Childhood as Topic of Philosophy of Recognition

On the Developmental Status of Children’s Ideals and their Philosophical Significance
Abstract

The Philosophy of Recognition, as it has been developed during the last two decades mainly by Axel Honneth, emphasizes that the emergence and development of the human self depends upon various forms of intersubjective recognition like empathy, cognitive respect, and social esteem. In my paper I shall show how and why these forms could and should be linked to the formation and development of children’s ideals, which according to the psychoanalytic theory of Heinz Kohut should be seen as a core dimension of the infantile self.

A further claim of the paper is that philosophizing with children is the social practice, which is probably best equipped to provide children and adolescences with those experiences of intersubjective recognition, which enable the articulation of infantile ideals and the transformation of these ideals into values. These articulation and transformation are basic preconditions for a free and autonomous human life. However, philosophizing with children can fulfill this task, only if its aim is not only to prepare children for an autonomous adult life. In addition, within this practice infantile views and ideals should be socially esteemed precisely because of their infantilism.

This paper focuses on children’s ideals as both a theme of theoretical philosophy and as a subject which should be addressed by the practice of philosophizing with children. As an issue of philosophy of childhood ideals should be seen through the lenses of the question, which role they play at the infantile self, and how they develop within the intersubjective matrix between the child and her significant others. On the other hand, the philosophical practitioner should ask herself how and to which extent she should address those ideals and why this should be an end of practising philosophy with children at all.

The bridging link between these two different types of philosophical approaching of children’s ideals lies in the assumption, that these ideals requires intersubjective recognition and intersubjective articulation as necessarily conditions for their for-
mation and development. As I will argue in the last part of my paper, philosophizing with children is best equipped to make these conditions available.

In the first part of the paper I shall focus on a psychoanalytical theory of the genesis and the development of ideals during the childhood as fundamental components of the structure of the human self. This theory has been elaborated mainly by Heinz Kohut in the second half of the 20th century.

As we shall see, ideals can be stabilized only if they become articulated, and only if they are supported by the significant others of the child. Axel Honneth’s theory of intersubjective recognition, which will be on stake in the second part of the paper, shall help us to describe more precisely which kinds of support are needed and how they could be given.

Finally, in the last section I shall argue that philosophizing with children is probably the best way systematically to encourage children to articulate their ideals and so to develop themselves as free individuals with sound selves.

**Children’s Ideals from the Perspective of a Psychoanalytical Theory of the Self**

It is a great merit of the Austrian-American psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut that he conceptualized a profound account on the central significance of ideals for the development of the human abilities to live a life in happiness and freedom, a life without mental pain. In more concrete terms, Kohut explored the foundational role which forming and developing of ideals play for the constitution of a sound and dynamic self, which he saw as a necessarily condition for living a free human life.

It is not accidentally that Kohut’s psychoanalytical approach is usually called “self-psychology” for this approach is founded in a conception of the self as the foundation of individual’s psyche. Accordingly, unlike Freud and the Freudians, Kohut does not locate the causes for mental pathologies and disorders in the oppression of sexual drives, but in the fragmentation and the weaknesses of the self. But what are the fragmentation and the weaknesses of the self actually about?

In order to answer this question, we shall take a closer look at Kohut’s conception of the self. According to him, the healthy self serves as an efficient and independent centre of individual’s incitements and a focus of individual’s perceptions and experiences (see Kohut 1979, p. 91). In the so understood self is grounded our feeling that our body and mind forms a unity in space and time (see bid, p. 155). Hence, the self is the
source of the coherence of our inner life and therefore of our freedom and autonomy, for freedom and autonomy presuppose the ability to form volitions that transcend momentary impulses caused by external stimuli. Otherwise the individual will be totally dependent on his external environment and on its situational changes. This would lead to his losing of his feeling for his own self, and many who are suffering under that deficit would attempt to reassure that they are still existing as human persons by exposing their bodies to extreme pleasure and/or pain by excessive sexual behaviour, by misuse of drugs and alcohol etc. (see ibid, p. 75).

The self, thus understood as precondition of personal freedom, has, according to Kohut, a bipolar structure. Roughly speaking, individual’s narcistic ambitions and wishes builds up the first pole of the self, while the second pole is constituted by her ideals. The primary narcistic ambition of the human individual is basically the wish of the child to be admired by her significant others (normally by her parents), to be mirrored by them as being a “great person”. A positive self-image of the child occurs as result of this admirable mirroring by the parents, and this image is the base for individual’s further ambitions in the childhood and beyond. Or to put it in Kohut’s terminology: the self-image of the child is result of child’s transmuting internalization of the images of him which his parents (and other significant others) communicate to him (see Kohut 1971, pp. 37 - 56; Kohut 1977, pp. 171-191; Kohut 1996, pp. 307 - 318). If the significant others love the child, which implies that they assert child’s unique personality, the child will develop a positive and sound self-image. This would allow her to develop during her entire live more and more personalizing features and to demand recognition by the others for these features.

However, if one’s only ambition is to assert the “uniqueness” and the “greatness” on one’s own personality, one would not be able to develop an independent self, for he would be totally dependent on the recognition of the others. He would not be able to take a reflexive and evaluative stand towards this recognition, and so for example to distinguish between authentic and manipulative forms of the latter. Hence, living an autonomous life requires that one’s ambitions are not serving only narcistic drives, but that they are directed also to trans-personal values, whose initial form are one’s ideals that builds up the second pole of the self.

Now, ideals have a dialectic structure: On the one hand their genesis is rooted, according to Kohut, in the interaction of the child with her significant others, insofar as ideals emerge through idealizations of the parents (see Kohut 1979, p. 150f.). However,
the growing individual transmutes these idealizations to ideals by detaching them from the concrete figures of the parents and by developing them to notions about how one’s own life in the world should look like. These notions get stabilized when the individual generalize them to views on what a good human life consist in. My claim is that this generalisation should be understood as a transition from *ideals* to *values*, and that supporting of exactly this transition is probably the most important task of philosophizing with children. In order to get a clue of what the supporting of the self-constituting genesis of ideals from idealisations and the subsequent transformation of ideals into values require, I would like to illustrate the entire process by an example.

Suppose that a child idealizes her mother as someone who is in every moment completely aware of child’s needs and wishes. (This is an idealization because evidently nobody can be in every moment fully involved in the inner life of another person). The transmuting of this idealization into an ideal of living a life characterized by mutual empathy and caring would be the second step of child's self-building process. The third step would consist in the developing of a notion that a good human life is *in general* characterized by mutual empathy and caring.

Now, it is important to mention, that although ideals and values functions as central constitutive features of the independence and the autonomy of the individual, of his getting beyond the realm of interpersonal relations, and of his disclosing of an objective world of meanings that transcends that realm, ideals and values are nevertheless grounded in the matrix of intersubjective relations between the self and her “self-objects” i.e. her significant others. The thus sketched process of individual’s values development can be only performed, if child’s significant others make her idealisations of themselves possible, and if they acknowledge and actively support her ideals. However, Kohut himself did not conceptualize systematically the forms of intersubjective recognition which the constitution of individual’s ideals and their development to values require. In order to describe more precisely these forms, we should turn our attention to Axel Honneth’s recognition theory, for this theory is probably currently the most advanced account on the intersubjective prerequisites and mechanisms of self-development.

*Ideals, Empathy, and Respect*
At the very beginning of the argumentation line that builds up the distinctive character of Honneth’s account on subjectivity and its genesis, stands the Hegelian claim that being oneself is always being in the others and through the others (see Honneth 1994, p. 11; p. 54; pp. 110f.; p. 154). Honneth spells out individual’s being oneself as a socially mediated process of self-realization; a process which he describes – following G. H. Mead – as progressive and continuous emergence of personal features and capabilities that the subject can attribute to himself and see as confirmations of his uniqueness and selfhood. This reflexive recognizing of the self’s features is possible only on the ground of the recognitional reactions of the individual’s interaction partners toward those features and capabilities (see Honneth 1994, p. 139; Honneth 2003, p. 163).

At this point of Honneth’s argumentation there is no significant difference between his and Kohut’s conceptions of self-development. As we have seen, according to Kohut the empathic treatment of the emerging self by his significant others is the driving force of his formation: an empathic treatment which consists in an affirmative mirroring of the needs, the wishes, and the abilities of the individual. According to both, Kohut and Honneth, the basic precondition for that treatment is a kind of synthesis between the child and her parents, a synthesis which consist basically in the direct participation of the parents at and their caring for the inner psychic life of the child (see Honneth 1994, pp. 167-172). It is exactly child’s feeling of being loved, understood, and embraced by the parents, which allows her to idealize them – and this is, as we have seen in the previous section, the base for the formation of her ideals.

However, unlike Kohut, Honneth does not reduce intersubjective recognition to empathy or love. This allows him to develop a more differentiated and a more dynamic account on the formation and the development of the self within and by her relations to her significant others. This account includes not only the constitution of individual’s needs and wishes, but also the development of her cognitive abilities, and also of her socially relevant competences.

For Honneth distinguishes between three forms of intersubjective recognition, namely love or empathy, respect, and social esteem (see Honneth 1994, p.211). The experience with empathy at first constitutes a self-relation of the subject, in which she becomes aware of herself as an independent body-centred entity equipped with her own needs and wishes (see ibid, pp. 153-157). The experience with respect enables her to
consider herself also as a subject with moral autonomy. For to respect someone means to acknowledge him as (at least potentially) morally accountable, as endowed with practical reason. It means ultimately to recognize individual’s potential for rationality, that is, for grasping concepts, for understanding and constructing of arguments (see Honneth 1994, pp. 173–185).

And finally, the experience with social esteem enables the individual to articulate those personal features and competences, on the basis of which she can make her unique contributions to the society and become in this way a worthy member of the latter (see Honneth 1994, pp. 196). Honneth himself tends to reduce the domain of social esteem to the sphere of labour, for according to him this form of recognition regards only professional achievements of the actors (see ibid, pp.142-144; pp. 201-210). However, there is no need of such reduction that leaves children outside of the scope of social esteem, for children are not participating at the sphere of institutional labour (see Stojanov 2006, pp. 163-198). Rather, eligible for social esteem are also those social practices, which Robert Brandom calls “deontic scorekeeping”, that is, practices of asserting and communicating of notions and beliefs that are capable to enrich the knowledge of the society, of which the individual is a member. Brandom names this kind of notions and beliefs “commitments” (see Brandom 1994, p. XIV; pp. 159-172; p. 590).

Correspondently, the pathologies of fragmentation and weakness of the self are caused not only by lack of empathy, but also by moral disrespect and social disregard (see Honneth 2000, pp. 96-101). One is subject of disrespect in cases in which individual or institutional actors deny his capacity (or his potential) for practical reasoning, that is, for making appropriate judgements. In the educational contexts disrespect often appears in the form of stigmatizing certain children as having a diminished “cognitive potential” because of their “biological prerequisites” and/ or because of their being socialized in an underprivileged family, whose “culture” is supposed to be far away from the academic canons of the educational system.¹ Social disregard oc-

¹ So, for example, several empirical surveys from Germany illustrate the point that teachers regularly evaluate children from immigrant families with a lower social status as only being eligible for low-performance, non-academic secondary schools without a college track. This holds true even if these children reached the same level of knowledge-related abilities at the end of primary school as children from non-immigrant families who have gymnasium recommendations (Baumert, 2001, pp. 279–402). The main reason seems to be a particular pattern of thought that is apparently widely widespread among school teachers in Germany. According to the pattern, family socialization of every child as well as her “acculturation” determines the child’s cognitive potential (Mannitz & Schiffauer, 2002, pp. 97–100).
curs in cases in which individual’s abilities are not socially estimated, or in which individual’s beliefs and opinions are subject of disregard. A widespread form of social disregard in educational contexts is the neglecting of beliefs and arguments of the pupils. This kind of disregard is likely to be perpetuated by teachers who take children’s views for being per se irrational, and who are not able to learn something from these views, to see them as a possible enrichment for the ways in which adults perceive and interpret the world. An enduring exposure to thus sketched social disregard as well as to cognitive disrespect could also cause weakness and fragmentation of the self, for this exposure damages one’s one self-confidence and self-respect. So lack of empathy is not the only factor of self-pathologies, as Kohut suggests.

However, Honneth’s theory entails not only advantages in comparison to Kohut’s self-psychology. For if we look at Honneth’s conception of self-realization and its intersubjective mechanisms trough the lenses of Kohut’s self-psychology a deficit of this conception becomes clearly visible: It thematises only individual’s relations to herself and to her significant others (including the “general other” of the society), but it does not regard her relations and notions to and of the objective world into which the individual projects herself. In other words, Honneth’s conception does not regard individual’s worldviews, in which his ideals and values are embodied. However, as we have seen in the previous section, self-realization is not only about the wishes and the ambitions of the self, but also about her idealizations, ideals, and values.

If we try to extend Honneth’s model of intersubjective recognition to individual’s ideals and their transformation into values in order to overcome this deficit in his theory, we could claim the following: The recognition form of empathy is needed not only for the formation of child’s needs and wishes, but also for the formation of her ideals. Respect is a precondition not only for the development of child’s cognitive capacities, but also for her articulating and communication her ideals. And finally, social esteem is needed not only for the development of socially valuable competences of the child, but also for her asserting of her ideals as her values. Let me elaborate a little bit more on this extension of Honneth’s conception.

To be empathetic to a child means not only to feel her needs but also to understand her dreams and to encourage her to “speak out” these dreams, to articulate them. Only when the child articulates these dreams they could get a sustainable form, that is, they could convert into ideals. However, as I stated above with regard to Kohut’s self-psychology, a central psychological function of ideals is to make a relative independ-
ence of the self from his significant others possible, to emancipate him from them. That is to say that articulation of ideals presupposes one’s transcending the realm of one’s intimate interactions with his family members. In other words, articulation of ideals could be fully performed only in a public space.

Public articulation of ideals requires that the speaker should take the distinct perspectives of the hearers to his ideals and try to make them understandable for the audience by putting them in the form of propositions and by providing them with arguments. Basic condition for this is that the speaker is recognized as having the capacity of practical reasoning, that is, that he is addressee of cognitive respect.

Fully articulated ideals reach the status of values, that is, of notions of what is good, and what is wrong, and how one should live. In order one’s value to get stabilized and thus to be able to carry out their foundational function for one’s self, they have to be socially recognized as being eligible to enrich the evaluative horizons of other society members, to be included in the societal processes of meaning-making. With regard to the interactions between adults and children this requires that the adults are open to understand children’s value notions and to see them as possible corrections and “refreshments” of their own evaluative habits.

Now, my final claim in this paper is that the best possible way to provide children with a public space for argumentative articulation of their ideals and for formation of their values, and so to cultivate their ability to freedom and autonomy, is to philosophize with them – provided that this philosophizing is characterized by empathy, respect, and social esteem.

**Articulation of Ideals and their Transformation into Values: the Point of Philosophizing with Children and Adolescences**

During the last months I was conducting philosophical talks with 14-years old teenagers at a Greek secondary school in Munich. Although the mother tongue of the pupils was Greek (which I am not able to speak and to understand) the conversations took place in German. For one of the aims of the project was to help the pupils to articulate themselves in German, and we assumed that inviting them to discuss on their own ideals and values is probably the best way to do so.
We had a number of wonderful conversations on topics like “happiness”, “freedom”, “family”, “friendship”. However, the most exiting discussions were on the concept of “love”.

Being in their early teens the pupils claimed that they still do not have “real” love re-lationships, but they are longing to be involved in such relationships in the near future. On the other hand, they were intensively reflecting on the kind of love they were receiving from their parents – and they were asking themselves, whether (and in which sense) their parents still love each other. So the key questions of our discussions were “Why is love so important for us?” and “What is actually love?”

During these discussions I sometimes deliberatively took the cynic position of a socio-biologist, who insists that love has only an instrumental value of making possible the continuation of the humankind and the rearing and upbringing of children. All pupils energetically protested against that view, for it was obviously not compatible with their ideals regarding love and with their intuitions about love as intrinsic and highest value in human life. When I asked (and provoked) the pupils to explicate these intuitions the entire group reached a consensus that to love and to be loved means simply to be alive, so that a “life in love” and a “truly human life” appear as synonymous concepts. Furthermore, all group members insisted that “true love” presupposes loving the beloved person for her own sake, without expecting any rewards from her. With a little bit help from a professional philosopher like me the group reached the conclusion, that love has an intrinsic value, and that we cannot live a truly human life without such kind of values.

At the beginning of these discussions there was an ideal of the pupils to live a life in love, and at their end – pupils’ asserting of love as a central value. What happened between the beginning and the end was the communicative explication of that ideal and its argumentative defending against its disdain. Since most of the pupils have had only a limited proficiency in the language in which the discussions were conducted, the exchange of arguments was sometimes a little bit tricky. But it was perfectly possible when the moderator signalized to the pupils that he holds them to be fully capable of reasoning despite their language deficits, and that there are even some advantages when one argues in a foreign language, for this form of arguing goes hand-in-hand with intensive reflections on the meanings of the concepts used in the discussion.
If the considerations in that paper are not entirely false, these philosophical talks will help the involved teenagers to articulate argumentatively their initially rather intuitive ideals and to transform them to sustainable and examined values; values, which serve as pillars for a coherent and dynamic self that makes individual’s freedom and autonomy possible.

On the other hand, encountering with children’s ideals always has very refreshing and enriching effects for adults. With regard to the example in that section of the paper we should be aware, how often we, the adults, are forgetting the immense value of love, and how often we are not able to grasp the intrinsic character of that value in our thorough functionalized life. The encountering with children’s ideals helps us to emancipate ourselves at least for a while from the dominant form of adult life, within which we permanently functionalize and instrumentalize our significant others and ourselves. That is why we owe our kids a sincere social esteem.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I first discussed Kohut’s claim that ideals build up one of the two core dimensions of the self. I argued that ideals can be stabilized only if they get articulated in a public space, and that this articulation leads to their transformation into values. This articulation-and-transformation process requires certain forms of intersubjective recognition, which can be conceptualized with Honneth as empathy, cognitive respect and social esteem.

Philosophizing with children is probably the best way to provide children and adolescences with those forms of intersubjective recognition. However, philosophizing with children can do so, only if its aim is not only to prepare children for an autonomous adult life. In addition, within this practice infantile views and ideals should be socially esteemed precisely because of their infantilism.

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