

# Consequentialism and the Responsibility of Children: A Forward-Looking Distinction between the Responsibility of Children and Adults

Daphne Brandenburg\*

## ABSTRACT

In this paper I provide a forward-looking account of the difference between the responsibility of children and the responsibility of adults. I do so by means of criticizing agency-cultivation accounts of responsibility. According to these accounts, the justification for holding a person to a norm is the cultivation of their moral agency, and children are, just like adults, considered responsible to the extent that they can have their moral agency cultivated in this manner. Like many forward-looking accounts, these accounts claim that the purpose of holding adults to norms is similar to the purpose of holding children to norms. I argue that the justifications for holding adults to norms are different because of the particular ways in which adults can be in moral disagreement with one another, and the consequences that this has. Moral disagreement is relevant to consequentialist accounts because it impacts on whether and how we can secure beneficial outcomes via holding someone to a norm. One of the upshots of this analysis is that the forward-looking justification for holding adults to norms is qualitatively different from how and why we should hold children to norms.

## INTRODUCTION

Forward-looking accounts of responsibility locate the justification for holding persons to norms in some good outcome of this practice where this good outcome typically exists in some type of positive influence on the future behavior of the person who is held to a norm. Mere behavioral adaptation is the most basic justification one could give for holding persons to norms on such an account (Arneson 2003; Smart 1961). But there are a number of objections to using this criterion for the justification of our responsibility practices. Among them is the objection that infants and animals would have to be considered responsible because their behavior can be positively influenced by holding them to norms. So, this account fails to distinguish between (what are considered to be) responsible and nonresponsible agents and fails to provide a distinctive normative picture of how and why we should hold people

\*University of Groningen

responsible over and above other responses that are conducive of getting people to comply with norms.<sup>1</sup>

More recent accounts avoid this objection by providing a different criterion for justification: the cultivation of a person's responsiveness to moral considerations. In this paper I will discuss the responsibility of children in the light of the theories of agency cultivation that are proposed by Victoria McGeer and Anneli Jefferson (Jefferson 2019; McGeer 2014, 2018). These accounts render responsible anyone whose moral agency can be cultivated by being held to norms, and this cultivation of moral agency in the addressee is also what *justifies* holding persons to norms. In the next section I briefly discuss the responsibility of children in general and on agency-cultivation accounts specifically. In the third and fourth section I provide an objection to their accounts that in turn will provide the basis for a forward-looking explanation of the difference between the responsibility of children and adults. While I specifically engage with McGeer's and Jefferson's agency-cultivation theories, I take it that my conclusions could be of interest to other forward-looking accounts, such as Vargas's two-tier agency-cultivation account (Vargas 2013).

### THE RESPONSIBILITY OF CHILDREN

Children are typically *not yet* considered morally responsible for what they do, and although it is commonly accepted that holding a child to norms can help them to develop the capacities that are required for responsible agency, this is not to say that they *are* already responsible. Hence, when we help them to develop in such a manner, we do not (or at least should not) *genuinely* hold the child responsible. The genuine practice of holding responsible is reserved for young adults and grownups who have the requisite capacities for understanding and living up to moral norms. It is generally thought that only these individuals can be genuinely responsible for the harm they do when transgressing a moral norm.

This standard view has recently come under scrutiny. In my paper "The Nurturing Stance," I argued that there is often something genuine about the ways in which we hold young children to norms and that, before they become fully responsible for the harm they do, a child can already be held to norms in ways that genuinely and communicatively engage the child in a process of moral development (Brandenburg 2017).<sup>2</sup> Rather than an objective stance, we often take a nurturing stance towards children; we consider them fit for being communicatively engaged in a process of moral reflection and learning. So I disagree with standard views and agree with agency-cultivation accounts, in so far as they claim that children can be responsible in *some* sense: they can be engaged in educative moral conversations via being held to norms (Brandenburg 2019).

That being said, I resist the conclusion that young children should be considered blameworthy for the moral mistakes they make and do not claim that they are *deserving* of blame, punishment, or some other imposition of burdens.<sup>3</sup> On my account when a (young) child is held to a norm via a communicative engagement about the importance of the norm, they are not held responsible *for* the harm or wrong they did but rather held to the expectation that they (continue to) engage in a process of moral learning that will enable them to (fully) understand and live up to these norms.

So, on my proposed reconsideration there are important qualitative differences between the responsibility of children and the responsibility of adults. These differences are (at least partly) grounded in their underdeveloped moral agency. On my account one should not hold children to norms because they already are fully responsible and potentially blameworthy for what they do; the justification for aptly holding them to norms is the possibility to communicatively engage them in a process of moral learning. And although one may do so in different ways, one typical characteristic is that holding a child to a norm involves providing the child with guidance and explanations. This is not how and why we typically hold adults responsible. In general adults, supposedly, are morally developed and do not need educative guidance and explanation because they can guide themselves and themselves think of and provide the relevant moral explanations.<sup>4</sup> An important additional difference, also highlighted by Schapiro, is that one typically does not relate to other adults in ways that demand or license that *you* are the person to take on the role of moral educator (Schapiro 1999). To conclude, holding children to norms is often educative and nurturing in character whereas with adults this is not typically what motivates why, nor what characterizes how, we hold them responsible.

Another recent reconsideration of our responsibility practices with regard to children has been proposed by Svirsky. She argues that a child may in fact be responsible to a parent before also becoming responsible to the moral community at large (Svirsky 2020). But the important qualifier here is that they are only responsible to caregivers or other persons that are in a position to hold them to norms. On her account children can count as responsible *within* a relationship; their responsibility is particular to and mediated by the relationship that they stand in. She does not specify what the (further) justification for holding children to norms is but it seems plausible that there remain some important differences between why we hold children to norms in comparison to why we hold adults to norms, especially because adults can also be responsible to the community at large, whereas a child is not. Furthermore, she writes, the manner of holding an immature person to a norm is “coloured by knowledge of their youth and the related challenges to their agency” (Svirsky 2020, 5).

In comparison to Svirsky’s and my own account, agency-cultivation accounts break with the standard view in a more radical manner. On those accounts the justification for holding children responsible and holding adults responsible is the same: the cultivation of the addressee’s moral agency. Furthermore, persons who can have their moral agency cultivated by being held responsible *are* responsible. Agency-cultivation accounts therefore also specifically diverge from my account in saying that children are responsible *for* the same things as adults are but only to a lesser degree. Children whose moral agency can be influenced *are*, just like adults, responsible persons. If there is any difference in their responsible agency, this is only a difference in degree and not in kind.

As a result the scope of responsible agents may turn out to be quite large indeed, and is likely to be too large for two reasons. First, although Jefferson and McGeer do assume that we can only really hold someone responsible if the person already has *some* moral agency, e.g., some capacity to detect and respond to moral considerations,

it is unclear as of which age a child has sufficient moral agency on their accounts. Very young children already engage in helping behaviors and will sometimes share or comfort others when no authority is present (Brownell 2013; Paulus 2020; Pritchard 1991). The psychological mechanisms that underlie these behaviors are hotly debated, but if these behaviors are an expression of moral agency these children may count as responsible on these accounts. And secondly, one may put further pressure on the proposed scope of responsible agents for another reason. The moral agency-cultivating effects of holding a child to a norm may be indirect. What starts out as prudential rule following may develop into moral rule following and certain ingrained habits and responses may become endorsed for moral reasons at a later age. When holding a child to a norm indirectly contributes to the development of moral agency via these routes one may wonder why this temporal delay in effectiveness would make any difference on these accounts, given that responsible agency is defined as the sensitivity to having one's moral agency cultivated by being held to norms. Pending the answers to these two questions, the scope of responsible agency may be very large indeed.

The differences in *how* we should hold children responsible that are central to Svirsky's and my own account might be accepted by an agency-cultivation account, in so far as these prove to be more effective ways of cultivating agency in children. Although there isn't any conclusive evidence on this, it is likely that we best succeed in cultivating moral agency in children by taking a nurturing stance. And additionally, their agency might develop best when they are primarily held responsible by caregivers or others who stand in particular relationships to them. Treating a child like an adult in this regard will be less conducive of their moral development.

But note that if this manner of holding responsible would *also* be the most effective way to cultivate moral agency in adults, then we should hold adults responsible in that way too. The upshot of the agency-cultivation account is that the justification for holding persons to norms is the cultivation of their moral agency and that the best *manner* of holding responsible is to be determined by what is conducive of such moral agency cultivation in the addressee.

Many existing blaming practices and manners of calling one another out, as for example seen in political polarization trends and online cancel culture, do not seem very conducive of the cultivation of moral responsiveness in the addressee. I therefore suspect cultivation accounts would prescribe significant changes in how we hold adults responsible. And, the differences between how we hold children to norms and how we hold adults to norms will be smaller as a result. Part of the advantages of our cultivating practices with regard to children are the unconditional inclusion and acceptance that come with it. We do not settle a score with children, and do not hold grudges against them, or at least not for a long time. Maybe these aspects should indeed be adopted in our responsibility practices more generally speaking if we are interested in their moral agency cultivating effects.

To summarize, on moral agency-cultivation accounts there is no difference in the *why* of holding immature and mature people to norms: the justification for doing so is the cultivation of their moral agency. And, when a person's moral agency can be cultivated by being held to norms they count as responsible agents. Why? Because

responsible agency is *defined* as sensitivity to cultivation via responsibility practices. This means children can qualify as responsible agents on their accounts, and they might do so at a very young age. On moral agency-cultivation accounts, the *manner* of holding responsible presumably is to be determined by what ensures effective cultivation. There may therefore be general differences in how we should hold children to norms in comparison to how we should hold adults to norms. But these differences are unlikely to be of the kind that they currently are in most of our life worlds. Not so much because we should treat children more like adults, but because we should treat adults more like children on these accounts.

A common objection to consequentialist accounts of responsibility is that they would render children responsible. But my issue with the consequentialist accounts described above centers on their proposed treatment of adults. I will argue that the justifications for holding adults responsible is more complex than the cultivation of moral agency and that the manner in which we (generally) hold adults responsible should, therefore, not solely be informed by this aim.

Agency-cultivation accounts are revisionary, so the mere observation that their proposal radically diverges from why and how adults *are* held to norms does not amount to an objection. Jefferson and McGeer may be correct in saying that we would all be better off if we strive to redefine and redesign our responsibility practices in such a way that holding one another responsible tends to cultivate the moral agency of those who are held responsible. I see the appeal and agree that a moral agency-cultivating outcome of responsibility practices is an *ideal* worth striving for. But I will argue that agency cultivation is not the only justificatory function of holding adults to norms. In the next section I provide a multifunctional justification. This justification will provide the basis for a forward-looking account of the difference between the adults and children.

### A PLURALISTIC JUSTIFICATION

A common objection to treating adults like children comes from deontology. We should not treat adults like children because this suggests that we do not recognize and respect their autonomy (Kant 2011 4:432; Schapiro 1999). But this particular worry about respect for autonomy does not move an agency-cultivation theorist in the same manner. According to them, moral norm transgressions provide evidence of some sort of defect in—or obstruction to—a person's moral autonomy. And the justifying purpose of holding adults to norms is the cultivation or maintenance of their autonomy, e.g., their ability to detect and respond to moral considerations. In this regard there is no qualitative difference from the purpose of holding children to norms; the aim is moral education.

However, holding adults responsible for the same reasons as children can also be construed as problematic from a more consequentialist perspective. In order to come to understand the consequentialist objection to agency-cultivation accounts I have in mind, it will be helpful to first attend to the nonideal circumstances under which people hold each other to norms. Imagining what it is like to hold an adult responsible in real-life circumstances brings three considerations into sharp relief. First, we typically do not know how a person will respond to being held to a norm. Second,

we may disagree with the other person about the importance of this norm and/or about how it should be applied. Third, we do not always have the opportunity or energy to resolve such moral disagreement.

These three considerations are easily lost in more idealized scenarios of responsibility exchanges. In a more utopian agency-cultivation scenario, someone who perceives that another person transgresses a moral norm is usually entirely correct about the relevance of this moral norm and the way in which it should be applied in this particular context. And, the person who is held to this expectation can and will (come to) see that they did wrong and this process of moral reflection is facilitated by them being held to the norm. This is then, ideally, how a person has their moral agency cultivated by being held to moral expectations. But in reality, such exchanges often proceed in a somewhat different manner. I will now consider such exchanges in the light of these three considerations.

First, the person who is holding someone to a norm does not know how the other person will respond to this. They might take it well, or they might not. They might agree or they might not. Arguably, resolving this uncertainty is part of the purpose of holding someone to a norm: one needs to figure out where the norm transgressor stands and how they will respond to you. Therefore, holding someone to a norm is often at least partly an epistemic endeavor. From the way a person responds to being held responsible, one will acquire a better idea of the person's evaluative outlook and their regard for you as a person. This information is important for securing an organization of future dealings and interactions that are more conducive to good outcomes for the self and others.<sup>5</sup>

In the light of these epistemic limitations, a forward-looking justification for holding a person to a norm lies in acquiring more information about the person in order to secure beneficial outcomes. And although moral agency cultivation of the addressee is a possible outcome, and might even be the *ideal* outcome, it is not the *only* possible good outcome. If a person deeply and robustly disagrees with you about the relevance of a moral norm and/or its particular application, this person may not have their agency cultivated by being held to the norm.

But the discovery or establishment of disagreement can result in another type of good outcome that exists in an improved reorganization of future interactions without thereby cultivating the moral agency of the addressee. In the sort of ideal scenario where one *already knows* how a person will respond to being held to account, one might easily overlook this second type of good outcome. For in this ideal scenario there seems to be no point to holding someone to a norm if the other person will disagree with you about the status and application of the norm. But, under nonideal circumstances the point is to discover or establish this deep disagreement and to then put that information to good use.

Benjamin Bagley has argued that the indeterminate outcome of a responsibility conversation is crucial for explaining why we (often) *blame* adults for transgressing moral norms over and above simply correcting them or communicating their fault to them in ways that do not involve resentment or hostility (Bagley 2017).<sup>6</sup> The fact that a person's evaluation of the norm transgression at stake may be different from our own (sound) deliberation, explains the hostile or harsh element of blame in a

way that is consistent with a forward-looking justification of blame. This harshness expresses a readiness to oppose this person when the person does not (come to) recognize and accept the moral considerations that we believe they have neglected (Bagley 2017, 854). This readiness to oppose furthermore helps to motivate the person to see things in the way that they *should*.

Bagley focuses on the proleptic aim of moral agency cultivation that is internal to blaming and does not reflect on the possible benefits of alternative outcomes when the addressee does not accept the blamer's evaluation of the transgression at stake. But the opposing outcome can be a good outcome too if the addressee fails to accept or admit that he was in the wrong. It is a good outcome when the knowledge of such disagreement is put to good use by, for example, avoiding the person and warning others who may be at risk about his problematic evaluative outlook.<sup>7</sup> I suspect this type of outcome is quite common and should therefore also be considered when it comes to analyzing the purposes of responsibility exchanges. Moral disagreement may provide us with a reason to avoid the person and doing so may be beneficial to all parties involved, even if it does not cultivate the moral agency of the person who was held responsible.

It is furthermore important to bear in mind that exclusion or avoidance is not the *only* way in which two grownups can deal with unresolved moral disagreement. Importantly, there are other possible beneficial reorganizations of future dealings and interactions that do not reduce to avoidance, exclusion, banishment, ostracism, or something of this kind. Maybe not in all, but certainly in some other scenarios where people disagree with one another, mutual avoidance is not the best possible outcome of a responsibility exchange. After all, moral disagreement can be relatively reasonable in character. Relatedly, we need not always hold people to norms via hostile types of blame when there is a possibility that a norm transgression is explained by such reasonable disagreement.

Imagine, for example, that your friend lied to you about, say, having dated your partner before you did. This may provide you with reason to ask your friend to account for this behavior and to hold him to the norm of truth-telling within a friendship. The ensuing responsibility conversation may go into different directions. Maybe your friend feels terrible and agrees that they should not have done so. They had not given enough thought to the subject matter but now see that they should not have lied about it. In this case both parties come to a moral agreement and at least part of the beneficial outcome of you having held your friend to the norm is the fostering of your friend's moral agency. You holding him to a norm has directed his attention towards important moral considerations that he will now become more responsive to. This is how the conversation would go in an ideal agency-cultivation scenario.

It is also possible that your friend, for example, lied to you because he wanted to be liked by you and now also pretends to agree with you because he wants to be liked by you. He may have the sort of outlook where his own interest in being liked by others trumps the importance of truth-telling or other moral norms. This may very well mean that you are better off avoiding this person as a friend, because he is likely to continue to hurt you and others around you. This would be akin to the sort

of exclusion outcome that Bagley has in mind. Note, however, that avoidance does not always have to be *global*, which would entail the avoidance of the person as such. It can also be *local*, which entails the avoidance of the person with regard to particular types of future dealings and interactions (but not all of them).<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, these two types of possible outcomes (cultivation and avoidance) are not exhaustive. Maybe your friend considered his past action to be a white lie and does not think he did something wrong. Maybe your friend sincerely thought that your blissful ignorance of him having dated your partner in the past rendered you better off. Or, alternatively, your friend may have suspected that you would get jealous and did not want to trigger this jealousy as it would be bad for all the parties involved. This type of disagreement about the status and the particular application of the norm for truth-telling, need not lead to the exclusion and avoidance of your friend. In this scenario some sort of compromise or other resolution seems feasible. Without changing your own values you may accept that your friend has a different outlook with regard to these norms and treat him accordingly. And, your friend may do the same for you if a similar situation were to arise. You may find a way to reorganize how you relate to one another when it comes to truth-telling, without exactly resolving the disagreement about what your friend should have done in the past. This last type of outcome may be quite common within pluralist liberal societies, where people who love and live with each other are unlikely to always see eye to eye about how to treat one another.

To summarize, the cultivation of moral agency need not be the sole aim of and justification for holding another adult to a norm within our lives. Instead, the overarching forward-looking purpose and justification of this practice is an improved (re)organization of future interactions and dealings with one another. How this should be done partly depends on how the persons who are held to norms evaluate the relevance and application of particular moral norms. An important initial function of holding a person to a norm is to establish or discover whether the two parties can come to a moral agreement. If they can, this exchange might lead to forgiveness, reconciliation, or some other resolution that also tends to cultivate the moral agency of the parties involved.

When both parties disagree, this information is also useful for an improved organization of future dealings and interactions. This organization may exist in attempting to avoid one another in a local or global sense, or it may exist in accommodating for the other person's distinct evaluative outlook. Whether these outcomes are beneficial depends on the relationship, context, and the moral norm at stake. What matters for my purposes here is that these types of outcomes *can* be beneficial outcomes; they can lead to an overall reduction of harm and increased wellbeing or some other form of improvement in the future. Hence, there are at least three types of possible beneficial outcomes of holding a person to a norm: cultivation, avoidance, and accommodation.

How and why should we hold another person to a norm on this account? We should do so in order to secure *one of* these beneficial outcomes and the manner in which we do so should be attuned to these different *possible* justificatory outcomes of holding someone to a norm. This more pluralistic justification for why and how we should hold a person to a norm is schematically represented in [figure 1](#).



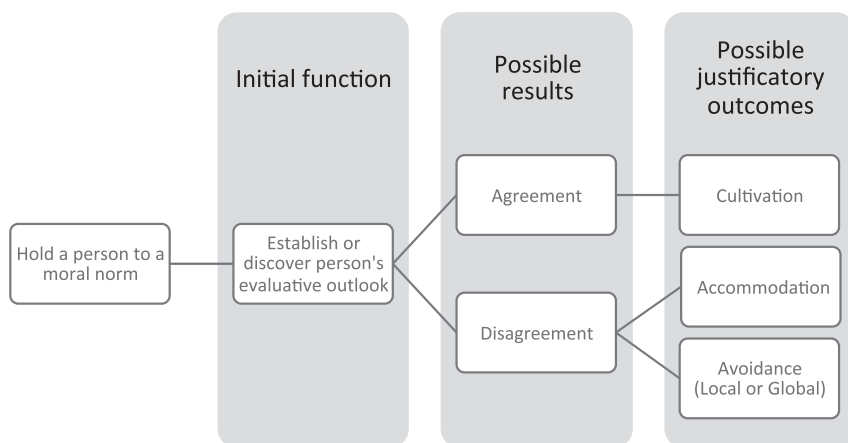


Figure 1. More pluralistic justification for holding a person to a norm.

There are, of course, a number of further nonideal considerations that complicate the functionality of this practice. In hierarchical relationships or in dependent relationships, a person may not always be in a position to hold someone to a norm, or even if they are, the option of exclusion or successful accommodation may not be available to them. Furthermore, it is not always easy to establish what a person's evaluative outlook is. First, because the addressed person themselves may not know what their own stance is with regard to the norm and its application. Second, because they may be inconsistent or changeable in this regard. Third, because they may deceive us (and themselves) about what their moral outlook is. A related difficulty is that disagreement may be about the state of the world rather than the status and relevance of a moral norm. All this serves to show that holding someone responsible for the right reasons and in the right manner is not easy! And sometimes holding someone to a norm may not—all things considered—be the best thing to do. This notwithstanding, when norm transgressions take place, holding the transgressor to a norm *can* provide one with a response that, one way or another, may allow one to make the world a better place than it would have been or become when this person was not held to a norm.

In the next section I will compare this alternative normative picture of why and how one should hold adults to moral norms with why and how one should hold children to norms. But before I do so I want to briefly raise and address a possible reply that is available to the agency-cultivation theorist. They might object that *all* these justificatory outcomes of holding someone to a norm tend to result in the cultivation of moral agency. Even when parties disagree, the disagreement may have made them both more attuned to moral considerations that could speak in favor of moral norms. It is harder to imagine how this would work in case of an avoidance outcome, but especially when two parties accommodate disagreement, this could be construed as resulting in an increased understanding and responsiveness to the interests of others. If all outcomes cultivate responsiveness to moral concerns, my proposed pluralistic justification does not conflict with their account. However, even if this were true, the

objection remains that moral agency accounts are underdescribed and miss out on important categories of good outcomes. In order to understand why and how we should hold adults to norms, it is important to attend to the real-life circumstances under which we do so and to distinguish between these different justificatory outcomes, even if all of them ultimately cultivate moral agency. This is important because, among other things, doing so allows us to understand why and how we should relate differently to children.

### HOW (NOT) TO TREAT SOMEONE AS A CHILD

In the last section I argued that the possibility of moral disagreement provides us with a pluralistic forward-looking justification for why and how we hold adults responsible. In this section I argue that this multifunctional account of holding adults to norms helps explain the difference between adults and children on forward-looking accounts of responsibility.

Contrary to (most) adults, we do not tend to treat children as parties with whom we can robustly disagree and who can bear the consequences of such disagreement. This is partly because they typically cannot yet have or formulate a robust moral outlook that can lead to genuine moral disagreement, and partly because of their special status as a child. I elaborate on both claims below.

Please note that I do not mean to claim that *all* children necessarily lack the capacity to robustly disagree or should *never* face the consequences of doing so. Nor do I mean to suggest that all adults are entirely capable of engaging in robust moral disagreement and capable of consequently reorganizing their future interactions. My claim here is more modest. Children should *in general* not be treated as parties with whom we can have the sort of robust moral disagreement that should inform a substantial reorganization of our future interactions and dealings with them.

Children, of course, do disagree with their caregivers in some sense of the word. A child as young as three can already disagree in a rudimentary (and very annoying) sense. But a very young child is not capable of robust and informed disagreement let alone able to understand and face the consequences of such disagreement. For example, if a child hits another child, she won't be able to disagree with your reproach *for* particular reasons that she will stand by in the light of the social consequences of this particular evaluative outlook. She will not be able to conceive of and face the consequences of taking a particular stance with regard to a prohibition on physical harm. Similarly, a child who refuses to share toys will not be able to explain and stand by this refusal and reorganize his future dealings and interactions with others on the basis of convictions about property and sharing. Indeed, when we hold children to norms in the light of moral transgressions, we, among other things, introduce or explain moral concepts, foster an understanding of moral norms, and instill or strengthen moral motivation.

The way in which we treat children is then different from adults in so far as we assume that their transgression is *primarily* explained by a lack of capacity and understanding. When we hold adults to norms, one should be (in general) open to the possibility that a transgression is explained by robust moral disagreement because this is both possible and relevant to how one may secure the good outcomes of a

responsibility exchange. This difference in justification will impact on the general manner of holding someone to a norm as well. With children the manner tends to be more explanatory and non-negotiable, e.g., paternalistic in character. We now see how there is a clear forward-looking justification for this difference in manner and we should not—even on a consequentialist account—treat adults like children.

Once a child develops the capacity to robustly disagree, the justification for holding the child to a norm may start to look more like why and how we should hold adults to norms. A caregiver will at some point discover, maybe the hard way, that a process of straightforward moral molding is coming to an end, and responsibility practices are becoming more complex in terms of manner and purpose.

Nevertheless, I take it that exclusion, and some forms of accommodation, remain unlikely responses despite the real possibility of disagreement. It is not considered desirable for a feisty teenager to have to bear the full repercussions of subscribing to and acting on a particular evaluative outlook in the way that adults do. An explanation and justification for this can be found in theories on the value of childhood (Ferracioli 2020; Gheaus 2015). What is, among other things, considered valuable about childhood is its carefreeness and focus on practice and play. Taking on different evaluative perspectives and trying out different arguments without relationship-altering repercussions may be considered part of this period of play. Therefore, even as children start to develop an increasingly elaborate evaluative outlook, we have good reason not to subject them to the full repercussions of disagreement, especially not to exclusion and avoidance, before they are older. With adults (and sometimes adolescents) these responses are harder to maintain, partly because we do not engage with them in contexts where such play and practice can be allowed, and partly because another adult may very well not let you relate to them like that, and partly because it may come at too great a cost to yourself.<sup>9</sup>

So, when we disagree with adults, the reorganization of our future interactions and dealings in the form of (global or local) avoidance or compromise may be the best way to secure good outcomes of a responsibility exchange. With children, disagreement often does not count as genuine moral disagreement and even when it does, the disagreement should have a different weight and status during childhood. For those reasons, the forward-looking justifications for holding adults to norms tend to be different from the main purposes of holding children to norms. These differences are also reflected in *how* we hold children responsible in comparison to adults.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I have provided a forward-looking explanation of the difference between the responsibility of children and the responsibility of adults. I first criticized agency-cultivation accounts. On those accounts there is no difference, or only a difference in degree between, the responsibility of adults and children. I objected that the justification for holding adults to norms differs from why and how one should hold children to norms. Adults may morally disagree in response to being held to a norm, and this response has bearing on what the best outcomes of a responsibility exchange will be. Therefore, the justification for holding adults to norms is partly

dependent on how the addressee will respond to being held to a norm, and this will impact on the manner of holding someone to a norm as well. One difference with children is that they cannot typically be in moral disagreement with an adult and/or grasp and face the consequences of such disagreement. Furthermore, they have a special status as a child and therefore disagreement does not always have the repercussions it has among adults. There is then a qualitative difference in justification and manner when comparing the responsibility of children with the responsibility of adults. The good outcome of holding children to norms is the cultivation of their moral agency whereas for adults the good outcomes of a responsibility exchange depend on whether the involved parties are in moral disagreement or not.

### NOTES

1. For a response to these objections see [Milam \(2021\)](#).
2. The same may sometimes be true for adults with regard to local norms when they, as of yet, lack the understanding of why and how to live up to these norms ([Brandenburg 2017](#)). But, generally the ways in which we hold adults to moral expectations is under the presumption they can—under reasonable circumstances—already grasp and meet these expectations.
3. See [Gillespie \(ms.\)](#) for a Strawsonian account of childhood punishment.
4. On Fricker's account of blame, blaming does have an explanatory function. But I wonder if she would want to include reproachful interactions with young children, because on her account one is only blameworthy when the person could reasonably be expected to have understood the moral significance of her behavior ([Fricker 2016](#)).
5. See also Mason's notion of detached blameworthiness ([Mason 2019](#)), and Wieland's helpful addition.
6. Which is more akin to the ways in which we hold children to norms.
7. Another possible good outcome is one in which the blamer needs to revisit her own convictions and the disagreement provides an occasion to do so.
8. If, for example, a person has no regard for punctuality you may refrain from making appointments with them but nevertheless interact with the person in other ways.
9. However, there may be other care-related contexts in which moral disagreement between adults has (or should have) a different status. Addressing these is beyond the scope of this essay.

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