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## Hope, Contentment, and Shame: The Formulation of Agency in Children

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### Abstract

In this paper, I examine how agency develops in children and I evaluate where parents and guardians are responsible for facilitating this development. I explain how parental scaffolding allows children to be supported by their parents to learn to hope, both as it is relevant to their growth and development, and as they begin to acquire particular skills relevant to their agency. Through what I call collaborative agency, I express the importance of parental facilitation and nurturing of the moral agency of their child so that they may better develop complete agency by adulthood. I explain the roles that hope, shame, contentment and community support play in an agent's development, and why it is essential to learn these skills through childhood so they may be mastered in adulthood.

As children learn and develop, they must be given the proper support and guidance to grow into full-fledged moral agents. Instilling the proper values, skills, and expectations of how to function in the world is integral to the healthy development of a child, and getting them started early makes these tools more easily accessible in their adolescence and adulthood. With improper introduction to skills like tolerating dissatisfaction, mitigating shame, and exercising good hope (McGeer, 2004), children will be disadvantaged as they enter adulthood and have to recontextualize the information they may have received in their upbringing, likely having to work harder if they are to develop these skills later. I contend that for children to organically develop into healthy, well-adjusted adults, they must receive proper parental scaffolding (McGeer, 106) and supportive influence from their guardian(s). More specifically, the guardian(s) of children are thus responsible for instilling an understanding in their child of the following: Beginning the practice of hoping well as defined by Victoria McGeer in *The Art of Good Hope*; Learning contentedness with things beyond our control and tolerating dissatisfaction or the limitations of one's agency as per Cheshire Calhoun's *On Being Content with Imperfection*, and understanding and developing a healthy relationship with shame where it is appropriate, also defined by Calhoun in *An Apology for Moral Shame*. I also intend to support this argument with references to *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* by R. Jay Wallace, P.F. Strawson's *Freedom and Resentment*, and *Holding and Letting Go* by Hilde Lindemann. As I will argue in this essay, development into a productive and effective moral agent in adulthood begins with agency formulation in childhood encouraged by parents and guardians.

In chapter 3 of *Holding and Letting Go*, Hilde Lindemann establishes the important role that parents play in their children's development of personality, skills, and learning. On page 72, Lindemann describes the ways infants and toddlers learn from their parents' modeled behavior; imitation of gestures and emotions starts as early as one month old, and at one year old children

exhibit imitation of desires; “if they see you unsuccessfully try to pull a tube apart, they try to do it, too (Gopnik 2009, 205).” (Lindemann, 72). This indicates to us how guardians’ actions, emotions, and expressions are all subject to scrutiny and internalization by their children. This notion challenges guardians to be mindful of their own actions as moral agents, and recognize the impact the behavior they model has on their children and their learning. It is no surprise that children will learn the behavior they see their caretakers and family exhibit, but this is exactly where the responsibility lies for parents to establish the right moral education for their children. Lindemann states, “[decent] upbringing is crucial, for we are not naturally virtuous,” (Lindemann, 66) illustrating the vital education that parents can provide in a child’s upbringing, or conversely suggesting how it can go wrong. If a parent is inconsistent with responses to their child’s behavior, or if they consistently model behavior that is contrary to the values they try to instill in their children, the message won’t be received. Worse, if the parent makes no attempt to instill good values in their children, or is ambivalent about what they teach their kids through modeled behavior, the child will receive the wrong message—moral behavior and virtue isn’t important because my parent doesn’t seem to think it’s important. This is to be avoided, because rejection of moral education or a lack altogether of moral education will make it harder for a child to learn these virtues independently, much more so in adulthood by way of unlearning old habits, ideals, and beliefs and reconstructing new views and practices.

Let’s continue with the discussion of the example Lindemann sets through McGeer’s essay on hope. I assert that developing the skill of hoping well is integral to the development of children, especially insofar as their agency develops. Lindemann notes the phenomenon of language games in her discussion of social kinds and conferral of identity. In conferred identity and recognition of distinct social kinds, there are rules to be learned and understood, but these rules aren’t codified, rather they “work the way they do against the background of common assumptions and shared understandings that form our way of life. In following them, we participate in the practice of conferral that creates the social facts about who is a member of what kind.” (Lindemann, 80). This social learning and participation in language games is built upon the steps parents make to encourage and establish the acquisition of new skills, similar to what McGeer references as “parental scaffolding.” (McGeer, 106).

Parental scaffolding functions as a structure parents provide for children to lean on as they acquire new skills and advance developmentally, established by the parents working collaboratively with their child almost as agents *for* the not-yet complete agency of their young child. I will refer to this as collaborative agency. An infant isn’t aware of the actions they take being approximations of a skill, so the parent elicits particular responses from them (such as encouraging the imitation of the sound “muh” as an approximation of the word “mama”) and ascribe meaning to the responses the infant gives in order to further build that set of responses into a skill, complicating the imitation games to develop the child’s agential capacity (ibid., 106). This collaborative effort in hope happens both on the part of the parents as well as the child. The parent hopes for the child to advance their skills as they develop, and the child learns to hope and

persevere in order to progress, even if they are too young to recognize that what they are doing is called “hoping,” or too young to call anything something yet. This is what I have referred to as collaborative agency on the part of the parents as agents *for* their child’s formulating agency, and it is in my opinion essential in learning to practice McGeer’s conception of good hope as the child develops.

What happens if a child doesn’t receive proper parental scaffolding? If this collaborative agency isn’t established, then firstly, the child may be underdeveloped as an agent until later, perhaps even after adolescence. This is a disadvantageous position to be in. Because we can begin formulating agency in children so young, children that formulate their agency earlier rather than later can begin to have a more positive impact on their environment and social groups, be better fulfilled in their goals and relationships, and feel more empowered. If a child’s agency isn’t facilitated by their caregivers, they are left feeling less empowered and more subject to discontentment, shame, or poorer engagement with their peers and environment. Specifically in regards to shame, Cheshire Calhoun’s *An Apology for Moral Shame* indicates where it’s appropriate to feel moral shame, and when it’s inappropriate or undue. On page 130, Calhoun discusses shame in the context of children whose agency is not yet developed, explaining that early experiences of shame usually center around parental demands and prohibitions, and later societal prohibitions or requirements. As an agent matures, ideally, they will begin to distinguish their values and priorities from those of general society, and thus can move away from feeling shame from societal pressure where it doesn’t represent their ideals in order to arrive at their own moral standards and judgements (ibid., 130). However, it could conceivably take longer for an agent to reach this point, if they ever can. Calhoun describes moral maturity as, “... when agents learn to spurn public opinion and think for themselves,” (ibid., 130) and contrastingly, “the immature are shamed simply by others’ critical gaze.” (ibid., 130). If an individual isn’t provided the proper scaffolding for hoping well, then we could reasonably assume that they may not hope in a functional way, or may even be bad hoppers, which I’ll later define in more detail. Furthermore, if they cannot effectively or functionally hope, it’s plausible that they may often fail to achieve their hoped-for ends, and this could plausibly lead to feelings of perceived judgment from one’s peers, thus leading to despair or shame. Shame from the critical gaze of others, as just defined by Calhoun, is a symbol of moral immaturity, and we could attribute this immaturity to poor parental scaffolding of one’s hopes and goals, leaving them underdeveloped as a moral agent.

The second issue of concern in the case that a child doesn’t receive proper parental scaffolding is in regards to the development of the child’s ability to hope well; with proper parental scaffolding, the child is more apt to accept “peer scaffolding,” as defined by McGeer, “peer scaffolding is a particular mode of engagement in which individuals are supported in their capacity to hope, not primarily by way of material aid but rather by way of psychological aid.” (McGeer, 118). This speaks to the receptivity of another agent to be able to be encouraged or uplifted in their hopes by their peers, even in the face of disappointment. This is an important

tool when we no longer receive parental scaffolding after childhood, and emphasizes the crucial role of communal support in hoping well; but those who haven't received proper parental scaffolding may be subject to experiences of "bad hoping," (which I will address later), or may not even be receptive to peer scaffolding in a meaningful way at all. If they indulge in bad hoping, they may not be able to be consoled or supported by peer scaffolding and will instead despair or feel helpless when they cannot achieve the goals they set.

In addressing hope and goals, it feels appropriate to note Cheshire Calhoun's concept of the expectation frame. Calhoun describes expectation frames as a view that determines what is "good enough" to accept (Calhoun, 334). Setting an expectation frame establishes what we can be content with, or what we can be discontent with. They allow us to formulate judgments of what could have been better or could have been worse about our circumstances. Similarly, Strawson's reactive attitudes track our responses to behavior, based on normative expectations of the connections and relationships we have with people. Reactive attitudes place an emphasis on the intentions we attach to our actions (Strawson, 191,192). The attitudes we hold, both in our own action and in response to others' actions, can be built upon standard expectations of "good enough" behavior. There is an interplay between these two concepts, and twofold responsibility on the parents' part: to begin construction of reasonable expectation frames for their child to operate within, and to help establish the proper reactive attitudes their child should adopt in life. In order to set and maintain goals, and ideally to practice hoping well, normative expectations should be set by guardians. Through parental support, a child can better understand what they should expect from life, and how to properly react to their peers and authority figures. Parents are the first to establish our expectations about the world, even if by indirectly or unintentionally modeling behavior, so the onus is on them to initiate a realistic approach to what a child expects to receive, how to engage, and what to hope for.

This is helpful to keep in mind when we consider the formulation of goals and what we hope for. McGeer addresses forms of bad hoping, and gives two profiles as examples: the wishful hoper and the willful hoper (McGeer, 113). The wishful hoper often has lofty expectations and unrealistic hoped-for ends, but takes no action to bring about their desired outcomes. The wishful hoper might hope that they'll become a famous rock star, but doesn't know how to read music, has never played an instrument in their life, and has a particularly bad singing voice. They never practice the skills that could lead them to one day achieving their goal of being the next Jimi Hendrix. Rather, they fail to realize their agency in their situation and neglect their agential responsibilities in achieving their hoped-for ends. Their desire clouds their ability to perform as an agent in their pursuit to achieve the outcome, and they rely on external intervention to bring about what they want (ibid., 113). As McGeer states, this could be a result of parents who do not provide appropriate parental scaffolding, and may instead indulge their children (ibid., 113), or satiate their every desire through direct intervention rather than leaving space for their child to learn to problem solve or struggle on their own for new skill acquisition—McGeer calls this "self-scaffolding" (ibid., 113). If they are never expected to exercise their

agency independently to bring about fulfillment of a goal, they will never achieve agential independence or competence, depending on the action of other agents or miraculous happenstance for what they desire to fall into their lap. The willful hoper, on the other hand, can successfully take action to meet their hoped-for outcome, but is in McGeer's words, "unreflective and sometimes unscrupulous" (ibid., 116) about how the actions they take affect others, blinded by their will to achieve their goal above all else and at any cost. They may use people or treat them without much consideration, as means to achieve the ends they are so focused on. The willful hoper could look like a person who desperately wants to own a yacht. They work constantly, neglecting their relationships with family and friends in the hopes of saving enough money for this stupid boat. Rather than spend their hard-earned money on supporting their family—paying for bills, groceries, or rent, setting aside money for their child's college tuition, or helping their ailing mother with expensive medical bills—they invest all their, time, money, and energy into achieving this end goal with no consideration for how they could be harming others they claim to care about. McGeer speculates that this could be a result of neglectful parental scaffolding, or otherwise cases where successful agential achievement is reinforced and rewarded by parents, but the child is offered no support when they are unsuccessful in their endeavors (ibid., 116). As a result of this, they may expect that they are only valuable, both as an agent and in a broader sense as a person, when they achieve that which they set out to do. This could consequently either lead them to conceive of themselves as an agent contingent upon whether or not they succeed in their endeavors, or make them highly insecure, crumpling in despair if they are not able to achieve their hoped-for ends (ibid., 116). Here I emphasize yet another reason proper parental scaffolding is critical, not only to the moral development of a child but also to their psychological well-being and their ability to autonomously act as a proper agent in themselves. As we see in McGeer's cases of bad hope, poor scaffolding on the guardians' part can result in warped perceptions of the self and can immensely inhibit the agency of a child, affecting them to their detriment in adulthood. Good hope can be taught through parental scaffolding, later peer scaffolding and self-scaffolding, and is a collaborative effort that requires agents to exercise a reasonable expectation frame and accept support from other agents to persevere in pursuit of their hopes, even in the face of failure or discontent.

Parental scaffolding acts as collaborative agency, a structure designed by parents and guardians to develop and train agency in their children where it may not yet exist. This begins as early as infancy, and is crucial in the healthy development of not only agency in children, but more broadly their personhood and wellness. I've illustrated where parental scaffolding can fail, and the results of receiving poor scaffolding or receiving no scaffolding at all. I've described the ways in which agency can be inhibited by poor development of good hope. As well as this, I've indicated the imperative care required in a child's upbringing to establish skills like constructing expectation frames, recognizing when to feel unashamed, recognizing when conditions are "good enough", and collaborating in hope by accepting peer scaffolding and development of self-scaffolding. The proper formulation of agency in children is dependent on the efforts of their

parents in supporting them and challenging them to build the skills necessary for resiliency, capability, and confidence in the world. Without the proper care and intention, agency can be malformed or ineffective. Finally, I again emphasize that support and cooperation is essential to a good upbringing, and that the efforts of parents to instill virtue in their children will be rewarded by the capability and fulfillment those children will demonstrate as they grow into proper moral agents.

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