



## Response to

**David M. Csinos,  
“Review of John Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*,”  
*JCR* 4/1 (April 2013).**

John Wall

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I would like to thank David M. Csinos for his generous, insightful, and comprehensive review of my book. I especially appreciate its pointing out the dual audiences of those concerned with childhood and those with broader interests in ethics and religious studies. The concept of childism is meant to serve a similar purpose to many notions of feminism:

not only to lift up the experiences and voices of a historically marginalized group, but also to challenge and reconfigure underlying social structures shared by all. As a male feminist, I see no contradiction in aspiring to be an adult childist too.

There are two larger contexts that might help place the book's aims in sharper relief. One is the global movement of childhood studies, which, since its beginnings in the 1980s, has sought to examine children not as pre-adults but as agents with their own voices, diversity, and social constructions. One of my aims is to press childhood studies a step further, so that children's lived experiences are not only better understood but also transformative of larger social norms. Another context is postmodern ethics and its focus on the deconstruction of moral languages. I came to realize that postmodern ethics frequently assumes highly adult-centered frameworks, and that children call for not only the undoing of oppressive norms but also the reconstruction of more richly and experientially expansive ones.

Csinos suggests that the book might have allowed practice more deeply to inform theory. The book is structured to move from children's experiences and their historical constructions, then to considerations of theory and finally to practices. In the process, theory is developed in light of a diversity of practices, and practices are explored in order to further deepen theory. My view is that the hermeneutical circle of practice-theory-practice is not radical enough to disrupt history's profound adult-centrism. What is needed is a thorough questioning of basic historical assumptions before new horizons of thought and action can be imagined.

Childhood studies certainly presents adults who conduct it with the serious dilemma of how to represent children's own experiences and voices, a question which has much vexed the field. The preferred solution is empiricism: to interpret children's agency and voices with the same detail and complexity as one would attempt to interpret any other group. My book frequently makes use of empirical studies and in addition quotes a wide range of children's own voices and writings. However, as a scholar who works primarily in the humanities, I also believe there needs to be room for examining and critiquing historical presuppositions, including those employed in empirical study itself as well as across the academy and society. I do not see children and adults as inhabiting separate spheres, but rather as socially constructed differently according to age, much as for males and females according to gender. One of the most important goals of contemporary ethical reflection is to overcome its own middle-adult privilege and take the broadest possible dimensions of age into account.

My larger goal in writing this book was to spark new thinking in ethics in such. It is deeply gratifying that Csinos should have picked this up so clearly.