates in moral life, and thus continuously grows as a moral agent deserving of appraisal respect. Here we can see that this statement also holds true in a Deweyan sense: Persons are agents who act within their social environment and are

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<sup>98</sup> For a discussion of the cultivation of the moral self as a non-egotistical ethical practice, see James, 2016, pp. 45-46.

naturally invested in the development and improvement of their character, which bears fruit in their improved engagement in social life.

This investment in the actualization of one's disposition to act out of the best possible reasons, and to improve the process of effectively producing these reasons, reveals Dewey's assertion that the self is not finished and monolithic, but "something in continuous formation through choice and action" (Dewey, 1980, p. 361). A person acts out of interests and thus constantly inform themselves through their actions. In this sense, "self and interest are two names for the same fact; the kind and amount of interest actively taken in a thing reveals and measures the quality of selfhood which exists." (Dewey, 1980, pp. 361-362). In "Practicing Courage in a Communal Key" Barbara Stengel (2018) presents a Deweyan view of character as the "self of a higher order". According to Stengel, character advances through a process of rationalization, socialization, and self-actualization through reflection, valuation, and criticism upon one's own conduct (2018, p. 221). The measurement of "the quality of selfhood" mentioned above coincides with the reflective part of the process and evokes the idea of appraisal respect which object is, precisely, the character of a person.

A person, then, can be unselfish not in the sense of renouncing interest, but by being able to effectively recognize that human interest tends towards social cooperation (as opposed to isolation). "As employed everywhere outside of this particular theoretical controversy, the term "unselfishness" refers to the kinds of aims and objectives which habitually interest a man" (Dewey, 1980, p. 362). This are characterized by "two intimately associated features":

- (i) The generous self consciously identifies itself with the *full* range relationships implied in it is activity, instead of drawing a sharp line between itself and considerations which are excluded as alien or indifferent; (ii) it readjusts and expands its *past* ideas of itself to take in new consequences as they become perceptible (p. 362)

These two characteristics of unselfishness coincide with those of Deweyan educative associated activity: They are widening both in the sense of furthering ties of social awareness and collaboration, and of being transformative for the person who through them becomes increasingly able to partake of the world, even in ways they had not foreseen as part of their identity.

As long as these two conditions are met, Dewey (1980) considers the results of growth to be moral. Moral growth is, for Dewey, the one that transforms the self through associated participation of the world so that the person who undergoes it is increasingly connected to their environment and invested in its advancement: “The moral and the social quality of conduct are, in the last analysis, identical to each other” (p. 368) because “The something for which a man must be good is capacity to live as a social member so that what he gets from living with others balances with what he contributes” (p. 369).

Everything in the educative environment of the school should contribute to further moral growth (in Deweyan terms), and thus Dewey describes “the moral trinity of the school” that is necessary to make its educative promise real: “The demand is for social intelligence, social power, and social interests. Our resources are (1) the life of the school as a social institution itself; (2) methods of learning and of doing work; and (3) the school studies or curriculum” (Dewey, 1975, p. 43). By defining the purpose of the school as fostering “social interest, social power, and social interest”, I take Dewey to be reinforcing his socially oriented conception of the moral purpose of education. Indeed, a major risk for schooling is losing from sight the true purpose of education: “There is the standing danger that the material of formal instruction will be merely the subject matter of the schools, isolated from the subject matter of

life-experience. The permanent social interests are likely to be lost from view.” (Dewey, 1980, p. 11). The social life of the school, its plans to structure academic contents and facilitate its meaningful study, and the pedagogical tools they will use to do so, are the trinity of resources that come together in the school and allow for it to pursue this ultimate formative goal.

Simply put, insofar as education is aimed at the improvement of the conditions of social life it is necessarily moral and realized in every aspect of school life. Any result of experience within the school, academic or otherwise, that cuts a person from society or that drives them to reduce themselves to finished products unable to grow further is, in this light, miseducative and morally wrong.

## **5.5. Conclusion**

Having defined education in terms of growth, John Dewey’s philosophy of education explains the nature of associated activity and the necessity of active participation in social life in order to undertake an education. Within this perspective, the importance of organizing schools as communities that provide an educative environment to the young is asserted as a mechanism to foster the moral growth of children and adolescents. A fundamental aspect of this philosophy has to be, necessarily, how we recognize and engage those around us, so that each interaction moves those involved forward in the process of moral growth. In this view, school is a group of persons held together by a shared recognition of each other’s dignity and a commitment to honor it through education. The school environment is everything that allows this purpose to be fulfilled. Since “The young live in some environment constantly interacting with what the young bring to it, and the result is the shaping of their interests, minds and characters – either educatively or mis-educatively” (Dewey, 1989, p.200) it is of the utmost

importance to recognize that school environment can also hinder moral growth if the meaning of schooling is relegated away from practice.

In the next chapter, I will move my argument forward by applying Dewey's conception of education in terms of the personhood of students: education should provide the conditions that ensure the cultivation of their agency and their character, that is, their moral growth. I have argued that the achievement of this end requires recognizing the personhood of students, a claim that reflects Dewey's understanding of the kind of participation necessary for growth. If this is true, K-12 schools need to be places that invite students to be active members of school life who actualize their character through their engagement with the (educative) environment. Furthermore, school-as-community can be vindicated, from a Deweyan perspective, as the ideal place for the sort of moral growth I describe in Chapter 4.

In this sense, students the moral equal of adults, both in terms of their dignity and because their actions have present moral import (as explained in the preceding chapters). I will argue that it is by exercising their agency within the educative environment of the school and reflecting upon this exercise, i.e., by participating in the moral life of the school, that they become increasingly capable of participating in the shared moral life of the community at large. So, even though their roles will keep changing through their whole life, they are members of their community from the get-go. Formal education, and K-12 schooling in particular, needs to make an explicit commitment to the personhood of students and to develop their personhood through having them participate in school community. To ignore the personhood of students is to impede their participation in a community of students and educators who share moral life in the pursuit of moral growth.

## Chapter 6: The School as Formative Community

In the preceding chapters I discussed the concepts of the personhood of students, the interpersonal stance, moral growth, and the characterization of K-12 schools as communities based on John Dewey's philosophy of education. In doing so, I argued for the importance of recognizing K-12 school students as persons. I claimed this recognition is fundamental to the moral growth of school students, which is a crucial educative end of schools.

Having defined schools as communities with an educative purpose and asserted the moral dimensions of growth, it is possible to bring these ideas together to argue for the unique value of K-12 schools, when properly conceived and organized. This exercise is both deeply philosophical and of pressing practical relevance, as it aims to provide guidance through clarity about the most fundamental questions of schooling: What is it that schools do that no other institutions (e.g., the family, sport clubs, or online instructional sites) do? What goods can be provided by schools that are inherently related to their educational nature and structure, so that they are better positioned to provide them than any other social organization or institution? In simple terms, why do we need schools?

John Dewey's philosophy of education, and in particular his understanding of growth and the educative effect of social life, provide the groundwork to conceptualize schools as formative communities deliberately designed to foster the moral growth of students. By properly understanding the participation of students in school life as the mean for achieving this end, it is possible to qualify their everyday activity as the moral life of students. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to flesh out the definition of schools as formative communities,

and to vindicate the intrinsic value of K-12 schools based on their aim of fostering the moral growth of students.

It is in this context that the importance of addressing students as persons whose actions are morally significant, both in an immediate and in a formative sense, is revealed. When applied to schooling, Dewey's conception of education invites a vision of the school as a community that recognizes its students as actively involved participants. In this sense, the school is a medium that makes it possible for students to actively engage with their ever-expanding material and social environment. In other words, Dewey's understanding of education allows for a definition of school as an educative environment; a community that includes the students who live much of their lives in them. When a student's material and social interactions at school result in their increased capacity to participate more fully and broadly in future material and social interactions, then the student is undertaking an education (Dewey, 1989, p. 195). Only under this condition can school life be a truly educative experience.

Making these points and its implications easy to appreciate, understand, and discuss has a practical effect on schooling. This sort of conceptual work is indeed necessary to produce clarity about the formative aims of school and, importantly, the way these aims should be realized through the shared moral life of teachers and students in K-12 schools. Following Dewey, a common sense of purpose is necessary to direct the many individual decisions that come together in associated living. If shared meaning is indeed to guide school at such a fundamental level, these guiding concepts need to be explicit and transparent.<sup>99</sup> This way of

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<sup>1</sup> I discuss the concept of meaning in Dewey's philosophy of education and its relationship with a common sense of purpose in Chapter 5.

thinking about school life leads us to think of schools as formative communities, and it is from this basic (although complex) concept that the theoretical framework proposed herein can structure the decision making that occurs at all levels of school life, from the (all-important) daily interactions of teachers and students to the policy-making that supports them.

I'll begin, then, by honing the definition of school as a formative community, and further explore what it means to think of school life in terms of the moral life of students. After illustrating this argument with an example, I conclude with a discussion on how moral growth, as a foundational purpose of formal education, supports the current value of K-12 schools both for society and for individual persons.

## **6.1. Participation in School Communities: The Moral Life of Students**

### ***6.1.1. Qualifying School Communities as Formative***

In Chapter 5, I proposed the deceptively simple notion that students go to school to live their lives in it. This idea was elaborated in richer terms by drawing upon Dewey's philosophy of education: K-12 school students live their lives by actively participating in associated living within the community of the school.

Thinking of schools as communities, and qualifying them as "formative", flows easily from the application of Dewey's ideas to the inquiry that motivates this dissertation. Community, as per Dewey, is a group of people brought together by a common sense of purpose, that is, an active and mindful commitment to a shared end that enlists their interests and directs their actions. Since the purpose of K-12 schooling is, and should be, the education of the young, organizing schools as communities that actively include students as participants (as opposed to passive objects of intervention) is necessary. Schools should be organized as



communities: this is not a commonplace utterance, but the normative consequence of understanding the requirements of true education and recognizing the personhood of students. Furthermore, since the outcome of education is growth, and growth necessarily has a moral nature, then the final purpose of schooling is moral growth.

Bringing all these concepts together substantiates the claim that schools are communities with educative purposes, and that these purposes have an unavoidable moral aspect. As per the concept of moral growth developed above, it is fitting to think of these purposes as formative in terms of the improvement of the character of students and the development of their mature moral agency. Schools, then, are rightfully thought of as formative communities.

Thinking of schools as formative communities comprises two basic facts: first, that students live in school only inasmuch as they are active participants of what goes on there; and that by virtue of their actions all students will have an effect on the school, and will in turn be changed by their participation. A student will change academically, as they learn new things, socially, as their bonds with others change for better or worse, and so on. As they interact with others and with the physical world around them, they will as well contribute to the changes in the social and physical aspects of their environment. In this sense, belonging to school-as-community and actively participating in it as a student is never artificial or “playacting”; it is truly living life with all the responsibilities and effects it carries. Being a community, this logic applies to all members of the school: teachers, who are in immediate communication with students, are also an involved participant who has a qualified role. They are in charge of providing direction by choosing and curating the experiences that they think better contribute

to the renewal and growth of their students. The educator is responsible for cultivating environments, both physical and social, that foster educative experiences (Dewey, 2015, pp. 39-40). In this sense, the teacher is purposefully *sharing* with the young the meaning of what they do.<sup>100</sup>

This responsibility is a central concern for the present project, as it requires the establishment of proper interpersonal relations with students in order for school experiences to be truly participatory, and therefore educative. Once we accept Dewey's claims that (i) the aim of education is the growth of students, and that (ii) this growth can only happen through the active participation of the young in the activities of their social and material environment, we can conclude that this sort of participation fosters the growth of students *as persons*.

Remember that the definition of personhood discussed in Chapter 1 relies, fundamentally, in the moral status of someone who, as a source of valid claims on others, can rightfully expect to be treated with respect. Furthermore, following Darwall, this sort of respect that has the dignity of persons as its object was qualified as recognition respect. The respect directed towards the character of a person, in turn, is a form of *aretaic* appraisal which Darwall defines as appraisal respect. The latter form of respect responds to the fundamental and inherently human interest

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<sup>100</sup> Think, for example, about the case of Annie and Michael in Chapter 3. Michael has shared with Annie and her first grade class the reasons for having a time devoted to shared reading, and so when problems arise he can engage Annie in a reasoned reflection about her attitude. Also, and thinking of the formative impact of all school interactions, see James (2007). As described in Chapter 5, I find Mr. Ford to be an example of an educator in the full sense of the word. He was a member of the school community who educated by actively involving a student in meaningful activity, even though he was not a formal member of the school's faculty. Within a school community, not only teachers educate: "Ordinary human beings (...) can help adults and children discover how experience can be organized in an enlightened manner as part of schooling" (James, 2007, p. 89). This reminder is important of and by itself, and also illuminates how education happens not through lessons but through experiences that are common because of shared purpose and responsibility. Since all of these interactions, both within and without the classroom, have an effect on students' characters, they are contributing to their moral growth.

in improving as a moral agent. When I say that a student grows as a person I am, firstly, asserting once more that they are persons endowed with dignity, and thus deserving of recognition respect; and that contributing to their moral growth is a properly respectful attitude in response to every person's interest in growing to be increasingly deserving of appraisal respect.

Since a fundamental interest of immature persons is to develop into mature moral agents (and therefore becoming increasingly deserving of appraisal respect), the following step in my analysis is to further substantiate the claim that growth, as discussed above, can be qualified as moral growth in the sense I propose in Chapter 4. Admittedly, this requires qualifying Dewey's understanding of the moral nature of growth, because the understanding of moral growth I propose includes details that are not apparent in Dewey's work. The notion of moral growth developed in Chapter 4 provides these details by explicating the contents of character, how they can become closer to a virtuous ideal, and how they affect the moral agency of young persons by better informing the reasons they have to act. Darwall's moral philosophy illuminates the fact that students, as persons, act out of reasons and are involved of a second-personal moral life based on the reciprocal recognition of their fellow students and teachers as moral equals. Another example of school life can help seeing how this is the case.

### ***6.1.2. An Example of Formative School Life***

Such an example of educative participation within school life can be found in the story of *Chameleon*, a drama club that operated for many years in the K-12 school where I studied and later came to work at. I participated in this club for many years as a student, and in this capacity lived through its origins and early evolution. Later on, when I came back to the school

as a teacher and eventually as an administrator, I further witnessed its formative power from a more reflective perspective. The value of this example resides in that it shows a group organized, within a school community, around a common interest. It presents the educative power of participation, and illustrates the moral dimension of growth: through the participation in a shared endeavor, students undergo moral growth and become increasingly capable of participating of this kind of formative experiences in the future (both within and without the school community). It is also important that this educative experience comes to be through the interaction of a teacher and her students, who intelligently participate of meaningful relationships mediated, first and foremost, by mutual respect.

Talking about *Chameleon* as a drama club is not precise. Its members identify *Chameleon* as a theater company or group. They refer to it simply as “the Group”, and to its members as “Chameleons”. Its origins were unambitious: each year some students of the senior class would get together to stage a play. The school would hire a drama teacher as director, they would rehearse the play for a couple of months, and then perform it for a few nights at the end of the school year. The Group began in earnest with the arrival of Patricia as the school drama teacher.

Patricia is a small, determined woman of wide culture and strong temperament. Her eyes sparkle with intelligence and humor, and her intense gaze that reveals the no-nonsense attitude with which she approaches everything she does. She had no formal training as a teacher, nor previous experience working in a school setting, but she knew theater well and had worked with some adult amateur groups in the past. With these credentials, she arrived at school to direct the senior class play (which she did successfully). This coincided with the

school's interest in offering "extracurricular" activities that were not a part of the formal study plan, and since Patricia was able to establish a good working relationship with students, the school decided to expand the possibility of joining the group to other grades.<sup>101</sup> Soon, Patricia was also teaching elective drama classes for middle and high school (which she ended up doing for over twenty years). As she accumulated experience, her practices became increasingly pedagogical, although she always struggled with the most formal aspects of schoolwork: grading, in particular, always seemed to annoy her, but once again the idea of an extracurricular activity allowed for flexibility in how she produced her evaluations.

For Patricia, theater is a serious business, and in this attitude lies her strength as a teacher. She never settled for a mediocre outcome. This being true, everyone was welcomed to her class, so that the casting process was conducted when you were already in: the question was not whether you'd be acting or not, but in what role. Quality was the premise, and thus an expectation of commitment and hard work was a given. Most members of the group would have more than one responsibility: besides acting they would be stagehands, prop masters, producers (taking care of budget and logistics), and so forth, so that all the work necessary for a successful play was shared by the group. To this day, I still find this balance fascinating: she could certainly be snobbish about her tastes and preferences, but she was never exclusionary. She welcomed everybody and proceeded to demand the best of everyone right away. The tone of her demands could be rough, but it expressed the recognition of the other as an equal and

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<sup>101</sup> Since I have argued for a Deweyan definition of education as growth, and for a conception of the educational aim of school as formative in a way that goes beyond the pursuit of academic achievement, I find the idea of "extracurricular" to be debatable. In section 6.2.2. below I discuss what constitutes the school environment, in a way that comes very close to a wide definition of curriculum including all the educative experiences available to a student.

thus revealed an authentic form of respect. Acceptance was a given, but based on the expectation that everyone would bring their best to the play. Quality was pursued not through exclusion but through commitment to a common purpose, which translated in a truly educative experience (and a higher quality play).

Acting with Patricia was hard work. It required understanding the play's text, its characters, the author and their times, and also the context in which it was being staged. To achieve these goals Patricia actively communicated with her students, asking them astute questions about their understanding of the play and their choices as actors. Answering these questions required the students to reflect on the reasons they had to act in particular ways, and thus brought their views and experiences into the production. Throughout the staging process, she would frequently provide purposeful little lectures and lead conversations about literature, history, or politics, always making sure that these ideas fed the work at hand. While some decisions were reached by consensus (e.g., the selection of the play) the whole process was firmly guided by the hand of the director. Periodical evaluations of the process, however, were conducted in a structured and open manner. The opinions of every member of the group were taken seriously as long as they were relevant and well-grounded, which motivated everyone to participate critically. The interaction between open discussions and clear direction, central to Patricia's teaching style, went from the beginning of the process until the night of the final performance.

She addressed "her actors" with complete, laser-focused attention, alternatively listening and directing them, always with a frank style that could easily come across as harsh. She communicated with very direct language, so her demands for quality could be perceived as

unrelenting and unforgiving. Not everyone took to her style, but she did not come off as rude or dismissive because she was also relentless in explicitly grounding her remarks in a recognition of the abilities of the actors and an open invitation to share her passion for the beauty and power of theater. It was in this conviction that everyone could do better and her commitment not to settle for little effort that her inclusiveness was grounded. Sometimes her remarks had humor, sometimes they conveyed unveiled frustration, but they were never condescending. As a result, her straightforwardness was revealed as an expression of respect. Actors recognized this approach as uplifting: everyone, including the director, was committed to their best possible work, and thus her high standards communicated a sense of pride that elevated the project and the people involved in it.

After a few years, students from different classes naturally began working together in the plays, and the idea of a senior class play gradually became obsolete. Members of the group began working together in two plays a year, independently of the class they belonged to. That's how talking about it as a drama club became insufficient. Patricia then gave the group the name of *Chameleon*. She was explicit in the meaning of using the name of the curious reptile whose eyes can either operate independently or focus together, allowing them both 360-degree vision of their environment and the ability for stereographic vision, and who can see their whole context to reflect it in their own bodies. While Patricia was always open about her methods and aims, in naming the group she poetically formalized the purpose of the many experiences in staging a play: the long rehearsals, the guided discussions, her constant expectation for the best. Through this act of naming, *Chameleon* became a password loaded with meaning for those who shared in the common effort. To be a Chameleon was to train in a particular way of

seeing the world and commenting upon it, to commit to a view of oneself as capable of great achievement, to join forces in a common enterprise, and thus to become a special kind of person.

Only through the concept of participation is it possible to fully understand the educative value of school activities, including non-academic ones such as *Chameleon*. In this sense, they are a central part of the educative life of the school. Its story also illustrates how a respect-based interpersonal relationship between a teacher and her students can produce formative school communities. While the purpose of the group (i.e., to stage a play) did not change ostensibly through time, the experience of the staging was substantially different under the new director. The invitation to be in the group was open, and explicitly based on the expectation that everyone would participate by investing all their effort and ability. This expectation was based in two premises: that the work of staging a play was important, and that the group, working together, was up to the task of producing one at the highest quality. The demands of the director were an explicit enactment of respect: respect for the play and its meaning, respect for the audience, but more than anything respect for each and every member of the group as a person who has something to say through art.

Using the terms of Darwall, Patricia enacted recognition respect in every interaction with the students/actors, independently of their dramatic abilities. As noted above, she would never let this respect be diluted in condescension, and thus her demanding attitude was not only an act of faith, but an invitation for improvement and growth. She asked every actor for their reasons to do something, questioned them, and once they were clear she would insist on seeing them enacted. If she noticed the need to improve a skill, she would set aside time to



train the actor or ask another member of the group to act as a mentor. Reflection, discussion, and implementation of conclusions were constantly enacted with the view of achieving a common goal. The invitation to grow was as tangible as the final product. By the end of the term, everyone would occupy their vulnerable place on the stage to show what they had built, together and proudly.

This purposeful way of engagement shows an example of a teacher that does not abandon her role (in this case, as director) and the authority that comes with it. Although the hierarchy between director and actor was in place, it was based on respect and justified by a common purpose. It did not become an obstacle to engage the other as a person within the boundaries set by their common activities. To the contrary, the way Patricia addressed her students invited a reciprocal show of respect between them, so that she had ample leeway to set up open spaces for debate. These spaces could genuinely welcome divergent opinions and preoccupations because they were held among persons who recognized each other as such. Both directors and actors could regulate their own behavior towards others in a way that recognized their dignity, both as persons and in their roles within the production. Through such exchanges, the individual buy-in into a shared endeavor was fed constantly. Such an interaction made it possible for a truly common purpose to emerge, and thus to gradually bring together students who would otherwise be separated (by grade year, talent, or anything else) into a community. Naming the group was the final stroke by which all Chameleons came to hold together a shared meaning capable of shaping identity, both individual and social.

I do not present this example as if Patricia was a flawless teacher: certainly, she was not. However, the meaning she brought through her own participation to the group and the way

she engaged her students did embody a form of respect in which coming to hold a shared purpose and a joint sense of responsibility was the norm. The outcome was a cohesive group of students that was heavily invested in their school lives, who became increasingly recognized by the school community at large, and that evolved as living communities do. The plays were indeed of a high quality, earning the group frequent prizes in interschool competitions, and some of its alumni went on to succeed as professional actors, writers, and so on. As I see it, though, the group's real brand of success went beyond these achievements: through the view of schooling I propose, *Chameleon* was a great success because it was educative in a formative sense. All Chameleons, as far as I could witness, lived the experience of being recognized as persons and respected as such, and in consequence grew to be better persons *through* theater.

### ***6.1.3. School Life and the Moral Life of Students***

With all these different elements in place, the moral impact of an educative experience can be explained in a Deweyan sense. Staging a play as described above, for example, is not a chore nor a diversion. It is an activity with real and deliberate outcomes, and thus apt for involving students in a joint enterprise in which, to quote Dewey, "the rise of conscious purpose, conscious desire, and deliberate reflection are inevitable" (Dewey, 1980, p. 360). The reasons behind the demands of the process were made explicit (both by deliberate exposition in the director's lectures and devices such as the group's name), and its results were literally embodied through acting, stage crafting, and so forth. As the result of the group's work was achieved in a way that depended on meaningful individual investment in a common purpose, the "ethical gravity of the whole experience shifted" (Dewey, 1975, p. 26). Thanks to this shift,

the value of the outcome went beyond the quality of the play: “What is learned and employed in an occupation having an aim and involving cooperation with others is moral knowledge, whether consciously so regarded or not.” (Dewey, 1980, p. 366).

*Chameleon* provides a clear example of the meaningful participation of students in an instance of school life. In doing so it also provides a good example of the moral dimension of school experience. In the group, students came to purposefully embody every single one of the Deweyan moral life attitudes as described by Hansen (2006).<sup>102</sup> These were evident in their investment in exploring and being affected by the play in order to enact it (open-mindedness), the relentless effort to bring it into life (wholeheartedness), the commitment to present a final product of which they could be proud (responsibility), and the actualization of an underlying conviction about the value of the whole endeavor (directedness). As students in the group came to purposefully embody every single one of these traits, it becomes apparent that they are acting in morally relevant ways and thus fully participating of moral life. Through this participation, and even if they were not necessarily dealing with issues in which their responsibility for potential trespasses was being discussed, they were engaging others as morally relevant beings whose interests required effective recognition.<sup>103</sup> By embracing a common purpose, Chameleons became better members of a moral community. They experienced moral growth.

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<sup>102</sup> See Chapter 5.

<sup>103</sup> As the brief example of my experience with multiplication (Chapter 5, this example is deliberately different to those of Michael and Annie (Chapter 3), and Joshua, Abby, and Ben (Chapter 4), in that they do not revolve around disciplinary issues. I want to make this difference explicit to avoid the impression that moral growth only happens when someone’s in trouble.

When students listened to each other looking to understand their views on the play and then struggled to enact that comprehension through the perspective of their own characters, they were exercising open-mindedness. The long rehearsal hours, and the many corrections demanded by Patricia (and the group) to make the result as close to perfect as possible, clearly showed wholeheartedness and a sense of responsibility. Both of these revealed directedness, as they relied on a practical conviction of the value of working together in a school activity. Furthermore, the fact that the members of the group grew increasingly capable of holding each other accountable for their dedication to the common endeavor became an exercise of mutual accountability proper of Darwall's second-personal account of moral life. For instance, if an actor was remiss in learning her lines, the rest of the group was recognized as having a valid claim against them, because every member of the production was recognized as having a vested interest in the whole process and thus had a standing to consider that they, themselves, had been trespassed upon. In learning to recognize oneself and others as equal sources of valid claims, and also to properly deal with the implicit mutual accountability, every Chameleon was undergoing an education in theater *and* a moral education.

Thinking about *Chameleon* and the kind of hierarchical *and* mutually respectful relation between director and actor (teacher and student) that lies at its base is an example of the sort of moral equality that I claim is present between adult educators and young students in K-12 school life. As explained in Chapter 5, Dewey vindicates the participation of young people by recognizing that they act with a purpose and thus are responsible for their actions, as they own the consequences of the activity they share with other students and teachers. Therefore, adults need to take them seriously by engaging them as persons who act in morally significant ways

and providing them with direction through shared meaning. I am reiterating here a central point of Part One: that this sort of participation does not require ignoring the characteristic needs of young people and the responsibilities and correlated authority of adults over them, nor the need to think of participation to be a simulacrum of “true” joint activity among moral equals. It does, however, vindicate that both adults and their younger counterparts are equally endowed with dignity as persons who act in morally significant ways that require being taken seriously.

Here, and in the examples above, we can see that children indeed participate as persons of the second-personal moral life described by Darwall (2006), with due consideration to all the necessary qualifications of age. Also, we can better understand Dewey’s central tenet about the education of children through active participation in life. However, I think this perspective also requires us to consider the moral life of students and thus the moral dimension of their education in ways that go beyond the one anticipated by Dewey. In Chapter 4 I proposed an understanding of moral growth that relies on an Aristotelian view of character actualization through practice, and qualified this view by looking at the aspects of character that can improve the moral agency of persons who act out of reasons from a very young age.

Based on the explicit and shared understanding of students as persons, and of moral growth as the ongoing process by which they actualize their character, better participate of moral life, and thus continuously grow as moral agents, it is possible to organize schools as formative communities. In this sense, a formative community is one that is organized around the shared purpose of educating persons progressively capable of enacting their dues and duties as active agents within a moral community.

## **6.2. Moral Growth and the Intrinsic Value of Schools**

In the previous sections, I defined schools as formative communities and argued that students act within them in ways that have an educative effect of moral import. Schools, in this sense, are formative communities in which students live their moral lives. To further flesh out this qualification of schools as formative communities, it is important to tie into this conception of schooling the previous discussions about moral growth as a fundamental purpose of formal K-12 education and examine how schools can go about fulfilling this purpose. Also, and for the sake of clarity, it is important to make explicit what aspects of school life can be educative and contribute to the moral growth of students (or, in Dewey's terms, what constitutes the environment of the school). With these ideas in place, the implications of thinking of school as a formative community whose purpose is to foster the moral growth of students become clear. Most importantly, from this perspective, it is possible to explain the school's value by vindicating the importance of its central inherent aim. This section, then, will draw from the framework I have developed to address the questions of why we need schools, what constitutes the school's environment, and how should schools go about the pursuit for moral growth.

### ***6.2.1. The Purpose and Intrinsic Value of Schools***

Having defined the sense in which a school community can be qualified as formative and discussed the ways in which school life is indeed the moral life of students, the question of why we need schools can be approached from within the theoretical framework proposed thus far. The purpose and aim of education are directly dependent on the way persons come to become better members of society. In Dewey's words, "Apart from the participation in social life, the

school has no moral end nor aim” (Dewey, 1975, p. 11). This claim requires we remember that the object of education is growth, growth is necessarily social, and the educational purpose of school is moral inasmuch as it enhances the possibility of every student to better participate of social life. Education is moral because, by definition, it aims to promote those forms of associated living that improves social life itself. I have also argued that education is moral as it is through social life that persons develop their character and thus become increasingly deserving of appraisal respect. These two effects of moral growth, the improvement of character and the improvement of social life, are not exclusive; to the contrary, they complement each other as the development of character realizes how moral growth contributes to social transformation, and shows how an increased participation of social life necessarily contributes to the fundamental human interest of growing as virtuous moral agent.<sup>104</sup>

The value of schools is therefore best understood by clarifying why and how can the young participate of social life *in* the school, reiterate the ways in which this participation can be transformative in a manner that is relevant to society at large, and further explicit how growth looks like in terms of the way students inform their moral life. Simply put, I argue that schools that are clear about their formative priorities are ideally situated to achieve the crucial social goal of fostering the moral growth of K-12 students. All of the steps necessary to support this claim have already been taken, and thus I can proceed to lay them out together.

The first step is quite straightforward, as the importance of having the young actively participate in social life has been thoroughly explained above. On this basis, the fact that school

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<sup>104</sup> See Chapter 2.2.3. for an explanation of how social dependence and autonomy are not exclusive ideas.

life *is* life (as opposed to a simulacrum of “actual” life) sufficiently asserts its present, non-instrumental, value. The need to recognize the personhood of students as participants of a second-personal moral life further qualifies this value, and it brings to the fore why the role of *student* deserves such a special status in the formative history of every person: Participating in a school community should give the student a special status because it requires taking students seriously within the pursuit of their education. The fact that someone is a student in a formative community necessitates recognizing the moral weight of what they do and honoring the formative effect of how we address them and their actions. For this to be true, any separation of life and school life needs to be shattered. What remains is the purpose of having communities in which moral growth lies as the center of every effort:

There cannot be two sets of ethical principles, one for life in the school, and the other for life outside the school. As conduct is one, so also the principles of conduct are one (...) The moral responsibility of the school, and of those who conduct it, is to society. The school is fundamentally an institution erected by society to do a certain specific work, - to exercise a certain specific function in maintaining the life and advancing the welfare of society. (Dewey, 1975, p. 7).

As long as students grow as moral agents within the social life of the school, this becomes a privileged space in which young persons, as students, can exercise their growing agency in a setting that is deliberately aware of the educative power of social life and of the needs and strengths proper of an immature agent.

The inherent worth of the school comes from its purpose and its ability to enact it. This is not to say that growth cannot happen without the school. Certainly, children can (and do) grow through contact with family and with other people in the groups they belong to throughout their youth. What makes school life different is precisely that it can be organized around an educative purpose, as defined above, and that the young person can be invited to



inhabit it as a student, also in the terms mentioned earlier. Simply put, being a student in a school that is aware of its nature as a formative community allows K-12 students to inhabit a role that is specifically designed to foster moral growth. By doing so, schools can honor the vital interest of each person to grow as an agent, and by doing this fulfill its duty to society, as expressed by Dewey. To be a student in such a school is thus substantially different than from being a member of a family, a patient at the doctor, or a junior competitive athlete. Students are to be treated as persons who are invested in their own moral growth and are protagonists in a formative process that is important by and of itself, both for each of them and for society at large. When schools forget this purpose or obfuscate it in pursuit of any ancillary goals, its value justly comes to be suspect (see Dewey, 1989, pp. 200-201).

As long as it is educative, the value of K-12 schooling also comes from the fact that school is transformative on a social scale. This is a consequence of understanding education as growth that affects both the student and society at large. It is important to reiterate this point here because while changing a person by making them able and inclined to contribute to the enrichment of social life, society should also change for the better. Education is transformative in this sense, which means school is an agent of change of significant social importance:

As a society becomes more enlightened, it realizes that it is responsible *not* to transmit and conserve the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as make for a better future society. The school is its chief agency for the accomplishment of this end.  
(Dewey, 1980, p. 24)

Moral growth is a crucial societal objective that extends beyond the individual who experiences it, and therefore schools are entrusted with a fundamental aim of society. The examples we have used so far to illustrate different parts of my argument illustrate the ripple effect of educative experiences in school life. Addressing members of the school community from an

interpersonal stance of respect as in the case of Annie and her teacher, Michael, will inform how we see and engage each other, irrespective of age, as persons endowed with an inviolable dignity, a most fundamental requirement of social life.<sup>105</sup> Consistently and respectfully treating students as responsible parties in the purposeful manner discussed with the examples of the buried camera and the missing device, in turn, will have an effect that goes beyond managing responsibility in school life.<sup>106</sup> They will inform the character of the students involved, and even those who are witnesses to the difficult situations at hand, by progressively changing both the content of their subjective motivational sets and the rational process through which they actualize them. Even the example of learning how to multiply by engaging in an effective exercise of dialogue has a moral impact that encompasses the ones mentioned above and furthermore has a socializing effect by providing the young person with a part of the common “language” that will facilitate his interactions with other member of their groups throughout their lives.<sup>107</sup> The work done by Patricia and the Chameleons requires all the practices mentioned above, and also explicitly calls for critical thinking within the group in order to make both artistic and practical decisions. Choosing which play to stage, responding to the director’s feedback, participating of discussions about the play and its intent, holding each other responsible for their choices and charges, etc., are all formative experiences and thus morally important. As a student comes to see their work in the school theater group as an expression of responsibility and the demands of their teacher as a sign of respect, for example, the way they

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<sup>105</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>106</sup> See Chapter 4 for a discussion of moral growth that refers to the improvement of a subjective motivational set and the rational process that underlies it, and more specifically Chapter 4.2. for a full discussion of responsibility and its formative purpose.

<sup>107</sup> See Chapter 5.3.

interact with other students and teachers, both within and without the classroom, will be affected. In all of these instances, as in those of the other examples I have used before and not recalled here, participation of school life contributes to the development of the moral habits and attitudes that make social life better.

As I have argued above, this progress requires the cultivation and development of the character of students. Through participation in school life, they will be able to expand the content of their character and improve the rational process through which they come to enact their virtues. In this privileged space, and for a relatively short time, they get to do so in an environment that is designed to help them live through this process in the company of educators and peers. Schools as formative communities are groups of persons that are, within their own roles, similarly committed to their growth as persons and who, based on this shared commitment, can relate to each other in ways that foster their individual and social growth.

I have described moral growth as a process of self-actualization in which each person builds the disposition to act out of reasons, but also to act out of the best possible ones. This essentially educative process, then, is what should define the purpose and value of schooling: “What then is education when we find actual satisfactory specimens of it in existence? Firstly, it is a process of development – of growth, and the *process*, not merely the result, is important.” (Dewey, 1989, p. 195)

### **6.2.2. Moral Growth in the School Environment**

In *Democracy and Education* Dewey (1980) confidently asserts that “Any social arrangement that remains vitally social, or vitally shared, is educative to those that participate in it” (p. 9). A superficial reading of this assessment may induce an impression of extreme

optimism, as if Dewey believed that any sort of shared activity would result in the improvement of those who partake of it. As we have seen, Dewey's definition of "social" and the shared meaning that characterizes it, and thus of the demands and commitments necessary for participation in associated life, are not nearly as simple. The moral attitudes that allow for growth, as defined by Hansen (2006), are both natural to life in common and easily overlooked or replaced by traits proper of mindless repetition (as opposed to participation). If the persons who are taking part of a shared activity lose sight of the joint pursuit of a common aim in the name of expediency or efficiency, participation is no longer in the picture: When someone cannot see the reasons behind their actions, they forsake their responsibility over the consequences they might have, and so are reduced to acting mindlessly. This form of action in which persons are instrumentalized by the loss of shared meaning is typical of the objective stance and contrary to Dewey's definition of an arrangement that is "vitaly social".<sup>108</sup>

Once more, this understanding explains why it is necessary to address students interpersonally, that is, as persons who are educated through participation in the social life of school and not as the relatively passive objects of successive interventions. It also has immediate implications in terms of pedagogy: if schools are to educate, they must do so by means that involve the student as a purposeful participant. In other words, I am simply asserting once again that participation in social activity is the only way for the young to partake of the human experience at large (Dewey, 1980, pp. 30, 34, 35; 1929, p. 188). Furthermore, this sort of participation requires addressing the student as a person, that is, from an interpersonal

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<sup>108</sup> For a discussion on the objective stance and how it can look like in schools, see Chapter 3.2.

stance. Participation in shared activity will be educative if, and only if, it empowers children to further participate in associated activity and thus contribute to their personal fulfillment and the continuation of social life. Given the fact that shared activity would either be educative or miseducative (either promote or hinder further growth), there is a fundamental responsibility of mature members of society to duly contribute to the development of the immature. This educative responsibility towards both the individual and their community (Dewey, 1980, p. 46), is ideally fulfilled through schools: deliberate environments designed with this purpose (Dewey, 1980, p. 23).

Given the importance of fostering moral growth as the inherently valuable purpose of school, a major risk for formal education is an excessive emphasis in the provision of goods that are ancillary to truly educative purposes.<sup>109</sup> If the purpose of education is misconstrued by placing undue emphasis on the pursuit of goals that could be more efficiently achieved somewhere else, schools would hardly have any value of their own. Mere instruction can be achieved, nowadays, in more ways than ever. Skills that are rewarded by the market can be also developed elsewhere. In many communities, schools have increasingly served as outreach facilities that provide much needed services to children, including counseling, health services, and even a source of proper nutrition for at-risk communities, but these services could be (and arguably should be) provided through other agencies better equipped to do so. What school has to guarantee if we are to justify its existence, then, is the provision of the truly educative experience that both individuals and society require.

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<sup>109</sup> See Dewey, 1980, p. 11 (as quoted in Chapter 5).

The “moral trinity of the school” introduced in the previous chapter (Dewey, 1975, p. 43) remains valid today as it was over one century ago, and invites the question of what, exactly, goes into the school environment conceived as an educational community. As defined by Dewey and discussed herein, it seems clear that the short answer for the question of what parts of school life constitute the school’s environment the is “*everything*”. The long answer is more nuanced, but not necessarily more discreet. Since the Deweyan concept of environment that I have repeatedly spoused includes both the material and social context in which a student lives while at school, the aspects of this life that Dewey’s moral trinity explicitly enunciates are of help.<sup>110</sup> The environment of the school must include all the resources available to promote the education of students, and these certainly include the study plan and its contents (including subject matter), the pedagogical methods through which these are conveyed and, importantly, the social interactions that make up school life itself.

When a Social Studies teacher devises a class for the seventh grade around the characteristics of Medieval economy, for example, they have planned to shape the school environment in a certain way. While preparing what they will do, the teacher has to be aware that this class plan is probably a part of a larger one that has already affected the environment. They also have to consider what their students already know, the skills they have to use if they are to profit from the class as devised, and the fact that the subject matter could easily appear stale and unimportant in the eyes of teenagers. When they go into the classroom and execute

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<sup>110</sup> Thinking about what constitutes the school environment, as per Dewey, can be reminiscent of ongoing attempts to provide an ample definition of curriculum that goes beyond organized subject matter and the learning experiences designed to convey it (e.g., Schwab, 1983; Dillon, 2009; and Pinar, 2014). Since this is not a central concern for my project, I acknowledge that there is a case to be made about the conceptual closeness of the concepts of curriculum and school environment, but will focus exclusively on the latter.

it, the environment is further changed by their tone, their manners, the way they frame the issues involved in the topic, the forms in which they reach out to each student, etc. And this environment continues, of course, outside of the classroom. Recess, intramural competitions, clubs and groups (such as *Chameleon*), and even informal conversations among teachers, administrators, and students, are formative parts of school life. This life, then, include all school activities, rituals, and spaces of social exchange within its community. Since planning and regulating each of these interactions is absolutely impossible, the necessary common thread is a clear and substantive understanding of the reasons people have to come together at school: A philosophy that informs how each of these aspects contributes to the moral life and moral growth of students.

The most fundamental aspect of this philosophy has to be, necessarily, how we recognize and engage those around us, so that each interaction moves those involved forward in the process of moral growth. In this view, school is a group of persons held together by a shared recognition of each other's dignity and a commitment to honor it through education. The school environment is everything that allows this purpose to be fulfilled. Since "The young live in some environment constantly interacting with what the young bring to it, and the result is the shaping of their interests, minds and characters – either educatively or mis-educatively" (Dewey, 1989, p.200) it is of the utmost importance to recognize that school environment can also hinder moral growth if the meaning of schooling is relegated away from practice, or if students are reduce to the passive object of an intervention.

### ***6.2.3. The Issue of Institutionalization***

A common preoccupation which is related to this potential for miseducation has to do with the fact that schools, as institutions, tend to be formalized in a way that would impede the pursuit of the formative goals I have described as defintory of the intrinsic value of schools. Alasdair MacIntyre's (1984) distinctions between practices and institutions, and internal and external goods, clearly illustrates this concern. Providing a detailed account of his complex definition of virtue goes beyond the scope of this project, but his distinction between practices and institutions is of substantive value for my inquiry. MacIntyre (1984) defines practices as complex cooperative human activities in which goods internal to the activity dictate the standards of excellence to which a person can aspire within the practice itself (p. 187, pp. 190-191). Institutions, in turn, are the necessary forms of association that support and sustain said practices (p. 194). Between them is a tension, as institutions are oriented towards the acquisition of external goods that are ancillary to the core of the practice, and thus liable to have a corrupting influence on it.

These ideas can be applied here by thinking of education as a practice whose pursuit, by definition, is moral growth, and schools as institutions whose primary purpose is to educate. The risk is that the practice of education and the goods that are internal to it (to which I have referred as the intrinsic value of education) could become secondary to the institutional preoccupations of schooling. In effect, I have mentioned the kind of external goods that MacIntyre describes when explaining the ways in which students can be addressed from an



objective stance (as clients, products, or problems).<sup>111</sup> As I defined those approaches, the risks of thinking of schools primarily as institutions with goals dictated by priorities such as the development of market-valued skills, the accomplishment of institutionally desired benchmarks, or “social normalization”, are actualized. What these views of schooling have in common is precisely that they are directed toward goods that lie outside the interests of the students as persons and thus of the practice of education: none of them is educative in the sense described throughout this dissertation. Indeed, having established the formative power of school life, it is clear that pursuing this sort of goals would be, in a Deweyan sense, miseducative.

Recognizing K-12 students as persons who act in morally significant ways while living their moral lives *as students* in a formative community is a practical necessity if schools are to avoid the “corrupting power” that concerns MacIntyre (1984, p. 194). Dewey, in a kindred spirit, warns us against the artificial separation of school practices from social life and the tendency to privilege institutional conventions over associated living in schools. This point lies precisely at the center of my commitment to the effective recognition of the personhood of students: as long as we see students as actual members of the moral community of the school and ensure that they participate in its life, the intrinsic value of schooling can survive the perils of institutionalization. Only in this way can we expect to fulfill Dewey’s deceptively simple standard for evaluating the outcome of a school education: “The educational end and the

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<sup>111</sup> See Chapter 3.

ultimate test of the value of what is learned is its use and application in carrying on and improving the common life of all.” (Dewey, 1989, p. 202).

The task, however, remains. It is up to us, teachers and administrators, to ensure that each school is organized in such a way that its true purpose is the moral growth of students as persons. Seeing students as persons and engaging them accordingly is the necessary condition for education.

## CONCLUSIONS

All my life I have had a close relationship with schools. Going back three generations, my family has been related to education. At the beginning of his career, my father founded a K-12 school which he led for the rest of his life, and which I attended from kindergarten to the end of high school. After practicing law for a few years, I came back to my first *Alma Mater* as a Social Sciences teacher, then Dean of Students, and later as Head of School for 11 years. During this time, I was honored to work with approximately two thousand students who enriched my life immensely. As I move to conclude my dissertation, I realize this brief biographical digression might offer an insight into the genealogy of why I find any conception of school life as playacting to be suspect. I grew up thinking of 'school life' simply as 'life', and of education as a fundamental human experience based on mutual recognition among persons.

I don't think, however, that the motivation behind my dissertation comes exclusively from this particular experience of school life and its nature. Even though my perspective on formal K-12 education is certainly informed by my history, I find the source of my inquiry in the relationships I established with my students when I became a middle school teacher. It was in those relationships that I started to discern the challenges of my profession and the principles that would inspire my pedagogical practice. As teacher I realized that my students were passionate people who, as people do, were constantly actualizing the tools with which they interpreted and engaged life. Addressing them as if this were not the case felt both absurd and

neglectful. I realized that if I was planning to have any impact on them, I was required to take them seriously. Furthermore, it became increasingly clear that doing so required a clear vision of the purpose of education that went beyond the completion of daily tasks and assignments. As Head of School, the necessity for this clarity of purpose became more pressing when thinking about education at an institutional level. From this perspective, I became increasingly aware of the challenge in trying to coordinate the efforts of large numbers of people around a vital, but hard to define, purpose.

In my dissertation I have formalized these intuitions and addressed them from a theoretical perspective, aiming to produce conclusions of practical relevance for K-12 education. I have argued that educators need to effectively recognize the personhood of students within K-12 schools to realize the formative goal of schooling, particularly as it pertains to the moral growth of children and adolescents. This argument led me to define schools as formative communities organized for the purpose of furthering the moral growth of students.

With this in mind, in Part One of this dissertation I developed an account of the personhood of children. To explain what it means to see young persons *as persons*, I began by defending a view of children that values childhood in its own terms. From this perspective, I rejected the views of childhood that cast the value of this stage of life as merely instrumental. In this sense, I found any argument that reduces the life of the young to a simulacrum to be fallacious. Furthermore, by rejecting criterialist accounts of personhood I adopted a humanist perspective that vindicates the essential authority of young persons to produce the sort of normative claims that support moral obligations towards them and thus originate agent-relative reasons to respect them.

Finally, the revision of autonomy as a criterion for personhood and its vindication as a fundamental human interest supported my characterization of the young as persons who act in morally significant ways. Also, seeing young persons in this way allowed me to argue that adults have towards them a second-personal obligation to foster their moral growth. Contrary to the deficit-based interpretation that sees early life as merely preparatory, accepting the personhood of children reveals that young people are the moral equal of adults whose status deserves full moral consideration.

Following these partial conclusions, Part Two was devoted to discussing the implications and importance of addressing K-12 students as persons within schools. I argued for the importance of addressing students from an interpersonal stance, i.e., by taking them seriously as immature moral agents who actively participate of (second-personal) moral life. By effectively engaging students as moral equals who relate with others through the mutual and reciprocal recognition of their dignity, teachers would be able to contribute to their moral growth as immature persons with a vital interest to improve their moral agency.

To support this argument, I proposed a nuanced definition of moral growth based on Darwall's definition of character (Darwall, 1977, p. 44), an Aristotelian view of character education, and Dewey's notion of growth as an educative process aimed at allowing further growth (Dewey, 1980, p. 58). Drawing from these sources I defined moral growth as the ongoing process by which a persons' character improves through their involvement in moral life, either by bringing the dispositional set that motivates their actions increasingly closer to an ideal of excellence, or by improving the rational process through which they bring these dispositions into reasons to act. The result of moral growth thus conceived is an increased

capacity to morally participate in life, and therefore an increased disposition towards further moral growth.

The personhood of children and the concept of moral growth as a fundamental interest of young persons allowed me to qualify this interest as a fundamental aim in K-12 education. Part Three was centered around this qualification of the purpose of schooling around moral growth, and in the effect of explicitly adopting this purpose in the way we conceive K-12 schools. Based on an analysis of Dewey's philosophy of education and his interconnected definitions of life, growth, education, and associated living, I proposed a definition of K-12 schools as formative communities organized around the purpose of fostering the moral growth of students. From this perspective, the intrinsic value of schooling will be determined by the impact of school life in the moral growth of students, and not by the ancillary goods that schools can provide alongside the pursuit of this fundamental purpose.

Following Dewey, I believe that education in its true sense is necessarily moral. Since society renews itself through the education of the young, and through this renovation determines its future, the function of K-12 schools is important both for individual persons and society at large. What school has to guarantee in order to justify its existence, then, is the delivery of the moral educative experience that both individuals and society require.

I find the main conclusion of my dissertation in the definition of K-12 schools as formative communities organized around the recognition of the personhood of their students and dedicated to the pursuit of their moral growth. Nevertheless, I will close this long argument with three important remarks.

In the first place, it is important to explicit how within the framework I have proposed the role of all educators, and of school leaders in particular, has a distinctive philosophical nature. In my experience, it is easy to reduce teaching to the delivery of lessons and classroom management. It is equally tempting to reduce school leadership to administrative chores that are far from the direct pursuit of educational goals. This 'shrinking' of educational roles has been a widely discussed issue of concern within philosophy of education. My intent is to contribute to this discussion by proposing that the notion of school as a formative community provides further clarity on how deeply problematic this restricted view of education really is.

I have adopted Dewey's notion of community as a group of people that come together around what they hold in common. Principal among the things necessary to produce the associated living characteristic of a community is a shared purpose, a common aim. In Deweyan terms, a shared meaning. In the case of K-12 schools, I have argued that the most important shared meanings are a commitment to effectively engage young students interpersonally, and a shared commitment to their moral growth through their participation in the moral life of school. This being the case, school leadership is very much a matter of communication, of making sure that all members of a community contribute to a vital and effective shared understanding of who students are and of the purpose of our shared experiences with them. School leaders are, in this sense, philosophers-in-chief. They are the ones who can't stop asking the hard questions about what inspires both every-day and long-term educative efforts. Teachers, in turn, will find a better ground for their complex work if they can support their decision-making in a shared, vibrant, and meaningful sense of purpose.

Furthermore, it is important to explicit how students, from a very young age, must be made aware and included in this way of seeing school as a community organized around a shared understanding of the dignity of all its members. Both in the theoretical analysis and in the examples I presented, I have referred to K-12 students of all ages as people who, appropriately for their own ages, are capable of engaging with those around them as moral persons. I think the engagement of students in this project follows easily from the adoption of an interpersonal stance in which the value of the moral life of children and adolescents is recognized and actualized.

The pressing nature of this dimension of school work is given, first and foremost, by the fact (also observed by Dewey) that the moral effect of lived experience is unavoidable; it would either result in an increased capacity to participate in moral life or in its restriction. Since students live much of their life in school, school life will either result in a moral education or miseducation. K-12 schools have an obligation to guarantee that its moral effect will be educative, and this consideration must be included among the priorities of effective school leadership and classroom practices alike. School, in this sense, is not a building populated by two distinct groups hierarchically organized, but a community structured around formative human relationships.

I have also acknowledged briefly that I have not included parents (or the caretakers who many times act on their behalf) in my inquiry. I focus on the school as a space in which students grow as moral persons through their interactions with their peers and teachers. In consequence, I have not discussed the importance of parents, who are the remaining constituency that easily comes to mind when thinking about the groups that interact in the



context of K-12 schools. I have chosen to focus on teachers (including administrators) and students as the two groups who directly interact in ordinary school life, but I recognize that parents affect these interactions in many ways and can be thought of as participating in school life. The role of parents in the school as formative community, and the impact of parenting and family life in school settings, are by themselves rich fields of study and could also be the focus of analysis from the framework I have proposed. I hope the considerations I offer herein can be of value for philosophical and pedagogical work on these topics.

As per further research in the specific topic of my dissertation, I realize there is much work to be done both from a philosophical and a practical perspective.

In the field of philosophy of education, specifically, it would be worthy to further explore the tensions between the different philosophical approaches I have tried to bring into dialogue throughout my argument. However, since this is theoretical work that aspires to have a practical application, I am particularly interested in the possibility of doing empirical research on the practical applications of the framework I have proposed. It seems plausible to design qualitative studies to test the impact of implementing the conclusions of my work in different K-12 schools. I believe it would be valuable to measure the impact of implementing pedagogical practices based on the shared understandings of this theoretical framework at different levels of K-12 schooling. Furthermore, I hypothesize that the conceptual tools I propose can be applied in schools that serve different communities and thus have different structures, priorities, and methods. Developing comparable studies regarding both the process and outcomes of implementing these understandings in diverse school communities could be of great educational value.

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