

The Ethical Voice of the Child

Plea for a chiastic responsibility in the footsteps of Levinas

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Today, one of the most common approaches from which we give children ‘a voice’ is through the concept of the child as an ‘active agent’: “a subject that is capable of constituting itself, and through acts and derivative actions produces effects on others”(Knapp). It is no longer fitting to treat the child as a passive ‘object’ of development and education. The child has become its own autonomous actor and inter-actor, and this both in terms of its own growth as well as with respect to its relationship to family, education and community. The child has indeed found its voice. This is clear from the way in which western society uses the discourse on the ‘rights of the child’ as linked to emancipation. Here, unthinkingly but also by argumentation, the child becomes both subject and claimer of these rights. In our contribution we wish to critically question, as well as broaden, the conceptualisation of the discourse surrounding the child as ‘independent and free actor’. Or, rather, we wish to enrich this discourse by grounding the ‘voice of the child’ in the relational-ethical. It is our conviction that the child can only become a humane ‘active agent’ if the relationships that precede its active speaking and acting are taken seriously. To root this relational-ethical perspective of the child we receive inspiration from the notion of responsibility, as seen by Emmanuel Levinas.

Before we do so, however, we must first prepare the way for our perspective by critically evaluating the underlying concept that sustains the idea of the child as active agent. After that we consider the pre-original context of conception that adds its own flavour to the voice of the child. It is this that forms the framework for the phenomenology of the alterity of the child in which its essential mastery can shine. This mastery will then be connected to the vulnerability of the child and thus indicate the basic ethical asymmetry of the heteronymous responsibility of parents and educationalists for the child. This responsibility starts from the commandment: ‘Thou shalt not kill’. Finally, this idea of responsibility will be related to the child itself, leading to the concept of a chiastic responsibility. The child is, after all, not only responsible for itself but also for the others, in the singular and plural, interpersonally and socially. This chiastic turn of the Levinasian concept of responsibility is necessary for a balanced approach to all education, whether in the family, at school and in the whole of society. Only in this way can the voice of the child be ‘woken up’ into a multi-voiced responsibility!