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The Many Inventions of Childhood: A Tentative Taxonomy

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What is a child? Every one of us has our own model, which dictates how we see children and interpret evidence about them. Because our perceptions also dictate how we treat children and our expectations shape the way children behave, they are often self-reinforcing. We all feel we are right, yet we disagree with each other. How can this be understood? The following musings are the product of thirty years of research, teaching, and debate in many forums.

The only definition on which my students have ever agreed is that a child is 'not adult,' but, in the words of Harry Hendrick, "though biological immaturity may be natural and universal, what particular societies make of such immaturity differs" (9-10). Many histories of childhood (e.g., Aries, Beekman, Cleverly and Phillips, Hardyment, Kociumbas, de Mause) propose an evolving construct, with one discourse displacing another. This is too reductionist in that it fails to account for continuing contestation or internal inconsistency. An alternative proposition is that the development of the construct has not been linear. Rather, although additional discourses have emerged over time, each discourse adds a new element, competing with or modifying other views, but not deleting them. They remain active to contest, qualify, and confuse the issue.
As new discourses are added through philosophical invention, religious innovation, scientific discovery, or cultural colonization, pre-existing discourses are challenged, embedded, or compounded, but not displaced. Discourses that are the products of Christianity, western liberalism, capitalism, and industrialization pervade these Christian westernized societies in which they originated. They have also, however, been imposed to a varying degree on other societies and cultures through colonization and globalization.

The outcomes of this are multi-layered and multi-faceted constructs giving rise to debates at cross-purposes, inconsistent policies, pockets of social alienation, and postmodern confusion about 'appropriate' parenting. Childhood has become a focus of endless study and argument that has generated a plethora of professional careers and enormous profits for publishers and the media and, for those at the coalface of producing and rearing children, in Shari Thurer’s words, “Parental performance anxiety reigns” (xi). This may lead us to think that this conflict, study, and argument is new. Parenting advice, however, is as old as the Bible, Confucius or the Ancient Greek philosophers. The passing of the years has simply added more and more elements to the compound. The postmodernism of the twentieth century only adds one more paradigm, but it is the crucial license to deconstruct the discourses in the belief that there could be more than one ‘right answer’ or no ‘right answer’ at all.

The co-existence and compounding of competing and contradictory discourses of childhood have produced a confused approach to children. Should we give priority to managing, loving, developing, correcting, protecting, studying, exploiting, educating, or containing them? Should we trust or mistrust? Should we favor punishment and control or freedom and responsibility? Should we want docile children or self-actualized children? Should needs be met or denied? Should we strive toward agreement on a ‘right’ model of childhood or is diversity a good thing?

This discussion proposes a tentative taxonomy as an aid to untangling the web of mixed messages. The use of the word, ‘tentative’ is quite deliberate. The author is questioning these thoughts for the reader’s consideration, in the hope that they might prove helpful. An exploratory intellectual dig offers seven alternative discourses, some of which have significant varying sub-discourses within them. They are (in approximate chronological order of first emergence): the organic discourse, the human-potential discourse, the good-citizen discourse, the metaphysical-moral discourse, the scientific discourse, the capitalist discourse, and the optional-extra discourse.

Organic Discourse

This is as old as human society. Documented examples include the Anbarra people of North Arnhem Land (Hamilton) and the Yequana Indians of Venezuela (Liedloff). It trusts nature and allows the child to regulate itself within safe boundaries. It therefore involves minimum intervention accompanied by unqualified love and support. Children are seen as belonging to the community rather than just their parents. The care of the child is integrated with, and children participate freely in, the daily activities of the society. Children learn by observing and by doing. Childhood is a carefree time of watching and experimenting through play. Discipline is functional and minimal. The Mohave Amerindians, for example, have no word for punishment and delinquent children are “treated with only a slightly exasperated tolerance” (Zeldin 382).

This is a discourse that makes children agents in their own growth and development, rather than objects of adult intervention. It focuses on being and surviving rather than becoming. Childhood is lived in the present rather than for the future. It ends with a rite of passage around the biological milestone of puberty. In the eighteenth century Jean-Jacques Rousseau rejuvenated this discourse, when he argued the virtues of the primitive savage. It has subsequently permeated western culture in the form of ideas about maternal instinct and approaches based on phylogenetic trust such as those in the helping mode identified by Lloyd de Mause (54). These are characterized by the instruction to “let the child develop in his own way and time” (Neill 12).

Confusingly, this oldest of discourses often presents itself as the latest discovery. For de Mause the helping mode is the most recent in his teleological model. Peggy O’Mara calls it “new, yet old” as she supports it in her first editorial of 2000 by citing recent research that demonstrates that humans have a natural tendency towards altruistic behavior and cooperation (2).

Human-Potential Discourse

This arose from civilizations that used architecture, planning, and technology to modify their environments. Confidence in the ability of humans to improve their environment sowed seeds of the philosophy of progress. It was a small step from believing in human ability to improve the environment to believing in human ability to improve humans.
This discourse sees childhood as a time for developing individual physical and intellectual potential. It is founded in the belief that humans can make the best of nature through teaching and encouragement accompanied by approval of achievement. It may segregate the child from the rest of society in order to concentrate more effectively on education and training, or it may integrate the child through structures such as apprenticeship, specifically designed to ensure the acquisition of skill. Children learn through instruction and intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Discipline is corrective, designed to ensure that the child is always doing its best. Doctor Benjamin Spock, for example, sells his version of this approach by ensuring that children will grow up to "make full use of what brains, what skills, what physical attractiveness they have" (4).

This discourse builds on the child's potential, but this potential takes many forms, predicated different ideas on how it is to be developed. Socrates (c. 470-399 BC) believed that truth, goodness, and justice came from within, hence his aphorism, "know thyself." The Chinese philosopher, Mencius (371-289 BC), believed that humans were born good, but that this goodness would deteriorate without teaching. The English philosopher, John Locke (AD 1632-1704), posited a blank slate so that a child could become whatever its experiences made of it.

The human potential discourse moves children to the center of the culture's stage as the key to the future well-being of the human race. It is widespread in the modern world, summed up by Michael Rosen, "We live in a time when anxiety about what children might turn into couldn't be higher" (1). It underpins an emphasis on infant health laying the basis for adult health (fluoride in the water to ensure adults have good teeth). It encourages us to find more and better ways to enhance learning from the earliest years, leading to such parenting programs as "Parents as Teachers." It seeks the educational value of toys and leads parents and governments to invest vast amounts of money in schooling. It makes childhood a time of trying to meet expectations, earnest endeavour, and lots of homework. It sets children up to succeed or fail in terms of observable outcomes.

Good-Citizen Discourse

This discourse builds on human-potential but changes the priority from benefiting the person to benefiting the nation. In contrast to the human-potential discourse, which focuses on what sort of individual children will become, the good-citizen discourse focuses on the collective and civic benefits of their adult behavior. It mistrusts nature and sees children as 'uncivilized,' but with the potential to become 'civilized' given the right experience, knowledge, and/or training. Its desired outcomes depend on the needs of the particular society or nation-state. Some tribal societies adopted practices to ensure their children would become fearless warriors. In Confucian China the goal of education was to create a Confucian scholar who could assume a role in society as a worthy Confucian official. In Ancient Sparta the nation demanded stoic soldiers, in Puritan New England, God-fearing tolerators, in Hitler's Germany, obedient Aryan nationalists.

This approach combines class with merit and childhood becomes a time of grading and sorting so that the right kinds of adults gain status and power. Children are segregated, controlled, and observed, but appropriate behavior is rewarded by increases in freedom and responsibility. The steps toward autonomy are usually structural and clearly defined. In Imperial China there were three stages of state examinations. In feudal society a person destined for citizen status (as opposed to a serf) progressed through being a page and squire to being a knight or through being an apprentice and a journeyman to being a master tradesman. In post-industrial society the steps involve pre-school, primary school, secondary education, senior secondary education (with prefect systems), and university or college.

This discourse becomes prominent when the nation is unstable. In a swashbuckling period of Chinese history, Confucius (551-479 BC) looked to education to produce the 'superior man.' As Athens declined, philosophers like Socrates, Plato (c. 429-347 BC), and Aristotle (384-22 BC) pondered the benefits to the civilized state of improved child rearing. The seventeenth century Puritans, who immigrated to America to establish a new society, produced the first significant body of written child-rearing advice. The British colonists, fearing the influence of convicts in nineteenth century Australia, removed convict offspring to institutions. The socio-political quake of the First World War popularized the work of Truby King, who argued for, "The training of the senses and creation and building up of healthful habits" because, "the hope of a nation lies in the children"(142).

The modern Western sub-branch of this discourse is the liberal-democratic version. This is evident in Ancient Athens, but its revival and survival is a product of the Enlightenment and subsequent growth of democracy, which has extended this discourse to all children who will grow up to vote. It sees childhood as a time in which to shape good citizens who will balance autonomy with responsibility. Under its influence, the role of the school in turning the 'uncivilized' child into a responsible citizen has found overt expression in
programs of civic education. Its barrier to autonomy and citizenship becomes age per se rather than proficiency or status. Legal definitions of adult status in Australia, for example, now range from 15 or 16 years old when a child may legally leave home and school and have sexual intercourse with someone of the opposite gender, to 25 years old when a university student may receive unqualified independent financial support.

This discourse is intrinsically controlling. It is used "to forge the political and cultural unity of burgeoning nation-states and cement the ideological hegemony of their dominant classes" (Green 9) and casts the non-conforming family as the ultimate "subversive organization" that "has continued throughout history ... to undermine the State" (Mount 1). In the modern western world, however, the hegemonic paradigm is one that at least pays lip service to the individualist ideals and pluralism of liberal democracy. For example, a criticism of the new "Discovering Democracy" program in Australia is that "it harks back to the ostensible instrumentalist sins of the old civics, and has little place for self-realizing students or self-determining communities" (Meredith and Thomas 1).

The desire for self-realizing individuals arose as a reaction to the Second World War’s demonstration of the evils of absolutely obedient citizens supporting dictatorship. A new school of Freud-influenced child-rearing experts admonished parents that "pure obedience is not a virtue because it leads to dictatorship" (Benjamin 111). In the arena of educational theory, "self-government" for school children was identified as important "to help children grow as citizens" (Patterson 90-92).

The western liberal-democratic view of the ideal citizen is, however, not the only version of the good-citizen discourse. An alternate and conflicting view can be found in traditional Asian authoritarianism that is based on rejecting the acceptability of different points of view in favor of models of consensus. This discourse evaluates individual action in terms of the Buddhist belief that individual ambition is something to be overcome and Confucian demands that individual needs be subordinated to the needs of society and the state. The resulting expectations emphasize the economic contribution of all-family members, deferred gratification, unselfishness, and traditional religious obligations.

Fascist and Communist states have also produced variations of the good-citizen discourse. Nazi Germany is a classic example of a discourse that emphasised conformity and obedience. Similarly, the Soviet Union wanted to produce selfless citizens committed to the social good. A 1961 advice book to Russian Parents, Roditeli i deti (Parents and Children) aimed to produce citizens who would "better, more quickly, and more joyously fulfil [sic] demands and rules" (Bronfenbrenner 10). In Communist China Mao wanted "everyone who receives an education to develop morally, intellectually and physically and become a worker with both socialist consciousness and culture" (165).

Metaphysical-Moral Discourse

The defining characteristics of this discourse are that salvation of the soul is more important than any earthly achievement and the path to that survival has been laid down by a superior unearthly being (God). For the child this means that right and wrong are absolute, and obedience is an end in itself. It is most evident in those societies that have religions based on the omnipresence of a single omnipotent God (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam).

This discourse is simultaneously present-centered and future-oriented. Every separate act and thought of the child matters, but their cumulative effect is also awesome. The possibility of infant and childhood mortality means the soul must be maintained daily in a healthy state, but childhood is also a critical stage in laying the foundations of good habits fundamental to adult soul maintenance. This discourse leads to authoritarian parenting when parents are constructed as agents of God or teachers are constructed as agents of an idolized dictator. Discipline is both retributive and a deterrent, being designed to make the child pay for sin, but also to ensure that the child will decide to sin no more. Physical discipline is valued because of the value of pain as penance. Atonement is important and can ameliorate the severity of punishment.

Within this discourse there are seemingly opposite subsets. One model (little angel) depicts the child as pure yet vulnerable and therefore to be protected at all costs from evil influences and to be corrected as soon as signs of evil appear. It underlies the myth of childhood as a golden age of innocence. It is evident for example in the verse of Methodist, Charles Wesley:

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
Look upon a little child;
Pity my simplicity,
Suffer me to come to thee. (Opie 59)
The other model (little devil) depicts the child as a vessel for original sin. This makes it imperative to break the will at all costs and remove evil tendencies. The Reverend John Robinson subscribed to this notion, writing in 1660, “there is in all children ... a stubbornness and stoutness of mind arising from natural pride which must, in the first place, be broken and beaten down” (qtd. in Beekman 56). Both versions are embedded in philogenetic mistrust. The angel discourse mistrusts society and mistrusts the child’s ability to resist it and the devil discourse simply mistrusts the child. Both therefore involve much intervention accompanied by qualified approval, dependent on the notion of desert (“I only like you when you’re good”). The activities and care of the child are segregated from the rest of society, for angels must be strengthened and devils broken before they can be exposed to temptation. Children learn through instruction, punishment, and reward. Childhood is a time of moral trial, earnestness and care. Thus Abraham Chear entreated his young kinsman in the seventeenth century:

You must take heed of every deed
That would your soul destroy.
You must not curse, nor fight, nor steal,
Nor spend your time in games,
Nor make a lie, what’er you all,
Nor call ungodly names.
With wicked children do not play,
For such to hell will go;
The Devil’s children sin all day,
But you must not do so. (Opie 34)

Both versions of the discourse are disempowering. The angel version contains the child with protection; the devil version punishes the child until it obeys. The models of the intrinsically powerless or untrustworthy child have become self-fulfilling through parenting practices and laws that have progressively deprived children of agency and power. By defining children as passive and obedient, they have made children powerless (compelled to live in an approved home, attend school, be economically dependent) and subject to external control. Under this influence, children have been specifically exempted from liberal-democratic laws protecting adult rights. The individual child may be legally assaulted (smacked) and its individual property stolen (confiscated) without recourse to law, providing the deed is carried out by a person in loco parentis.

In its pure forms, this discourse remains widespread in the western world through religious communities and religious schools, ‘fundamentalists’ of various religions who want to contain their children in such a way that they will reproduce the parents’ belief system without extension or challenge. It has also, however, permeated much post-industrial western thinking with emphasis on ‘saying sorry,’ persistent linking of childhood with innocence, and ‘obedience’ as the sure measure of a good child. Even the frequent use of the word ‘naughty’ to describe a misbehaving child derives from designating it as morally worthless. Whenever the media tugs our heart strings with stories of lost innocence, it is echoing the metaphysical-moral discourse of angel children. Whenever the media whips up paranoia about the evils of uncontrolled youth, it is echoing the metaphysical-moral discourse of devil children.

**Scientific Discourse**

This is a product of the Enlightenment’s growing faith that if a phenomenon is studied it may be objectively understood and effectively manipulated. It is evident as the underlying theme of many modern social science texts, written in the belief that through understanding “we can enlarge the possibility for taking control—through education, public policy, psychotherapy, even moral preaching” (Thurer 300). It has particularly given birth to the modern medical model of childhood. The most generic characteristic of the scientific discourse is that it posits a discoverable benchmark designated by such value-laden terms as ‘normal,’ ‘healthy,’ or ‘correct.’ Thus, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry advertises its Parent’s Handbooks online as offering, “what’s normal, what’s not and when to seek help.” This, in turn, has given rise to a whole gamut of sub-sets of different theories of how to manipulate individual and social health, from Sigmund Freud’s psycho-analysis to Burroughs Frederic Skinner’s behaviorism, from Karl Marx’s redistribution of wealth, to Wilhelm Reich’s mass psychology.

This discourse has contributed to the rise of modern professions including psychologists, social workers, and counselors. It has had an impact on discipline, including the juvenile criminal justice system, with the conviction that the right diagnosis and treatment can cure anti-social behavior. This makes it a hegemonic tool, propagating the one ‘right’ or ‘healthy’ way to rear children. Parenting is constructed as a set of correct skills and right attitudes. Parent education programs turn parenting into a finite set of learnable competencies. Families
must conform. Childhood is a self-conscious time of behaving in appropriate ways or suffering prescribed consequences, which, whether in the form of therapy, discipline, or medicine, will be intended to ‘cure’ or ‘normalize’ the behavior of the child.

The scientific discourse mistrusts nature as containing the elements of sickness as well as health and, therefore, according to the rules of the particular theoretical perspective, monitors, controls, and intervenes. Its benchmarks are then used by professional practitioners, who counsel, mediate, and ultimately remove children whose childhood has strayed too far from the norms. The activities and care of the child may be segregated and institutionalized in order to be more effectively monitored, controlled, and, where necessary, corrected.

The underlying scientific discourse tenet is that all such intervention is for the child’s own good according to some objective scientific measure. This justifies an unprecedented level of state intervention and home invasion. It is responsible for state institutions that remove children from their families and for the encroachment of state regulation on families. It gave birth to state supported and controlled schools, orphanages, reformatories, health visitors, and welfare workers. Some horrific cruelties have been perpetrated in the wake of this discourse, such as the wholesale removal of the “Stolen Generation” of Australian Aboriginal children.

The subsequent revelation and repudiation of the removal of Aboriginal children is just one symptom of shifts in this discourse, which is far more pluralistic in appearance than its dogmatic presentation. There is no agreed protocol for intervention. Welfare workers are at continual risk from public criticism, either for intervening with little justification, or for leaving a child in a dangerous situation (Tregeagle, Cox, and Voigt 7). In the implementation of juvenile justice, there is no agreed conception of desired ends. As Behlmer points out, “the agents of regulation ... are far from united in their views of how best to cope with young delinquents” (270).

Capitalist Discourse

This is a discourse that began with the child as a participant in cottage industries and climaxed with the industrial revolution and economic rationalism. It focuses on the economic value of childhood. It may be sub-divided into three historical phases: seeing children as a profitable and convenient source of labor (still prevalent in many third world countries); seeing children as potential adult workers; and seeing children as exploitable consumers with significant disposable income.

It defines the attributes of childhood in terms of their contribution to successful capitalism. The first phase sees children as good workers because they are cheap and docile and easily replaced if they happen to be chewed up by a machine. The second phase sees children as potential employees and focuses on their receptiveness for skill development and learned conformity. The third phase sees children as consumers and focuses on their need for material indulgence, child-centered products, and instant gratification.

The second phase of the capitalist discourse moved the end of the stage in which a person was ‘not adult’ from a biological to an instrumental definition. This created a period of ‘adolescence’ in which the human has adult biological characteristics, but is like a child in remaining the object of intervention and training. In the third capitalist phase adolescents have a significant disposable income, but are not responsible for household expenditure, making them excellent consumers.

Every version of this approach sees the child primarily as a means to an economic end, thus devaluing the child as an individual. The activities and care of the child are focussed on making it into a servant of the economy. It is a discourse in complete opposition to psychological and sociological investigations of childhood. The use of child labor enhanced profits and was only abolished because industry needed more skills, which required a period of compulsory education before the person was set to work. The creation of the child consumer occurred as technological advances meant the economy needed consumers more than worker drones. It may appear indulgent, but it puts profits ahead of the welfare of the child, leading child care experts to condemn the influx of ‘too many’ possessions as making the child overwhelmed, demanding, and ungrateful (Jolly 305, Dobson 30).

Optional-Extra Discourse

The widespread occurrence of this discourse in twentieth century western societies is a product of contraception, labor-saving technology, and women’s liberation, although shades of it may be found in the upper classes of past cultures who relegated the care of their children to relatively unsupervised servant classes. It places the preoccupations of adult individuals ahead of the needs of children, thereby making children an optional-extra, a mere accessory to life.

Avoiding parenthood has become possible and desirable (e.g., the Dual Income No Kids model). For those who wish to perpetuate their name, prove their fertility, or project their ambitions, childhood is seen as a rather unfortunate stage in human growth, to be managed
with as little trouble as possible. Optional-extra parenting advice manuals and videos focus on how to make your children behave (e.g., eat, sleep, defecate) in the most convenient ways and as quickly as possible. An example is Richard Ferber’s widely promulgated ‘cry-it-out sleep’ training method. Optional-extra justifications emphasize genetics rather than parenting as the determinant of behavior. They reconstruct love and support as ‘quality time’ to license part-time parenting. They minimize the responsibility of parents for the behavior of their children. In her ultimate attempt to let parents off the hook, Judith Rich Harris describes expert advice as “a set of assumptions written in sand” (96) and suggests peers have always been the primary socializing agents. Optional-extra parents out-source the management of their children as far as possible to professional caregivers through nannies, institutional childcare, organized after-school activities, or boarding school, all of which allow the parents maximum freedom from the wear and tear of their children.

In constructing children as a “separate tribe” (Rosen 1), the activities and care of the child are almost completely segregated from adult daily life. Children learn by instruction as they have little opportunity for watching and doing. Much of this instruction comes from machines as children interact more with computers and televisions and less with living people. For children, it means that maximum freedom can be achieved through being no trouble, but attention can only be achieved by being trouble. Parents’ discipline is irregular and unpredictable. Much disciplining is institutionalized, regulated by law, and from people with whom there is no affective relationship so that instrumental punishment must replace the power of human disapproval. Discipline is, in any case, oriented toward making the child as little trouble as possible, rather than moral pay back, correction, or therapy. Why else exclude a child from school for being a truant?

With the dilution of adult significant others, peers do indeed become the most significant affective agents. Children live out their lives in arenas where they have no private space (e.g., childcare and schools) or in completely private spaces (e.g., own room with computer), but they do not experience much intimate shared space. While this discourse is strongly criticized from the human-potential perspective (Miles xi; Rosen 1), it can be compatible with (and may even be a product of) capitalist discourses. Its subjects are destined to become good consumers who depend on material gratification for any sense of well-being and are suited to a world of media power, bureaucracy, and money as the primary social nexus, and perform well in open-plan offices or solitarily working from home via computer (Choderow 188-9).

Tensions and Hybrids

So far, so good, but complexity arises from the fact that these discourses can be compounded in an almost infinite variety of ways. The tendency of humans toward multi-lateral thinking has produced many hybrids. Indeed, the identified discourses are rarely found in their pure form, which is why attempts to define the category of childhood are complex, lead to conflict and often have internal inconsistencies. The human-potential discourse can, for example, incorporate an organic element proposing self-regulation and finish with a scientific argument that this is the way to rear healthy adults (Ritter). Another version of the human-potential discourse, however, could lead into a metaphysical-moral argument stressing the developmental value of obedience and finish with a good-citizen conclusion that this was the way to rear law-abiding adults (Isaacs 101-3). In every case, tensions between the proponents of varying views arise at the point of interface between the discourses.

An example of problems arising out of conflicting discourses can be seen in unpacking the statement that ‘children have rights.’ Alexander S. Neill says (organic discourse), “the proper home is one in which children and adults have equal rights” (9), but Rosemond’s Bill of Rights for Children includes (metaphysical-moral discourse), “children have the right to hear their parents say ‘no’ at least three times a day.” Western democracies claim to believe in legal rights and subscribe to the United Nations’ Declaration of the Rights of the Child but many of these ‘rights’ are reactions to the disempowering impacts of the good-citizen and metaphysical-moral discourses. Children remain “disfranchised, unable to lobby and cannot participate in the political affairs of their society” (Franklin 1-2). The complications arising out of attempting to apply the paradigm of ‘rights’ to one who is not adult may be illustrated by the case of seven-year old Jeremy Costello-Roberts who was disciplined by being beaten at an English Public School. On application by his mother, the European Commission of Human Rights decided that the punishment was in breach of its Convention (based on human-potential discourse) and referred the case to the European Court of Justice. That court, however, drew on a metaphysical-moral discourse and upheld the school’s right to beat (Miles 161).

An understanding of the contesting discourses can help to unpack debates about the value or otherwise of such modern western ‘sacred cows’ as compulsory state education and the nuclear family. Almost
all these debates range at cross-purposes because the different discourses predicate different purposes for institutions. The organic discourse wants children to experience a life that is sufficient unto itself and free from any obligation to the future. Families create safe environments in which this can happen. Formal schooling is seen as largely irrelevant and possibly dangerous. The human-potential discourse wants families and schools that will maximize children’s chances of realizing their individual potential. Success in this discourse varies according to different ideological constructs, but will be measured in terms of the individual achieving valued goals. The good-citizen discourse mistrusts all but the most conforming families and places great faith in schools as tools of the prevailing hegemony. The metaphysical-moral discourse asks both families and schools to be strict in enforcing absolute morality and fear of transgression. The scientific discourse measures the processes and outcomes of families and schools in terms of established quasi-objective standards of ‘healthy’ and ‘normal.’ The capitalist discourse evaluates each institution only in terms of its effectiveness in feeding the economy. The optional-extra discourse wants families to be optional and looks to schools to take over much of the task of parenting.

Tension can arise in families and the children produced can end up confused about their destiny when different parents base their attitudes and behavior on different discourses. For example, a capitalist discourse on the part of one parent can imbue the child with the need to succeed by amassing wealth, while a good-citizen discourse on the part of the other parent can set up a drive towards philanthropy. Parents whose own childhood has imbued them with one set of baggage, but who are drawn intellectually towards another discourse can also set up conflict and confusion for their children. These difficulties may be resolved by understanding the pluralism that underlies seemingly unitary concepts of right upbringing and desired outcomes.

Most of the western gurus in the field of parenting advice appeal widely because they draw from several of the available discourses. One of the reasons Doctor Spock was so successful is that, in spite of being designated the guru of permissiveness, he managed to simultaneously accommodate most discourses. Take, for example, his section on the controversial issue of masturbation, with my diagnosis of the discourse in square brackets:

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The parents and child psychiatrists who are opposed to showing disapproval of masturbation...reason that masturbation doesn’t do any physical or psychological harm which is correct [organic discourse], so why risk any chance of sexual maladjustment by instilling guilt or fears [human-potential discourse]... The opposite reasoning goes that all of us grew up with some degree of anxiety and guilt about sex; that it is, in fact, built into our species through the resolution of the Oedipus complex [scientific discourse]... If parents are made uncomfortable... Then it is better for all concerned for the parent to try to inhibit it [optional-extra discourse]... Furthermore, many parents still have strong religious and moral objections [metaphysical-moral discourse]... Part of my discomfort would come from not wanting the neighbors to disapprove of my child [good-citizen discourse]. (411-2)

Penny Leach, who became popular in the 1970s, similarly combines many approaches. She follows the organic discourse in rejecting punishment (440) and the human-potential one in seeing the child as a “person-in-the-making” (13). She also, surprisingly, however, includes the metaphysical-moral discourse in places. On the subject of the night-wandering child, for example, the accepting approach born of the organic discourse disappears to be replaced by the moralistic, “the best way of teaching her not to get out is probably to make absolutely sure that she gains nothing by her exploits” (304). Although Leach seemingly rejects the scientific approach: “any set of rules or pre-determined ideas—can work well if the rules you choose or follow happen to fit the baby you have” (8); she does lay down her own laws: “don’t ever leave her crying alone, but don’t ever get her up again either” (218). She appears to acknowledge the optional-extra discourse that was emerging at the time of her writing by telling parents that “fun for her is fun for you” (14); but she ultimately rejects it by pointing out that bringing up a child “involves extremely hard work” (15). Even the unilateral position of the demagogues of the Soviet Union combined many discourses to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. Pechernikova, writing on childhood in 1965, advises:

...if a child does not obey and does not consider others, then his independence invariably takes ugly forms [metaphysical-moral discourse]. Ordinarily this gives rise to anarchistic behaviour, which can in no way be reconciled with the laws of living in Soviet society [good-citizen discourse]. Where there is no obedience, there is no self-discipline; nor can there be normal development of indepen-
Training in obedience is an essential condition for developing the ability of self-discipline [human-potential discourse]. (qtd. in Bronfenbrenner 11)

Desmond Morris has an anthropological approach grounded in scientific discourse, “look again with an unprejudiced eye at the baby itself,” but he also offers an organic discourse, “babies are almost impossible to train” and a human-potential discourse, “a secure babyhood provides the basis for a successful adulthood” (7). On another page his underlying rationale adopts a good-citizen discourse by looking at “the behavior of the babies when they become adults” (116). He attempts to explain the optional-extra discourse in scientific terms as a product of over-population (116), but reveals his own metaphysical-moral bias when he slips from the scientific evidence that babies need “a central mother-figure” to the assertion that they need “a typical family unit” (119).

James Dobson, one of the authoritarian gurus who emerged in opposition to the Spock school, embeds his advice in a scientific discourse by citing “the psychological laws of learning” (vii). His science, however, is behaviorism, which by stressing the value of corporal punishment and taking as its goals “sexual morality, honesty, personal integrity, and meaningful faith in God” (145) emerges as a metaphysical-moral discourse.

On the Internet, John Rosemond’s affirmative parenting also crosses the discourse boundaries. The fundamental discourse is metaphysical-moral with its emphasis on absolute obedience and ‘memorable’ and ‘persuasive’ consequences of disobedience. The human potential discourse appears, however, in the emphasis on the value of ‘character-building.’ The optional-extra discourse is served by the assertion that every child “has the right to discover early in his life that he isn’t the center of the universe (or his family or his parents’ lives).” There is even a trace of the organic discourse in his suggestion that “Children have a right to scream all they want over the decisions their parents make.”

This tentative taxonomy offers a pluralist approach to aid in deconstructing the many compound versions of humans as ‘not adult.’ Enhanced understanding may be achieved by untangling the strands and realizing that there is no one model, no unequivocal message about the category of childhood. Co-existing discourses have been woven together, sometimes with little understanding that co-existence does not mean compatibility. Shari Thurer’s puzzle that “In a time when society values the fulfillment [sic] of women as persons, we have an ethos of maternity that denies them that very thing” (xxvii) can be understood if we see that the ethos of maternity belongs to the organic discourse, while the emancipation of women comes from the equally current, but incompatible, optional-extra discourse.
Works Cited


The Many Inventions of Childhood


