Title: Ethics is for Children: Revisiting Aristotle’s Virtue Theory

Introduction

Aristotle did not believe children could be virtuous and disqualified them, stating in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *EN*) that “the child’s life must follow the instructions of his guide, so, too, the appetitive part must follow reason” (*EN* III.12.1119b13-15). At the same time, Aristotle’s virtue ethic, as Gareth Matthews notes, is the most “well-worked out and influential treatment” that is similar to the philosophy of children he hopes for. In this paper, I suggest how we can rehabilitate the form of Aristotle’s virtue ethic to one well-suited for children and their capacity for excellence.

My paper proceeds as follows. First, I sketch briefly an outline of Aristotle’s ethic, segmenting it as an *ergon*-excellence-*eudaimonia* account of human flourishing. Second, I look at how Aristotle failed to consider the child as an ethical subject. Third, I look at both internal and external reasons for believing Aristotle was wrong to do so. Finally, I will suggest an *ergon*-excellence-*eudaimonia* virtue ethic that works for children. Through this, I argue that we can develop a virtue ethics for children, which respects that they are growing and changing, but acknowledges that, in some respects, they are more mature than we imagined (or than we ourselves might be).

*Aristotle’s Ergon–Excellence-Eudaimonia Model of Ethics*

Here, I develop (what I take to be) a relatively non-controversial reading of Aristotle’s virtue ethic to serve as our reference model for a children’s virtue ethic. I center this on

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1 Matthews 2006, 6.
three features: *ergon* (function), excellence, and *eudaimonia* (flourishing). These features are central to Aristotle’s *EN*, especially Book I.

In *EN* Book I, Aristotle’s foundational claim is that all human action seeks some goal or end, which is the good (*EN* I.1.1094a1). Aristotle called the final end we seek when we act “*eudaimonia*,” which is translated as “happiness” or “flourishing” (*EN* I.7.1097b20-25). Aristotle’s claim is not that what we seek happens to match *eudaimonia*. Instead, he makes *eudaimonia* by definition to be that which we seek. Thus, different people could identify *eudaimonia* with different things. It follows both that *eudaimonia* is not sought for any other reason, and that we would undertake other actions to get *eudaimonia*.² Moreover, it would make sense that if we are acting reasonably, the other things we seek are those that we believe contribute to the good life and thereby become parts of *eudaimonia*. As J.L. Ackrill explains, *eudaimonia* is thus the most desirable sort of life:

To put it at its crudest: one can answer such a question as “Why do you seek pleasure?” by saying that you see it and seek it as an element of the most desirable sort of life; but one cannot answer or be expected to answer the question “Why do you seek the most desirable sort of life?” (Ackrill 1980, 21).

Thus, insofar as anyone acknowledges or acts as if there is a “the most desirable sort of life,” they seek *eudaimonia*: “most people virtually agree: for both the many and the cultivated call it happiness” (*EN* I.4.1095a18-20). Clearly, this also applies to children.

How then do we achieve this in Aristotle’s virtue ethic? To understand this, we need to move from *eudaimonia* (happiness) to *ergon* (function). In the process, we will

see how Aristotle identifies eudaimonia with excellence in being human by understanding Aristotle’s central analogy: “For just as the good ... for a flautist, a sculptor, and every craftsman ... has a function and ... action, the same seems to be true for a human being, if a human being has some function” (EN I.7.1097b25-29: again at 1098a10). Again, nothing about this excludes children.

Aristotle’s model is one in which excellence in the human ergon leads to eudaimonia. Thomas Nagel gives a helpful image by looking at how a giraffe has capacities focus into a single “good life” for the giraffe:

One thing is clear: its walking and seeing and digesting are not simply three separate activities going on side by side in the same individual, like a doll that wets, cries and closes its eyes ... [a giraffe’s] proper excellence is not just the conjunction of these special excellences of its component functions but the optimal functioning of the total system in the giraffe’s life (Nagel 1980, 10).

Thus, on this sort of ergon picture, the giraffe’s life is good when it integrates its functions and spends its efforts to manage its animal life.

For our human eudaimonia, Aristotle stated, “we are looking for ... the special function of a human being” (EN I.7.1097b30-1098a8; quoting EN I.7.1098a1: EN I.7.1098a15). Aristotle shortly dismissed the possibility that the function of human life which brings eudaimonia is to be found in either “the life of nutrition and growth” or “some sort of life of sense perception” (EN I.7.1098a1-3). Instead, Aristotle identified it with the activity of the soul in accord with reason.³

³ Interestingly, Kant agreed with Aristotle’s account of the function argument and provides an argument for why we should find our end in our rationality in the (Kant,
While it might seem that we could merely add human reasoning to the list and be giraffes with reason, Aristotle believed that the addition of reason as a power reframes everything in the same way that an animal’s powers reframe the pattern away from a plant’s life of taking in the sun and growing all day. Thus, human eudaimonia means managing all of a human’s abilities with reason – at least according to EN Book I. In doing so, the individual will do such things with excellence.

From the above, we see that, in Aristotle’s account, ethics is the achievement of eudaimonia through excellence in performing the human function. While the argument of Book I is ambiguous and insufficient on this point,⁴ other parts of EN argue that the truly human function for Aristotle was a form of reason (theoria), which he thought was available only to a select few (who are not children), and we will consider this problem in the next section.

**Aristotle’s Dismissal of Children as Moral Agents**

Daryl Tress, in cataloging Aristotle’s treatment of children, concludes that “Aristotle’s corpus does not include a single, sustained discussion of the human child.”⁵ Moreover, Tress notes that Aristotle’s limited treatment of children is scattered among his theoretical and practical works.⁶ While there are dangers in assuming Aristotle is consistent across these two contexts, Tress sees a consistent Aristotelian view of the child as a transitional substance: “the human child must be regarded as a substance

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⁴ See Akrill 1980, 27.
⁵ Tress 1997, 63.
⁶ Ibid.
that is and comes to be, growing and developing to completion as a human adult.”7 We can ascertain three reasons why Aristotle thought children cannot be moral agents.

First, on a general level, Aristotle viewed children as potencies brought about by the prior actualities, i.e. their parents.8 Thus, Aristotle's child lacks finality and is a transitory state heading towards its telos, adulthood.9 Since Aristotle viewed childhood as transitory rather than an end state, he did not believe they had their own mature sense of flourishing since they are not a kind of their own. Instead, their flourishing and excellence are tied to growing into their final form – adulthood. I will return to this reduction of children to their development below in proposing a virtue ethics for children.

Second, Aristotle denied that children are capable of moral action, because their actions lack the appropriate decision procedure. Aristotle maintained that moral action has all of the following features: a voluntary action, which begins with wishing, involves deliberation, and culminates in decision (EN III.5.1113b4-6).10 Voluntary action has its principle (or causal source) in the agent rather than in an outside source: “if the principle of action is in him, it is also up to him to do them or not do them” (EN III.1. 1110a16-18; Cf. 1110a3).

8 Tress 1997, 67 and 74 
10 “We have found, then, that we wish for the end, and deliberate and decide about things that promote it; hence the actions concerned with things that promote the end are in accord with decision and are voluntary” (EN III.5.1113b4-6).
Aristotle stated that both children and animals engage in voluntary actions: “For presumably, it is not right to say that action caused by spirit or appetite is involuntary. For, first of all, on this view none of the other animals will ever act voluntarily nor will children” (EN III.1.1111a26-27). Thus, by elimination, Aristotle believed that children lack the ability to engage in wishing, the ability to deliberate, or the ability to decide what they have deliberated. Even a passing familiarity with children would reveal that children most certainly do have wishes, leaving either deliberation or decision.

Aristotle’s account of intemperance hints that he would have located the problem in deliberation: “We also apply the name of intemperance to the errors of children, since they have some similarity” (EN III.12.1119b1-2). Intemperance is the inability to moderate oneself in the face of pleasure. Aristotle justified this by stating that children “live by appetite and desire for the pleasant is found more in them than in anyone else” (EN III.12.1119b5-7). For Aristotle, the root cause is that large appetites will “expel rational calculation” (EN III.12.1119b10).

Third, there is an important ambiguity in what Aristotle meant by “reason,” which I elided above but now must address, that excludes children from having it. While Book I makes it seem like the human function could be a life that includes the same goods as giraffe life but organized and implemented through practical reason. At the end of EN, Aristotle declared that the human function is the human’s ability to transcend his mortal circumstances and theorize, i.e., to know essences.\textsuperscript{11} As you read

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{11} Nagel 1980, 12-13.
\end{footnotesize}
it in the context of the whole, Aristotle’s conclusion feels like a bit of a non sequitur – an issue I return to in the next section.

Identifying the ergon with the reason of Book X means that the animal capacities cease to have any hold on the human being or any place in eudaimonia. This is because the new revealed purpose of reason is theoria – a Platonic striving for the divine forms and their contemplation. Moreover, Aristotle maintained children could not do this.

Returning to our giraffe analogy above, it is as if our giraffe has learned her real function is to be a symbol on a postcard for a zoo rather than to be simply a giraffe. Now all of the animal functions exist only to make the picture pretty. Similarly, the claim that this form of reason is the quintessentially human and thus the human function reorders how the human should spend its time. As Nagel explains, this would mean that practical concerns have become mere nuisance for humankind:

“[Humanity’s] time is, so to speak, too valuable to waste on anything so insignificant as human life.”[12]

This Book X reading of the ergon-excellence-eudaimonia picture amounts to a rejection of the possibility of a virtue ethics for children since they (at least according to Aristotle) do not engage in this sort of reason, or cannot do so with excellence. Thus, Aristotle rejected children as moral agents in his virtue theory, because their function is to become something else, they are not self-controlled enough to deliberate for the good, and they lack (again, at least according to Aristotle) the right form of reason.

Instead, Aristotle recommended they be taught right conduct first and receive an
explanation only when and if they are ready.\textsuperscript{13}

**Recovering Children as Virtuous Agents**

Despite this negative conclusion, there are several considerations that enable us to
keep the basic model and reverse Aristotle’s dismissal of children. Internally,
Aristotle’s consideration of particular virtues, especially friendship, seems
incompatible with the reduction of the function of human life to *theoria* (which as
shown above leads to the exclusion of children). Externally, Aristotle’s account
presents an overly rigid distinction between childhood and adulthood.\textsuperscript{14} Finally and
most importantly, there are excellences both from Aristotle’s catalogue of the virtues
and from our own considerations that we can associate with the life of a child and
which contribute to their flourishing.

**Internal Considerations**

Despite Aristotle’s statement to the contrary in Book X, much of what comes between
Book I and Book X encourages a reading of human flourishing that includes
excellences built on animal capacities and aspects of human persons. Such a reading
can enable children to practice the *ergon*-excellence-*eudamonia* model of ethics. In this
section, I want to consider three specific issues: the role of pain and pleasure in
Aristotle’s ethics, the role of friendship, and the role of courage.

The first such inconsistency is that Aristotle’s account of how pain and pleasure
relate to ethics undermines the *theoria* reading by integrating our animality. Aristotle

\textsuperscript{13} Noddings 1995, 13.

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. Matthews 1994, 7.
notes that we experience pain and pleasure with our actions (EN II.3). Aristotle saw these as signals such that the virtuous agent experiences pleasure when doing what is good and pain when doing what is bad (EN II.3.1104b30-35). For those of us who are not fully virtuous, these signals can go wrong, such that we experience pain at doing right and pleasure at doing wrong (or perhaps that we experience nothing as we do evil or good).

This matters for our account, because Aristotle summarized this by saying that “ethical activity is about pleasures and pains” (EN II.3.1105a15). But if ethics and consequently human flourishing are really about engaging in \textit{theoria} and thinking about essences, this claim makes no sense. On the other hand, if our \textit{ergon} is to live out our animals lives well, learning to control what we do by using practical reason, then this reflects an important system of reward feedback whereby we can move closer or further from excellence.

Second, Aristotle’s treatment of friendship directly undermines the idea that human excellence is about maximizing our ability to think about essences. Aristotle began this treatment by stating that “[friendship] is a virtue, or involves virtue. Further, it is most necessary to our lives” (EN VIII.1.1155a3-4). His explain tells us that friendship is a good we would trade for none other for it helps us to enjoy what is good and to suffer well what is bad. Aristotle qualified that this is not true of everything we call “friendship” but it is true about friendship that involves virtue.\textsuperscript{15}

What has been translated as “friendship” is \textit{philia} or “affection,” and this

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. EN VIII.3-4
excellence occurs best in families and, more generally, in the community.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, Aristotle noted that “a parent would have natural friendship [i.e., affection] for a child, a child for a parent, not only among human beings, but among birds and most kinds of animals” (\textit{EN} VIII.1.1155a17-19). Moreover, Aristotle identified this excellence in affection as the building block of families and communities.\textsuperscript{17} This account sits poorly with Aristotle’s \textit{theoria} but sits well with an idea of excellence in a community of rational animals whose excellence depends on using their minds to manage their bodies, live excellently, and flourish.

Third, Aristotle’s account of \textit{eudaimonia} in Book IX also recommends excellences that seem better suited to well-ordered biological life than to a life devoted to contemplating the essences. Aristotle opened these considerations by distinguishing an animal’s \textit{ergon} as the “capacity for perception” from human flourishing as the “capacity for perception or understanding” (\textit{EN} IX.9.1170a16-18). He then identifies the \textit{eudaimonia} flourishing of each with acting on the capacities (i.e, \textit{ergon}) appropriate to its kind: “every capacity refers to an activity, and a thing is present fully in its activity; hence fully living would seem to be perceiving or understanding” (\textit{EN} IX.9.1170a18-19).

\textbf{External Considerations}

We can now turn to external considerations that are contrary to Aristotle’s expectations. Aristotle was highly committed to a distinction between the sort of adult

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} See Krouse 1982, 147.
\item \textsuperscript{17} \textit{EN} VIII.12 and VIII.9-11 respectively. Cf. Landes 1982, 135 shows how Hegel held a similar view in which love in the family is the immediate context of life.
\end{itemize}
male citizen of Athens capable of virtue, and women and children. Regrettably, reconsideration in “a different voice” to respond to Aristotle’s idea of moral development was long absent. We now have the resources to suggest an alternative.

Central to these considerations is a reconsideration of the categories of “adult” and “child,” and further attention to what children are really like. Philippe Ariès’ Centuries of Childhood shows at least some of the problems of wholly separating the category of “childhood” from adult life. First, there is the reality that our modern progression from baby to infant to toddler and beyond is not merely a scientific discovery about development, but rather a social construct that may hide individual differences. As Jenks explains, much of the modern commotion about development is less about what is best for the child and more about how the child’s precocity or slowness will affect the parents’ social standings.

Second, Ariès points out that moral instruction for children and adults was nearly indistinguishable from the sixteenth century until the social stages of childhood were solidified in the eighteenth century. This hints that, as moral beings, adults and children are, for the most part, not quite so different. Similarly, education in general was not conducted in terms of grades but rather in terms of abilities, regardless of age. Thus, Ariès noted that these exceptional abilities were seen exclusively in terms of the ability and not the violation of some standard model of

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18 Ariès 1962, 21-25.
20 Ariès 1962, 119.
21 Ariès 1962, 152.
development:

… a premature skill caused no more surprise than the exceptional nature of the gifts; we also noticed that the more brilliant careers, those of our memorialists, were characterized by a certain precocity, and this precocity remained for some time an attribute of success (Ariès 1962, 238).

On this picture, there is no barrier to imagining children with their own virtues, excellence, and flourishing. And Ariès asserts that this is what happened in society:

“In the Middle Ages, at the beginning of modern times, and for a long time after that in the lower classes, children were mixed with adults as soon as they were considered capable of doing without their mothers or nannies, not long after a tardy weaning (in other words, at about the age of 7). They immediately went straight into the great community of men, sharing in the work and play of their companions, old and young alike” (Ariès 1962, 411).

Conversely, the later implemented idea that a child, merely due to age, would not be ready for specific study or participation in society, while bringing beneficial protections to children, re-erected barriers to seeing children as virtuous agents in their own right.

Thus, what we can learn from Ariès is that the idea “child” as a category strictly delineated from “adult,” and thus incapable of virtue, is false. Moreover, an important insight Jenks arrives at from these considerations is the recognition that the experience of childhood differs as the social concept of childhood differs.\footnote{22}{Jenks 1996, 121.} And this matters because society's moral expectations and beliefs about children's moral potential depend directly on how children are understood.\footnote{23}{Jenks 1996, 123.} When children are viewed
primarily as incomplete adults, their possibilities for flourishing in the present are marginalized. The sum of these internal and external considerations positions us to present a moral world of ergon-excellence-eudaimonia for children.

A Virtue Theory for “Children”

In this section, I suggest how we can produce an ergon-excellence-eudaimonia virtue ethic for children. At the root of this section is the belief that children are, in fact, moral agents. This denies both the innocent cherub and evil imp understandings of childhood. Nel Noddings’s primer on philosophy of education provides a good picture of what we are looking for:

Because virtue is central to the good life as Aristotle described it, and because virtuous persons — persons of good character — exhibit virtues in every aspect of their lives, children should be trained to respond virtuously to life’s demands. One becomes virtuous, Aristotle held, by behaving virtuously (Noddings 1995 137).

This virtue ethic is for children themselves. Its purpose is not the production of compliant children who are easy to discipline and manage (even though this might be a desirable double effect). Instead, it hinges on acknowledging that children have ergon, which they can perform excellently or poorly, and which will lead to their flourishing in eudaimonia or to their languishing in despair.

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26 Cf. Jenks 1996, 70-72 and 73ff for these two respective errors.

27 This stands in contrast to a model in which “ethics” is understood as meant to “order life on earth” in terms of a police state, rather than as geared towards the achievement of moral selfhood (Cf. Noddings 1995, 8-10 and 141).
Second, as we have seen above, there can be problems in referring to “children” as a unified category in contrast to “adults.” At the same time, dismissing any notion of “childhood” as transitory would be to throw the baby out with the bathwater. There remains a certain general trajectory Aristotle was right to note: that one part of childhood is growth that leads to adulthood *de minimis* on a physical and biological level.\(^{28}\) This is not to be confused with a strict path for their growth in all respects vis-à-vis certain competency theories.\(^{29}\)

Contrary to Dewey’s belief that we should seek nebulous “growth,”\(^{30}\) there are several specific areas in which we can expect and hope for children to achieve excellence and growth.\(^{31}\) An obvious example is that children are capable of friendships including excellent friendships. In this aspect, they may be freer than adults in showing loving affection to others. A second excellence specific to children and their flourishing is to grow well, which includes transformations like the loss of baby teeth, growth spurts, growth in the ability to relate to those inside and outside one’s family, and growth in capacities to reason and think, *inter alia.* Moreover, while children begin in utter dependency,\(^{32}\) their degree of dependency changes throughout their lives. This entails that their excellences in relating to their caregivers also change as they grow.

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\(^{29}\) See Noddings 1995, 81 and Matthews 2006, 9.

\(^{30}\) Noddings 1995, 38.

\(^{31}\) Matthews 1994, 23.

\(^{32}\) Jenks 1996, 41.
The claims in the preceding paragraph seem at odds with Kohlberg’s stages of moral development – which supposedly tell us that children are not moral agents. And in a certain respect they are, but Gareth Matthews helps us to quash this as objection by pointing out that Kohlberg has demonstrated the limit to a child’s “ability to reason her way through a moral dilemma and to resolve a moral conflict.”\textsuperscript{33} As Matthews notes, this reflects knowledge of the idea of morality, i.e. moral theory.\textsuperscript{34} In contrast, this virtue ethic for children is not focused on contemplating the idea of morality but on flourishing in our capacities.

Matthews’ prior work again proves useful to us when he suggests several different dimensions of moral development.\textsuperscript{35} One of these where I think children can excel more than ‘more mature’ adults is moral imagination.\textsuperscript{36} I take here as an example research into the patterns of moral growth in child characters in C.S. Lewis’s \textit{Chronicles of Narnia}, wherein children rise to excellence in areas they previously lacked and learn to enjoy the good.

As Bill Davis points out, the characters often begin as lacking in moral excellences:

\begin{quote}
[T]he children who enter Narnia are not saintly or heroic characters. All of them are morally immature, and some, like Eustace, are worthless blighters. Over the course of their adventures they grow. Most become genuinely brave, kind, and truthful; all
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{33} Matthews 1994, 61.

\textsuperscript{34} Matthews 1994, 62ff.

\textsuperscript{35} Matthews 1994, 63-65.

become less selfish. The moral development of the children in the stories depends largely on the structure of Narnia itself. In Narnia they discover a rich, and enlivening, moral order. They are forced to undertake difficult tasks and bear heavy burdens. It is natural to think that the victories in which they take part would give them affection for their comrades that would blunt their self-centeredness (Davis 2005, 106).

In other words, they enter Narnia as quite normal children with normal habits, vices, and tendencies, but they also experience growth in moral excellence there, building on both their strengths and weaknesses. This growth takes places primarily by way of the children courageously becoming excellent in a place where there is no adult to turn to in order to arbitrate life's problems and fix them from above – but on a playing field more level than that provided by raw bullies.

In Narnia, children grow to excel and flourish in virtues like justice, wisdom, courage, and temperance (Cf. EN IV) as they rise to face the challenges ahead in ways that are not restricted or defined by their status as non-adults. Their examples are generally animals who have their own excellences (virtues) built around their own non-human natures – including not only the lion Aslan, but the brave mouse Reepicheep and an extremely brave squirrel. As the children achieve the virtues, they thrive and become morally excellent even if they never planned for this, because this is what humans are meant for. Thus, Narnia provides a template of how

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37 Davis 2005, 110.
ergon-excellence-eudaimonia can happen for children, not just in fictional texts, but also how it can impact real lives.

At the heart of this is Lewis’s belief that children's books should not be dumbed down to our expectations of what we think children are like, how they should be doted upon, or what sort of books we as adults imagine that they should read. Instead, Lewis reverses the use of this foolish educational theory for the parody it deserves, through narrow, condescending adult characters who lack the excellences that the children in the books grow to achieve. Moreover, the very concept at the heart of these texts is that children have the capacity to transcend both their own mediocrity and the impositions of adults and demonstrate excellence – even if it takes a little imagination to see where they can practice these virtues in this world.

And thus in some excellences, the roles are not as obvious as we might imagine. Rather than seeing the family as a place in which children can grow in virtue at the tutelage of adults, there are good reasons to believe children can help to morally form their parents. Moreover, there are many ways in which children can prove more morally excellent or more excellent in general than the adults who patronize

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39 For instance, Uncle Andrew who talks down to the characters and treats them as lab rats for his experiments with the gateway to another world (Menuge 2005, 200-201).

40 Menuge 2005, 203.

41 Matthews 2006, 2-3.
them. Thus, more recent perspectives have recognized that family provides opportunities for children to help their parents grow and excel:

   Historically, the family has been viewed as the primary socialization agent of the child … A basic assumption of most of the early research was that socialization influences were largely unidirectional -- that is, from parent to child. … Newer approaches to the family tend to emphasize the multi-directional and transactional nature of family influences. In other words, there is a clear recognition that children influence the behavior and adjustment of parents (both as individuals and as a couple) as much as parents influence children (Thinking about the family, xi-xii).

   Thus, we see that human lives lived in human families provide opportunities for both children and adults to demonstrate virtue and to flourish within their family situations. This, in turn, creates obligations that parents have to children to give them chances to flourish.

   Finally, while it has not been central to this paper, Aristotle’s negative belief about children’s capacity for theoretical reason may itself be mistaken. Children should be taken as partners in inquiry. As much of the work of Matthews has empirically discovered, children seem fully capable of the wonder central to theoria. Pritchard explains: “However, there is a growing body of psychological research suggesting that Piaget's account seriously underestimates children's cognitive abilities (Astington, 1993; Gopnik, et al., 1999; Gopnik, 2009).”

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42 Matthews 2006, 8.
43 Matthews 2006, 2.
44 Matthews 1994, 14.
45 Pritchard 2013.
Conclusion
From the above considerations, I think that it is not only possible but is helpful to provide an Aristotelian virtue ethic for children. First, there are the weaknesses in Aristotle’s reasons for dismissing children (and many others) from the realm of virtuous agents. Second, there are the benefits of recognizing children not only as capable of right and wrong action, but as capable of excellence in right and wrong action and in eudaimonia, which includes, but is not limited to, their growth and maturation. Moreover, such an account can also recognize that the inflexibility which comes with adulthood can itself be morally limiting. Such an account moves us closer to understanding “the goods of childhood” and “the moral capacities of children,” and the “cognitive interests and goals appropriate to children.”

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