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For Their Own Good: Oppression, Childhood and the Spectre of Paternalism

Abstract: Children are rarely considered an oppressed group. The power exercised over them is 'for their own good': a case of legitimate paternalism. Adults, by contrast, are credited with a basic rationality that makes paternalistic treatment inappropriate. I question this familiar set-up. In Part I, I argue that children plausibly count as oppressed, including on Dara Bascara's theory. This holds regardless of whether paternalism is justified for children. In Part II, I consider Bascara's use of a 'pragmatist standpoint epistemology' as a response to a common worry about paternalism. I argue that this response does not solve the problem it aims to address. But I also suggest that this problem is not really a problem in the first place. The preoccupation of political philosophers with the spectre of paternalism is indicative of an underlying confusion, which makes the rejection of domination conditional on the assertion of an implausible picture of (adult) human rationality, generating an artificial and irresolvable tension between radical social criticism and respect for human beings. By moving away from that picture, it is possible both to dispel the spectre of paternalism and to expand the constituency of those who might count as oppressed and in need of liberation.

I. Are kids oppressed?

Children[1] and young people are not usually considered to be an oppressed group. A child or young person might be acknowledged to be oppressed by virtue of their class, by the gendered or racialised classifications and treatments imposed on them, or in ways connected with disability or neuro-divergence. But the idea that children *as such* might constitute an oppressed group is rarely voiced.[2] This is as true within academia as it is in wider society. Often, in work that is not specifically focused on childhood, children are simply missing or marginal in much the way that women historically have been. Political philosophy, Dara Bascara's home discipline, has long been criticised for tending to be interested only in mature and often implicitly male subjects – healthy and self-sufficient ones at that, not dependent or requiring care – and for proceeding as if these subjects somehow came into existence fully formed (as in Hobbes' oft-cited image of men sprouting from the earth 'like mushrooms'

1 For my purposes, a 'child' is someone who (while no longer a baby) is under the age of majority in a given society. This is, of course, an internally diverse and socially and historically variable category. As far as I can see, however, this does not substantially affect the arguments I'll put forward here.

2 For some exceptions, see Barth and Olsen (2020) and Medina-Minton (2019).

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(Hobbes 1998)). But insofar as this elision of childhood is problematised, the objection has been that it serves to exclude a different group: women, who perform the bulk of the work involved in producing and caring for children. Thus children appear, when they appear at all, not 'in their own right', but as appendages or extensions of adults: someone has to pay for the kids (Folbre 1994), and someone must labour to look after them (Kittay 1999; Tronto 2002). Somewhat more positively, children occasionally figure as sources of value in the lives of adults, or as the raw material out of which may be sculpted the right kind of future citizens: civic virtues honed, ready to play nicely in the great democratic paddling pool (Rawls 1971; Okin 1989).[3] But only relatively rarely are children *themselves* the primary focus of attention.[4]

The absence of childhood from Bascara's discussion of oppression is thus in no way surprising or unusual. Not only have political philosophers not considered the possibility that children might be oppressed *qua* children, they have long used childhood as a go-to contrast case when considering what practices might be oppressive (or otherwise inappropriately coercive, intrusive or disrespectful) when applied to adults.[5] Whereas *children* may be controlled for their own good, it is argued, similar treatment of adults would be a violation of their rights, a denial of their dignity. The word 'paternalism' says it all: the treatment of someone as a father (or parent) treats a child. Thus, childhood is cast as the canonical case of benign, non-oppressive control.

Perhaps more surprisingly, the picture is much the same in radical political circles. While support for teachers' unions and for better-funded or socialised childcare is *de rigueur* on the left, fundamental criticism of the institution of schooling or of adult control over children is not.[6] In fact, it seems to me that

3 Speaking of pools, another place where children show up in philosophical discussion is in water, typically drowning (Singer 1972; Rachels 1975). I'll leave a discussion of the psychological significance of this for another occasion. The particular setting of water aside, it's clear that the selection of children as the ideal victims in various hypothetical scenarios has to do with their presumed innocence. If a child rather than an adult is drowning, the thinking goes, we can set aside any thoughts along the lines of "Well, how did she end up in the water? Maybe it's her own fault. Maybe she's a *bad* child." This manoeuvre helps to entrench some ways of thinking that serve to rationalise and perpetuate violence under the guise of respecting people by treating them 'as adults' (the rhetoric around benefits dependency and the 'nanny state' is just one example). At the same time, the presumption of childhood innocence seems to be little use to actual drowning children. Those who drown in the English Channel, however innocent, are sacrificed on the (racist) logic that saving these children will only encourage other parents to put theirs in danger.

4 Some ostensible exceptions are those strands within the philosophy of childhood which debate the 'rights' of the child (for example, to an 'open future' (Feinberg 1980; Arneson and Shapiro 1996; Mills 2003), or to the 'best available parent' (Gheaus 2021)). I note that even these discussions often turn out to be as much about adults (e.g. the objectives of society at large, the rights of parents) as about children.

5 As Grill (2018: 123) puts it: 'Children appear in the paternalism debate mainly as archetypal targets of justified benevolent interference.'

6 Feminist critiques of the family, which have been revived in recent years (Lewis 2022; O'Brien 2023), sometimes come close. But while family abolitionists reject a 'propertarian' approach to children and advocate for children's freedom, this often remains rather vague, and seems to play a secondary role in motivating the position as compared to concerns over the oppression of women and queer people.

there is often a strange suspension of radicalism when it comes to childhood. After all, what it means to be a radical critic of society is to see the social order as fundamentally and thoroughly awry: rotten to the roots (the term 'radical' itself comes from *radix,* or 'root'). Such a critic doesn't harbour any illusions about the nature of institutions like police and prisons, and doesn't place much faith in these as instruments for bringing about a better society. But when it comes to schools, the same critic is likely to conform to the conventional view that these are essential institutions whose purpose is to nurture and educate. If schools often fall short of this mission, this is treated as a deviation from an ideal – a consequence of insufficient funding, for instance – rather than as belying the overall justificatory narrative. Whereas police and prison abolitionism are well-established currents, school abolitionism remains virtually unheard of in left-wing milieux.[7] Similarly, a favourite answer to questions about how social change might be realised in the long term is: teach it in schools. This answer seems once again to presuppose the basic benignity of schools as institutions, and moreover relies on their being or becoming receptive vehicles for the political objectives the critic has in mind.

There need be no strict contradiction here. It is possible, for example, to believe that schools are a different case from prisons and police, such that radical critique or abolitionism is appropriate in the latter case but not the former. Nor does opposition to one kind of top-down power structure – such as patriarchy – logically dictate opposition to all such forms. My point is just that there is a *prima facie* tension between a general posture of radical critique and a basically affirmative view of the social structures that govern childhood. On such a view, there is no need for specific attention to the politics of childhood, let alone for a 'children's liberation' movement.[8]

In sum, the idea that children are oppressed is generally considered unserious (if it is considered at all). Yet on the face of it, this is strange. By the standard criteria taken to be markers of oppression, children seem to fit the bill quite neatly. As Richard Barth and Amanda Olsen note (Barth and Olsen 2020), children's minority status, exclusion from voting and political participation,

7 School abolitionism occasionally crops up on the libertarian right (Dexter 1964; Lloyd 2021), which may go some way to explaining the reticence of some on the left to engage with it.

8 It's worth noting that this situation is in contrast to that of radical politics a few decades ago. Advocates of 'child liberation' in the 1970s often expressed a view and an expectation that their movement was gathering in support and awareness and would continue to do so (for instance, Richard Farson wrote in 1974 that, in the wake of the civil rights struggle, 'we are beginning to see the necessity for children's liberation' (Farson 1974)). This strand of thinking is now either ridiculed or, more often, simply forgotten. While radical critiques of the family have begun to come back into vogue, this is yet to translate into a significant revival of interest in child liberationism (see fn.6 above).

high exposure to violence (including legally sanctioned forms),[9] and lack of access to resources (including medical and legal goods as well as property) are all characteristic of oppression.[10] As legal theorist Samantha Godwin observes, moreover, the leading rationalisations for society's treatment of children – that their allegedly inferior mental capacities justify their subordination both for their own and the greater good – run parallel to the 'scientific' rationalisations used for canonical cases of historical and continuing oppression such as patriarchy and white supremacy (Godwin 2011: 257–259).[11] As she anticipates, '[m]any people will instinctively reply that the racists and male chauvinists of nineteenth century were wrong about black people and women, whereas our scientifically superior contemporary society is right about children and adolescents' (Godwin 2011: 259). Godwin suggests reasons to be sceptical of this widespread conviction, pointing out that (as with other historically oppressed groups) the apparent differences cited in justification of children's subordination might alternatively be read as *products* of that subordination, rather than as natural or immutable. In addition, she questions the *relevance* of whatever differences we may grant to exist: 'Reasonable people rightly recognize that those allegedly (or even demonstrably) more rational and intelligent should not enjoy greater rights than those with lesser capacities for rationality and intelligence—we do not see legal caste hierarchies arranged by IQ points or brain size as legitimate or just ways of organizing a society' (Godwin 2011: 262).[12]

I'm not concerned here directly to question or deny the claim that children's difference from adults warrants some (which?) kinds of control and intervention that are not warranted in the case of adults – there is another discussion to be had about that. I want to make a more obvious point, one which I think is nonetheless often overlooked: there is no good inference from i) "children need to be controlled in some ways that adults do not" to ii) "adult control of children *in its present, actual manifestations* is justified." The second simply does not follow from the first. Yet there is an easy leap made from one to

9 Barth and Olsen point to practices such as spanking, which would be crimes if done to adults. Also relevant here are 'juvenile status offenses' (Purdy 1992: 3), or acts which are crimes only when committed by minors, since these expose children to the violence of the state in circumstances in which adults would not be so exposed.

10 One point often made here is that children, unlike other disenfranchised and subordinated groups, will in the normal run of things grow out of their subjugated condition (and that, in addition, this condition is one through which every human being passes). This, however, does not seem sufficient to ground the reluctance to apply the notion of oppression (is oppression not oppression, if it lasts for 'only' eighteen years?).

11 Godwin is not the only one to point to these parallels, which seem to strike almost every writer who treats this topic (especially those with broadly child liberationist sympathies).

12 While this is a line often taken by child liberationists, it is not clear that it is convincing (their tendency to feel the need to argue that children's capacities are greater than commonly recognised is perhaps an implicit admission of this). The point I will make here is a somewhat different one, as should become clear.

the other, reminiscent of that sometimes made between statements about 'ideal' liberal democracies and actual ones. It's the kind of leap that relies on not being noticed: as soon as you point it out, it is likely to be denied – the proponent of paternalistic control of children will insist that they never meant to say that all is well with the ways children are *actually* treated, just as the liberal political theorist may strongly deny being an apologist for actually existing 'liberal democracies'; but both are wearing a mask that occasionally slips – when push comes to shove, it becomes clear that they do have an affirmative view of the status quo, if not in all its particulars then in its basic essentials. Thus those who talk about the developing agency of children and their need for guidance from supportive adults (none of which is wrong *per se*) as justification for constraints on children's freedom, usually think that the form that adult guidance of children should take is basically what we see around us: compulsory, age-stratified schooling (with a few tweaks here and there), with the remainder of a child's existence more or less determined by parents or legal guardians. Whatever you think of this, all I am saying here is that it doesn't follow from – and is more contestable than – the premise from which it is derived. If paternalism is justified in the case of children, that doesn't mean that *this* 'paternalism'[13] is justified.

With that in mind, we can turn to a prominent philosophical account of oppression. For Marilyn Frye (Frye 1981), oppression is a matter of being effectively immobilised by a set of systematically interrelated barriers (Frye uses the metaphor of a birdcage in order to illustrate this), where this works to the detriment of those confined and to the benefit of the dominant or 'oppressor' group. Importantly, for Frye, what it means to be oppressed is not first and foremost a matter of how any person feels about the situation. Oppression is instead a structural reality in which one social group is restricted, *pressed down* (Frye draws attention to the etymological roots of the word 'oppression') by another in a way that is not easily reducible to any particular individual acts (let alone intentions) of the members of either group.

How does this account fit the case of children? Passably well, I suggest. Actually existing structures of adult control severely restrict what children can do and where they can go (most are physically confined to certain spaces, e.g. schools, for much of their time). That much is undeniable, whether you approve of those structures or not. It is also hard to deny that at least some of these structures, some of the time, work to children's detriment (note, again, that this

13 The scare quotes here indicate scepticism that the status quo is *actually* paternalistic, either in the sense of serving children's interests or in the sense of being motivated by this objective. I say more about this shortly.

is not to prejudge the question of whether *some* form of restriction or adult control is necessary and justified by reference to children's interests: we are talking here about *actual* structures, past and present).[14] The evidence that children suffer under, and are harmed by, many of the structures that constitute (and have constituted) supposedly benevolent adult control is considerable.[15] It is beyond the scope of the present paper to survey or assess that evidence. All I claim here is that it is at least plausible to say that the particular forms of adult control that are and have been imposed on children are significantly harmful to them, perhaps systematically and severely enough to warrant the term 'oppression'.

Moreover, 'double binds' of the kind which Frye highlights as characteristic of oppression – and of the oppression of women in particular – are not difficult to identify in the case of children. Comparably to the case of the relationship of women to norms of femininity, both conformity and non-conformity to expectations of childhood are often penalised, or taken as vindicating those expectations and the mechanisms that enforce them: children who are quiet or compliant or appear 'responsible' are seen as evidence that the structures to which they submit are benign, and that children do not mind them; children who rebel, meanwhile, are seen as confirmation[16] of the need for adult supervision and control – even as secretly wanting it ('crying out for boundaries').

Perhaps the aspect of Frye's picture that many would find most difficult to relate to the case of children is the bit that says that oppression is not only to the detriment of the oppressed but *to the advantage of the oppressor*. Whether it is for children's good or not (the thought goes), surely the current system involves significant self-sacrifice by adults, far from being to their benefit. After all, the supervision, management and education of children requires vast expenditure of time and material resources. But on further reflection, the case is not so clear. For a start, the same thing has been said in other contexts too – e.g. that far from benefiting from patriarchy, men suffer under the financial and other burdens of responsibility for 'their' women. Of course, the claim might nevertheless be false in one case but true in the other. But it is also instructive to consider, in this connection, the point made by feminists and others about

14 Another way of putting this is that the relevant comparison case, when considering whether the social structure of adult control harms children, need not be a scenario of *no* structure whatsoever – a scenario George Dennison evocatively describes as leaving children 'thrashing around in a vacuum of neglect' (Dennison 1972).

15 See, for example: Alice Miller's *For Your Own Good* (Miller 1987), or the 1977 collection by Beatrice and Ronald Gross, *The Children's Rights Movement* (Gross & Gross eds. 1977). For more recent examples, see *No!* (2020); see also the recent work of Tyler Black (Black 2022) on the relationship between school and youth suicidality.

16 For instance, a common response to the wave of pupil strikes in Britain in 1889 was to see these as underlining the need for school discipline (Cunningham and Lavalette 2016: 66).

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the double-edged nature of the effects of oppression on the 'oppressor'. Feminists have often been at pains to point out the respects in which patriarchy harms and imposes burdens on men (who thus stand to gain from its overthrow), while also insisting on a *relative* sense in which they benefit at women's expense so long as patriarchy continues. In the same way, many who have argued for liberating children from existing structures of adult control have pointed out not only the ways in which those structures are damaging to children, but also the ways in which they are harmful to adults (see e.g. Farson 1974: 226). But it is also possible to point to many benefits (at least in an immediate or superficial sense) that adults derive from present arrangements, just as it is possible to point to benefits that men derive from patriarchy. How many of the norms and rules that govern the lives of children, from bedtimes to school attendance, are for the convenience of adults as much as or more than for the benefit of children themselves? How much of adults' investment in these rules and norms, their defensiveness when these are challenged, can be attributed to what Kathleen O'Neal calls a 'conflict of interest' (O'Neal 2020)?

It looks like a good case can be made for seeing children as an oppressed group on the terms of Frye's influential account (and that this case is independent of the vexed question of children's capacities). What about Bascara's theory? For Bascara, what it means to be oppressed is understood in modified republican terms: oppression is present when some people are able to interfere arbitrarily with others based on their respective group memberships, and where such interference at least sometimes occurs, leading to harm to those interfered with. Interference, for Bascara, is 'arbitrary' when it fails to track the interests of the person who is interfered with. If my reasoning above is persuasive, then it should be at least plausible that children are an oppressed group on Bascara's account, too. Adults interfere constantly in the lives of children based on their membership of the group 'children', and this interference – in its actual historical and present forms – plausibly fails to track children's interests (even if we think those interests are served by *some* kind of special interference). It's also worth noting, as an aside, that the interference of adults in children's lives is arbitrary in a more everyday sense of that word (and the one that is relevant for many republican theorists), a sense which is captured nowhere better than in that notorious parental phrase, 'because I say so': children are, in almost every area of their lives, at the mercy of the arbitrary whims of various adults, who are able to impose their will on children without offering reasons and relatively free of external constraints, simply because they are adults and children are children.

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I want to conclude this part of my discussion by considering a couple of objections that might be raised in response to what I've argued so far. The first goes something like this: "What you've said is guilty of a category mistake. Children, not being proper agents (or lacking certain relevant capacities), are not the kind of being that can be *oppressed*. If power is exercised over them in a way that is bad for them, we call it 'cruelty', or 'abuse'; or in milder cases, we might talk about 'bad teaching' or 'bad parenting'. But it stretches the term unduly to call it 'oppression'. Arguably, it's actually insulting to truly oppressed populations…" I won't say much about the little bit of mouth-frothing at the end there, although it is interesting insofar as it lets slip that the issue is not really about a 'category mistake', but about affirmativeness again: the suggestion is that what is done to children is not as bad as what is done to the *really* oppressed – and this does not follow from the original premise of the objection (that children lack the right characteristics for the concept of 'oppression' to be applicable).[17]

As for the main body of the objection, it seems like more of an assertion than an argument: you just *can't* use the concept of oppression for populations who (allegedly) lack certain capacities. So my main response is: why not? An extension of the worry might point out that, if we go on like this, then we might have to allow that non-human animals and even plants are oppressed. So long as we admit that these are beings that have a good, or 'interests', then couldn't we say that when power is exercised over those beings in ways that harm them (and benefit those who exercise the power), they are oppressed? As before, my first response to this is to ask: what's wrong with saying that? Perhaps the possibility of speaking of power exercised over animals or even the environment in terms of 'oppression' is not the *reductio* that the objection assumes it is. At any rate, a growing number of people are prepared to apply the term in these ways (Gruen 2009; Murillo Melchor 2016; Project Animal Freedom 2024).[18] But the second thing to say is that if this apparent consequence is a problem, then it

17 At least, it is not obvious why it should follow. It might be possible to construct an argument, along these lines: it's an injury to deny self-determination to a being that is fit to self-determine, but not an injury (in fact a kindness) to deny it to a being who lacks that fitness; thus, even if children are imposed upon *in the wrong way*, this does not inflict the primary injury that is inflicted in the case of oppressed adults. My own view is that this line runs the risk of insulting the capacities of children, as well as tying self-determination to 'capacities' in a potentially dangerous way. But even if we agree with the argument as stated, it seems to me to fall short of showing that what is done to oppressed adults is 'worse' in some overall sense than what is done to children (that doesn't strike me as a very useful question, but answering it would in any case depend on an investigation of actual political realities).

18 It might take a bit more imagination to see how the notion of a 'double bind' might be applied to the situation of non-human animals, but even this is not impossible. Couldn't the alternative paths of domestication, on the one hand, and of remaining wild and coming to occupy the role of 'pest' or 'vermin', on the other, constitute a similar kind of dilemma on an evolutionary scale? Or the choice, for an individual organism, between coming 'too close' to humans in order to access food, and staying remote and suffering the consequences of the depletion of 'natural' habitats?

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looks like a problem not with what I have argued but with the accounts of oppression at hand. After all, if Frye's account casts oppression as a kind of immobilising structure that restricts one group to their detriment and to another's benefit, then there is nothing there that obviously precludes the applicability of that concept to certain groups on account of their supposed lack of certain capacities. In the case of Bascara's account, the picture is slightly complicated by her appeal to a 'pragmatist standpoint epistemology'. I'll discuss this in more depth in Part II, but for now the basic point is that this additional component of her account requires on the part of the oppressed group some ability or potential to recognise their situation as one of oppression. That looks like it rules out animals and plants,[19] but does not obviously exclude (most) children – or so I'll suggest.

A somewhat different objection – but one which again hinges on a worry that the term 'oppression' is being stretched out of shape when it is made to cover the situation of childhood – is that in saying that children are oppressed, I am saying something that turns out to be far less radical and less interesting than it might initially seem. If the claim does not entail a rejection of 'adult supremacy'[20] *tout court*, but only of this or that particular form, then so what? Virtually nobody thinks that everything is perfect in terms of societal arrangements for dealing with children. Many people would agree that those arrangements are often positively detrimental to children – including many conservatives, who think that schools are indoctrinating the kids with 'critical race theory', 'gender ideology', and so on. If everyone can agree that children are 'oppressed', hasn't the term ceased to mean very much?

My answer to this objection is to concede it, up to a point. The claim that children are oppressed is *not* particularly radical – part of what I have been saying is that it is, in a way, obvious. Childhood is an area of a peculiar kind of double vision, whereby on the one hand (as noted earlier), even radicals conspire in a suffocating wrap-around fiction that *everything is basically OK*, and on the other hand everybody knows it isn't. While few people would describe themselves as 'child liberationists',[21] many would agree that the actual operations of power over children, as institutionalised in schools and in prevailing norms of parenting, are detrimental rather than beneficial to

19 Technically, Bascara's account could allow for the *existence* of animal and plant oppression, but we (let alone they) could not *know* that such oppression exists.

20 This term is sometimes used to refer to adult control, domination or subordination of children (parallel to 'white supremacy' as invoked by some critical philosophers of race; see e.g. Mills 2017).

21 This is partly because this term is associated in people's minds with what they would regard as extreme positions, such as the libertarian scheme of 'equal rights' for adults and children advocated by some theorists of the latter part of the 20th century (e.g. Cohen 1982; Farson 1974; Holt 1974), or with what they regard as failed experiments in education and child-rearing.

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children's interests. It doesn't strike me as a particular problem if the people who take this view include some conservatives or those on the political right – we can have other reasons for disagreeing politically with them. But it is also worth adding that the complaint from the right in terms of childhood is more often that children are not controlled *enough*, that parenting and schooling are too 'permissive', rather than that the power exercised over them is exercised in ways that are detrimental (examples like the 'critical race' one are exceptions).

At the same time, the claim that children are oppressed is a lot stronger than the claim that the way children are treated is not perfect. Again, it comes down to whether we take a broadly affirmative view of the effects of the operations of power over children with respect to their interests, or whether we think on the contrary that those operations are broadly harmful (even though they loudly proclaim for themselves the opposite). I haven't attempted to establish the second view, although I have claimed that it is *prima facie* plausible. I have been more concerned to establish something else: that the claim that children are oppressed does not depend on the outright rejection of paternalism for children, and does not require us to descend down the rabbit-hole of the debate over children's 'capacities'. I will close this section by re-emphasising a different and more basic reason, touched on earlier, to find that claim plausible. This reason is best expressed by a question: why, in a social world that is as thoroughly screwed up as this one, and in which the operations of power can hardly be said to serve the interests of people in general, would we expect the way children are treated to be an exception – to be genuinely *for their own good*?

II. The spectre of paternalism

I've so far argued that the traditional omission of children from the roster of oppressed groups is (at the very least) worth questioning, and that Bascara's account has the resources to accommodate childhood as a case of oppression. In order to do this, I set aside the question of paternalism – of when, for whom, and under what conditions it might be justified. I want now to turn to confront the issue of paternalism more directly. In doing so, my aim is not to settle the question, earlier deferred, of whether children are appropriate objects of a special paternalistic treatment (i.e. one inappropriate in the case of adults), and if so, what this might properly look like. Instead, I want to look at the role that what I've called the 'spectre' of paternalism plays in Bascara's account of oppression and in the broader climate of Anglo-American political theory. That is, I want to examine the aversion that many political theorists have to characterising people in ways that they call 'paternalistic'. This aversion is often

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coupled with a sentiment to the effect that we must respect the first-person authority of individuals with regard to their own interests. I'll suggest, however, that we have good reasons to be wary of certain kinds of exercise of power over people (including those which are accompanied – as many exercises of power are – with a paternalistic rationale), reasons which actually have nothing to do with any such epistemic authority, and that these reasons therefore both underdetermine and undermine the anxiety about 'paternalism' often found among liberal theorists. In other words, we can be anti-authoritarian (and anti-paternalistic) without pretending that people are particularly good judges of their own interests: we're not, but there are still good reasons for the general presumption not to mess with us. One good reason is the unsuitability and corruptibility of available interfering agents. Another has to do with what might be thought of as a basic interest in not being messed with, and with the consequent fact that what is a good for us is sensitive to our relationship to the good in question, whether it is willingly and enthusiastically chosen or in one way or another thrust upon us. These considerations – which seem to apply to children as well as adults – suggest a powerful (albeit defeasible) reason to be wary not only of the particular form of paternalistically-rationalised control that is currently exercised over children, but of such control more broadly.

Paternalism, as generally defined, is the coercive restriction of the freedom or autonomy of a person or group, ostensibly in order to promote that person or group's own interests. One way of putting the position I've mooted above is that the societal treatment of children is a case of 'false paternalism': it claims to serve children's interests, but does not (and plausibly falls far enough short of this as to constitute oppression). This leaves it open that a 'truer' paternalism would be unproblematic as a way to deal with children. In the case of adults, by contrast, a consensus among political theorists and beyond holds that even a 'true' paternalism would be inappropriate, indeed would constitute a serious wrong.[22]

A spectre of 'paternalism' persistently haunts political philosophers, even when the exercise of coercive power is not directly at issue. Standard discussions of topics including ideology,[23] autonomy,[24] oppression and

22 It's interesting to note, however, that on the accounts considered above (Frye's and Bascara's), it seems that *genuine* paternalism could not constitute oppression, since those accounts build into the notion of oppression that it must systematically frustrate the interests of the people over whom the power is exercised – and Bascara, at least (as we will see in more detail shortly), explicitly states that the interests in question are 'objective' rather than 'subjective' (that is, they are distinct from whatever subjective desires people may have).

23 See e.g. Wolff (2003: 103–4); Rosen (1996: 182); Elster (1986: 168). I defend the critical notion of ideology from this objection in Finlayson (2015) and Finlayson (2019).

24 Pettit (2012) is an example that features in Bascara's dissertation. See also Rodríguez Apólito (2022) for an extended discussion.

emancipation are dogged by concerns about insulting or condescending to people (and in particular the oppressed or victims of injustice) by portraying them as overly gullible, lacking in rationality or knowledge of their own interests – a portrayal which is assimilated to treating people 'like children'. Since to treat adults like children is seen as presumptively oppressive, theories which proclaim emancipatory aspirations yet appear to portray their objects of concern in this way are suspected of being part of the problem rather than the solution.

Bascara's use of pragmatist standpoint epistemology may be understood as a response to this worry. In her doctoral dissertation, Bascara distinguishes and deals separately with the 'ontology' and the 'epistemology' of oppression: the questions of what oppression *is* and of how we can *know* when oppression is present. As she points out, these two things can, at least in principle, come apart: it's possible to say that something is an instance of oppression, even if this is not recognised. If it never quite happens in practice that there is oppression that *nobody* recognises, there can certainly be instances of oppression which are heavily contested, i.e. where many people, perhaps including some on the receiving end of the oppression, do not know or do not express themselves as knowing that it exists. Children are arguably a case in point.

In terms of the epistemology of oppression, Bascara's suggestion is that in order to know whether oppression exists in a given instance, we should look for inter-subjective agreement among the putative oppressed group. While this agreement should preferably be actual, there are instances where social conditions block the kind of collective deliberation that would produce consensus (for example, by separating people from each other or impeding communication between them). So, while commendably mindful of the dangers of this kind of move, Bascara allows that *hypothetical* agreement might be relevant to the epistemic question too. She connects this answer with both standpoint theory and the pragmatist tradition: in line with the former, she takes the view that where oppression exists, those subject to that oppression will be epistemically privileged with regard to the existence and nature of their oppression; and influenced by a version of the latter, she connects not only *knowledge* but also *truth* to human practices of enquiry, suggesting that what it means for something to be 'true' (at least in the case of truths about oppression) is that this is what the oppressed agree on amongst themselves, or would agree on after a sufficient period of deliberation.

As an aside here, this is not quite how I am used to thinking of pragmatism. I have always understood it as having fundamentally to do with the relationship between truth and human *interests*: put crudely, truth as usefulness (although this doesn't mean narrow expedience of the kind that would make lies become 'true' so long as they're convenient for the liar – the 'interests' in question must be more basic and general ones, such as the interests in explanatory and predictive power, coherence and comprehensibility). Bascara's 'pragmatist standpoint epistemology' seems to be primarily influenced by Cheryl Misak's understanding of pragmatism, which (if I understand it correctly) is basically Habermasian – hence the emphasis on hypothetical and idealised processes of 'deliberation' (cf. Habermas's 'ideal speech condition'). This strikes me as a distortion, arguably an abandonment, of the pragmatist insight: the further we get into the hypothetical and the 'ideal', the further away we get from actual practices, and the more this 'pragmatism' starts to look like just a disguised version of the kind of view that pragmatists say they want to get away from – and as with the liberal use of devices like 'hypothetical consent', its disguised nature can make it more insidious than its more up-front equivalents.

My problem, then, is not with standpoint theory or pragmatism as such (both of which I think capture important truths). It is instead with a particular move which lands on the idea of hypothetical agreement as a solution to a perceived problem about seeming to ride roughshod over the actual views or wishes of oppressed people. I'll come back to this perceived problem shortly (as indicated earlier, I am not convinced that the problem is a genuine one that should exercise theorists in the way that it does), but my objection here is a different one: that whether or not the problem is a real problem, the proposed solution is not a real solution. In the end, it seems to me, the problem with recourse to hypothetical agreement (or endorsement, or consent, as the case may be) is that it boils down to just another way of saying what we reckon to be true, justified or acceptable (regardless of what the people concerned think). We feel uneasy about saying that certain people can be wrong about certain things (in the present case, about their own oppression). But we are also aware of the perils of taking people's beliefs and preferences at face value – and are aware, more particularly, of the ways in which the beliefs and preferences of the oppressed can be shaped and distorted by oppression itself. We don't want to say "This is true, whatever you think." So we end up saying some version of: "This is what you would agree with if you were thinking straight." However you dress this up, it doesn't seem to me that it gets around the original worry. If anything, it succeeds only in adding a layer of sneakiness that serves to intensify any element of condescension that might be present.

Putting that to one side for the moment: how does Bascara's pragmatist standpoint epistemology apply to the case of childhood? Is there inter-subjective agreement among children as a group that they are oppressed? Some might think that the answer to that question is obviously "No". They might think that this becomes only slightly less obvious when we stipulate that knowledge of oppression does not have to involve the application of the particular *word* 'oppression'. Most adults would probably be confident that children do not object to the overall system of adult control to which they are subject, even if they frequently complain about or take issue with particular manifestations of it. On the other hand, it is reasonable to ask on what this impression rests, since children are rarely if ever asked the relevant question. The idea that many children regard themselves as oppressed *qua* children is perhaps not so implausible as it initially seems to many people. Many children seem to express something like the claim that they are oppressed – a protest at the general state of affairs in which things are not up to them, and a sense that this is not in their interests (and is hence in some sense fraudulent) – and it seems plausible that many more would express a thought of that kind if they were given the opportunity to express it without fear of ridicule or redress, or might come to develop such a thought if they were to undergo something akin to 'consciousness raising' (as it is, children are under an unusually stultifying system of ideological control, having no meaningful freedom of thought, speech or information, and being subject to wall-to-wall propaganda that aims to rationalise the institutions and rules to which they are subject). So, it seems to me, it is not too much of a stretch to argue that children (at any rate, those who are verbal and have mastered the requisite concepts) either agree or would agree that they are oppressed, after a suitable period of deliberation – hopefully a period short enough for them not to have grown up and become adults in the meantime.[25]

With that said, I want now to return to the move I found problematic – the move to hypothetical agreement – and to the worry I see as underlying it, because I think that doing so can point to an interesting way of moving beyond an impasse which affects a lot of contemporary political and critical theory. The problem with Bascara's invocation of hypothetical agreement, to be precise, is not really that it says anything false. It may be correct to say something to the effect that, where oppression is present, those subject to it will either be aware of it, or will at least be potentially able to become aware of it given the right

25 I suppose there is nothing inherently incoherent about saying that children are oppressed if and only if they would come to realise that they *had been* oppressed, if allowed to deliberate for a period of time after which they would be adults and thus no longer oppressed as children, but the proposal does admittedly sound slightly strange.

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conditions. That is really just to say that there is always *some* kind of experiential aspect to oppression, some kind of connection (however indirect or twisted) between the situation of oppression and the consciousness of the oppressed. I take it that this is at least a plausible thought, even if not incontestable.

The trouble is then not that it is false, but that it does not *help* to invoke hypothetical agreement. But what is it that it fails to help *with*? As I put it before, the worry is about seeming to insult or condescend to people by purporting to know their own putative oppression better than they do. The worry arises because of a simultaneous desire not unduly to limit the scope of social criticism by saying, in effect, "Nobody's complaining, so it must be OK." Phenomena like oppression, as theories like Frye's and also, in her own way, Bascara's emphasise (Bascara specifies that the interests which arbitrary and hence oppressive interference fails to track are 'objective' ones), are not straightforwardly reducible to anyone's subjective feelings. This 'objectivist' instinct exists in competition with an opposing impulse: to respect and to attribute some kind of authority to people's own experiences and perspectives. That impulse is often then expressed as a worry about 'paternalism', one which Bascara addresses and to which her pragmatist-standpoint-theoretical solution is offered as a response.

I've always thought this worry a confused one, although it is an almost universal obsession of political philosophers as well as critical theorists. Are we seriously supposed to believe that people are never or rarely wrong about their own interests? This is hard to reconcile with our experiences of ourselves or with other actual human beings. Do we generally know what is in our own interests? Not unless this is reduced to a fairly unambitious claim, by being restricted to relatively easy matters: we do tend to know that it's not in our interests to run into fires, or to eat shit, or to jump off cliffs (very small children may be an exception). But on all sorts of other things, if we are honest, we have no idea; or, even if we do have some idea, we manage to fuck things up for ourselves anyway (isn't quite a lot of classic literature about exactly this?).[26] So the answer to the question of whether people 'generally' know what's good for them is a resounding "yes and no" (with the "no" arguably the more salient in many contexts). But this doesn't get us very far, either as political philosophers or as people.

26 This doesn't mean, of course, that we do not often have good reasons to be circumspect about the contexts and ways in which we say this (and in particular, to be conscious of the potential of claims to the effect "they don't know what's good for them" to be used as rationales for oppressive practices). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

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So it seems obvious to me that acknowledgement of human fallibility, perversity and 'false consciousness' (the term sometimes reserved for error about our own interests, though it can also be used more broadly) has to be our starting point – there may then be worries that we have to deal with, but we can't make these go away by pretending that people are reliable authorities on their own interests in any straightforward sense, because we're manifestly not. But in any case, the worry about 'paternalism' as it is often expressed strikes me as overly quick. So people can be wrong about their objective interests. Why think that if we say this, we'll have to send in the tanks? Couldn't there be rather a lot of reasons why various types of intervention are undesirable, regardless of any view about 'objective interests' and people's first-person authority (or lack of it) over them?

There are all sorts of reasons. Even a benevolently motivated intervention based on a correct appraisal of interests might go wrong in practice, in any number of ways. When we look at concrete cases, the problem also arises that the agents who are in a position to intervene are often hopelessly ill-suited to doing so in a way that would further the interests of those on the receiving end. The basic problem with 'humanitarian interventions' at the level of foreign policy, one which isn't often enough or bluntly enough spelt out, is that the proposed agents of such intervention are rarely (if ever) either benign or competent. One sufficient reason why Britain or the United States shouldn't intervene in other countries is that neither is fit to do so in a way that would lead to anything good. The plight of the people in question, however terrible, doesn't alter this; nor does what the population in question thinks about its own interests and even whether it wishes for an intervention to happen. As the Australian writer Caitlin Johnstone has put it (Johnstone 2021): 'People who think the US military can be used for good remind me of that scene in Edward Scissorhands where he's going around the house accidentally slashing things and then trying to fix them but he can't fix them because he's got horrible scissor hands that can only slash.' The difference between this case and the case of US foreign policy, as Johnstone is perfectly aware,[27] is that the damage wreaked by the latter is far from accidental, but that is beside the present point: you can have reason to be highly wary of coercive 'interventions' by some agents in the affairs of others based on a passing knowledge of who these agents are and how their interventions tend to work out; and those reasons apply regardless of whether you think that people can often be wrong about their own interests (which they obviously can). Of course, the worry that preoccupies

27 The title of her satirical piece is: 'Stop Believing US Military Invasions Have Noble *Intentions*' [emphasis added].

liberal theorists is not only or even mainly about intervention in the context of international affairs – indeed, liberals have in recent years been all too comfortable with this kind of 'paternalism', and show little sign of having learned their lessons. But parallel points apply to other types of interference: just because we think that someone is wrong about what is good for them, it doesn't follow that intervening coercively (or even non-coercively, for that matter) is justifiable or likely to be a good idea; there are often good and clear reasons – ones based on past experience and on our knowledge of the kinds of agents that would be doing the intervening – why intervention would be a very bad idea indeed.

There is another problem with the implied possibility of reasoning from "x is wrong about her interests" to "send in the tanks". The problem is deeper and in a way even more basic than the ones just mentioned. Discussions of 'objective' interests and 'paternalism' often seem to me to overlook something crucial, which is that we don't just have an interest in things *full stop*: our interest in them is dependent on how we relate to and how we come to access the things in question, and different modes of relation or access can even change what a given thing *is*, in ways that may alter the 'objective fact' of whether we have an interest in it. For example, I might have an interest in X, but not an interest in having X imposed on me. This seems obvious. Certainly, it is truer of some things than of others. If I have an interest in taking antibiotics, then that basic interest is served whether I do so voluntarily or whether I have to be strapped down (though coercion may, of course, still have some deleterious effects on me, at least psychologically). But other things are not like antibiotics. Something like sex, which we might choose and might in a general sense be said to have an interest in, is a radically different thing depending on whether it is chosen and wanted or coercively or otherwise imposed.[28] But the point applies much more widely. I might have an interest in doing more exercise, and this seems like an 'objective' interest *par excellence*: it's not dependent on my inclination or desire for exercise, but exists even in the face of my reluctance and disinclination. But I don't think it follows that it would be in my interests to have some authority impose an exercise regime on me against my will. The 'good' in question, the good of exercise, would survive to some extent: I would presumably still derive some physiological benefit from the exercise, forced or not. But it would also change it, in ways with physical as well as psychological ramifications: the stress and resentment caused by being marched around might well *not* be good for me,

28 Some would object here that rape is not sex, but violence. This only serves to underscore the point I'm making: that we don't just have interests in things that are definable independently of how we relate to them; how we relate to them can affect whether we have an interest in them, and even what things they are.

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and I would lack the sense of achievement that I could get if I did it of my own accord; moreover, I might get forced to do it on days when it is *not* in my interests (e.g. because I am injured), where this fact is not accessible to or of no interest to my handlers; or I might physically resist, and get hurt or imprisoned (etc.).[29] The same sorts of considerations apply to most things we might be forced into doing, because they are after all points about the nature of interference or coercion.[30]

This last point seems to me a fairly simple one, but can be obscured by a tendency to assume a strict dualism between 'objective' and 'subjective' when thinking about interests. Like that between 'normative' and 'descriptive',[31] the dichotomy between 'objective' and 'subjective' is a staple of the analytic tradition in which Bascara's thesis is written and to which she had a complicated and ambivalent relationship (as Koshka Duff mentioned in the symposium that became the basis of this volume, Bascara often spoke about the difficulty of writing political philosophy within the constraints imposed by the prevailing academic culture and process). Like the normative-descriptive split, the subjective-objective one is hard to get past, once you have learned to see the world in its terms. What I have tried to point out, however, is that 'objective interests' are not really prior to or fully independent of subjective inclination or desire in the first place.

* * *

I've argued that we can have good reasons to be wary of coercive and other kinds of interference in the lives of others without recourse to what I find an obviously implausible claim, namely that people are in general good judges of their own interests (or reliable witnesses to their situations more broadly). Where does this leave us, in terms of what we say about paternalism with respect to either adults or children?

It should hopefully be clear where it does *not* leave us: in an uncritical, blanket embrace of paternalistically rationalised forms of domination. It should be almost equally clear that it need not commit us to a blanket *rejection* of 'interference', even of the coercive variety. The existence of the reasons

29 This crucial point – about the violent substrate of any paternalistic regime – is often overlooked, in political philosophy as well as in thinking about childhood. As Dennison puts it: 'So many adults… do not realize, it does not sink in, that compulsory attendance is not merely a law which somehow enforces itself, but is ultimately an act of force: a grown man, earning his living as a cop of some kind, puts his left hand and his right on the arm of some kid (usually a disturbed one) and takes him away to a prison for the young' (Dennison 1972: 73).

30 They also apply, with variations, to non-coercive forms of pressure such as cajoling, manipulation and bribery. These, too, can affect whether and to what extent a given thing is in our interests.

31 I question the normative-descriptive dichotomy in Finlayson (2016: 9–11).

identified, powerful as they are, why interference can be an evil does not mean that it is so in every conceivable form or context. The idea that we might renounce interference altogether is in any case an illusion. Understood broadly as the phenomenon whereby people affect each other's conditions of living, in ways those affected do not always choose, interference is no more or less than the stuff of social and interpersonal life. That general observation, needless to say, in no way detracts from the reasons we have for opposing (for example) so-called 'humanitarian interventions' by Western states.

I won't try to answer the question of when and under what conditions 'paternalistic' interventions are permissible, or of how exactly these conditions differ for different groups such as adults and children. Not only would that be far too ambitious an undertaking for the space available here, but I also believe that no *general* account of this question is possible. It seems obvious both that paternalistic interference is sometimes in order, and that age (among other things) will sometimes make a difference to the manner and extent of this. You would grab a child to stop them running into traffic; and you would do exactly the same, if necessary, for your grown-up friend.[32] But you probably wouldn't put your grown-up friend on reins, or insist that they hold your hand.[33]

What I want to note instead is that the points made above apply as much to children as to adults. They plausibly apply even to babies, as well as to non-human animals. That is to say, the general points I) that the available agents or institutions in a position to exercise interventionist power on purportedly paternalistic grounds are often highly unsuitable in one way or another (malign or incompetent),[34] and II) that the way a being relates to a given object or end can affect the kind of thing this is and also how good (or not good) it is for the being in question, seem as true of toddlers, cats and badgers as they are of the canonical 'rational man'. To take point I): it makes perfect sense that we might worry, for example, about approaches to environmental ethics which endorse a 'stewardship' model of the relationship between humans and the environment, on the basis that the human institutions likely to be tasked with 'protecting' the environment or its wildlife are unfit to do so (and

32 Farson uses this exact example to make the point that insofar as emergency situations are concerned, our attitude to restricting the movements of children and of adults doesn't significantly differ: 'Just as we would pull an adult out of the path of an onrushing car, we would do the same for a child.' (Farson 1974: 37).

33 As Farson also observes, even this difference is not entirely 'natural' or necessary, but a consequence of the way we have chosen to organise our public infrastructure: 'The problem of having to constantly control and supervise our children only arises because of the potential dangers of playing in or near the streets. We are forced into this posture because our traffic systems have not been designed with child safety as a high priority. Instead, designers have placed the responsibility to protect the child with the parent, and the parent has accepted it without even realizing that there might be another way' (Farson 1974: 37–8).

34 We might add, in line with Bakunin's insight, that even the best-placed agents are liable to be corrupted when endowed with a dominating power over the lives of others (Bakunin 1867).

may well do the reverse).[35] This point has nothing whatsoever to do with the question of the 'rational capacities' of the creatures on the receiving end of the stewardship. As for II): the point here is that on the whole, living creatures do not like to be frustrated in their efforts, and that such frustration represents a certain degree of stress to them. That holds whether the creature is a baby, a cat or, arguably, even a plant. The manner of a creature's approach to and attainment of some particular end – whether it is sought and selected by the creature itself, presented to it by some external agency, or forced upon it – can make a difference to the kind of end it is for that creature. I take this to be quite a minimal and intuitive claim. It does not mean, of course, that frustration is everywhere and always bad, that there are never any countervailing reasons to override it even where it does represent a bad, or that a creature's 'agency' is in the first place something simple and spontaneous and unaffected by the world in which it plays out (a world that includes the exercises of agency of other creatures).

What it does imply, I take it, is an additional presumption against certain kinds of interference in the lives of beings including children, a presumption which does not show up if we think about the good or bad of certain ends as unrelated to a creature's particular orientation toward those ends (or, to put it another way, if we think of 'subjective' and 'objective' interests as sharply separate from one another). In plainer terms, what this means is that there is no smooth and simple inference from "X is good for children" to "It is good for children to be forced to (consume, attend, do) X", both because adults and adult institutions are generally terrible, and because what children want and how they feel about things (indeed, what *people and other creatures* want and how they feel about things) make a difference to how good or bad those things are for them – that is to say, it matters.[36]

35 Chris Armstrong criticises this aspect of Martha Nussbaum's recent treatment of animal ethics (Nussbaum 2023), detecting 'a tension [...] between the focus on protecting individual flourishing, in which all animals are able to live the kinds of lives distinctive to their species, and her commitment to a multi-species society in which humans have such a strong directing role' (Armstrong 2023). Interestingly, part of Nussbaum's defence of the stewardship model is that animals *would* agree to it if they were in a position to do so. In Armstrong's précis: 'Since life in so-called wild places is so challenging, animals themselves would probably choose a life of enlightened human stewardship if they could, [Nussbaum] thinks.'

36 This, again, is not in and of itself a very radical claim. Most defenders of the status quo in terms of the management of children would probably agree that children ought to be 'consulted' from time to time, their wishes 'taken into account' (this is also reflected in law, e.g. in custody disputes; see Matthews 1996). But depending on the extent to which we endorse point I) above, and on *how much* we think a creature's subjective orientation matters (the essence of point II)), it could be radical indeed in its implications for societal change.

Conclusion

I have argued, in Part I of this paper, that it is plausible to regard children as an oppressed group by the lights of theories of oppression including Bascara's neo-republican account. I argued that this case can be made independently of any particular thesis about children's capacities, for instance their degree of rationality. Rather, to say that children are oppressed is to make some variation of the basic claim that the actual systems controlling children's lives are not, contrary to their claims for themselves, for children's 'own good', but in fact work to their systematic detriment.

In Part II, I argued that a common worry about 'paternalism' among political theorists including Bascara is misplaced. The worry is that it is insulting or infantilising, even proto-oppressive, to fail to treat people as generally authoritative as to their own situations and interests. This creates big problems for left-leaning political theorists especially, because various conditions, including conditions of oppression themselves, can make people less able to identify their own situations and interests accurately. In order to retain the ability to say that oppression is present in such cases, theorists are forced into some awkward manoeuvres, among which the recourse to 'hypothetical endorsement' and 'idealised conditions' (and similar notions) figures prominently. I argued that these manoeuvres do not help. However sophisticated, they all boil down in the end to telling people that they *would* agree with us if they were thinking properly – a move ironically reminiscent of common ways of addressing children ("You'll understand when you're older"). So, if it is impermissibly infantilising to tell people that they are wrong about their own interests, then these 'solutions' fail to solve the problem. However, I also argued that the perceived problem is a false one. It is *not* inherently and impermissibly infantilising to say that people are often wrong about their own interests (though of course there may be false or insulting instances or ways of saying it); it is, in any case, very often true. But I also argued that saying this in no way leaves us devoid of resources for opposing would-be paternalistic and other kinds of unwanted interference in people's lives. On the contrary, there are good general reasons not to mess with people, ones which apply in the cases of children and adults alike; namely, I) the unsuitability of interfering agents, and II) the intimate way in which 'subjective' and 'objective' interests are intertwined. Political theorists would thus do well to throw off the spectre of paternalism that so frequently haunts them.

The same idea – that we need to pretend that people are basically rational (in the sense of being reliable guides to their own situation and interests) in order

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to oppose coercive or dominating forms of interference in their lives – thus seems to lie at the bottom of two phenomena: the contortions undertaken by many theorists in order to square the impulse to be maximally sensitive to oppression with the competing impulse to avoid 'paternalism' (the focus of the second part of my discussion); and the widespread assumption that children are not, cannot be, oppressed by the structures of adult control under which they live (the subject of the first). By unhitching the question of domination from the vexed issue of 'competence' or 'rationality', notions whose use has tended to be exclusionary in myriad ways, it is possible to expand the constituency of those who might aptly be seen both as victims of oppression and as candidates for liberation.

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