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“Others” as Moral Teachers: South African and Swedish Children on Virtues and Values

Karin Sporre

Abstract

This chapter focuses on voices that are not immediately understood as carrying crucial moral messages. In this study, forty-one South African and Swedish children aged ten to twelve years old were interviewed in 2019 about sustainability and hope. As a background to the analysis of the qualitative interviews the chapter introduces “childism,” which represents a theoretical rethinking and deconstruction of established norms that prioritize adults and hinder the recognition of children and young people as moral agents due to their age. The exploratory analysis of the interviews points to how care for water and care for human beings and their rights are virtues expressed in the interviews, as well as how the children articulate survival of planet Earth and its inhabitants as a crucial value. The study points in the direction of what could be called a “childist” ethics—in parallel to critical perspectives raised within social ethics, for example, by groups of women, people of color, or in today’s decolonizing debates.

Keywords

Children’s voices; ethical agency; womanism; sustainability; childism.

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1. Introduction and Aim of this Chapter

An article by Katie G. Cannon from 1985 offers an interesting dialogue with the texts on mothers’ moral wisdom that Karina M. Hogan analyzes in her chapter of this book.[1] Born in 1950 in Kannapolis, North Carolina, USA, Cannon began during the 1980s to articulate a womanist ethics, that is, an ethics expressing the lives and concerns of African-American women.[2] In particular she used texts by the African-American author, journalist, and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) as a resource. In one powerful story Hurston writes of a dying mother at her deathbed speaking to her daughter:

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[1] Cannon, “Resources for a Constructive Ethic in The Life and Work of Zora Neale Hurston,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion,* 1(1985): 37–51. I want to acknowledge the generous assistance of Mary E. Hess, professor of educational leadership at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, USA, in proofreading my manuscript and correcting it from the point of view of language. However, the responsibility for the text is mine.

[2] See Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, AAARAS 60 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); and Cannon, *Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995). In 2018 Cannon passed away (*New York Times*, Obituaries, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/14/obituaries/katie-cannon-68-dies-lifted-black-womens-perspective-in-theology.html).

> Stop cryin’, Isie, you can’t hear whut Ahm sayin’, ’member tuh git all de education you kin. Dat’s de onliest way you kin keep out from under people’s feet. You always strain tuh be de bell cow, never be de tail uh nothin’. Do de best you kin, honey, ’cause neither yo’ paw or dese older chilun is goin’ tuh git ’long. Mark mah words. You got spunk, but mah po’ lil’l sandy-haired child goin suffer uh lot ’fo she get to de place she can ’fend fuh herself. And Isie, honey, stop cryin’ and lissen tuh me. Don’t you love nobody better’n you do yo’self. Do, you’ll be killed ’thout being struck a blow. Some uh dese things Ahm tellin’ yuh, you won’t understand ’em fuh years to come, but de time will come when you’ll know.[3]

Here the mother instructs her daughter to understand the harsh living conditions of racism that await her, but also offers ways to resist them, specifically to try to get as much education as she can, and always to try to take the lead rather than following others. The daughter is also told not to expect too much from her father or siblings, but to trust herself if she is going to get somewhere. Perhaps the sharpest piece of advice, or wisdom, and what may most catch one’s attention, is when the mother says: “Don’t you love nobody better’n you do yo’self,” and then the mother continues: “Do, you’ll be killed ’thout being struck a blow.”[4]

In her text Cannon interprets this passage and other texts by Hurston as being autobiographical and having a background in Hurston’s own life, in this case mentioning that Hurston lost her mother at the age of nine. The wisdom that Hurston’s mother had possibly shared with her daughter was passed on by being brought into the literary text. In relation to this paragraph Cannon also gives further details of the hard life Hurston as a Black woman had to live, and summarizes:

> This moral wisdom, handed down from mother to daughter as the crystallized result of experience, aimed to teach Hurston not only how to survive but also how to prevail with integrity against the cruel system of triple oppression.[5]

The way Cannon describes the situation of African-American women as a triple oppression is characteristic of her womanist ethics. She discusses from an ethical and political point of view how to negotiate the complexities of this triple oppression.[6] And, a crucial perspective from the work of Hurston that Cannon takes along into her womanist ethics, she herself describes in this way, thereby characterizing a core in Hurston’s work: “Hurston possessed a sharp accuracy in reporting the positive sense of self that exists among poor, marginal Blacks.”[7]

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[3] Cannon, “Resources for a Constructive Ethic,” 41.

[4] Cannon, “Resources for a Constructive Ethic,” 41.

[5] Cannon, “Resources for a Constructive Ethic,” 41.

[6] Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*, 129–35.

[7] Cannon, “Resources for a Constructive Ethic,” 37.

To underline: This positive sense of self in the midst of oppression in the work of Hurston is what Cannon takes into her own womanist ethics as a most important insight when living under oppression. A distinctive expression, to my understanding, of this is the sentence: “Don’t you love nobody better’n you do yo’self.” Directed to the child to make her remember that she herself is important. She needs to love herself—and she will have to stand up for herself.[8]

In her further work Cannon elaborates on three crucial virtues in a Black womanist ethics and names them “invisible dignity,” “quiet grace” and “unshouted courage.”[9] These three virtues reflect situations of oppression that Black women experienced and where they needed to identify ways and means to preserve their dignity. Under the extremely violent conditions where they lived, open resistance could be life threatening and therefore their ethical agency had to be invisible, quiet, unshouted but still acted out.[10]

When one screens the research areas of ethics education, moral education, and education generally today to explore the theme of mothers’ moral wisdom, the search does not give many results, indicating that this is an underresearched theme.[11] Therefore, I have chosen to pick up on a slightly different one, namely – *voices that are rarely listened to*. In doing so I am connecting to the work of Hogan and the two-millennia-old texts she works on. The women in those texts are in the first place few, and their authority is questioned. Still the moral messages they articulate are of interest, perhaps one could even say they are important, since the messages from these women have still been recorded and form part of old texts – indeed, are thus rescued through millennia. The work of Cannon expresses something similar, that is, voices that were recorded and basically lacking authority, but still were carefully listened to by Cannon. The messages they were carrying were explicated, laid out, and gained significance through her work. Cannon was an early voice for a womanist ethics in addressing the triple oppression that she herself lived, and Hurston’s literary work gave her resources to discuss such an ethics in depth—an ethic that did not privilege those already privileged, but lifted up previously silenced voices. Within ethics this has been part of discussions where social ethical matters are foregrounded in feminist or womanist ethics, where early works by, for example, Beverly Wildung Harrison, Sharon D. Welch, or Cannon are examples.[12] Among those whose works also have been recognized are Iris M. Young, Seyla Benhabib, or Nancy Fraser arguing for the need for ethics to include more voices and political concerns.[13]

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[8] This aspect of Cannon’s work I elaborated on in a book chapter published in English in 2015: Sporre, “‘Do Not Love Anybody More Than You Love Yourself’: On Ethics, Oppression, and Resistance,” in *In Search of Human Dignity: Essays in Theology, Ethics and Education,* ed. Karin Sporre, Religious Diversity and Education in Europe 29 (Münster: Waxmann, 2015), 28–37. The chapter was originally published in Swedish under the title “‘Älska ingen mer än du älskar dig själv’: Om etik, förtryck och motstånd,” in *Det nya motståndet. Om regnbågar mot förtryck* [*The New Resistance: On Rainbows against Oppression*], ed. Ingemar Lindberg, Agoras årsbok 2001 (Stockholm: Atlas, 2001), 26–38. My work with Cannon’s womanist ethics formed part of my PhD dissertation. Sporre, *Först när vi har ansikten: Ett flerkulturellt samtal om feminism, etik och teologi* [*First When We Have Faces: A Cross-Cultural Conversation on Feminism, Ethics and Theology*] (Stockholm: Atlas, 1999), 153–252.

[9] Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 105–57.

[10] See Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*; Cannon, *Katie’s Cannon*; as well as Karin Sporre, “Appendix 1: English Summary of PhD Thesis,” in Sporre, *In Search of Human Dignity*, 255–71; for a more complete analysis of Cannon’s work, see also Sporre, *Först när vi har ansikten*, 153–252.

[11] Searching through databases the following search terms were used: “ethics & mother* & education”; “moral wisdom & mother*”; “moral wisdom & mother* & education”; “wisdom & mother* & education”; and “moral teach* & mother*.” No systematic findings indicated that this theme was a frequent one in educational research.

Cannon articulated her concerns at a time when the discussion of intersectionality was beginning to be articulated theoretically within gender and women studies. An article by Kimberlé Crenshaw Williams became crucial in codifying the situation of African-American women and their triple oppression by use of the concept of intersectionality.[14] Therefore, since the 1990s discussions on intersectionality have explored several issues codified as matters of *gender*, *race*, *class*, *ethnicity*, *sexuality*, *colonialization*—and more recently also including discussions on *age*.

From an intersectionality perspective this chapter focuses on *age*. The questions I want to explore are: What moral wisdom do children and young people today share as their concerns? What virtues and values are discovered if we listen to their voices?

To answer these questions I share results from the study *Children, Sustainability and Hope* where forty-one children aged ten to twelve years from South Africa and Sweden were interviewed individually in 2019.[15] Drawing on an older Swedish research tradition with open questionnaires directed to children, this project has from a methodological point of view modified that approach somewhat by replacing questionnaires with interviews but also by adding new aspects of content.[16] Additionally, this study is placed within the theoretical construct of "childism," soon to be elaborated.

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[12] Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon, 1985); Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989); Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*; Cannon, *Katie's Canon*.

[13] Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Young, "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective," *Signs* 19 (1994): 713–38, https://doi.org/10.1086/494918; Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992); Benhabib, *Dignity in Adversity: Human Rights in Troubled Times* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011); Fraser, *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008).

[14] Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1241–99, https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039. Another theorist at the same time who had an interest in women's agency as a political collective was Iris M. Young in her article ("Gender as Seriality," 713–38). My own choice to include the work of Katie G. Cannon in my PhD study of three various theological ethicists during the 1990s depended on Cannon's way of describing the triple oppression of African-American women. My interest in intersectional perspectives meant that I constructed a "conversation" in my study of texts by Katie G. Cannon, Mary C. Grey, a European theologian, and Chung Hyun Kyung an Asian woman theologian (Sporre, *Först när vi har ansikten*; with an English summary in Sporre, *Appendix 1*). In the 1990s the Swedish gender discourse was focused on gender and class and hardly included discussions of racism as a cause of oppression or discrimination.

[15] The study was carried out by the author. Three publications have so far come out of the project: Karin Sporre, "Young People – Citizens in Times of Climate Change? A Childist Approach to Human Responsibility," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77.3 (2021):1–8, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i3.6783. Sporre, Heila Lotz-Sisitka and Christina Osbeck, "Taking the Moral Authorship of Children and Youth Seriously in Times of the Anthropocene," *Ethics and Education* 1 (2022): 101–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2021.2024991. Sporre and Osbeck, "Responding to the Voices of Children," *NORRAG* NSI 7 (2022): 96–99. A comprehensive book from the study is planned. The project was funded by Umeå School of Education.

To summarize, the aim of this chapter is to listen to the voices of South African and Swedish children with an analytical focus on the virtues and values expressed in interviews, bringing forward what can be called a *childist* ethics.

2. Theoretical Background

John Wall in his book *Ethics in Light of Childhood* introduces a childist approach.[17] Additionally Wall together with Jonathan Josefsson have developed the two concepts *empowered inclusion* and *deep interdependency* when discussing matters of political influence of children and young people in a global perspective that adds to the theoretical background of this chapter.[18] Two more texts that employ and develop a childist approach offer important underpinning for the study described here.

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[16] For summaries of results from some of the older studies within this tradition, see Sven G. Hartman, *Barns tankar om livet* [*Children's Thoughts about Life*] (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 1986); Hartman, *Children's Philosophy of Life* (Stockholm: Stockholm Institute of Education, 1986); Hartman and Tullie Torstensson-Ed, *Barns tankar om livet* [*Children's Thoughts about Life*], 2nd ed. (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 2007). In a parallel study to the one presented here the Child and Curriculum: Existential Questions and Educational Responses (The C & C project), parts of the older Swedish studies have been repeated and archived questionnaire data reanalyzed. For some results of the C & C project see Christina Osbeck et al., "Children's Existential Questions and Worldviews: Possible RE Responses to Performance Anxiety and an Increasing Risk of Exclusion," *Journal of Religious Education* 72 (2024): 51–72, https://doi.org/10.1007/s40839-023-00219-8. For other publications out of the C & C project, see https://www.umu.se/en/research/projects/the-child-and-curriculum.-existential-questions-and-educational-responses/publications/.

[17] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010). Wall has in his further writings pursued a discussion on questions related to representation of children and young people from a democratic point of view, as in Wall, "Can Democracy Represent Children? Towards a Politics of Difference," *Childhood* 1 (2011): 86–100, https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568211406756; and Wall, "Theorizing Children's Global Citizenship: Reconstructionism and the Politics of Deep Interdependence," *Global Studies of Childhood* 1 (2019): 5–17, https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610618815484. In the book *Give Children the Vote*, Wall develops his argument further for the democratic inclusion of children and concerns of theirs. Wall, *Give Children the Vote: On Democratizing Democracy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022). I have introduced and discussed Wall's work in other texts, a first one being Karin Sporre, "Barn, kvinnor och passion" ["Children, Women and Passion"], in *Kvinnligt religiöst ledarskap: En vänbok till Gunilla Gunner* [*Female Religious Leadership: A Festschrift to Gunilla Gunner*], ed. Simon Sorgenfri and David Thurfjell (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2020), 219–28. Some parts of the text here are translated from that Swedish text. I have also discussed Wall's work in Sporre, "Young People,"; we do so as well in Sporre, Lotz-Sisitka, and Osbeck, "Taking the Moral Authorship."

[18] Josefsson and Wall, "Empowered inclusion: Theorizing Global Justice for Children and Youth," *Globalizations* 6 (2020): 1043–60, https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2020.1736853. The concepts Josefsson and Wall develop we have discussed in relation to Swedish preschool and sustainable development. See Farhana Borg and Karin Sporre, "Children's Empowered Inclusion in Early Child-

2.1 Childism: Children and Childhood as a Lens

When Wall is to elaborate his understanding of childism he starts his book by stating that children and childhood face humanity with the most challenging and deepest questions, namely:

> What does it mean to be human? What should relations and societies strive for? What is ultimately owed to one another?[19]

Although children in the world are one third of humanity, Wall continues, they are most often disregarded in their own right and viewed as in need of growing up to become fully human. Throughout history philosophers and theologians have given various meanings to childhood. Some have viewed it as being a passive phase, others have interpreted it optimistically in terms of potential. Children have also been seen as in need of development, sometimes even needing to "become civilized."[20] Wall wants to turn old thinking around, not least regarding ethical life and how morality is understood, by arguing for not seeing childhood as a special phase of human life but rather understanding childhood as on par with human life in general, and a necessary lens through which human existence ought to be seen. To take childhood seriously requires a rethinking of ethics: "the experiences of children need to become new lenses for interpreting what it means to exist, to live good lives, and to form just communities—for the sake of children and adults both."[21] Thus, theories of childism ask for a rethinking of beliefs about human nature, relations, and societies from an ethical point of view with the purpose of challenging adultism—denoting dominant thinking where the grown-up person is, and has been, an unquestioned norm throughout history at the expense of children.

When Wall, from an empirical point of view, argues for childism he gives examples of the suffering of children in the world. He lists how children are dying from preventable diseases and malnutrition, work in sweat shops, are engaged in sex trafficking, are soldiers in war, and even in the United States, his home country, Wall notes how poverty has increased among children during the last several decades. Noting these facts Wall raises the question of what a truly child-inclusive society would look like and argues that when children are neglected, the full humanity of all humans is set aside.[22]

When Wall defines childism he is deliberately connecting his work to the contexts of feminism, womanism, and environmentalism. He explicates how these movements have challenged ethics and renewed and reformulated ethical thinking. With femi-

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hood Education for Sustainability," in *International Perspectives on Educating for Democracy in Early Childhood: Recognizing Young Children as Citizens*, ed. Stacy Lee DeZutter (New York: Routledge, 2023), 260–78, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003229568-21.

[19] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 1.

[20] Wall elaborates this discussion extensively in the first part of his book (*Ethics in Lights of Childhood*, 13–34).

[21] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 1.

[22] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 2.

nism terms such as "care, relationality, embodiment, and power" have come to influence how human life can be understood quite differently from earlier conceptions.[23] Womanism, in turn, has highlighted how issues of racism in Black women's lives need to be articulated and brought into discussions of gender theory.[24] Movements that focus on the environment require that humanity be understood as part of the larger ecosystem. And thus, "childism is the effort to respond to the experiences of children by transforming understanding and practices for all."[25] Such a reimagining leads to new ways of viewing ethical aspects of human life.

In three sections Wall develops the argument of his book. The first part is a comprehensive review and critical examination of theoretical thinking around children and childhood throughout millennia via the history of ideas of philosophical and religious thinking, including pedagogical philosophies.[26] In the second part, the core part, Wall elaborates on his main concern, rethinking ethical reasoning. He does so under three headings: What is human being?; What is the ethical aim?; and finally, What is owed each other?[27] In the third and last part of his book, Wall draws conclusions from his theory into fields of practice such as human rights, family life, and further applications in ethical thinking.[28] Below I summarize the main ideas in the second part of Wall's book.

2.2 Human Being: Human Existence as Vulnerability and Interdependence

When elaborating on human being in the world, Wall adopts a phenomenological approach inspired by philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Paul Ricœur. Starting from how each newborn child influences and changes its environment through its mere presence in asking humanizing questions, Wall works with the idea that being human is above all about creation of meaning in relationships. Through the creativity that constitutes meaning-making, human existence constantly comes to new expressions. At the same time, the creation of meaning takes place in interaction with the surrounding culture, with the given social conditions. Human being can therefore be seen as both constructing and constructed. This is because, to be human, from birth to death, is continually to create new worlds of meaning from the worlds of meaning that history and others have already created.[29]

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[23] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 3.

[24] See also Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins"; Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*; Cannon, *Katie's Canon*.

[25] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 3. On the website of the Childism Institute childism is described in the following way: "Childism is like feminism but for children. It has emerged in the academic literature as a term to describe efforts to empower the lived experiences of the third of humanity who are children through the radical systemic critique of scholarly, social, and political norms." https://www.childism.org/. Notice here also the element of empowerment included in the definition.

[26] Wall, *Ethics in Lights of Childhood*, 13–34.

[27] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 35–10.

[28] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 113–78.

[29] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 35–36.

When Wall puts the focus on children and childhood in relation to human existence, he notes that until now it is merely in a societal sense that children's voices and children's actions have been highlighted, for example, in the new sociology of childhood. This understanding has then been marked by how agency is traditionally understood within Western ethical theory, when to be an agent, or subject, means emphasizing freedom, autonomy, and independence. Yet if you want to understand human existence from a childhood perspective, Wall underlines, you must see the connection between agency and vulnerability. He emphasizes that seeing vulnerability as a center of human being is not the opposite of agency but is rather a starting point for a different understanding of agency, one through which strength can grow. Such processes involve an openness toward other people in relationships. Thus, by holding vulnerability and agency together, perspectives from children and childhood come to challenge traditional ethical approaches with their focus on freedom, autonomy, and independence.[30]

2.3 The Ethical Aim: Creating Narratives in Time

When Wall tackles the question of what the ethical aim of human existence is, he introduces time as a decisive factor. Our lives as humans are inscribed in time, which is something we must relate to. Seeing human being from the perspective of children and childhood means that it becomes obvious how birth, but also death, mark the human relationship to time. The task of human beings, both the adult and the child, is to create their own story of what they have experienced, the time they have lived. The more time a person experiences, the more such a narrative can expand through the creation of meaning and incorporation of more of experience, earlier and new. The difference between children and adults, according to Wall then, is not their way of giving meaning through their narratives to the time they have lived, but how extensive their experience is in creating their narratives.[31]

Thus, Wall believes that interpreting one's life through narrative creation is a primary expression of human beings' ability to create meaning in time. To do so continually is the ethical goal. This is what human existence, being human, aims to accomplish. When describing how narrative creation takes place, Wall emphasizes the body and relationships, but also adds relationship to something divine, something outside of human existence. He uses this idea later to express an ability to relate to something outside of time.[32]

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[30] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 37–41.

[31] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 59–73.

[32] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 74–86.

2.4 What Do We Owe Each Other? Our Moral Obligations

In the last chapter of the book's second part, Wall addresses the questions of moral obligation between us human beings. He argues that when coexistence between people is understood to be based on individual freedom, autonomy, and rationality, children and childhood will necessarily be understood as something adults must take responsibility for, rather than children being perceived as persons who in themselves can be responsible. From such a point of view, children's limited experience of autonomy and freedom will make them appear morally incapable, and thereby they are denied their full humanity.[33]

Against such an approach, Wall develops his ethics understood as a moral obligation for all to respond, to act responsibly in relation to a fellow human being, an "other." In moral encounters with other people, one's own sense-making is challenged, that is, a narrative expansion is called for when one's own self meets another who cannot be reduced to a nonperson, but must be treated as a full and equal human being. Compared to adults, children do not have as many experiences of their own self being decentered in human encounters and thus how an expanding, a new narrative, could be shaped. However, based on the relational nature of a newborn child's incorporation into the human world, the child itself will be formed, as will their responses. Thus, the child is meaning-making in relational encounters.[34]

2.5 Empowered Inclusion and Deep Interdependency

In Wall's rethinking of human life through the lens of childhood he has articulated aspects of democratic representation of children, first by noting that children are differently situated, as they live under varying conditions globally.[35] In the context of understanding citizenship globally, Wall has suggested adulthood is operating as a hidden normative presupposition and therefore a rethinking is needed that includes children for a fuller participatory understanding of global citizenship.[36]

Regarding empowerment and inclusion of children and young people, Wall and Josefsson have developed a discussion around the two concepts: *empowered inclusion* and *deep interdependency*.[37] By empowered inclusion they refer to how children and young people can be in need of support from others more adult than they, as they are often disempowered, and need adult support politically for their empowerment. Since children and young people might lack experiences of articulating their needs both their self-empowerment and empowerment from others may be necessary.

Additionally, to create understanding for how power relations are at work in today's complex globalized relationships, Josefsson and Wall also bring in the concept of deep interdependency to describe the complexities and interwovenness of relationships globally. They develop their conceptual framework against the background of three political movements: child labor, child and youth migration, and young people's organizations related to climate change. These movements are responding to global problems that children and young people have organized themselves around.[38]

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[33] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 87–88.

[34] Wall, *Ethics in Light of Childhood*, 88–110.

[35] Wall, "Can Democracy Represent Children?"

[36] Wall, "Theorizing Children's Global Citizenship."

[37] Josefsson and Wall, "Empowered Inclusion."

2.6 Childism, Moral Authorship, and Narratives

In a recent article a group of authors, Wall being one of them, have discussed the concept of childism further, its use, as well as the challenges it might pose to philosophy.[39] Being in favor of a prochild understanding of childism as elaborated above in this chapter, they note that childism academically also has been used in a limited sense to denote mechanisms of prejudices over against children and young people somewhat the way dynamics of sexism, racism et cetera, have been explored. They note, however, that some advocates of childism have not then included aspects of empowerment for resisting these oppressive dynamics. Being aware of this conflictual usage of the same term, the authors maintain a prochild position that intends to be empowering of children and young people, but that at the same time is critiquing and rethinking "the foundational historical assumptions on the basis of which children's lived experiences are sidelined in the first place."[40]

In line with this and in an effort to describe the creative capacity of children and youth when they address moral concerns of importance to them, in a recent article we drew on Wall's theoretical work.[41] Including also Mark B. Tappan and Lev Vygotsky into the discussion we pick up on Tappan's concept *moral authorship* and elaborate the importance of narratives, children's own narratives, to be crucial for their self-expression.[42] In the article we also argue for education to open up space for children's narratives as a crucial educational priority.[43]

3. Methodological Concerns

3.1 Overarching Perspective and Crucial Concepts

Given the aim of this chapter to listen to the voices of the children based on the interviews and to explore crucial values and virtues, the theoretical background sketched above was chosen to provide an overarching perspective anchored in the prochild understanding of childism.[44] The concepts of narrative, self-empowerment, empowered inclusion, deep interdependency, and moral authorship form the framework for the interpretation of the interviews. This choice means that the children's ways of expressing themselves in the qualitative interviews are understood as experience-based *narratives* whereby they in an encounter with the interviewer express their self-understanding in that moment in time. Through the narratives they express their situatedness, their concrete life situation, and make use of discourses they are surrounded by, reflecting what is constructed. At the same time, when they construct their narratives they also articulate their self-understanding and voice their own "moral authorship."

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[38] Josefsson and Wall, "Empowered Inclusion."

[39] Tanu Biswas et al., "Childism and Philosophy: A Conceptual Exploration," *Policy Futures in Education* 22 (2023):1–19, https://doi.org/10.1177/14782103231185178.

[40] Biswas et al., "Childism and Philosophy," 2.

[41] Sporre, Lotz-Sisitka, and Osbeck, "Taking the Moral Authorship."

[42] See Mark B. Tappan, "Narrative, Authorship, and the Development of Moral Authority," *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 54 (1991): 5–25, https://doi.org/10.1002/cd.23219915403; and Tappan, "Telling Moral Stories: From Agency to Authorship," *Human Development* 53 (2010): 81–86, https://doi.org/10.1159/000288209.

[43] Sporre, Lotz-Sisitka and Osbeck, "Taking the Moral Authorship," 112–14.

It is crucial to see children as both empowering themselves when speaking up, but also that they need support for that empowerment from others in their communities. The interview situation itself, with an interested adult who pays attention to what is said, can be seen as expressing a certain kind of empowerment. Additionally, the situatedness of children in the South African and Swedish contexts in these two parts of the world might in turn reflect aspects of global dependency. Thus, both empowered inclusion and deep interdependency can be useful concepts in the elaboration of the analyses, in addition to narrative, self-empowerment, and moral authorship.

3.2 Data Collection, Research Ethics, and Researcher's Positionality

The interviews in this chapter took place in the first part of 2019, in four schools in South Africa and Sweden respectively. The schools were chosen in areas where a shortage of water had been experienced. In Sweden the summer of 2018 was extremely dry, reflecting changes in weather patterns due to climate change. In South Africa from 2018 "Every-drop counts-campaigns" had taken place with climate change as a background, but in some places locally water sources were also severed by lack of repair and economic mismanagement. The schools in both countries were chosen to represent schools with students from varying socioeconomic situations. In each school class five, in one case six, children were interviewed with their age ranging from ten to twelve years. In all school classes but one the author visited the school class telling the whole class about the study and giving information about South Africa or Sweden respectively, this to stimulate interest and offer something for the teachers to connect to in their teaching if they so wished. This initiative could also build relationships for the children and the teachers to the research project and the researcher.

When carrying out the qualitative interviews with the forty-one children I followed closely an interview guide with questions of an open-ended type, giving the children ample freedom to express themselves. The interviews, lasting seventeen to forty-one minutes, took place in school, often in a room nearby the classroom. At the start of the interviews I took time to introduce myself to begin to build a relationship with the student, in addition to the presentation of the study in the school class.

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[44] Regarding a definition of value I lean on Martha Nussbaum stating it to be: "not the easiest definitional question in philosophy." Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 30 n. 21. She continues, saying that values are often notions of "what's worth pursuing, what is a good use of someone's time, what it seems good to do or attend to" (30 n. 21). In an empirical study like this one, values become situated, concretized, and interpreted by the researcher. Coming next to virtues in the analysis here they are in turn also situated, concrete, but represent more habitual patterns of actions.

I have transcribed the audiotaped interviews in full. The material is organized not only to give easy access to the individual narratives of the children, but also to provide for comparative analyses of the ten clusters of questions. The work with the material has given me an in-depth familiarity with the material and thus far three articles have been published building on the material.[45] Given the focus of this chapter on the virtues and values of forty-one children from two different geographical and societal contexts, I have started with their individual narratives to identify tendencies, both respectively South African and Swedish, but also in common in what can be described as a thematic qualitative analysis.[46]

The study has been assessed and approved through the relevant research ethical processes in Sweden and South Africa. Informed consent has been given from the parents/caregivers as well as the children themselves. On one occasion a child did not want the interview to be audiotaped so I took notes instead, but all other children agreed to be audiotaped. My impression is that the children in general enjoyed being interviewed, as if they appreciated that someone was interested in what they are thinking, an interest that made them "special" in a way. In addition, my presentation in the school class served to make my presence in the school recognized by all. I could then explain that I could unfortunately not interview all the students in one class, as it was useful for the study to visit several schools rather than merely one.

Although I am based in Sweden my familiarity with South Africa dates to 2001. Since that time, I have been involved in academic exchanges between South Africa and Sweden as a guest lecturer, as a participant in conferences, leading courses for PhD students in exchange, and pursuing research. These practices have resulted in familiarity with different parts of the country, an awareness of the development of political dynamics over time, as well as an understanding of the tendencies in policy and practice of schools and educational systems that have evolved. Also to be noted regarding my interest in childism, is my background as a feminist researcher within ethics. This focus has facilitated the recognition of silencing mechanisms as well as provided an opportunity for seeing the renewing potential of a childist approach to the theory of ethics. In summary, this study based on an analysis of qualitative interviews methodologically connects to the tradition of studies within social ethics, now with children and their experiences as lenses.

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[45] Sporre, "Young People"; Sporre, Lotz-Sisitka, and Osbeck, "Taking the Moral Authorship"; Sporre and Osbeck, "Responding to the Voices of Children." A book is planned to give ample place to presenting the material and discussing it methodologically.

[46] After thorough reading, I have in the analyses initially checked frequencies for keywords in the children's narratives, in the Swedish and South African interviews respectively, compared them, and searched further with keywords emanating out of these searches and checked their presence in the respective contexts. Based on frequencies I have checked the qualitative understandings in the texts, noting similarities and differences. I name this a qualitative content analysis in line with Mojataba Vaismoradi, Hannele Turunen, and Terese Bondas, "Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis: Implications for Conducting a Qualitative Descriptive Study," *Nursing and Health Sciences* 15 (2013): 398–405, https://doi.org/10.1111/nhs.12048.

4. Listen to Their Voices: Forty-one South African and Swedish Children

In the following section, parts of narratives of the children are exemplified through quotations and summarized first in two virtues *care for water* and *care for human beings and their rights,* and second as the value of *survival of the Earth, humans, animals, and plants.* But to start with, initially to give an overall impression of the responses from the students, I quote examples of their writing about human beings, one of the two questions in the otherwise oral interviews where the students were asked to write down their answers.[47]

4.1 About Human Beings

In the study's first interview a South African student wrote:

> A human being is a special creation from God. They feel special because God is good in their lives. A thing that's important is to treat everyone equal. Human beings can save Africa by saving water. Not all get equal opportunities but God can change their lives. Human beings must treat one another like a normal human being not a threat. A[n] important difference between human beings and creatures is to be strong and never give up. (SA school no. 1, student no. 1).

To the same question the first Swedish student answered:

> A human being can feel differently depending on what happened recently. A human being can feel differently, they can look differently, they can want different things. In Sweden everyone has the same opportunities, but in other countries it is not like that, in some countries girls are not allowed to do the same things as boys. (Sw. school no. 1, student no. 1. Author's translation).

To continue to exemplify a few more answers, randomly chosen, the last student in both countries serve as examples, here the South African voice:

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[47] From a methodological point of view I did this to be able to compare the results with responses from the C & C project and earlier Swedish studies. Additionally, methodologically the insertion of questions asking for a written response brought variation into the interview situation that was constructive. In an unpublished manuscript, we have initiated a comparison of the kind mentioned above. Annika Lilja, Karin Sporre, and Heila Lotz-Sisitka "Children, Justice and Agenda 2030" (forthcoming).

> It is important that we all do our best. The simelaretees[48] of human beings are that they all have two eyes, two feet, ten toes but they are all different in ways like lets say one has got brown eyes and another has blue. Human beings should treat each other by knowing them as family because we are actually all family if you look back in the past. The most important difference between human beings is that they have different personal opinions and that you can reconize one another. Human beings can manage to invent th [deleted] all sorts of things, litter, waste, warter, eat, drink, move, smell, taste, move and hear. (SA school no. 4, student no. 5).

The last Swedish student responding to what a human being is and how human beings are, wrote:

> A human being can be in many different ways, for example, nice, mean, or maybe scared. A human being is a kind of animal that knows of many things. A human being can, for example, feel scared, strong, cool, mean, smart, or maybe cute. Human beings think that it's important that others should have a good life, and they think the climate is important. What human beings have in common is that everyone has a life, and that everyone can be afraid. Human beings can fix a lot of things if they only want to. No, all do not have the same opportunities, it depends on how and what one has trained for. Human beings can be nice to one another, but some are mean. That we can do a lot of things that they [animals] cannot, for example, speak a language and a lot of other things. (Sw. school no. 4, student no. 5. Author's translation).

The question posed to the children about what a human being is and how they are (a question with exemplifying subquestions) had an imaginative form. Through the introduction to the question the children were asked to describe human beings to a researcher from another planet who wanted to know more, specifically about human beings.

As noted above, the answers to the question went in varying directions. Aspects of answers had a descriptive form, human beings for example having two legs, being able to use a language, or having varying colors of their hair or eyes. Reflections were shared about whether all have the same opportunities. Generally, in their responses the South African children clearly addressed poverty and differences within their society as a reason why equal opportunities were not at hand, while the Swedish children addressed inequality in more general terms, some with a focus on gender equality. Through some of the children's texts a sense of vulnerability shines forth, as when a South African girl expressed the following:

> Response (R): I think … Interviewer (I): Yeah. R: … human beings treat one another with love, with friendship, with [slight pause] respect, with privacy and with … [pause] … involving, like playing with them and letting them in and [pause] just know them really well. I: Mmm. R: And one thing I know, just, is that when you find a friend always at the

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[48] In the written quotations here the language of South African students is not corrected, but as the Swedish students' texts are translated, their spelling mistakes do not appear and their exact wording is lost through translation. As to mistakes, students in both contexts made them when writing.

> end you lose a friend. And, when you make a friendship you end up fighting and then you lose a friendship (SA, school no. 4, student no. 1).

The vulnerability in relationships this girl talks about, expressed here in relation to both a human potential for doing good but also the pain of an unexpected loss of a friend, also appears in responses to other questions in the interview. For example, children express fear of not being loved by their family, of running the risk of being violated, or excluded in friendships at school.[49]

4.2 Care for Water: A Virtue

As already indicated, the interviews started with questions in relation to lack of water, known to all but one Swedish child through the dry summer in Sweden 2018, or drought due to failing rains and maintenance problems in South Africa. This way of opening the interviews by asking for the children's familiarity with these events, next inquiring about what they had done at home to save water, and concluding with the question of why it is important that we save water, proved to be a fruitful way to start the interview and establish the relationship. The children could immediately relate to matters known to them and gave examples from the daily life at home. For some of the South African children the water situation was severe at the time the interviews took place, making one child share the following when telling how they saved water:

> R: So my little brother likes water so I take a mug and put it at a half… I: Okay. R: … and I give him. I: So, you give him just what he is going to drink and not more than that? R: Yes. I: Yeah. Yes, that is a way to save water. R: 'Cause, if we don't save water we won't have a chance to have water again. I: So, we need to save it because otherwise we may not have a chance to have more? R: Yes. And, if somebody is not having water for a week he will die. I: Hmm, that is true. Mm. We really need water to live. R: Yeah. I: Yeah. (SA, school no. 2, student no. 1).

Through this dialogue the concern for water as a limited resource becomes immediately obvious when the child talks about not giving his little brother more than what he is supposed to drink. When analyzing the interviews with the South African children there are several examples of cups of water mentioned, for example, in relation to toothbrushing or how much to drink during a day. Buckets for saving rainwater are also mentioned, as is the practice of learning when to flush toilets or not. Taps for water figure repeatedly in the conversations and, for example, one child is deeply concerned about how other children at school sometimes leave a water tap on out of carelessness.[50]

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[49] In the C & C study we can note that Swedish children today express fear of social exclusion and this is one of the most obvious results of the study. Actually, Swedish children of today experience this more intensely than children the same age when compared with children up to fifty years back. See Osbeck, Knebro, Lilja and Sporre, "Children's Existential Questions and Worldviews."

[50] SA, school no. 2, student no. 1.

Most of the South African children directly connect access of water to the survival of humans like the child above. Water is also concretely connected to the needs of daily life: cooking, washing of clothes, and cars. Among the Swedish children the need for saving water is not connected with the same immediacy to human survival. Just a few children mentioned this concern, more as something they know in principle but not as a real threat to life or daily living. Among these children, by way of contrast to the South African children, water may temporarily be gone but is then supposed to be back. A few Swedish children do not express any reason why it is important that we save water.

When responding to how to save water several of the Swedish children mention the need to shower for shorter periods, some suggest replacing showers by swimming in the outdoors during summer. Water restrictions are reflected in the mention by some of not watering lawns, and of not using water sprinklers. Some who have access to water from their own dams or wells mention how this could be used for watering plants and animals on a farm. One child in responding to the question of whether she and her family knew about the scarcity of water says:

> R: Yes. Me and my family we are very much like that. I mean, my dad and my mum often watch the news and so did I. So I was fully aware about everything. I: Mmm. Did you do anything special in your family to save water? R: Well me, we never water our lawns, so they, so [inaudible]. At least we watered our plants. We were very careful not to take too much water when we were giving water to our animals. And then it turned out that instead of showering, we went swimming in the lake. I: Okay. R: So we did not spend so much water in that way either. I: So, you were saving water in different ways. R: Mmm. I: And Why do you think it is important that we save water? R: There isn't as much water, after all. I: No. R: That, we must have something left too. You can't waste all water in one year. (Sw. school no 1., student no. 4. Author's translation).

In this quotation the child reflects how she and her parents were responding together to the scarcity of water. It is apparent in both Swedish and South African narratives that the parents, siblings, and grandmothers but also schools are present in reminding of or educating about how to carefully handle the challenge of scarcity of water through various practical means. And the children join in. They assume responsibility as exemplified above by sharing just half a cup of water, not leaving taps open, swimming in lakes, shorter showers, and so on. A special pleasure of Swedish children in summer is to run through sprinklers that water lawns to cool themselves off, so refraining from such fun was part of the story one child tells.[51]

Summarizing all these practical examples by the children of their actions in the contexts of home and school it is obvious that they express a *care for water.* In addition to the needs of human beings many of them also mention plants and animals as those needing water. In their narratives they describe themselves as interwoven in relationships with their close family, but their concerns, their ethical responsibility also extends more widely to others also in need of water, as well as to plants and animals. Due to the way the children describe what to do, how to handle the situations of scarcity of water, one could name their *care for water* a virtue—a learned preparedness for action.

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[51] Sw. school no. 4, student no. 5.

4.3 Care for Human Beings and Their Rights: A Second Virtue

The second question in the interview where children were asked to write down their responses was about justice. The cluster of questions they were to respond to dealt with what is good and fair, and what is not, why this is so, and what could be done to change things for more fairness and justice to come about.[52] When analyzing the answers to those questions it becomes obvious that the children care a lot for human beings and their rights. A Swedish girl responded to the questions in the way quoted below [questions put in parenthesis, the numerals indicating that the girl responded by starting with the last question and leaving the second one out]:

> [Question: What do you think one could do to make things better?]. R: 4. I think that everyone should have a right to healthcare even if you come from a different country. [Q: Why is it the way it is?]. 3. Because people do not think alike and are not alike in our thoughts about others. [Q: What is good and fair?]. 1. That everyone has the right to a job and roof over their head, and not be judged by how they look and what gender they are. (Sw. school no. 1, student no. 4. Author's translation).

This Swedish girl is addressing the political Swedish discussion of the right of immigrants in Sweden to benefit from the healthcare system, a matter that has been under debate, and stresses the need for not judging people by their looks and the freedom to express one's gender identity freely. Other matters that appear repeatedly in the Swedish children's texts are those of equal treatment of boys and girls/men and women. Brought up is also the right to education for all children worldwide, some including the right to a free meal at school, which they know that they themselves benefit from but that is not necessarily true for children worldwide. Freedom of expression is also among the things they mention, as is the right to love persons of the same sex.

Turning to the South African children, one of them succinctly responded in this way:

> What is good is to share you[r] things if you have a lot. Fair is you have to treat a person like you want to be treated. What is wrong is when people bully each other and do wrong things. Things are the way they are because people will never change it. We can start with

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[52] The exact wording of the question was: "Sometimes you come across things that are unfair. It can be things that happen to you yourself. It can be things that take place in South Africa [Sweden] or things that happen in other countries. There are so many things that happen to you. There are also many things happening in the world that you get to know via newspapers, TV, or the Internet. Think for a while. What do you think is good and fair in life. And why is it so? Write down what you come to think of. What do you think is wrong and not fair in life. Why is it so? Please write this down as well. What do you think one could do to make this better?" Quoted from the interview guide.

> ourselfs then start making other people do the same and it will spread. (SA school no. 1, student no. 4).

Among the South African responses, you find several that underline the need for sharing your resources if you belong to those who have such resources. One can also see the situation of high crime rates reflected when children address the injustices of violence and robbery and stress the need for the law to be followed. The concern for poor and homeless people is also present, as is the concern for all children to have access to school. One child in response to what one could do to make things better said: "Now I kind of can't but if I was an adult I would have said 'All children must go to school not even 1 left out, every single child.'"[53]

Summarizing the Swedish and South African responses to the questions of justice and fairness it becomes obvious that the children pick up on the societal situations they live in, making use of discourses they hear related to problems in their societies. Their concern is clear for both the rights of others but also their own, when matters of justice related to daily living or the future are articulated. Many of them consider education to play a crucial role in granting equal opportunities in a future perspective. That all human beings are treated equally and that they and their value should be respected is addressed by many of the children, both Swedish and South African.

Based on my interpretation of their texts I consider it appropriate to argue that *care for human beings and their rights* is a second virtue expressed in these texts. As the texts often express a proximity to the situations of the children, that they take examples from their daily life, but also express a will to act in line with their care for others, I think it is appropriate to name this also a childist virtue with a preparedness to act.

4.4 Survival of the Earth, Human Beings, Animals, and Plants

In the first quotation above among the South African children (SA school 1, student 1), God is mentioned as having created human beings and the divine being as a resource in the lives of human beings, something which is mentioned also by other South African students in response to a few of the questions in the interviews. When describing what is of value to human beings, one South African student reflected in this way when describing at first what a human being is, and next what is important to them:

> R: A human being is a living-thing it's also a mammal. They also have emotions. Some think it is money, some think it is God and some think it is family. (SA, School no. 3, student no. 1)

So, a belief in God, consumerism, or the family could be seen by this student as what people around her value. Among the Swedish children the mentioning of a relationship to something divine is totally absent in the responses, but a critique of consumerism is found among many of them. Among several of the Swedish students there is an engagement in favor of the earth, our planet, and expressions of the earth as being at risk are repeated, as they are also among the South African students.

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[53] SA school no. 1, student no. 5.

For students from both countries animals and plants have a place together with human beings in their concerns for our planet, the Earth. Looking at specifics, in general the Swedish children were more critical of cars and emissions from them and aircrafts as a sustainability concern, while the South African children to a larger extent talked about plastic in the sea as an environmental threat to fish and connected this to food chains and fish to be of importance for humans' survival. Among the differences between the two countries when speaking of sustainability concerns was that the Swedish children more often spoke of "the climate" as something of a worry to them but that they also were making references to conditions of other people in other parts of the world when addressing matters of justice. To the South African children matters of justice were more immediate and dealt with problems within their own society, also positively reflected in the discourses about the sharing of resources.

However, summarizing the discourses, both the sometimes wide-stretching, global perspectives of Swedish children, or the communal ones of a society with respect and love for one another among the South African children, the talks about water as a limited resource to share, an underlying value throughout many responses is the *care for survival of human beings, animals, and plants on planet Earth*.

5. Concluding Discussion

Being a response to the chapter by Hogan (ch. 22 in the current volume) and her exhortation to listen to mothers' voices in ancient texts, this chapter is an example of what listening to the voices of South African and Swedish children today can result in when a focus on virtues and values in relation to an educational context is at stake.

Through quotations from the interview study carried out in 2019 with forty-one children aged ten to twelve years their concerns have become obvious. In various ways, reflecting their societal contexts with both similarities and differences, *care for water* and *care for human beings and their rights* are virtues they express. An underlying value is *care for the survival of human beings, animals, and plants on planet Earth*.

Put into a current global educational context, their concerns can be understood to be resonating with the two recent UNESCO reports discussing the necessity of a rethinking of education toward a common good and the need for a new social contract considering the present-day demands of a common global sustainable future and the challenges this poses to educational systems globally.[54]

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[54] UNECSO, *Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good?* (Paris: United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2015). UNESCO, *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* (Paris: United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021).

Childism, the theoretical approach introduced in this chapter, provides a framework whereby the children's interviews can be understood as narratives. When the children encounter the interviewer, it is an opportunity for them to formulate an ethical understanding of their own situation. Through their narratives they give examples of them being empowered through relationships within the family, but also themselves being prepared to empower others when standing up to assist or act on behalf of someone else. The interviews themselves can also be understood as a form of empowerment for them to be able to articulate their concerns. In various ways their voices also give examples of deep interdependency when the children are concerned, for example, about education for all, or access to water for humans, animals, and plants. Through the mere mentioning of parents, siblings, and other persons around them their narratives testify to the webs of relationships they are part of, and moments of vulnerability also become obvious. Finally, their personal narratives, as they in their own way take on the interview questions, are examples of their moral authorship.

As a "bridge" to the text by Hogan, the work of Cannon was chosen. Cannon's way of elaborating a womanist ethics, an ethics born out of the narratives of the lived lives of African-American women but at the same time being an ethic in favor of them—a way to formulate a pro-African-American women ethics—is here used as an inspiring example. If understood in such a way, this study could be said to be one effort of articulating a childist ethics, with the two virtues and the value articulated in the interviews with the South African and Swedish children pointing in such a direction.

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