

Article

Taking Children's Moral Lives Seriously: Creativity as Ethical Response Offline and Online

Kate Ott

Theological School, Drew University, Madison, NJ 07940, USA; kott@drew.edu

Received: 31 July 2019; Accepted: 9 September 2019; Published: 12 September 2019



Abstract: Core Christian ethics concepts are affected by assumptions related to the primary subject or moral agent and the social context in which moral encounters take place. This article asks: Are children full moral agents? If so, what can Christian ethics, which predominantly focuses on adult subjects, learn from a focus on children? A small group of Christian ethicists has asked this very question in conversation with psychologists, child development theorists, educators, theologians, and philosophers. Centering children requires attention to age and ability differences and inclusion of their voices. Children as ethical subjects focus attention on issues of particularity, a decentering of rational individualism, and debunking linear moral developmental assumptions. The research on children's moral lives points toward ethics as creativity in forms of play or improvisation. Given children's digitally saturated lives, their creative use of critical digital literacies also helps Christian ethics begin to map a response to the impact of digital technologies.

Keywords: children; childhood; ethics; play; improvisation; moral imagination; moral agency; digital literacies; digital technology

1. Introduction

The discipline of Christian ethics has imbedded assumptions about the primary subject or moral agent and the social context in which moral encounters take place. For example, are children full moral agents? Can children or infants make moral-decisions? If so, what can Christian ethics, which predominantly focuses on adult subjects, learn from a focus on children? A small group of Christian ethicists has asked this very question in conversation with psychologists, child development theorists, educators, theologians, and philosophers. Ethicists join a variety of scholars within religious studies fields, often in the fields of biblical studies or practical theology, who have made the methodological shift to centering children (Bunge 2001, 2012; Browning and Miller-McLemore 2009; Browning and Bunge 2011; Fewell 2003; Mercer 2005; Miller-McLemore 2019). The shift to centering children requires attention to authentic representation and inclusion of children. Many scholars use first hand child narratives or direct participant research to bring the voices of children into conversation with their research. They then ask, how does centering children affect Christian ethics concepts and assumptions? The response is a reimagining of moral agency away from historically dominant criteria like rational individualism and a debunking of linear moral development.

The research on children's moral lives points toward ethics as a creative response. Ethics as a creative response does not completely replace ethics as a system of norms, duties, or principles. Rather, moral imagination exhibited in practices of play or improvisation more closely align with children's (and adults) moral decision-making and the expansive growth of their moral selves interpersonally and communally. After addressing the shift in ethics that centers children and its effect on redefining ethics, I invite the reader to consider the radical social shift of the digital revolution. In a digital age, ethics as creative response matches well with the networked and co-produced nature of digital

technology. Given our digitally saturated world, children evidence creative ethical response through critical digital literacies.

This article contributes to the field of childist ethics in particular, and childism as an advocacy movement in academia, public policy, and education more broadly. Religious ethicist John Wall proposes “the concept of ‘childism’ in this particular sense: not as an ethical or social ideology, but as a methodology for social change, albeit one that should revise basic ethical norms in the process” (Wall 2012, pp. 136–37). Scholars who focus on childism often share a commitment to eliminate the oppression of children (Young-Bruehl 2011; Wells 2009). Thus, the childist ethics approach significantly raises the profile of one of the most vulnerable and diverse segments of our population (children) as well as attending to an experience and state-of-being that all of us share (childhood). The specific investigation of moral agency and children in this article suggest a number of new directions for Christian ethics. A centering of children’s moral lives opens Christian ethics to theological imagination and ethical response as a creative act. It affirms an on-going process of moral growth, rather than an age of reason or goal of moral completion. In addition, it may provide the necessary clues needed to live ethically in a rapidly changing digital society.

2. Christian Ethics and Children

The shift to children as the subject in Religious studies is a few decades old. In the field of Christian ethics, it is a relatively new phenomenon. That is not to say that past theologians and ethicists have not addressed the lives of children (Bunge 2001; Ridgely 2011). In fact, narratives about children and theological responses to and for children have been part of the Christian tradition since its earliest beginnings (Fewell 2003; Browning and Bunge 2011). Historically, theologians address children as objects or not-yet-adults rather than address them in their full humanity at whatever age they are. It is also rare for past theologians to represent children’s voices in their works. In this section, I outline the effect of centralizing children’s lives—capturing their voices, interpretation, activity, and participation—and the new insights this brings to moral agency, a central concept in ethics.

Western Christian formulations of agency view the moral actor as rational, independent, and experienced, while overwhelmingly discounting affective or emotional knowing, interdependence, and inexperience. Intentionality has played a significant role in the formulation of moral agency. That is to say, a moral agent should have a level of rationality measured by the ability to explain and analyze one’s decision, be independent and able to act autonomously, and have a level of experience to predict consequences. Women, people of color, the disabled, and the elderly have at different historical times been left out of this definition or been treated as less capable moral agents due to constructions of gender, race, and mental capacity.

If one must be experienced, independent, and rational to be a moral agent, then how would one describe children? Are they pre-moral or amoral given they do not have these capacities? John Wall argues that most historical theologies put children into three ethical categories (Wall 2010, chp. 1). The first is children as little devils, evil and corrupted by original sin in need of harsh obedience training. The second is children as innocent, in need of protection from the sinful world. The third view sees children as empty vessels in need of developmental training to shape these blank slates into morally good adults. Wall suggests that these absolutes are part of the problem. Instead we might think of children’s moral status as shaped by all three, considering children from as “diverse of ethical angles” as we do adults (Wall 2010, p. 32). He eschews the notion of a “magical time of adulthood in which moral capability is completed” (Wall 2012, p. 147). The proposed new understanding of moral agency values children as complete moral agents—as they are now—rather than waiting for what they will become. In addition, it engages the diversity and complexity of children’s moral lives rather than seeing them as completely evil, completely innocent, or amoral.

The Christian imagination related to children, or babies, and ethics often references back to Augustine’s confessions. In an infamous passage, Augustine describes his own remembrance of his infant cries and grasping for milk as evidence of original sin and self-centeredness (Augustine

2009, Book 1 chp. 7). Cristina Traina revises Augustine's reading of infantile behavior: "To begin with, crying for milk is an obvious expression of appropriate dependency that others must honor an expression that Augustine himself implies cannot be communicated to inattentive adults except through the language of tears. If this is the act of a dependent moral agent, it is an act of necessary and appropriate self-preservation" (Traina 2009, pp. 31–32). Augustine leans on the first model of children and ethics that Wall names—the infant as corrupt and sinful. In response, Traina balances the ways in which children (even infants) react out of diverse moral sensibilities within dependent relationships (Traina 2011).

Current research in cognitive sciences and childhood studies with infants as young as three months old has shown that babies express a moral sense or "capacity to make certain types of judgements" (Wynn and Bloom 2013, pp. 437–38). A variety of scholars, referenced in and collaborators of Karen Wynn and Paul Bloom have demonstrated that babies "have prosocial tendencies that influence their social actions and interactions; in some circumstances at least, they care about others, and this motivates certain positive actions" (Wynn and Bloom 2013, p. 437). Babies not only communicate about their own desires making claims on those who care for them as Traina points out. They can interpret social meanings of actions and how actions influence others (Wynn and Bloom 2013, p. 447), including in some cases the difference between intention and outcome. Wynn and Bloom conclude, that "infants' and toddlers' social judgements and responses bear a strong resemblance to those of adults" (Wynn and Bloom 2013, p. 450). Given this research, Traina's revision of infant Augustine's cry as evil to a moral sensing or relational call is not only theologically helpful, but scientifically accurate.

In response to views of children as born innocent or as blank slates, Wall argues the linear and inevitable progress of time built into these theories implies passivity and generalizability of the child (Wall 2010, p. 80). Interdisciplinary scholars engaging queer theory, also dismiss a romanticized or linear developmental view of children (Cornwall 2017; Ott 2015, 2019). Moving the child to the subject, a queer subject in this case, disrupts seeing childhood as a stage on the way to adulthood or children as some proposed future hope of humanity (Halberstam 2011, p. 27; Cornwall 2017; Ott 2015, 2019). Kathryn Bond Stockton calls childhood "growing sideways" (Stockton 2009). Children are moral agents with full humanity to be valued as they are, rather than for a teleological adulthood. Susannah Cornwall, in her latest book, *Un/Familiar Theology*, engages a queer approach to the "alterity and otherness of the child" (Cornwall 2017, p. 146). She uses José Muñoz and Stockton to counter Lee Edelman's use of child reproductive futurity. She writes, "Childhood is not, then, what Edelman constructs as a permanent deferral to the future, rather, the child, as queer, as natal, already has agency and influence to generate in the present" (Cornwall 2017, p. 148). The child is both now and not-yet which characterizes an eschatological hope. The child in this version of queer theology lives in "back-and-forth reciprocity" rather than downward transmission (Cornwall 2017, p. 147). This is another example of the child understood contextually, interdependently, and theologically as an "already complete person" (Cornwall 2017, p. 147). Children are striving for wholeness, a narrative wholeness, which is expansive rather than linear or inevitable (Wall 2010, p. 80).

For example, a three year old child who defends another child on the playground from teasing is a full moral agent. An affective and empathetic moral knowing undergirds her actions. She may provide limited interpretation of her actions, like "I was helping a friend who was sad when another child was mean." She may also have intervened because appeals to adults were unhelpful or they were not present. The children who choose not to help are also making a moral choice. Whether the moral agent is three years old or fifty years old, no human is completely independent and uses only rational knowledge. Cristina Traina writes, "Children's behavior in situations of dependency is still moral agency even though it is not fully autonomous. Agency is not a zero-sum game . . . Children are neither marionettes nor mere conduits for powerful adults' actions. They possess moral freedom even when that freedom is (sometimes rightly) circumscribed" (Traina 2009, p. 24). Traina directly engages a crucial connection between moral agency, freedom of choice, and accountability. If the three year old who ends the bullying is a moral agent, so too is the one bullying. This raises the question of how to

hold a three year old accountable for immoral actions. When moral agency is no longer a “zero-sum game” equal measures of accountability need not be either. Traina is not arguing that because children have full moral agency they must be penalized in a similar fashion to adults. Rather when a child (or anyone) is dependent, responsibility for her actions should be determined by a mix of contextual factors that account for her dependent status. Some feminist scholars, like Traina, have argued for a decoupling of one-to-one measurements of moral agency and social or legal accountability.

Critics suggest childist ethicists romanticize the child, their agential abilities, and freedom from adult influence. Of course, like all human beings, children are influenced by those around them. With children, we tend to assume they are parroting adult ethical standards even when evidence strongly suggests otherwise as in cases, for example, where preschoolers engage in racist behavior (Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001 and see also Ott 2014). Additionally in studies with children from preschool to tenth grade, researchers found that children’s status as a victim or perpetrator influence their moral understandings (Wainryb et al. 2005, p. 2). That is to say, children’s beliefs or personal interpretations, like adults, influence their moral judgements. When children recognize themselves as a perpetrator, they often “depicted themselves as being engaged in pursuing their own goals or interests, rather than intending to hurt someone else” (Wainryb et al. 2005, p. 37). Children’s recognition of harm and consequences is nuanced exhibiting complex morally agential responses.

While infants exhibit moral behavior that leans toward valuing the helper, as children grow older they encounter more complex ethical circumstances. Children’s own awareness of their agency affects social and relational encounters. Jennifer Beste, a Christian Ethicist who uses sociological quantitative research notes, her “research findings indicate that, not only are Catholic second graders social actors, but their perceived sense of agency when receiving Reconciliation (a Roman Catholic sacrament) greatly affects their overall experiences and its effects” (Beste 2011, p. 347). Her research validates “children as actively co-constructing meaning and reality as opposed to merely absorbing and internalizing the teachings” (Beste 2011, p. 346). The children in Beste’s study demonstrate creative synthesis and ethical reflection. Their sacramental experience deepened through social participation that recognizes their agency.

Integrating the revised notion of children’s moral agency with a human rights framework, Wall argues that we need to expand children’s right beyond provision and protection, which objectifies them. He argues children, like those in Beste’s study, deserve avenues for social participation that honor their agency (Wall 2012, p. 150). Bonnie Miller-McLemore articulates an example of children’s right to participation related to child labor (Miller-McLemore 2012). If we consider child labor from a global perspective, we can see that for some families children’s paid labor is a necessity even though it is often exploitative. Many child advocates using a human rights framework focused on provision and protection argue for the elimination of child labor. However, child labor (when not abusive and exploitative) is a form of social participation not for future gain or a return on investment, but part of children’s call and flourishing. Miller-McLemore advocates for efforts related to increased wages, safety, and fair practices (Miller-McLemore 2012, p. 182). Understanding the value of child’s work as social participation includes seeing it “as an obligation, a crucial part of formation, a contribution to the common good, and a demonstration of love of God” (Miller-McLemore 2012, pp. 185–86).

The methodological commitment to centralizing children as moral subjects in ethics yields a revised conceptualization of moral agency, including treating the child for who they are now, acceptance of their diverse and complex moral leanings, and the need for their increased social participation. The scholars noted in this section establish that children have richer moral capacities than previously thought. As John Wall writes, “it is clear that children do not just passively absorb the narratives that are fed to them by adults. Rather, each child is a full human being who both is narrated by her world and narrates it anew for herself” (Wall 2010, p. 152). Children exercise their moral agency even when they cannot explain reasons for their actions, when they are dependent on others, and when they lack experience with social codes or moral norms.

3. Children's Moral Lives and Creativity

In my experiences with leading Christian Education ministries, coaching sports teams, and running communities programs, I am amazed at how children puzzle through moral-decisions in community contexts. Below is an example of this, one that has shaped me over the years as I reflect on children's moral agency and what it might teach us about moral-decision making and ethical practices.

In 2003, my partner, Brian Hill and I led a children's program in Bridgeport, CT called Coaching Kids. The program served about 25 children aged 5–12 twice a week in an after-school program. The children learned about healthy eating habits, physical fitness, and social skills like resolving conflict, dealing with aggression, and asking others for assistance. The 21st Century Lighthouse grant received by Fairfield University School of Nursing funded the program. The majority of participants were elementary school age and identified as African American or Latinx. In the first few months of the program, the children were vocal about what hindered their personal health and relationships. For example, playing games like kickball, tag, or jump rope in the neighborhood was difficult given safety issues, such as broken glass and drug paraphernalia littering the open field, sidewalks in disrepair, or car traffic. We often played indoors at the high school where we rented space. The children only had access to this space when the program met.

The children's astute assessments of their environment lead to conversations about desired change. Given the social, economic, and environmental problems in the city, how would the children envision a different space? What values would guide them? How would they organize themselves? What was needed in such a community? We challenged the children to design a new community. The process of designing a community requires evaluation, imagination, and cooperation. As part of the project, the children negotiated the ethics of group dynamics in addition to the ethical vision of change for their community. We created the community out of a 12-foot-long piece of plywood, cardboard boxes, paint, and popsicle sticks (Figure 1). After designing parks, stores, living spaces, hospital, police station, firehouse, and beaches, the kids decided what employment they would have. There were pilots, bankers, firefighters, restaurateurs, and music producers. A priority for the children was that this community be clean and safe. From a newspaper story about the project, Shanitza said, "It's a lot of fun to go swimming . . . But I don't swim here in Bridgeport. It's much too cold and dirty. The water at our Ocean Shores is warm and clean." Jennifer Concino noted, "Our community has a lot of places to go . . . There's a lot of different stores and it's real safe" (Meshberg 2003). Additionally each child created a magazine page describing a different aspect of the community and enticing travelers to visit.

As adult group leaders, we facilitated the activity by helping with supplies, mediating disagreements, and asking questions to encourage reflection on their ethical choices. For example, how would we keep the ocean shores clean? Is the recording studio open to all types of music or only the kind the owner likes? What food options would Jose Corcino offer at his restaurant that would be unique and welcoming? One of the magazine pages "features Jose's Famous Restaurant. 'I'm a good cook,' said 12 year old Jose Corcino, who specializes in burgers and seafood. 'But I'll cook whatever anybody wants'" (Meshberg 2003). During the course of the project, all of the children engaged in various sorts of ethical decisions related to community design and lived these ethics in the way they related to each other during the building of the project.

I share this story as a low-tech engagement of children's moral evaluation, decision-making, and vision. These children ranging from 5 to 12 years old had wise insights about community development and design. Similar to the interviews with Catholic second graders preparing for reconciliation (albeit without the rigorous sociological research method), the children in Coaching Kids demonstrated creative ethical response. They answered and implemented fundamental questions of ethics: who ought we to be and how ought we to act as a community? They named the values that guided design—safety, cleanliness, hospitality, inclusion, diversity—and used the same values to negotiate intergroup dynamics. The youngest participant was Eva Ott Hill, 18 months old, a daughter of the leaders. Following their values, the kids added a daycare center to the community given the challenges and needs posed by a toddler trying to help paint during construction!



Figure 1. Photo from Connecticut Post article, 1 June 2003. (Abraham 2003)

4. Ethics and Creativity

The research related to children and Christian ethics warrants changes in the dominant approaches to moral agency and ethical response. Or as Wall argues, it is time “to ask the difficult question of how the ways in which children think ethically should transform how to understand ethical thinking as such” (Wall 2010, p. 168). Children’s formation of self and relational engagement happens most often through play and social interaction as encounters with otherness (Ryall et al. 2013; Qvortrup et al. 2009). The community building activity in the Coaching Kids program was both a critical thinking opportunity to articulate shared values and vision *and* an immediate opportunity to test these values. We creatively built together, played at a craft activity, and negotiated our otherness together. While some might characterize this play as moral education in a process of development, I claim it was that, *and* it was the “doing of ethics” as full moral agents who participated across our differences of age, ethnicity, race, gender or ability. Ethical response, as Wall puts it, “creates received historical and social meanings into new worlds of meaning over time and in response to others. It deals in moral tension and disruption as selves confront their own narrative diversity and the otherness of others” (Wall 2010, p. 169). In this section, I will argue that the centering of children’s moral responses shifts ethics from a practice of thinking and doing through logical, independent rationality to an interdependent encounter that requires imagination and creative practices like play or improvisation.

In Christian ethics, we often rely too heavily on socially imposed, normative rules and expectations that obscure the moral opportunity of encounter with another in mundane everyday situations. Wall worries that, “Fixed principles, laws, and virtues have ever since dominated over children in particular and over imagination, interdependence, and change in general” (Wall 2010, p. 169). This does not mean we should completely jettison moral rules or principles. Rather we need an approach that does not use the rules and expectations to foreclose creative discernment or imply a preference for independent, rational reasoning exempting children’s moral agency. Such an approach would value moral response

that includes the use of imagination exhibited in play or improvisation as a reaction to or engagement with otherness.

Thelathia Nikki Young, in *Black Queer Ethics, Family, and Philosophical Imagination*, argues that imagination is “a significant part of moral subjectivity and moral agency that contributes to social transformation” (Young 2016, p. 152). Her turn toward imagination stems from in-depth interviews with black queer family members, some are youth but most are adults. Many black queer people experience a moral erasure or judgement that resonates with the moral dismissal of children. As I have already noted, many queer theorists view the child as a queer subject. Christian ethics use of dominant constructions of moral agency that preference rationality and independence, socially and theologically elevate whiteness, heterosexuality, and adulthood. Blackness and queerness have resulted in characterizations of people as immoral or morally inferior. I am not equating histories of violence against black and/or queer bodies with that of all children. Rather, Young’s insights specifically generated from conversations with black queer families provides an example of moral imagination that disrupts dominant notions of moral agency similar to those discussed above. Young demonstrates how black queer families use imagination in survivalist, prophetic, subversive, and generative ways (Young 2016, pp. 153–54).

Thinking back to the example from *Coaching Kids*, these predominantly black and brown children’s moral imagination created a different possibility for community. Their creative moral response was not naïve to their current daily survival, it was in response to it, subversive of it, and generative of new possibilities. Young suggests that “imagination helps us to see and classify the consequences of policies, to see what it is like for people to be in certain situations, and to relate moral ideas to pragmatic considerations” (Young 2016, p. 157). Thus, moral imagination is both aware of current realities and seeking a new vision or world, which Young characterizes as “queer world making” (Young 2016, p. 158). She notes the role of improvisation and a building capacity like play that utilize “culture’s normative discourse” as “raw material” for these new visions or expansive worlds (Young 2016, p. 159, see p. 156 on improvisation). “Moral imagination also features this element of now and not-yet and allows moral agents to occupy spaces that are projections (of) future possibilities,” writes Young (Young 2016, p. 161). Young points to the power of relationality and micro-communities where these possibilities become realities. Young’s black queer family ethic shares eschatological resonances with imaginative practices like John Wall’s description of play and Samuel Wells’ notion of moral improvisation.

Engaging Christian notions of mystery and creation, Wall looks to phenomenological understandings of play as co-creational examples of self-expansion and “an ever fuller imitation over time of humanity’s Creator” (Wall 2012, p. 147). This human activity is one in which we all participate, not only children. From a phenomenological perspective, “Play is ultimately impossible to explain because it is not a meaning but, rather, the very condition for the possibility of meaning as such. It could be called the impossible possibility: able to be experienced, evoked, even symbolized but not finally containable within the playground of play itself” (Wall 2010, pp. 53–54). Play involves the imagination in ways that acknowledge reality and seek to alter it toward new forms of meaning. Wall says ethical thinking is “inherently artful or poetic . . . in the sense that it creates more imaginatively expansive relationships” (Wall 2010, p. 169). Children participate in constructing their worlds in and through the relationships around them, first with family, and then friends, broadening out as they meet new people (Wall 2010, pp. 152–53). The practice of play provides the forum for moral imagination to contribute to self-transformation and world making.

The communal nature and open-endedness of improvisation employs moral imagination in similar ways to children’s play. Samuel Wells writes, “Improvisation means a community formed in the right habits trusting itself to embody its tradition in new and often challenging circumstances” (Wells 2012, p. 12). Wells draws on Shannon Craigo-Snell’s incorporation of embodied and communal notions of performance in worship and theology to develop his theo-ethics of improvisation (Wells 2012, p. 61). He argues that discipleship or Christian moral formation as a performance akin to theater with a script

can be limiting even when rehearsal is the primary mode of new interpretations and roles (Wells 2012, p. 62). Wells suggests that, “improvisation is concerned with discernment. It is about hearing God speak through renewed practice and attending to the Spirit through trained listening. It is corporate ... (and) ... concerned with engaging with the world” (Wells 2012, p. 66). He situates his notion of improvisational listening in a communally pre-formed habit or Christian virtue, similar to Young’s concept of using “culture’s normative discourse” as “raw material” (Young 2016, p. 159).

In relation to children, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso shares an example that reflects aspects of play and improvisation. She describes children learning Midrash as an engagement with the dominant narrative (in this case the Torah) and creating new meaning through the conversational practice (Sasso 2012, p. 47). Sasso observes the need for both a story that provides meaning and expansive narration of children’s selves. She advocates for “children as partners in telling the story” (Sasso 2012, p. 47). This requires imagination on the part of all involved. Sasso adds a helpful reminder that being a communal partner, engaging personal and collective religious imaginations may like queer theorist Jack Halberstam suggests, involve failure (Halberstam 2011). In the Jewish practices Sasso describes, she notes, “It is the process of a child’s seeking and learning, trying and even failing, that is valued over accuracy” (Sasso 2012, p. 46). Engagement and response to the encounter constitute outward, swelling moral change and growth.

Whether we focus on practices like improvisation, play, storytelling, or art, imagination is core to moral response. The role of imagination is central in responding to otherness as each person and community presents itself anew, and we morally constitute and reconstitute ourselves. In the Coaching Kids example, the children were not going to lobby lawmakers and civic leaders to revamp the whole city. With increased community investment in children’s social participation that might happen. The economically disadvantaged, black and brown children in Coaching Kids were living into possibilities that allowed for immediate shifts in their everyday interactions and visions of a new future. With their moral agency centered, the world as they (and I) knew it shifted through each other’s visions. We used our moral imagination to make community, relationships, and our sense of selves anew in the now and the yet-to-come.

5. Children in a Digital Society

For many of today’s children, community building and encounters with otherness take place in both analog spaces like afterschool programs and online like gaming and social networks. I wonder how the Coaching Kids community building exercise would be different now that digital devices and software are ubiquitous. In 2003, most schools and homes had internet and many people used mobile phones to call and text. But, no one had our current smart phones (iPhone was released in 2007), no Wi-Fi centers in public places, and no social media networks (Myspace started in August 2003). Digital technology has shifted the way we communicate, form relationships, and participate in society (Ott 2018). Most children, today, grow-up digital. Factors like ownership of hardware, online access, and stability of one’s country or local community affect the digitization of a child’s life. Even with these qualifications, only a few rare locations escape directly interacting with digital technology, indirectly they are mapped by global GPS systems, populations quantified for government measures, and so on.

Does this radical growth in digital technology affect children’s use of imagination as central to moral response? I have argued against a linear and inevitable moral development model that views children as not-yet-adults. Rather than preferencing rationality, independence, and experience, imagination and creativity are important elements in children’s moral response. Similarly, the structure of digital technology “as responsive, adaptive, and networked” moves us away from an analog, linear way of knowing and being in the world (Ott 2018, p. 2). Children’s moral responsiveness shares a way of operating with digital technology that can teach us how ethical response may need to shift in our new digital landscape. John Dyer, a technologist and theologian, says “when it comes to using technology, the ability to imagine and tell stories is awakened even in adults” (Dyer 2011, p. 32). Technologies allow us to imagine new ways of doing things as well as being in the world.

Wearing a watch, for example, transforms me into a human time-teller. Not just digital technology, all technology “is a bridge from this world to the imagined one” (Dyer 2011, p. 34). Though humans often create the technology; it recreates us as we interact with it. Digital media has an even greater impact than wearing a watch given the avenues for self-expression and experimentation. Luci Pangrazio notes, “informal digital writing involves play and communication” as well as “complex identity performances” (Pangrazio 2019, p. 15). It is a space to meet otherness and respond. The digital self becomes another part of the embodied self; one is not fake and the other real. It is more accurate to describe ourselves as “digitally embodied spirits” (Ott 2018, p. 58). Pangrazio explains, “While the audience might know the offline identity of the individual, the online identity that is presented through a digital profile works in an aspirational way” (Pangrazio 2019, p. 15). Moral imagination fuels the recreation of the self and community as a now and not-yet.

The centralization of children also provides insights for the overall approach and openness needed to address digital technology (Ott 2018). Charles Ess notes, that digital technology similar to a centralization of childhood displaces the rational, independent self. He writes, “the emergence of networked communications as facilitated via the internet and instantiated in social networking technologies, correlate with the (re)turn to more *relational* emphases in our conception of selfhood and identity” (Ess 2016, p. 310). Because digital technology democratizes participation with a delimiting of time and geographic barriers as well as shifts in authority of knowledge production and dissemination, “there is a blurring and distribution of the ethical *agencies* and *responsibilities*” (Ess 2016, p. 310). The agencies and responsibilities are no longer held by “those who know” or “those who have been trained” (read: adults or authority figures like digital developers). Instead, agency to participate, reshape, and create via digital technology exists regardless of age and sometimes background knowledge.

Digital technologies require more fluidity in how we characterize moral agency and moral response. Similar to the centering of children as the subject of ethics, we should ask: “Do such new [digital] technologies require new ethical frameworks, norms and processes of decision-making, and/or will extant norms, processes, and frameworks prove to be adequate in confronting the new behavioral and thus ethical possibilities evoked by these technologies?” (Ess 2016, p. 309). Talking specifically about digital literacies and young children, educational theorists Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown, want to “make play, questioning, and imagination the bedrocks of our new culture” specifically related to digital learning and I would argue related to ethics (Thomas and Brown 2011, p. 20). Digital technology changes at a rapid pace. “Wonder, imagination, and creativity are the genesis of digital technology, they must also be its constant moral companion” (Ott 2018, p. 144). We can take a clue from childist ethics as we both observe and learn from children’s interaction with digital technology. If we overlook the impact of digital technology on ethics the same way we have overlooked children’s contribution, we will be a generation behind in formulating Christian ethics relevant to a digital world.

Children engage in a variety of imaginative moral responses to otherness in digital spaces. On a daily basis, they use multiplayer video games to create new social landscapes. Whether it is Minecraft or Fortnite, children have the tools to build communities from scratch or manipulate existing structures (Minecraft 2019; Fortnite 2019). As Fortnite suggests, “Build your Fortnite: Imagine a place where you make the rules, filled with your favorite things and your favorite people. Claim your own personal island and start creating!” or “Design your own games: Invent games with friends, and build your dream Fortnite experiences” (Fortnite 2019). This is one example of the many ways children are prosumers (producers + consumers) in a digital landscape. They may also be creating relationships with people across the world in ways that break down geographic and time barriers that once limited encounters with others (and otherness). This is not to say that the game platform is value free. The medium of the game has more built in values than the Coaching Kids example using plywood and cardboard. For starters, these games require a form of survival that includes fighting others to preserve one’s community. When Young reminds us that moral imagination is survivalist, she does not mean it in this sense. Rather, she is pointing toward survival amidst systems of oppression and the

need for prophetic moral alternatives (Young 2016). A creative moral response along these lines define “winning” as or building a world to end the oppression of others.

Moral imagination also has a connection to physical realities and current circumstances while imagining hoped for futures. Likewise, digital networks exist beyond, and yet, connected to physical realities of embodiment. Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner write,

“The idea of the network highlights not only how we encounter various people and relationships but also the variety of ways in which those relationships are organized. The network can promote flattened rather than hierarchical structures, along with relationships that allow more dynamic interaction rather than being unresponsive and static. This creates sources of creativity and participation that promote connectedness within Christianity Community”. (Campbell and Garner 2016, p. 14)

Networked Theology, the title of Campbell’s and Garner’s work, describes the way in which interdependence and interaction—constant engagement with otherness—characterize faith communities in a digital landscape. They view the impact of digital technology on Christian community formation as an opportunity to democratize participation and invite moral imagination.

For example, youth are leading international movements made possible by digital technology. In 2018 Bana Alabed, at eight years old, used a Twitter account to raise awareness of the daily violence in Syria. She used the platform to “broadcast the nightmarish experience of living in Aleppo during the siege, airstrikes, and hunger” (Pimentel et al. 2018). Alabed creatively deploys the technology (for which she is too young to legally have an account) to highlight social and political vulnerabilities that needed an immediate response. Additionally, she exploits the viral, democratizing affordance of the technology to up-end social systems that grant authority to journalist over citizens.

A group of students who survived the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida engaged in similar digital activities (Pimentel et al. 2018). They used their online influence to draw attention to and pressure companies who supported gun manufacturers and sellers. They used online organizing tactics to generate a national march in Washington DC to end gun violence. Akin to Bana Alabed, these students exploited the affordances of digital technology for social good. In both examples, children engage their moral imagination when responding to social forms of otherness that lead to death and destruction albeit on different scales. The prophetic and generative moral response became possible via digital spaces and connection. Unlike the cardboard and plywood out of which a new moral vision of community arose in Coaching Kids, the digital technologies employed by Alabed and the students of Marjory Stoneman yielded embodied communities in real time.

Of course, some children exploit the creative, connected, and networked opportunities of digital technology for immoral purposes. Some prominent child hackers, like Ittai and Ruben Paul, demonstrate their skills live for cybersecurity conferences to show the ease with which many children can hack toys, company networks, or social media accounts (Bell 2018). They also do this as a way of promoting digital literacies and cybersecurity education. Digital literacies can be used for moral good or evil. Similarly, children’s practices of play and improvisation can promote moral good or evil (Bell 2018). The examples of Alabed and students and Marjory Stoneman demonstrate the best of children as moral agents acting in their fullness, responding to complex moral circumstances, and engaging social participation that transforms communities. Of course, we cannot expect the same from every child who logs onto Minecraft or Fortnite, Twitter or Instagram. Children have complex and nuanced moral lives, like adults. Digital technologies provide a space and place for moral harms as well as moral good. This is the reality of all worlds we inhabit and why we desperately need moral imagination to envision the now and not-yet. Digital literacies used for creative moral response can be one of these practices of ethical imagination.

6. Christian Ethics as Creative Moral Response

Centering children and childhood as the subject of Christian ethics helps us to see how imagination is a central characteristic of a moral response. Whether it is online or offline, creativity is the process

by which we (adults and children) morally grow through narrative expansion when we encounter otherness. The social act of painting cardboard together or building a digital world with players across the globe are examples of this process. Childist methods highlight the ways Christian ethics can be enriched by centering the subjectivity of children.

The recognition of creativity as a moral response begins with a revision of the ethical concept of moral agency. Moral agency is not something that one gets at a certain age or with certain capacities. The rational, independent, and experienced self has no more moral agency than an interdependent, pre-verbal, vulnerable self. They have different levels of ability to socially enact their moral choices and how we judge accountability should also differ (Traina 2009). In general, the proposed revision of moral agency also begs the question of the existence of any independent and rational self. Humans have always been relational and reliant on various forms of knowing—cognitive, affective, embodied, and now digital. We need to move beyond ethical theories that denigrate these qualities and seek to erase the moral agency of particular populations of people.

The Coaching Kids children employed imagination and creativity as moral response in the process of both designing new community and becoming community with each other. Childist ethics reminds us to encounter these children as they are, at the age they are, as complete moral beings. They are dependent and relational, yet capable of social participation that enriches community and contributes to the Christian story. Like adults, children have diverse and complex moral lives. We should not romanticize them as exempt from or affected by evil. And still, children lead rich moral lives that highlight imagination as moral response. Christian ethics can learn a great deal from a childist turn. We can and should use these insights to navigate pressing ethical issues raised by digital technologies.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- Abraham, Christian. 2003. Photo in “Children Offer Vision of Hope, Community”. *Connecticut Post*, June 1.
- Augustine. 2009. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bell, Sara. 2018. Child Hackers Encourage Ethical Use of Skills at UMSL’s STLCyberCon. *USMLDaily*. November 19. Available online: <https://blogs.umsl.edu/news/2018/11/19/stlcybercon-18/> (accessed on 24 August 2019).
- Beste, Jennifer. 2011. Children Speak: Catholic Second Graders’ Agency and Experiences in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. *Sociology of Religion* 72: 327–50. [CrossRef]
- Browning, Don S., and Marcia Bunge, eds. 2011. *Children and Childhood in World Religions: Primary Sources and Texts*. Piscataway: Rutgers University Press.
- Browning, Don S., and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, eds. 2009. *Children and Childhood in American Religions*. Piscataway: Rutgers University Press.
- Bunge, Marcia, ed. 2001. *The Child in Christian Thought*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Bunge, Marcia, ed. 2012. *Children, Adults, and Shared Responsibilities: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Campbell, Heidi, and Stephen Garner. 2016. *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture*. Grand Rapids: Baker Press.
- Cornwall, Susannah. 2017. *Un/Familiar Theology: Reconceiving Sex, Reproduction and Generativity*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Dyer, John. 2011. *From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology*. Grand Rapids: Kegel Publications.
- Ess, Charles M. 2016. Ethics—and—Emancipation for the Rest of Us? In *Controversies in Digital Ethics*. Edited by Amber Davisson and Paul Booth. New York: Bloomsbury, pp. 308–19.
- Fewell, Danna Nolan. 2003. *The Children of Israel: Reading the Bible for the Sake of Our Children*. Nashville: Abingdon.
- Fortnite. 2019. Creative. Available online: <https://www.epicgames.com/fortnite/en-US/creative> (accessed on 31 July 2019).
- Halberstam, Judith Jack. 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Mercer, Joyce Ann. 2005. *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood*. St. Louis: Chalice.
- Meshberg, Ronald. 2003. Children Offer Vision of Hope, Community. *Connecticut Post*, June 1.
- Miller-McLemore, Bonnie J. 2019. *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. First published 2003 by John Wiley & Sons.
- Miller-McLemore, Bonnie J. 2012. Work, Labor and Chores: Christian Ethical Reflection on Children and Vocation. In *Children, Adults, and Shared Responsibilities: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*. Edited by Marcia Bunge. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 171–86.
- Minecraft. 2019. What Is Minecraft. Available online: <https://www.minecraft.net/en-us/what-is-minecraft/> (accessed on 31 July 2019).
- Ott, Kate. 2014. Children as An/other Subject: Redefining Moral Agency in a Postcolonial Context. *Journal of Childhood and Religion* 5. Available online: <http://childhoodandreligion.com/issues/volume-5/> (accessed on 15 July 2019).
- Ott, Kate. 2015. “Animating Children” for Syndicate, Roundtable on Queer Art of Failure. Available online: <https://syndicate.network/symposia/literature/the-queer-art-of-failure/> (accessed on 15 July 2019).
- Ott, Kate. 2018. *Christian Ethics in a Digital Society*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Ott, Kate. 2019. Orgasmic Failure: Ethical ReVisions of Adolescent Sexuality. In *Theologies of Failure*. Edited by Roberto Sirvent and Duncan Reyburn. Eugene: Cascade Books, pp. 107–29.
- Pangrazio, Luci. 2019. *Young People’s Literacies in the Digital Age: Continuities, Conflicts, and Contradictions*. New York: Routledge.
- Pimentel, Julia, Carolyn Bernucca, and Khal. 2018. 20 Young Activists Who Are Changing the World. *Complex*, December 22. Available online: <https://www.complex.com/life/young-activists-who-are-changing-the-world/> (accessed on 26 August 2019).
- Qvortrup, Jens, William Corsaro, and Michael-Sebastian Honig, eds. 2009. *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*. New York: Palgrave.
- Ridgely, Susan, ed. 2011. *The Study of Children in Religions: A Methods Handbook*. New York: NYU Press.
- Ryall, Emily, Wendy Russell, and Malcolm MacLean, eds. 2013. *The Philosophy of Play*. New York: Routledge.
- Sasso, Sandy Eisenberg. 2012. Children’s Spirituality in Jewish Narrative Tradition. In *Children, Adults, and Shared Responsibilities: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*. Edited by Marcia Bunge. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 39–58.
- Stockton, Kathryn Bond. 2009. *The Queer Child or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Thomas, Douglass, and John Seely Brown. 2011. *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change*. Lexington: CreateSpace Publishing.
- Traina, Cristina. 2009. Children and Moral Agency. *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 29: 19–37. [CrossRef]
- Traina, Cristina. 2011. *Erotic Attunement: Parenthood and the Ethics of Sensuality between Unequals*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Van Ausdale, Debra, and Joe R. Feagin. 2001. *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Wainryb, Ceclia, Beverly A. Brehl, and Sonia Matwin. 2005. *Being Hurt and Hurting Others: Children’s Narrative Accounts and Moral Judgments of Their Own Interpersonal Conflicts*. Boston: Blackwell Publishing.
- Wall, John. 2010. *Ethics in Light of Childhood*. Washington: Georgetown University.
- Wall, John. 2012. Imagining Childism: How Childhood should Transform Religious Ethics. In *Children, Adults, and Shared Responsibilities: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*. Edited by Marcia Bunge. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 135–51.
- Wells, Karen. 2009. *Childhood in Global Perspective*. Oxford: Polity.
- Wells, Samuel. 2012. *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press.
- Wynn, Karen, and Paul Bloom. 2013. The Moral Baby. In *Handbook of Moral Development*. Edited by Melanie Killen and Judith G. Smetana. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 435–53.
- Young, Thelathia Nikki. 2016. *Black Queer Ethics, Family, and Philosophical Imagination*. New York: Palgrave.
- Young-Bruehl, Elisabeth. 2011. *Childism: Confronting Prejudice against Children*. New Haven: Yale University.

