Review

John Wall,

Ethics in Light of Childhood

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Reviewer: David M. Csinos

davecsinos@yahoo.com

A title can say much about a book. This is certainly true for *Ethics in Light of Childhood*. Rather than using adulthood as the standard and norm through which ethics is studied, John Wall argues that childhood can become the focal point for understanding and practicing morality and ethics.

In using childhood as a lens for understanding ethical life, new perspectives are garnered and new insight is uncovered for ethical living in the contemporary world. As feminism used women's lives as the basis for exploring ethical issues, Wall calls this practice of focusing on childhood "childism." In his words, "Childism is the effort to respond to the experiences of children by transforming understanding and practices for all" (3). Thus, there is a political aspect to Wall's view of childism, one that seeks to alter ethical understanding and practices that neglect the lives of young people.

The introduction of this book offers readers essential information about Wall's purposes and goals. After explaining the view of childism outlined above, the author admits that his exploration of childist ethics is not an easy endeavour. While it is a universal phenomenon, childhood is also a social construction, one not always seen in light of the complexity and diversity inherent in it. To explain this complexity, Wall invites readers to consider the stories of three children, each of which reveals both the agency of children and the ways in which children's lives are constructed by the social worlds of adults. Finally, he introduces three questions that guide his discussions throughout the book:

- An ontological question: "What does consideration of childhood suggest about what it means most basically to be human?" (7).
- A teleological question: "What does childhood teach about what human relations and societies should try to aim toward?" (8)
- A deontological question: "What, in light of childhood, do human beings owe each other?" (9).

Wall admits that he is not the first to consider "ethics in light of childhood." Thus, the sole chapter of the first section ("History") deals with historical considerations for such an approach to the study of ethics. He outlines three models for understanding childhood that have existed throughout history and persist in the present day. The "top-down" model holds that humanity is inherently unruly and thus children require a moral purpose to be imposed on them from above. The "bottom-up" model emphasizes the inherent goodness of humanity which, when nurtured, is able to transform societies that are corrupt. The argument of the "developmental" or "horizontal" model is that human morality is a potential that is progressively realized over time.

In outlining each of these concepts of childhood, Wall remains focused on the ontological, teleological, and deontological guiding questions and offers examples of how this model has been understood in Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and secular contexts throughout history. Additionally, he critically evaluates each model, highlighting it strengths and advantages as well as its weaknesses and disadvantages to understandings of childhood and the lives of children.

The second section of this book ("Theory") is devoted to theory and includes three chapters, one for each guiding question. The first deals with the ontological question and asks "What is Human Being?" Taking childhood into serious consideration, Wall argues that humanity involves at once being constructed and constructing. Human being, then, is a capacity for creating worlds of meaning. Childhood shows that this capacity—which is a gift to humanity—not only *involves* play, but *is* play. To be human is to play, to create even as one is created by

social worlds and contexts. The next chapter takes on the teleological question of ethical aims. Wall argues that childhood teaches that the ethical aims of humanity involve "narrative expansion," that is, a growing wholeness of one's life story that expands to intersect with and include the narratives of others. Wholeness, in this perspective, does not mean that every aspect of a person's narrative fits neatly together. Wholeness means that all are present in diverse, messy, and complex ways. The final chapter of this section asks the deontological question: "What is Owed Each Other?" The answer builds on the responses to the previous two questions. Wall has already shown that a childist perspective sees humanity as self-creative and self-narrating; in this chapter the spotlight turns to the other. The appropriate response to the other is a disruption of the self. The presence of the other and the other's narrative decenters the self and the self-narrative in ways that allow one's "horizons of meaning and activity" (88) to continually expand in creative new ways.

With chapter five, Wall moves into the final section ("Practice"), which transitions his discussion from theory to practice. Here he focuses on how the theories he develops in section two can be put into practice. He begins with human rights, which he re-imagines as responsibilities for responding to the otherness of one another. A childist perspective advocates for the creative interplay of top-down protection rights, bottom-up participation rights, and developmental/horizontal provision rights which work together to ensure the expression of shared creativity and allow for the growth and expansion of human narratives and obligations. His discussion in chapter six focuses on the family and puts forward a child-centered perspective on the purpose of the family, which is to nurture creative meaning among and in relation to each

member. Borrowing from Erikson, he argues that both children and adults can foster generativity in one another's lives, which includes an "ever-expanding circle of interdependent responsibility" (146). The final chapter in this section recasts ethical thinking in light of a childist perspective. Childism, according to Wall, calls attention to the moral life of children, which in turn re-imagines moral living as an effort to create more expansive and inclusive moral worlds in response to otherness. In Wall's view, this conception of ethical thinking is poetic and artistic. Following this chapter, the author wraps things up with a very short conclusion that recaps in the briefest of ways the arguments outlined throughout the book.

Ethics in Light of Childhood is a provocative and fascinating book that has the power to transform ethical thought and practice. As Wall decenters assumptions and views about children, morality, and ethics based on adulthood and viewed through adult lenses, he invites readers to expand their narratives and their circles of meaning. Throughout the book, he uncovers and embraces complexities that are intertwined with children's lives, understandings of childhood, and re-imagining ethics through the perspectives of the child. I am encouraged that he does not assume a universal humanity nor a universal childhood, a mistake that some attribute to first-wave feminism. Rather, he highlights differences, in particular difference among childhood and adulthood without equating difference with deficiency. In fact, it is often within difference and complexity that his deepest insights are uncovered. For example, after outlining the top-down, bottom-up, and developmental/horizontal models of ethics that consider childhood, he does not simply throw them all away. He adopts certain aspects and elements of these models in crafting his own circular approach to childism.

This example highlights another strength of this book: a concern with—and reliance upon—where we have come from. Wall does not dismiss historical conceptions of childhood and ways of doing ethics in light of childhood; he re-envisions them in ways that more fully capture the realities and complexities of children's lives. Using a metaphor from the world of children, it can be said that the author dips his fingers in many colors of paint in an attempt to create a more colourful and vivid picture.

Another positive feature of this book is Wall's balanced study and arguments about childhood. Rather than seeing children as wholly innocent or amoral and in need of adult guidance, he upholds a perspective that lives within a tension between these views. Children—as human beings—have a capacity for good as well as a capacity for evil, and by remaining in this tension, he ensures that he does not romanticize childhood nor lapse into cynicism and despair. By remaining in this and other conceptual tensions, he opens himself to fresh and creative understandings.

While I find much merit in Wall's book, I take issue with his overall approach. As a practical theologian, I find the movement from theory to practice to be problematic. It is clear from the organization of the book's sections that Wall begins with theory, constructing conceptual arguments and ideas about ethics in light of childhood. Following the "Theory" section comes the "Practice" section, where the author applies theory to three areas of moral life. I find such an approach problematic because, by beginning in the realm of theory and then moving to the realm of practice, Wall seems to imply that practice has little (or nothing) to say

about theory. On the other hand, he writes that "theory sheds light on action just as understanding action changes theory" (113).

Another problem with the book involves the issue of children's voices. Throughout the book, Wall relies on children's narratives in making his arguments and generating insight. The stories of children like Anne Frank and Ishmael Beah surface throughout the text and are woven together with the work of philosophers, theologians, ethicists, and other scholars. While at times Wall uses these narratives to generate insight, at other times he includes them to describe his ideas and arguments. Yet a dilemma arises in that the first-hand voices of children are absent from the text. After all, it is not a child that wrote the book, but an adult. And it is through the eyes of adults that children's lives and stories are interpreted.

This is an inherent difficulty and limitation of a childist methodology, which Wall makes clear in his discussion of childist ethics in the 2010 volume *Children's Voices*: "A child-centered ethical methodology must recognize that, however much children do have their own voices and agency, they are always to a higher degree than adults dependent on others for interpreting these into a transformed world."[1] Unfortunately, *Ethics in Light of Childhood* does not include a similiar admission of the complications and problems inherent in a childist approach, although it is implied throughout the text. In the introduction, Wall admits that children's stories are never solely their own: they are "created in part by children themselves and in part by the adults and societies around them, including finally, you and me as we read about and ponder them" (4). But this passage refers to the social constructions behind children's narratives rather than the inherent

[1] John Wall, "Childism and the Ethics of Responsibility" in *Children's Voices: Children's Perspectives in Ethics, Theology, and Religious Education*, edited by Annemie Dillen and Didier Pollefeyt, pp. 237-65 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 251-2.

difficulties in accurately representing children's perspectives in a child-centered methodology. This leaves me wondering whether Wall's discussion actually reflects the concrete realities of children's lives or if it better reflects *adult perspectives of children's lives*. I have heard scholars debate about whether or not men can engage in feminist ethics or whether white women can construct womanist ethics. Wall's book leaves me wondering: Can an adult really do ethics in light of childhood? This dilemma is not going to disappear nor will it be resolved; it is inherent in a childist approach to ethics. A clear admission of this dilemma would have enhanced Wall's methodology and his arguments.

Despite these objections, *Ethics in Light of Childhood* is a milestone that offers not only fresh perspectives, but a fresh approach that can significantly transform ethical thought and living. It offers a new way of seeing ourselves, one another, and proper ways of living together. There is a tendency to simply recommend this book for those interested in childhood studies. Yet it is not simply a book about children. It is primarily a book about ethics, about seeing moral life through the lens of childhood. Thus, it deserves a wide and varied audience, including students and scholars in ethics, religious studies, public policy, and theology. Furthermore, I recommend it to thoughtful practitioners, ministers, and policy makers who will surely find Wall's book enlightening, even if the technical language and complex arguments may be difficult for some readers. *Ethics in Light of Childhood* will be useful to those who walk through halls of the academy, who spend time in deep thought in home offices, and who walk side by side with children in a quest to repair the world.