Global justice and childhood: introduction

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ABSTRACT
This brief introduction frames a guest-edited collection of eleven contributed articles in the Journal of Global Ethics focused on global justice and childhood. On a general level, there is widespread consensus that there is a strong need for improvement in the lives of children around the globe. What global justice demands in this regard, however, has never been fleshed out in detail and there is only a little philosophical literature on this topic. Against this background, five aspects of the question of global justice for children need to be addressed. First, one has to take into account the debate between cosmopolitanism and particularism, as well as the debate as to whether and to what extent individual, collective or institutional actors should be prioritized. Secondly, a theory of global justice for children must explain how the content of global justice for children is founded and justified, and what it comprises. Third, different principles can be used to assess global justice for children. Only two prominent alternatives are mentioned here: egalitarianism and sufficiency. Fourthly, the temporal dimension of global justice is of particular importance for children. Fifthly, an approach focusing on the examination of injustices is equally necessary.

In view of the current global situation of children, it can hardly be disputed that the question of global justice for children is of urgent relevance. Children are threatened to a great extent by hunger and poverty, and die of avoidable diseases due to a lack of medical care and vaccinations, contaminated drinking water or environmental toxins. It must also be acknowledged that children face several disadvantages compared to adults and that nearly all indicators used to measure global injustice show that they are a particularly deprived group. Children show higher rates of poverty in developing countries, as well as in developed countries (Newhouse, Suarez-Becerra, and Evans 2016; Minujin and Nandy 2012; Chzhen et al. 2016). A large number of children are undernourished and malnourished, exploited by forced labour, sexual abuse and trafficking (Bang et al. 2014), or recruited as combatants in violent conflicts against their will. For example, UNICEF and the World Bank report (UNICEF and World Bank Group 2016) that 385 million children were living in extremely poor households in 2013, while the youngest children are the worst off – in the developing world over 20% of all children below the age of five live in extremely poor households, compared to nearly 15% of 15–17-year-olds. In another
report, UNICEF (UNICEF 2016) estimates that around 150 million children under the age of 14 are engaged in child labour, often in hazardous conditions, of which 5.5 million are engaged in forced labour. In addition to these injustices, which mainly affect children in developing countries, there are other important issues and questions concerning global justice for children: what about the political participation of children and their right to vote (Wiland 2018), are children protected from corporal punishment by their parents or teachers (Lenta 2012), are children allowed to take part in decisions in medical treatments (Alderson 2007) and are the wishes and opinions of children respected, or even heard at all (Archard and Skivenes 2009)? Questions of global justice for children therefore concern not only the greatest and most painful injustices in the lives of children, but also their status as social, moral and legal subjects in the various societies of the world. On a general level, there is widespread consensus that there is a strong need for improvements in the lives of children around the globe. What global justice demands in this regard, however, has never been fleshed out in detail and there is only a little philosophical literature on this topic. This is surprising, because questions of global justice (for adults) have been debated extensively in philosophy for some time now and there is also an increasing interest in philosophical questions surrounding children and childhood. Against this background, five aspects of the question of global justice for children need to be addressed, as follows.

**Agents of global justice for children**

First, one has to take into account the debate between cosmopolitanism and particularism, as well as the debate as to whether and to what extent individual, collective or institutional actors should be prioritized (O’Neill 2001). Both debates are not directly child specific, but are very much indirectly related to them. If particularism argues that social justice should take precedence, because the bond between members of society and in particular, citizens, can provide the foundation for justice, then actor-specific characteristics that seem less relevant to children than to adults are usually addressed. For example, children are (usually) not involved in a mutual exchange of services or labour via markets, they do not contribute (not much at least) to the preservation of the social systems and are largely excluded from the political shaping of their political environment and its social order. This does not mean that these considerations are irrelevant for children. Children in welfare states benefit from its facilities and they will later also develop the actor-specific qualities valued by particularism. Similarly, the debate about the respective actors and their rights and duties largely ignores children and relieves them of responsibility, as they have only limited access to the necessary qualities of autonomy, rationality and capacity to act. The roles individuals can have, which are relevant for global justice, such as donors, consumers, voters, politicians or entrepreneurs, are almost always roles that children can only have to a very limited extent. In such an actor-centred view of global justice, children usually only become visible as passive objects and in the roles of victims of injustice, who are perceived to be part of the respective society without being able to really shape or change it. Children are to be protected and helped, but it is widely held that they cannot protect and help themselves (Graf and Schweiger 2017). This view of children as passive objects and not active subjects can be criticized. On the one hand, the criticism is about the subject status of children and whether it is sufficiently recognized and respected if they are viewed as only unfinished,
passive and vulnerable (Archard and Macleod 2002). On the other hand, it must be clarified to what extent children themselves can become or already are actors of (social or global) justice (for themselves and others; take, for instance, the role of children in the social movement ‘Fridays for Future’). This applies in particular to their involvement in political processes and decision-making (Hill et al. 2004). Just as the actor status of victims of global injustice, such as the poor, has received more attention in recent years (Deveaux 2015), it would also be a theoretical challenge and a practical desideratum of global justice for children to no longer qualify them as powerless and helpless per se.

The understanding of children as passive objects rather than active subjects, as well as its criticism, relates back to the complex question of what is meant by the term ‘child’ and what constitutes childhood, which involves empirical, conceptual and normative questions. Obviously, as a group, children are heterogeneous and equipped with very different abilities and characteristics. Therefore, also with regard to the actor status of children in a conception of global justice, how we can justify a distinction between children and adults based on the various features and skills of children (which only partly correlate with their age) and what descriptive, explicative or normative value and function these distinctions have in a theory of global justice for children must be clarified.

**Foundations of global justice for children**

Secondly, a theory of global justice for children must explain how the content of global justice for children is founded and justified, and what it comprises. In doing so, children can be subsumed either under the theoretical framework of certain general theories of global justice, for example as bearers of human rights, as victims of unjust global structures, or as citizens. Moral obligations towards children at the global level would then not specifically differ from obligations towards adults. Or it is assumed that such a subsumption is not sufficient and that rather, three aspects have to be clarified, namely, whether the reasons for moral obligations towards children are different from those towards adults, whether the actors who have these obligations are different because they have obligations towards children and finally, whether the content of these obligations is different when they are applied to children. Hence, to give an example, global justice for children and adults could be rooted in the fact that both are bearers of human rights (that is, global justice demands equality between adults and children in this respect), but the actors who are responsible for the protection of these human rights differ between adults and children, or the content of human rights for children and adults is different and that the human rights of children are somewhat special (that is, global justice demands inequality between adults and children in this respect).

Approaches towards identifying relevant differences between adults and children in these three aspects can be reconstructed on the basis of normative terms and conceptions which refer to the moral, as well as the social and political status of children. Some of them are mentioned here: a particular difference in the justification and design of the human rights of adults and children (Archard 2004), which is also reflected politically and legally in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, indicates, for example, that global justice for adults and children has a distinctly different content and that other actors are accordingly assigned a different set of responsibilities or duties. In this context, for children, the focus is on the best interests of the child, while for adults, autonomy is more
important. The child rights focus on the welfare of the child can also be interpreted in such a way that global justice for children assumes strongly paternalistic traits that are explicitly rejected for adults. In the area of children’s rights, the family acts as a central place and actor in the fulfilment of the best interests of the child, which in turn is endowed with strong rights. These aspects are also lacking at the general human rights level (for adults). The fact that this difference is actually thought of as one between children and adults becomes obvious when one, in comparison, takes a look at the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which by no means refers to a concept of well-being (‘best interest’), but rather strengthens the concepts of autonomy and empowerment (for adults).

Autonomy and the rationality often associated with it are also two central points of reference outside a human rights or child rights framework that highlight the differences between children and adults that are relevant for a conception of global, as well as social justice for children. In many normative theories, the autonomy and rationality of adults is assumed to be an important intrinsically or instrumentally valuable good to be protected and respected, which must be taken into account both in the establishment and design of global justice. For children, in contrast, it is usually only seen as an aim to be achieved. This can also mean that children should not primarily be considered as children, that is, as agents with specific interests and rights in the here and now, but as future adults. Although no one will deny that this is an important perspective, it can be asked whether it should be the only one or the priority. Thus, it is disputed whether the current well-being of the child or the future well-being of children as adults should be at the forefront on a global level and how conflicts of interest between these two aspects should be assessed (Bagattini and Macleod 2014). In the background are often considerations about the normative value of childhood in general (Gheaus 2015).

Another example of a possible difference between global justice for children and adults could be derived from the particular vulnerability of children (Schweiger and Graf 2015; Mullin 2014; Macleod 2015). The vulnerability of children can be interpreted in three ways: that children are more vulnerable than adults and therefore need greater protection, that children are vulnerable in other respects than adults and therefore other protective measures must be taken, and that children should have moral priority over adults, i.e. children should be protected more than adults. All three interpretations can be interpreted as the core of global justice for children, with specific consequences for the shaping of the global order and the determination of obligations on the actors’ side.

**Principles of global justice for children: sufficiency and equality**

Third, different principles can be used to assess global justice for children. Only two prominent alternatives are mentioned here: egalitarianism and sufficiency (Schweiger and Graf 2015). Is it the goal of global justice for children that everyone is equally well off or that all have the same goods? Or is it sufficient if all children have enough goods to lead a good life, regardless of whether other children have more? In the debate about the justified claims of children at the social level and even more at the global level, sufficiency-oriented principles play an important role (Dixon and Nussbaum 2012). An important reason in favour of a sufficienarian approach to global justice for children is that children are different in terms of their talents, potential, weaknesses and
developmental risks. Access that advocates the equal distribution of the corresponding goods of justice risks failing to do justice to this complexity and overlooks the fact that it often fails to meet the individual needs of the child. An appropriate distribution, defined as the provision of sufficient goods to each child, seems to better contend with the challenge addressed. The aim to ensure that, for example, all children in the world are equally healthy, equally educated or equally cared for must necessarily fail because of the different conditions children bring with them. In addition, there are major differences in institutional, economic and also cultural and social conditions of childhoods at the global level. Moreover, due to this diversity, an equal distribution of the goods of justice does not seem to be desirable, even if one does not wish to adhere to cultural relativism. Particularly with regard to aspects of the welfare of the child that are associated with love, affection and attention, greater difficulties of an equal distribution are to be expected than with economic goods, since the former cannot be compensated by state institutions, or only with considerable difficulties. A threshold value, for example, says nothing about inequalities above and below the defined threshold and so profoundly unequal societies could have to be regarded as equitable if everyone is doing well enough, which is seen as particularly counterintuitive in the case of children (Macleod 2007).

Temporality and global justice for children

Fourthly, the temporal dimension of global justice is of particular importance for children. This concerns, among others, the following issues and questions: first, the question of the definition of children as a group, which involves other questions beyond the appropriate demarcation between children and adults (Franklin-Hall 2013). Is global justice related only to already existing children, only to those who are already born or only to those who are still children? In view of the great suffering that awaits children in poverty, war and hunger, it could be argued that justice would be better served for them if they would not be born in the first place, even if this conflicts with parental reproductive rights. The moral status of unborn children is controversial in principle and thus, so too are the questions of what claims of global justice these unborn children (might) enjoy and how these claims are to be weighed against the rights of the mother. From the perspective of global justice, certain aspects of the institutional arrangement are of relevance here: for example, prenatal health care, the influence of external conditions such as poverty, hunger, polluted drinking water, environmental toxins or even war and overwork on the unborn child (mediated by the mother) or an increased risk of being aborted on the basis of cultural norms (for example the undervaluation of girls and women).

The second issue is that nearly all children will become adults, but many of them have suffered during their childhood from injustices, some of which continue into their adult lives. Hence, there are questions about the demands of compensation and the demands of transferring claims that a person had as a child to the adult that the child became. Are there any claims to compensation for adults who are no longer poor but who suffered from global poverty as children? Who could be responsible for these claims?

This issue is, thirdly, closely related to the question of the relationship between global justice for children and intergenerational justice and historical justice. Intergenerational justice usually describes the relationship between generations within a society and is directed towards the coming generation (Tremmel 2009; Gossseries and Meyer 2009).
What are the current obligations of living persons towards those who are not yet living? The impact of climate change, environmental degradation and the exploitation of natural resources on the living conditions of future generations (of children and adults) is certainly enormous and great efforts will be needed to avoid future suffering. For children, it is certainly of importance that they are largely excluded from political decision-making processes that will affect them and their future families to a greater extent than the decision-makers who decide on these issues now. People who do not yet exist cannot be actively politically involved, however, children, even younger ones, certainly can be so.

In contrast to this focus on the future in debates about intergenerational justice, debates about historical justice are mostly concerned with the past and past injustices against previous generations. The above-mentioned questions of the compensation of injustices within a life course also have an undoubtedly historical dimension, but they are not in the focus of a theory of historical justice. In view of the living conditions and opportunities of millions of children in developing countries compared to their peers in rich countries and in view of the fact that these inequalities can be traced back to a not inconsiderable, but controversial share of past injustice (such as colonialism, exploitation, oppression, war and the financing and military support of dictators and the undermining of democratic movements), the dimension of possible claims arising from historical justice becomes visible. However, intergenerational and historical justice are interrelated, since the compensation of historical injustice is directed not only at already living (and deceased) persons, but also at future ones.

Fourth, the relevant temporal reference point of global justice for children must be clarified. Is global justice for children established when at a certain point in time, or at any point in time, their claims to justice are satisfied, or only when these are to be regarded as satisfied over the entire duration of their childhood (or their entire life)? The first case could be interpreted as equal opportunity with a starting gate. All children should be given the same opportunities at a certain point in time (for example, the same educational opportunities), differences that then arise from what they make of these opportunities (which educational and career path they choose) are not unfair. In addition, there is the birth lottery, i.e. the fact that nobody can choose who their parents are and whether they live in a rich or poor country (although the inequalities within rich and poor countries are also very large). The second case would be extremely demanding, since a comparison of all children would have to be used at all times as a yardstick for global justice. Thus, continuous interventions would be necessary, especially if an egalitarian understanding of global justice were to be applied, i.e. all goods relevant to justice must be distributed equally among all children at all times. The latter case again might permit inequalities at certain points in life, as long as these are balanced out again over the longer period of time defined as relevant. If, for example, the entire childhood is taken as the period over which justice is to be established, then it is not a justice problem if, over a certain period of time, one child is worse off than another, provided that the latter has and is allowed to experience a sufficiently good childhood overall, or a childhood of equal quality.

**Childhood and global injustices**

So far we have said quite a bit about how to draft a theory of global justice for children, but an approach focusing on the examination of injustices is equally necessary. A theory of
global justice for children should be able to determine what all children, wherever they are, are entitled to as a matter of justice, which implies determining what kinds of goods they are entitled to and to what extent they are entitled to them. We can call this the positive approach to global justice. Furthermore, a concept of global justice should also be able to determine what constitutes global injustice for children. Here, adapting a suggestion of Gillian Brock (Brock 2017), we propose that global injustice is an injustice that affects a large number of children in different countries and that its solution demands the coordination or cooperation of many different states (directly or through established global institutions). We can call this the negative approach to global justice, because it takes global injustice as the starting point of philosophical reflection. The positive and the negative do not fully overlap. For example, some social injustices (such as relative poverty in a rich country) are not global injustices (because they only affect children in one country and do not demand cooperation between countries, but only redistribution within this one country), but they might be covered by the positive approach to global justice (because it could also demand that no child should be poor compared to relative standards of poverty). The attempt to conceive a theory of global justice for children that truly encompasses all children on this planet is again faced with the serious difficulty of how to deal with differences between cultures, societies or states. After all, global injustices are always local and specific. To make matters worse, the material possibilities for intervention in the societies and states of this world differ drastically and this in turn influences what can reasonably be assumed in terms of responsibility. When considering particular injustices – such as hunger or corporal punishment – two dimensions must therefore always be taken into account. This first concern is to understand these concrete problems children have in a particular context or country and their causes on the basis of theoretical and empirical findings. Only then can we ask how it can be alleviated and justice established. This second concern is then to clarify what tasks and responsibilities global actors and actors in other countries should assume. This tension between the local and global levels in turn again relates to the debate about cosmopolitanism and particularism (see above).

To conclude: The theme of global justice and childhood covers an immense variety of theoretical and practical problems and challenges. The contributors to this special issue take up these challenges in arguments of ideal theory (in Rawls’ sense) and in a non-ideal contexts in which context-specific questions of global justice for children arise.

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