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Sapere Aude: Critical Ontology and the Case of Child Development

JAMES WONG *Wilfrid Laurier University*

Introduction

In *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, Michel Foucault develops an account of the workings of modern political power. In contrast to pre-modern political power, which Foucault identifies as ‘sovereign power’ characterized by the Sovereign exercising power over the life and death of his subjects, modern political power takes its task to be the management and administration of life itself, through all the ways it unfolds for individuals (1980a: 138). Foucault called this form of state power ‘biopower.’ Biopower is organized around two poles: “an anatomicopolitics of the human body” and “a bio-politics of the population” (Foucault, 1980a: 139). Both mechanisms combine to regulate persons and groups of individuals through detailed knowledge of their bodies and behaviour at every level of the social body. Rather than revealing its might through public displays, as illustrated by the execution of Damians in *Discipline and Punish* (1979), biopower operates subtly by measuring, appraising and normalizing individuals. Such detailed information about individuals, however, requires the continual development of disciplines (Foucault, 1980a: 144). Foucault points out that “the man described for us [by various disciplines], whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself” (1979: 30). He warns that “at present, the problem lies ... in the steep rise in the use of these mechanisms of normalization and the wide-ranging powers which, through the proliferation of new disciplines, they bring with them” (1979: 306). Against what he perceives to be the trend toward yet more disciplinary networks meant to enmesh individuals,

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Foucault closes *Discipline and Punish* by foretelling a “distant roar of battle” against the spread of such normalizing practices (1979: 308).

Given its alarming tone, one can imagine a series of questions raised in response to Foucault’s critical analysis of biopower and its effects. What, one might well ask, is to be done in the face of such biopower? Do we simply abandon the advances we have gained in our knowledge of individuals? What alternatives to biopower are available to us? Foucault, however, leaves his readers hanging. As a consequence, some of Foucault’s critics have described his various genealogical studies of psychological, medical and ‘educational’ practices and institutions as “anarchist clap-trap” and “self-indulgent radical chic” (Rorty, 1986: 47), and “infantile leftism . . . committed to nothing more than an elaborate pun on the word ‘discipline’” (Walzer, 1986: 51, 64). Others choose a different tack. They take Foucault to task for not providing “normative yardsticks” (Habermas, 1986: 108). In their view, Foucault cannot provide normative foundations for his partisan critiques of modernity (Habermas, 1987: 276; Fraser, 1987: ch. 1–3). Michael Walzer echoes this line of criticism when he writes, “Foucault makes no demand on us that we adopt this or that critical principle or replace these disciplinary norms with some other set of norms. He is not an advocate” (1986: 65). But, Walzer (1986: 65) asks, what then are we to do since “there may be some [positions] that we have ‘good reasons’ not to support”?

In this paper, I argue that in Foucault’s later work, in particular “What is Enlightenment?” (1984) and “The ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom” (1988a), his proposed positive program of practical critique, which he calls ‘critical ontology,’ provides a response to his critics. In mapping out the project, Foucault addresses the issue of normative yardsticks as well as the question of what is to be done about the practices and institutions which are constitutive of biopower. Critical ontology is concerned with the possibility of self-transformation, i.e., “work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings” (Foucault, 1984: 47). A central concern of the project is to understand how we have constituted ourselves as the kinds of subjects we are. The goal of critical ontology, however, is practical. It seeks to “separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing or thinking what we are, do, or think” (Foucault, 1984: 46). However, it may be objected that, since Foucault emphasizes going beyond contingencies, it appears that he is guilty of committing a kind of genetic fallacy: in unmasking the social relations which constitute the conditions for the possibility of certain concepts, in particular normative ones, and practices, these concepts and practices are shown to be mere fabrications and can be rejected.

I will defend Foucault against such a charge by using concepts and practices in child development as an illustration of his project of critical

Abstract. This paper argues that Foucault's proposed positive program of practical critique in his later work, which he calls 'critical ontology,' provides a response to his critics. The goal of critical ontology is to "separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing or thinking what we are, do, or think." However, it may be objected that, since Foucault emphasizes going beyond contingencies, it appears that he is guilty of committing a kind of genetic fallacy. I will defend Foucault against such a charge by using concepts and practices in child development as an illustration. The example of child development is fitting for political theorizing because the development model of childhood is now central to the practices and policies of healthcare providers, social workers and educators. Such practices and policies aim to enhance the abilities of individuals to be both citizens and autonomous agents. Yet the effects of these policies on individuals are not always positive. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of critical ontology for practices grounded in the model of child development.

Résumé. Cet article cherche à démontrer que le programme positif de critique pratique que Foucault propose dans ses derniers ouvrages, et qu'il qualifie d'une «ontologie critique,» constitue une réponse à ses détracteurs. Le but de cette ontologie critique est de dégager «de la contingence qui nous a fait être ce que nous sommes la possibilité de ne plus être, faire ou penser ce que nous sommes, faisons ou pensons». Néanmoins, il est possible d'objecter que Foucault commet une sorte d'erreur génétique, puisqu'il insiste sur la nécessité de dépasser les contingences. Je cherche à défendre Foucault contre cette accusation en utilisant les concepts et pratiques du développement des enfants comme illustration. L'exemple du développement des enfants convient à la théorie politique puisque le modèle d'aménagement de l'enfance est maintenant au coeur des pratiques et des politiques de ceux qui travaillent dans les secteurs de la santé, de l'aide social, et de l'éducation. Telles pratiques et politiques ont comme but d'accroître la capacité des individus d'agir en même temps comme citoyens et des êtres autonomes. Pourtant, les effets de ces politiques sur des individus ne sont pas toujours bénéfiques. L'article se conclut par une analyse des implications d'une ontologie critique pour des pratiques fondées sur le modèle du développement des enfants.

ontology. The example of child development is fitting for a political theory discussion because the development model of childhood is now central to the practices and policies of healthcare providers, social workers and educators. Such practices and policies aim to enhance the abilities of young individuals to eventually be both citizens and autonomous agents. Yet the effects of these policies on individuals are not always positive. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of critical ontology for practices grounded in the model of child development. It should be emphasized at the outset that the focus of this paper is concerned with the effects of the developmental model of childhood, or 'developmental thinking,' on how children are perceived and dealt with today especially in the West. The focus of this paper is not intended to be a discussion specifically on the impact of Foucault's project of critical ontology on how we ought to think about children's education, including specific policy initiatives; such analysis will have to wait for another occasion. The contribution of this paper is more methodological than policy oriented. Nonetheless, I hope that the present discussion is in some small way a prolegomenon to any future policy discussion.¹

To be sure, political theorists in the Modern period, Hobbes and Locke for example, and, even earlier, Plato in *The Republic*, discussed children in their works. However, Hobbes's concern with children was primarily in the context of an account of the justification of political authority, while Locke's case is more complicated. There were two contexts for his writings on children. In his *Two Treatises on Government* (1689), Locke was interested in providing an alternative to the account of authority put forth by Filmer and Hobbes. In *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), he wanted to address the issue of how best to raise future citizens. David Archard tells us that in *Some Thoughts* "Locke writes of children as the recipients of an ideal upbringing, citizens in the making, fledgling but imperfect reasoners, and blank sheets filled by experience" (1998: 85). Nonetheless, neither Hobbes nor Locke wrote about children in today's framework of childhood development, as I shall argue. It is a far cry from the kind of general observation that Locke makes about children's abilities in his *Some Thoughts*, such as when a child can talk, "it is time he should begin to *learn to read* ... [But] a great care is to be taken that it be made a business to him, nor he look on it as a task" (1996: 113) to contemporary experiment-based claims about young children which state that, for example, from a few weeks of age on they can distinguish people from inanimate objects (Bradley, 1989: 127).²

It should be noted that Jean-Jacques Rousseau's general remarks about children's abilities in his famous work on education, *Emile* (1762), also do not fall under today's framework of child development. Like Locke, Rousseau emphasized the distinctiveness of childhood as a phase in human life. He tells us that children have their "own ways of seeing, thinking and feeling" (57). For instance, he remarks that "from the first children hear spoken language; we speak to them before they can understand. Their vocal organs are still stiff, and only gradually lend themselves to the reproduction of the sounds heard; it is doubtful whether these sounds are heard distinctly as we hear them" (37). Both Locke's and Rousseau's remarks, however, are based on unsystematic observations of children, and not grounded in experimental studies. In *Emile*, Rousseau tells us that "we know not what nature allows us to be, none of us has *measured* the possible difference between man and man" (29, italics added). Perhaps, contemporary psychological research will show that children are much more able at various tasks than either Locke or Rousseau had supposed.

Critical Ontology

Given his scathing critiques of various features of modern societies, Foucault has been taken to be a standard bearer for anti-Enlightenment thought. But contrary to his critics, Foucault sees himself as following in

the Enlightenment tradition, at least as outlined in Kant's 1784 essay "What is Enlightenment?" In his essay, Kant tells us that enlightenment consists of "the escape of men from their self-incurred tutelage" (1963: 9). To wake themselves from dogmatic slumbers, individuals, both singularly and collectively, must make use of their reason to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions guiding their beliefs. In short, they must analyze the state of affairs in which they find themselves. Hence, Kant proclaims *Sapere Aude* ('dare to know' taken from Horace) to be the motto for the Enlightenment.³

Foucault's reading of Kant's essay is that the hallmark of enlightenment is the attitude of challenging assumptions about what we know and how we act.⁴ For Foucault, the project of enlightenment commits us to a "permanent critique" (Foucault, 1984: 43). Lewis White Beck points out in the Preface to the first edition of *Critique of Pure Reason*, that Kant had already declared "our age [to be], in especial degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit" (Kant, 1963: 8 note 4). Foucault is aware, of course, that much of Kant's philosophy is dedicated to 'critique' as a systematic philosophy. In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes that "all the interests of my reason, speculative as well as practical, combine in the three following questions: What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope?" (1965: 635). Critical philosophy then yields theories about, as Foucault puts it, "what can be known, what must be done or what may be hoped" (1984: 38). For Foucault, however, the project of a permanent critique will not attempt to "identify the universal structures of all knowledge or of all possible moral action," but rather, it will be "a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression" (1984: 46, 45). The project, he tells us, implies a series of historical inquiries that are as precise as possible; and these inquiries will not be oriented retrospectively toward the 'essential kernel of rationality' that can be found in the Enlightenment and that would have to be preserved in any event; they will be oriented toward the 'contemporary limits of the necessary,' that is, toward what is not or is no longer indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects (1984: 43).

By 'limits' Foucault means those taken-for-granted ways of thinking and acting which form the backdrop to our behaviour.⁵ A critique of limits would then be an analysis of how we have constituted ourselves as subjects who think and act in particular ways in order to open up new spaces for thought and action (Norris, 1994: 169).

Because of its connection with self-constitution, i.e., different ways to be a person, Foucault also describes the permanent critique as a "critical ontology" of ourselves.⁶ Foucault suggests that inquiries in critical ontology could be organized under three interrelated headings: "How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations? How are we

constituted as moral subjects of our own actions?" (Foucault, 1984: 49) Foucault describes these areas as "the axes of knowledge, power and ethics" (1984: 49), representing different domains in which we constitute ourselves as subjects. For instance, under knowledge, what can be known about us as objects of knowledge at a particular moment will inform our thinking both of ourselves as persons and of the possibilities available to us. As an illustration, consider the idea of therapy in contemporary life. Therapy appears to play a prominent role in Western culture today. Think of the volumes of self-help literature available in bookstores, and the talk of various addictions along with the establishment of the appropriate recovery programs. In the West, individuals have constituted several possible ways to be a person through what they say, think and do in terms of therapy, from victim or addict, to survivor or recovering addict, to confessor and many more permutations. Of course, therapy is but one organizing principle informing possible ways to be a person in contemporary life. The point of critical ontology is to examine ideas and principles that organize our habitual ways of thinking and acting in order to think and act differently.

Foucault does not intend the project of critical ontology as a "gesture of rejection," but rather as a practical critique for possible transformations (1984: 45). He suggests that the project take on an "experimental" attitude towards "contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take" (1984: 46). One of the key issues addressed by critical ontology is what Foucault calls the "paradox of the relations of capacity and [disciplinary] power" (1984: 47). The ability of individuals to be autonomous agents is linked with the development of capacity for thought and action (Tully, 1999: 93). Thus encouraging and fostering such capabilities would enable individuals to approach practices critically. But the capacity for thought and action are developed within disciplinary matrices of pedagogical and medical institutions, in which individuals are also normalized and placed in a hierarchy. Here think of Foucault's remarks in *Discipline and Punish* where the routinization of tasks and the very spatial arrangements of individuals are geared towards the normalization and hierarchization of individuals (cf. 177–194). The question Foucault raises is, "How can the growth of capabilities be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?" (Foucault, 1984: 48)⁷ Notice that, in raising the question, Foucault is *not* claiming that all that is given to us now as universal and necessary is problematic. His project is more modest, but no less audacious. It seeks to examine "in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent and the product of arbitrary constraints" (1984: 45). As suggested by the idea of an "experimental attitude," the practical critique is intended to challenge the taken-for-granted necessity of prac-

tices and the concepts and values informing such practices, and “where change is possible and desirable ... to determine the precise form this change should take” (1984: 45). I will explore how such an experimental attitude might work in practice in the case study of child development. The discussion focuses on Foucault’s concern about the “paradox of capacity and power” as applied to the case of child development.⁸ However, before that discussion can get off the ground, I will first consider some criticisms of Foucault’s project.

Enlightenment Blackmail—answering critics

“How can Foucault’s self-understanding as a thinker in the tradition of the Enlightenment be compatible with his unmistakable criticisms of this very form of knowledge of modernity?” Jürgen Habermas asks (1986: 106). Rather than working within the Enlightenment tradition, he argues that Foucault’s work actually undermines “modernity and its language games” (1987: 283). Against criticisms such as Habermas’, Foucault warns against what he calls the “blackmail of the Enlightenment” (1984, 42). One is either for or against the Enlightenment *tout court*. Take, for example, the idea of ‘reason’: one “recognizes reason or casts it into irrationalism—as if it were not possible to write a rational criticism of rationality” (Foucault, 1989: 242). But the dichotomy between either supporting reason or irrationalism is a false one, and Foucault is right to reject it. As a set of political, economic, social, institutional and cultural transformations, the accomplishments of the Enlightenment are still felt today. Yet *some* of the changes resulting from the Enlightenment period may prove to be in conflict with the current autonomy of individuals. It is the task of critical ontology to unmask such arbitrary constraints. Foucault’s project, then, does not repudiate the values or the institutions which fall under the broad notions of ‘modernity’ or ‘Enlightenment.’⁹ It is quite possible that *some* values and practices should turn out to be indispensable for our autonomy today. But, “where change is possible and desirable,” Foucault adds, the project will attempt “to determine the precise form this change should take” (1984: 46). Critical ontology, then, is not a global anarchist-deconstructionist project but a local and experimental, hence tentative, one.

Foucault acknowledges that the project of critical ontology abandons “hope of ever acceding to a point of view that could give us access to any complete and definitive knowledge of what may constitute our historical limits” (1984: 47). From this admission, however, it does not follow that no critical judgements are possible. One must still provide reasons and evidence for why certain practices must be changed and how, except these reasons will not be cast as universal claims (Rouse, 1994: 112). We can give partial justification for any particular suggestion by using other non-problematic practices or discourses. The transformed prac-

tices will then be put back in play. If in time those practices were to prove problematic, then the critical process would begin anew. Changes, according to this view, are always provisional. The process of permanent critique is not dissimilar to the work of sailors on Neurath's boat rebuilding their ship while still at sea.¹⁰

But what do these changes accomplish? Would the end result be just substitution of one regime of power for another, as his critics suggest? First, Foucault does not conceive of power just in terms of domination. His concerns are with relations of power in various settings, such as the family and other institutions, rather than a theory of power *per se*. "When I speak of power relations," Foucault tells us:

I am not referring to Power—with a capital P—dominating and imposing its rationality upon the totality of the social body. In fact, there are power relations. They are multiple; they have different forms, they can be in play in family relations, or within an institution, or an administration—or between a dominating and a dominated class.... It is a field of analysis and not at all a reference to any unique instance. [Furthermore,] in studying these power relations, I in no way construct a theory of Power. But I wish to know how the reflexivity of the subject and the discourse of truth are linked—"How can the subject tell the truth about itself?"—and I think that relations of power exerting themselves upon one another constitute one of the determining elements in this relation I am trying to analyze. (1988b: 38)

For him, the idea of 'relations of power' is a general notion, describing the ways in which individuals direct the behaviour of one another and themselves (1983: 219). These relationships range from one-sided domination of one over others to consensual and reciprocal relations between individuals. Foucault does not deny that there are cases of domination. For him, a relationship of power is not necessarily identical with a relation of domination. "When an individual or a social group manages to block a field of relations of power," he writes, "to render them impassive and invariable and to prevent all reversibility of movement ... we are facing what can be called a state of domination. It is certain that in such a state the practice of liberty does not exist or exists only unilaterally or is extremely confined and limited" (1988a: 3). Individuals in relations of power other than domination, however, have the liberty to coordinate their actions in particular ways. In this kind of coordination problem, individuals align themselves according to certain goals that each wants to achieve. The relationship may or may not be hierarchical, depending on the context in which it is situated. Nonetheless even if it were hierarchical, individuals in various subject positions would be constrained. When a manager or a department chair plans to implement new initiatives, she or he can do so only if others 'accept' the plans and work within them. Individuals in such circumstance can choose to act in accordance

or resist. They can even attempt to modify the way in which they are connected to each other *to the degree they can*, by changing the rules governing the relation itself. In this sense, the relation of power is reciprocal between individuals, and requires that individuals have the freedom to make choices (Rouse, 1994: 105ff; Tully, 1999: 132). Change is, therefore, possible.¹¹ Indeed, the problem, Foucault writes, “is to find out where resistance is going to be organized” (1988a: 12).

Second, Foucault is suspicious of overarching claims about liberation or emancipation.¹² Aside from the potential of merely uttering empty platitudes, the danger in such speculative universalist claims is that in their name, many heinous acts have been committed. Foucault reminds us that “we know from experience that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society ... has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions” (1984: 46). But he does not deny that, in concrete instances, liberation exists. “When a colonial people tries to free itself of its colonizer,” he tells us, “that is truly an act of liberation, in the strict sense of the word.... [But] this act of liberation is not sufficient to establish the practices of liberty that later on will be necessary for this people, this society and these individuals to decide upon receivable and acceptable forms of their existence or political society” (1988a: 2–3). Foucault here echoes Kant’s view in his essay “What is Enlightenment?” Kant tells us that “an age cannot bind itself and ordain to put the succeeding one into such a condition that it cannot extend its (at best very occasional) knowledge, purify itself of errors, and progress in general enlightenment” (1963: 7). Rather than schemes of transformation that seek to establish ‘freedom’ once and for all, Foucault argues that we should instead focus on *specific* kinds of transformations concerning our ways of being and thinking. “I prefer even these partial transformations that have been made ... to the programs for a new man that the worst political systems have repeated throughout the twentieth century” (Foucault, 1984: 46–47).

Genetic Fallacy

There is another objection. Foucault tells us one of the aims of his historical studies is “to show people that a lot of things that are a part of their landscape—that people think are universal—are the result of some very precise historical changes. All my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence. They show the arbitrariness of institutions and show which space of freedom we can still enjoy and how many changes can still be made” (1988c: 11). Showing that certain ways of thinking and acting are historically contingent, however, does not prove that they are false or even problematic. If one were to hold that the unmasking of power relations behind concepts and practices by itself dem-

onstrates that propositions informed by those concepts are false, then one would be committing a genetic fallacy.

Foucault, however, is well aware of this possible objection. He tells us that “we can show, for example, that the medicalisation of madness ... has been linked, at some time or other, to a whole series of social or economic processes, but also to institutions and practices of power. This fact in no way impairs the scientific validity of the therapeutic efficacy of psychiatry. It does not guarantee it but it does not cancel it out either” (1988a: 16). Consider another example. Suppose, Foucault says, mathematics is linked to structures of power. What follows from that? Foucault tells us that this does not “mean that mathematics is *only* a game of power but that mathematics is linked, in a certain way and *without impairing its validity*, to games and institutions of power” (1988a: 16, italics added). In these passages, Foucault acknowledges that there is an epistemological or evidential side to knowledge claims. Whether or not a particular claim is true will depend on the evidence. Nevertheless, knowledge claims may be linked to and affected by relations of power. Feminist epistemologists have argued that not everyone is allowed to participate. Lorraine Code points out that the social order establishes structures of credulity and incredulity which may exclude potentially good informants (1995: 75). Under such circumstances, it is likely that “there are truths which could have been and should have been transmitted, but were not” (Fricker, 1998: 173).¹³

For Foucault, however, knowledge is not reducible to power, even though they directly imply each another (1979: 27). In an interview, Foucault complains that “when you point out to [others] that there can be a relation between truth and power, they say: ‘Ah good! Then it is not the truth’” (Foucault, 1988a: 17). The general perception of his idea of power/knowledge is that knowledge is reducible to power. Foucault chafes at such an interpretation. He remarks acidly:

I know that, as far as the general public is concerned, I am the guy who said that knowledge merged with power, that it was no more than a thin mask thrown over the structures of domination and that those structures were always ones of oppression, confinement, and so on. [This] point is so absurd as to be laughable. If I had said, or meant, that knowledge was power, I would have said so, and having said so, I would have had nothing more to say, since, having made them identical, I don't see why I would have taken the trouble to show the different relations between them.... Those who say that for me knowledge is the mask of power seem to me to be quite incapable of understanding (1988d: 264–265).

A full treatment of Foucault's idea of power/knowledge is beyond the scope of this paper, but perhaps it is enough for our purposes to point out that his studies reveal the connections between various knowledge

claims and the practices by which they are justified and become intelligible. In "The Discourse on Language," Foucault tells us that "a proposition must fulfil some onerous and complex conditions before it can be admitted within a discipline; before it can be pronounced true or false it must be, as Monsieur Canguilhem might say, 'within the true'" (1972: 224). Yet, as Linda Alcoff points out, the "rules of discursive formations do not mandate specific truth-values for specific sentences, but open up a delimited space in which some statements can be meaningfully expressed" (1996: 123). Since discursive formations, which are moulded by both intellectual and social events, only delineate what can be stated and what is capable of having truth values, it would be wrong to attribute to Foucault the view that knowledge is reducible to power relations.¹⁴

The historical inquiries in critical ontology reveal the connections between knowledge and power in various taken-for-granted practices. That changes are necessary in these customary ways of thinking and acting will be shown by problematic practices themselves because they pose arbitrary or unnecessary constraints on individuals.

Child Development

As an illustration of the workings of critical ontology, consider the case of child development. If we peruse literature from pediatricians' offices or off-the-shelf self-help books for parents, one idea that leaps out immediately is that children must develop according to physical, cognitive and psychological norms. Today, these norms are taken for granted, yet they are a fairly new concept, barely 200 years old.

Of course, people have always been aware that children grew up, or 'developed', at different rates. How could they not? But their notion of development was not "theoretically well-formed" (Archard, 1993: 30). In contrast, today, most people, especially in the West, are guided by a *scientific* idea of development, as a consequence of systematic explorations of childhood from the perspectives of biology, psychology, psychiatry and much else over the past century and a half. For example, consider Shakespeare's sketch of growing up in *As You Like It*:

All the worlds' a stage,
 And all the men and women merely players.
 They have their exits and their entrances,
 And one man in his time plays many parts,
 His act being seven stages. At first, the infant,
 Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
 Then the whining schoolboy with his satchel
 And shining morning face, creeping like snail
 Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
 Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
 Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then, a soldier (1994: 151)

Although the bard recognized infancy and childhood as different categories, there is neither the mention of age nor any fine-grained details about what children ought to have achieved or acquired at different times, as we would expect from recent pamphlets. Individuals in general, and children in particular, were not yet objects of scientific knowledge.¹⁵ For knowledge of children's development to emerge, society must be organized in such a way that childhood is recognized to be a distinct period from adulthood. Furthermore, the view that there is a *rate* at which individuals developed and that their development could be compared had not yet been advanced. Once that measure is acquired, development, as a norm, can be deployed in the detailed management of individuals. But the techniques and technologies for such knowledge would not be invented until the mid-nineteenth century.

The claim that childhood is a particularly modern invention is, of course, not new. Phillippe Ariès made such a claim in his landmark *Centuries of Childhood* (1962). But Ariès's analysis is flawed. He applied contemporary attitudes, assumptions and concerns about children to the past. Since present attitudes were not found in past societies, he concluded that such societies lacked a concept of childhood altogether. But all that he could have claimed was that they lacked *our* concept of childhood. By definition to be a child is to be not yet an adult, and all societies make this distinction between those who are and those who are not yet adults (Archard, 1993: 22–7). My interest in this paper is in how the idea of development became a central organizing principle in the way we think about and interact with children, parents and care-providers and how such developmental thinking may pose unnecessary limitations on individuals.

Knowledge

A key figure in the formation of knowledge on the topic of children's development was the Belgian astronomer-statistician Adolphe Quetelet. For him, just as there were laws governing the heavens and human societies, there were likewise laws governing the development of man's various powers. Statistical thinking was the key to uncovering such laws. Quetelet applied the 'Law of Error' used by astronomers at the time to human populations. Man's thinking was ready for the idea that there was a truth to be discovered about man's development, one which governed every aspect of his maturation. Unlike Locke or Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who based their views on single or isolated observations, Quetelet used data from various anthropometric studies to find out what the average person would be like at various points in his or her development. In his view, the 'average man' (*l'homme moyen*) was the embodiment of the physical *and* moral attributes of his people. He claimed that the features

of the 'average man' could be considered a "type of perfection" for a group at a specific time, since extreme variations would cancel each other out. The features of the average man would serve as the standard against which an individual's development would be measured. Average features represent the normal, or healthy, state for individuals in a population (Hacking, 1990: ch. 19). Average values, as *norms*, are no mere arithmetic constructs. They have real effects on people's lives: normal connotes health, abnormal suggests deviance. People are motivated, then, to mould themselves according to such norms.

Educators and Evolutionary Thinking

Educators, too, had high hopes that anthropometric studies would yield knowledge about the laws of mental development in children. They had a practical interest in such studies. For them, the key in making pedagogy more effective was to understand how the child's mind unfolded. When educational practices are adapted to the natural developmental order of children's abilities and interests, such practices would finally be able to do what they were supposed to do: mould these children into future citizens. The subject of mental development in children quickly became a hot topic for discussion in women's clubs and teachers' organizations in the mid-1800s. G. Stanley Hall of Clark University, a founding member of the American Psychological Association, tapped into this enthusiasm and put teachers and parents to work. Questionnaire after questionnaire about children's behaviour was filled out. It is as though the mere gathering of numbers and calculating of averages and presentation of tables and graphs guaranteed that their findings would reveal yet more laws governing children's development (Wong, 1994: ch. 4).

There was another reason for interest in children's mental development at the time. Those involved in natural history and 'evolutionary thinking' saw 'development' as *the* organizing principle in Nature. Robert Chambers, the author of the anonymously published popular work, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), tells us that "the inorganic has one final comprehensive law GRAVITATION. The organic, the other great department of mundane things, rests in like manner on one law, and that is DEVELOPMENT" (1844: 360). The development of mind was seen to separate human beings from the animal world. Children's mental development was of particular interest because the child was thought to be situated between the animal and the human. A number of papers on children's behaviour were published in the second half of the nineteenth century. For instance, Charles Darwin's "A Biographical Sketch of the Infant" was published in *Mind* in 1877. The trickle of publications would soon become a flood.

Knowledge, Power, Ethics

As the account just provided shows, developments in statistical and evolutionary thinking and worries about population health and education converged to create a space (conceptual and institutional) for the emergence of a science of child development. Hall's sloppy questionnaires would give way to more rigorous tests, such as Binet and Simon's intelligence test in 1904. Such tests provided a simple way to obtain knowledge about children's behaviour, scholastic or otherwise. They made it possible to reason objectively about children in developmental terms both physical and psychological. For instance, claims such as 'a one-year-old boy should weigh 10 kg' or 'two-year-olds can use words such as I, me and you' are now taken to be true or false. More importantly, the various tests started to change the way in which research on child development was done. Children would be studied in controlled laboratory settings. Conceptual tools, techniques and instruments would be developed and refined to verify claims about children's development. Pediatrics and developmental psychology would become mature sciences, eventually providing us with now familiar claims such as 'children between the ages two and four have no real conception of abstract principles guiding classification.' Although modern societal relations of power are constitutive of the conditions for the possibility for knowledge of children's development—for example, separation of childhood, concerns about populations and education, and so on—they do not specify the truth values of individual claims; rather they provide the material and conceptual conditions for the possibility of such knowledge.

Knowledge of children's development has also changed the way we think about and do things for children. Children are now seen as individuals who develop more or less normally, according to physical and psychological norms. Such knowledge has an immediate impact on parents. Parents were told by self-styled pundits, like James Sully, the Grote Professor of Philosophy and Psychology at the University of London (and a child-study enthusiast), that raising children was no longer "a matter of instinct and unthinking rules of thumb [but] has become the subject of profound and perplexing discussion. Mothers—the right sort of mothers that is—feel they must know *au fond* this ... creature which they are called upon to direct onto the safe road to manhood" (Sully 1903, cited in Ross, 1972: 284). The message was clear: good parents would seek out and learn the latest findings on how to raise their children. Parents, especially middle-class parents, sought out that knowledge in pamphlets and popular magazines, like *Parent's Magazine*. Development became part of their working vocabulary in their dealings with children and with one another. They willingly transformed their homes and *made* themselves into the kinds of persons that this knowledge led them to believe they

needed to be. Who wouldn't want their children to be healthy and normal? It may be true that, as the popular saying goes, 'it takes a village to raise a child.' but, with the scientific notion of development, that village had better include, or at least have access to, an expert or two.

Even if we moved away from the rigid thinking about development, reflected in various developmental charts, as recommended by popular writers like Dr. Benjamin Spock, and pediatricians themselves,¹⁶ how could we today completely avoid thinking in terms of development in our interactions with children? Two recent British studies tracked the cognitive, social and emotional outcomes of children classified as small for their gestational age. These studies show that, although these children are less likely to excel academically, they do not suffer any other bad outcomes socially and emotionally (Owens, 2001). But even earlier, long before the child is born, indicators have been established for the fetus, marking it as a developing being. We believe that it is in the nature of children that they 'develop,' i.e., their growth is governed by developmental norms. But *we* inculcate that belief in children and in ourselves. In the West, the first image a parent sees of her or his child is likely an ultrasound image of the fetus taken at a prescribed checkup of fetal development during pregnancy. Furthermore, think about the toys and games for children. They are designed with the aim of promoting certain developmentally appropriate skills. Consumers are very much aware of the age-appropriate recommendations of such games. Think about schools. The whole curriculum is based on fostering skills in a developmentally appropriate way. Such mundane practices and attitudes entrench the concept of development in our culture.

Recall the three kinds of questions examined by critical ontology: "How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations? How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions?" (Foucault, 1984: 49) These are inquiries into the axes of knowledge, power and ethics, different domains in which we constitute ourselves as subjects. In the example of child development discussed in the previous paragraphs, we have seen how individuals, in particular children, have become objects of knowledge, and how individuals, parents and other care providers have willingly entered into various relations of power, guiding their behaviour. The analyses there focused on the domains of knowledge and power. What about ethics? The relationship between children and parents, between children and experts, and parents and experts, are all informed by the knowledge we have about development. And that knowledge has also shaped the way we think about our responsibilities in terms of caring for children, for example legislation on child abandonment, corporal punishment and so on. Such ethical demands have normalizing effects on individuals. However, these effects are asymmetrically borne. For instance,

mothers, who are typically the primary care-providers of their children, bear the brunt of the burdens; the hardships are multiplied for those in marginalized situations, such as single teenaged mothers.

Conclusion

What, then, are the implications of a practical critique for child development? As the discussion in the previous sections illustrates, an analysis inspired by Foucault's notion of critical ontology shows how development itself became a central organizing principle in contemporary Western societies. Such reasoning about children has also penetrated the thinking of other traditions on the topic of children's growing up. Among the Native peoples in the Canadian far north, formal schooling now interrupts traditional communal practices, such as hunting (Owens, 2001; Roundtable, 1999: 167). Yet attention should be paid to these other child-rearing practices, since they may provide valuable insights into children's growing-up process. The variability in child rearing provides a rich resource to help us understand Western practices. This is not a rejection of the vast body of knowledge now available on child development, but rather a call to consider it critically. Far from advocating anarchism, or worse nihilism, Foucault himself tells us that his genealogical analyses do not "vindicate a lyrical right to ignorance or non-knowledge" (1980b: 84). Instead, they allow individuals to "question the truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses on truth" (1997: 32). The point is *not* that we can do without knowledge, or truth: "nothing has ... proved that we could define a strategy exterior to [knowledge or truth]. It is indeed in this field of obligation to truth that we sometimes can avoid in one way or another the effects of a domination" (1988a: 15). In his view, changes can only be brought about "not by playing a game that was a complete stranger to the game of truth, but in playing it otherwise or in playing ... other trumps in the game of truth" (1988a: 15).

A historical inquiry into development shows that the idea of development cannot be neatly offered up in an either/or dilemma: either you accept development or you reject it. But, in grasping the workings of the normalizing effects of knowledge about child development on individuals, parents and other care providers have a richer knowledge base to make judgements about children's growing up and child rearing practices. Knowledge of children's physical or psychological development can tell us when something has gone seriously wrong. However, pursuing the standards set out by developmental schedules too single-mindedly could be disastrous for children. In choosing to use their knowledge about child development critically, perhaps in conjunction with other models of how children grow up, individuals would disrupt the normalizing effects of

such knowledge. It is important not to overstate the claim however. Individual cases of resistance may not lead to a disruption in the practices and institutions of child development. Such ‘macro-level’ changes will require much else, including the acceptance of other, including non-Western, accounts of child rearing.

As the case study of child development illustrates, the tasks laid out by critical ontology—demonstrating the historical contingency in our present ways of understanding and organizing ourselves, and imagining other possibilities—would seem to be key components in framing possible transformations. Such changes are, as noted earlier, provisional. They may or may not continue to contribute to the autonomy of individuals at some other juncture. Nonetheless, that they *now* remove some of the arbitrary constraints on a person’s ability to act would seem to suggest that increasing the capacity for autonomy in individuals is possible without a concomitant increase in the effects of disciplinary power on them.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank one referee for the JOURNAL for emphasizing the importance of making this point plain.
- 2 Bradley is here commenting on Jerome Bruner’s research on the interaction between adults and young infants.
- 3 The motto had already been adopted in 1736 by the Society of the Friends of Truth, an important group in the German Enlightenment (Kant, 1963: 3).
- 4 Attitude is contrasted with analytics, the latter being Foucault’s term for formal theory (Habermas, 1986: 107).
- 5 According to James Tully, limits are “any of the multiplicity of ways of speaking, thinking and acting, of being conscious of ourselves as human subjects” (1999: 92). These limits are taken for granted, “functioning as the ... horizon of [the subject’s] questions and contests” (1999: 93).
- 6 Foucault also gives ‘critical ontology’ the ironic name ‘historical ontology’. Of all the branches of philosophical inquiry, ontology would appear to be the least historically inclined.
- 7 Foucault was already aware in *Discipline and Punish* of the ‘double bind’ of the Enlightenment. He tells us that the “development and generalization of disciplinary mechanisms constituted the other, dark side of the process [of modernity] ... The Enlightenment which discovered the liberties, also invented the disciplines” (1979: 222).
- 8 In his later works, Foucault is also concerned with the ethics of self-fashioning, and he expands on this theme in “What is Enlightenment” with the discussion of dandyism. However, the ethics of self-fashioning are aimed at *mature* agents and not children. Furthermore, in contrast to Kant’s insistence on autonomy in his 1784 essay, Foucault tells us that “the care for self implies also a relationship to the other to the extent that, in order to really care for self, one must listen to the teachings of a master. One needs a guide, a counsellor, a friend—someone who will tell you the truth. Thus, the problem of relationship with others is present all along this development of care for self” (1988a: 7).

- 9 Foucault tells us that critical ontology examines “in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent and the product of arbitrary constraints” (1984: 45).
- 10 James Tully tells us that “the modification in practice provides in turn a test against which the original conceptual tools are assessed and reformulated and put into practice again, thereby forming a ‘permanent critique’” (1999: 99).
- 11 Foucault claims that “in the relations of power, there is necessarily the possibility of resistance, for if there were no possibility of resistance . . . there would be no relations of power” (1988a: 12).
- 12 As such, the ethos of continual critique applies reflexively to Foucault’s own project as well.
- 13 See also Vrinda Dalmiya and Linda Alcoff’s discussion of midwives in relation to modern medical knowledge (1995).
- 14 As Paul Rabinow points out, critical ontology does not challenge whether or not a particular claim is true or false. If the discipline were a mature science, there would be well-established procedures by now to make that determination. Rather, it seeks to examine the conditions whereby certain statements were seen to be true or false, the concepts around which disciplines are organized (1984: 12).
- 15 On the science of the individual, see Foucault (1979: 191).
- 16 One Canadian pediatrician tells us that she uses “the growth charts with a grain of salt” (Owens, 2001).

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