Let's Accept that Children Get Anxious Too! A Philosophical Response to a Childhood in Crisis

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I am well aware of the countless lives of children, including that of my own, that are affected daily by anxiety's pain.[1] This article is an address to this pain and does not discount it. My concern however is that the current narratives about anxiety in philosophy and in childhood studies are inadequate and do not provide robust educational responses to anxiety in childhood. My assumption is that a serious response to anxiety cannot be left only to those working in medicine and psychology. Philosophers of education must also engage with anxiety and childhood.

NARRATIVES OF ANXIETY IN CHILDHOOD AND IN PHILOSOPHY

In the September 2017 issue of *The Atlantic*, psychologist Jean Twinge writes, "It's not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades, if ever."[2] This expressed worry, over worry, was only an echo of a narrative that surfaced in the modern era in the early 1980s with David Elkind's work, *The Hurried Child*, and in Neil Postman's work, *The Disappearance of Childhood*. And yet even these works were only extensions of a narrative that has held dominance in the Western world, at least since the publication of Rousseau's É*mile*, that the innocence of childhood is disappearing. In the Western mind at least, childhood has always been in its death throes, the threat of television, homework, the iPhone and general anxiety only the most recent weapons against it.[3] What the narrative does is force the experience of anxiety in childhood into the realm of the unnatural and abnormal—a good child cannot be anxious and anxiety cannot be part of a good childhood.[4]

However, the narrative of anxiety in philosophy has quite a different feel. Simon Critchley writes: "Anxiety is perhaps the philosophy mood par excellence, it is the experience of detachment from things and from others where I can begin to think freely for myself."[5] In essence, Critchley argues that the "good" philosopher is they who knows the self well enough to embrace both the ecstasy and anxiety of living and of death.[6] Within this narrative, the philosopher celebrates anxiety's ability to lead one towards truth and turn away from the mad chaos of society.

The two seemingly disparate narratives quietly inform one another and the discourse on anxiety in philosophy and in childhood. Both serve to point out who gets to feel anxious, who can do philosophy, and what it means to do philosophy well. The argument following these connections might be something like this: If one has to be anxious to do philosophy, doing philosophy is too dangerous for children (they would submit to the anxiety) and philosophy is also too difficult for children (they cognitively and developmentally cannot grasp this kind of thinking that calls for detachment and logic). While many have pushed back against the second of the two claims, that children cannot actually do philosophy, there is less challenge to the first claim, that philosophy is too dangerous. The reluctance to challenge this first part of the argument is due to the dominant narrative of anxiety in childhood, which is that childhood must be free from worry. Thus, hypothetically neither philosophy nor anxiety has any place in childhood. This, of course, is also a celebration of the mature adult, those who can rationally think through the terrorizing grip of anxiety, quelling fear by residing in the logic of discourse.

Simone de Beauvoir offers a revision to both narratives, providing a recourse to those who see philosophy and childhood as interlocutors of one another. Moreover, her disclosure of childhood in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* recognizes the presence of anxiety as a normal human response in even the very young. And she then offers the beginnings of the adult moral response to anxiety's presence, which appears to be a guided approach to engaging in philosophy as lived experience.

BEAUVOIR ON ANXIETY AND CHILDHOOD

In the resilient child Simone de Beauvoir describes in her *Memoirs*, we find a model of childhood in which anxiety is accepted as a normal response to the human condition. Her insights into anxiety and anguish felt by the young recognize childhood's complexity. This view of childhood problematizes a singular focus on the deficits of childhood, seeing instead in childhood its immediate qualities and perplexities. While she does not go so far as to dismantle the aetonormative lens of the mature adult onto childhood, she nevertheless positions the child as a person with will and some moral agency.[7] And thus her focus turns towards the adult's responsibility to nurture and educate the developing and fully potential child in their present experience. I conclude she sees a humane responsibility to foster a philosophical resilience to anxiety in the young and to appreciate its presence as a marker of children as persons.[8]

Though Beauvoir firmly situates herself within the existentialist tradition, recognizing the position of "bad faith" in which most humans find themselves, she challenges practices of freedom focused on the autonomous subject. She finds that these individually directed practices only serve to foster a separation between the spirit and the body, or material being, from consciousness. According to Beauvoir, most men in this situation become, "serious" and try to recover the void or gap by grasping at things or values, or to reside wholly within the self, *pour-soi* (for itself).[9] Man's seriousness becomes the articulation of a being without the possibility of freedom. He lives only as measured by the value of others.[10]

To live freely Beauvoir argues, one must instead recognize and disclose being, i.e.: find ways to creatively express with others one's material boundaries. She argues that one's own situation and lived experience are central to the project of practicing freedom.[11] To live well is to experience both the ambiguity of disclosure even while finding joy in the activity, which involves complete immersion and embodiment.[12] And she discovers that this is doing philosophy as lived experience.

To engage in a project of freedom is thus not to choose one way of

life over another; it is to find possibility within one's life as situated. It is to practice freedom in an impossibly un-free space of a particular time, history, and context. It is to practice freedom in relation.[13] In the recognition that individuals are inter-subjective and can only act within their present, the risk of freedom becomes bearable and possible. This provides the construct that resists and is resilient to anxiety. Beauvoir situates herself to embrace both body and spirit within all human experience. Recognizing this in others provides a rich ethical and moral foundation.[14] Other people are not hell for Beauvoir, they are one's salvation.

For Beauvoir then, anxiety is not a condition that points one towards truth, it is a symptom of ignoring that one is not and never will be completely free. Anxiety is not the mood of a good philosopher; it is merely the symptom of those who are living towards a future of false absolutes. Beauvoir offers philosophy a revised understanding of anxiety. Anxiety is what happens when persons practice a false freedom directed toward accomplishing tasks in the future, embodying other's values, and attempt these tasks without regard for others. Anxiety comes from unboundedness, from ignoring one's material condition. And the response is neither to turn away from one's material condition nor to blindly accept it.

One of the reasons Beauvoir is interested in an ethics of freedom is that she is arguing for a way to heal this gaping wound of being—the acknowledgement that from birth on, one moves further and further from feeling at one with the world. Beauvoir writes that those who most often feel what it means to be in the world are children:

> In particular, it often happens that children, who are not yet anchored in their little corner of the universe, experience with astonishment their "Being-in-the-world" as they experience their bodies.[15]

Childhood allows for a unique time in the human life where one is both secure and un-free, an experience denied the adult. Children thus can feel both the sense of belonging and of the eventual separation with the world.

Her examinations of childhood and lived experience are both personal and abstract and occur in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, *The Second Sex*, and *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*. Her inquiry of childhood makes apparent the tension between ontological freedom and situated freedom tenable and bearable. She finds that the project of freedom is something that can be developed within life and it is first practiced in childhood. According to Beauvoir a child can either learn to become free by willing all others to be free; or, the child may learn to become a slave to absolute values and choices (seriousness).[16]

Memoirs shows how great an effort it is to develop freely in the world. The inquiry takes two tracks, each dependent on the other. First, Beauvoir is engaged in describing her own successful apprenticeship to freedom against the failed apprenticeship of her best friend (Zaza). Secondly, Beauvoir is setting out a relationship to her own childhood, rooted in freedom. She chooses to forge a relationship with herself as child as author, she makes room then for herself as a child to be the other that she frees.[17] This will be why the discussion in the particular of the girl child and her development is central to Beauvoir's analysis of the construct of woman in the *The Second Sex* and why *Memoirs* is both a philosophical as well as creative project.

Beauvoir sees children emphatically. By telling the story of her own apprenticeship to freedom, Beauvoir discloses the transcendent and embodied freedom of childhood. She outlines ways of seeing and describing freedom in childhood. She finds evidence that the project of freedom can be embodied or situated, ambiguous, and relational. Moreover, she recovers the joy spent in this suffering time. This will enable her to position childhood as fundamentally a condition that holds the possibility which calls on others to support and nurture the development of this ethical way of being.[18]

The model of freedom that Beauvoir apprentices herself to as a child is not unanchored freedom; it is an astonished freedom at finding oneself able to be free and joyful while at the same time recognizing that one is, yes, a being, who is caught up in the world. Beauvoir challenges then the dominant narrative of childhood as an absolute other, something that is pure and innocent, that does not feel like a human by recognizing in childhood another kind of

freedom, this is a transcendent or ontological freedom—the freedom that all persons potentially can embrace at every moment.

Beauvoir locates the expression of this second freedom in the anger and anxiety felt by children in their childhoods. For it is in these moments that the child feels the inconsistency between her supposed freedom and lack of responsibility (recall that for Beauvoir one can only truly be free if one can choose between responsibilities and values). She recalls her temper tantrums she had at age three, recognizing children's rage as an expression of the anxiety of living beings:

> Why must I stop playing just at that particular moment? I seemed to be confronted everywhere by force, never by necessity. At the root of these implacable laws, that lay as heavily as lead upon my spirit, I glimpsed a sickening void: this was the pit I used to plunge into, my whole being racked with screams of rage.[19]

Beauvoir recognizes the arbitrariness of laws over persons, particularly children. Tellingly, at every turn, external forces confront her body as well as her spirit. Were children mere material objects, only facticity, then force would be ample motivation for them to do anything. As Beauvoir recognizes (and really anyone who has told a three-year-old to do anything recognizes) the rages felt by Beauvoir within her childhood indicate a complex human spirit that both can be constrained and can feel this containment. Conscious beings act due to internal necessity; they are propelled forward to act, not pulled down upon by external force. Beauvoir recognizes that the rage of her childhood discloses childhood as a fully human and conscious experience, rage and anxiety against rule and order. Children are embodied and situated. Moreover, the child lacks knowledge and depends completely upon the authority figures that surround, nurture, and cherish him or her. Yet, within this facticity, the child is also a person in him or herself; he or she is transcendent as only beings with free will and consciousness can be.

Beauvoir does recognize that children's anxiety about living is often

short-lived. She admits that children do feel at home in the world (for the most part) because they are deeply connected to it. The world makes sense because they understand themselves as wholly within situation. And, if they do feel the anguish of freedom (of being at once related to the world and a subject apart from the world), this is quickly rectified by the seemingly absoluteness of values held by esteemed parents and teachers over them. She continues:

> On the whole, my rages were adequate compensation for the arbitrary nature of the laws that bound me; they saved me from brooding in silent rancor. And I never seriously called authority in question. The conduct of adults only seemed to me to be suspect in so far as it took advantage of my youthful state: this is what I was really revolting against. But I accepted without question the values and the principles of those around me.[20]

Beauvoir sees that within these two modes of childhood, rage and feeling-at-home, there is a possible education to living well in the world. For even as one lives within these two poles, which might seem contradictory, in essence this is what all human life entails, making the choice to live freely or to be oppressed. Thus, childhood (as Schultz writes) is an opportunity to apprentice, to learn to lean towards one of these two extremes (recognizing that to dwell always within one extreme is impossible).

Beauvoir argues that childhood is the time of apprenticeship to either freedom *or* oppression and thus must inhabit this seemingly dual world. She presents then a challenge: to see that the child, even in this contradictory space, can move toward freedom. One might read this as an educative argument. Beauvoir writes:

> To treat him as a child is not to bar him from the future but to open it to him; he needs to be taken in hand, he invites authority, it is the form which the resistance of activity, through which all liberation is brought about, takes for him. And on the other hand, even in this situation the child has

> a right to his freedom and must be respected as a human person.[21]

Beauvoir sees that freedom to choose and to make decisions develops throughout one's life, culminating (as for Rousseau) in the ultimate resistance and fight against seriousness during adolescence. The situation of freedom however is already present for the child; it is something that the child learns to recognize with support and guidance, but as an apprentice, in the practice of the freedom with others, itself. This is why, as an adolescent, it is possible to choose freedom, for it is has always been present to the child as possibility. Children see and feel freedom. They can disclose the world around them, though this is a difficult task that they are often denied time and the space to attempt.

Here too is the philosophical language missing in medical and psychological approaches to anxiety. For, rather than focusing on limitations or deformation of human physiology and mind, we rather instead find a way to articulate anxiety as a condition of being. Rather than a mood layered over the mind and body that we uncover or distract ourselves from, we know that anxiety is an accurate response to the complexity of living in an unjust and evil world. And with this acknowledgement, the language of philosophy then allows for responses to anxiety to include other aspects of human life—education, social, political, and the natural world. Most importantly others, who can be a part of what it means both to diagnose and develop resiliency to anxiety's grip.

Beauvoir challenges the serious person to find the anxiety as well as the joy of childhood thus revealing and recovering the project of joyful and unserious freedom in their adult life. Moreover, in this disclosure, she offers a philosophical response to the threat of anxiety, which is not to embrace this fear of fear but to seek ways to disclose, name, and turn away from actions that fund it—in short, to do philosophy within one's life.[22] Beauvoir has practiced this herself, reframing the concept of childhood through memoir. Showing a childhood that includes anxiety, allowing for this complicated aspect of human life within the time of development. Her project is philosophical but it does not call for detachment or a turning away from the world, rather, anxiety calls for a philosophical response rooted in relationship, art, and lived experience.

It is not anxiety that makes a child lose childhood, anxiety is a symptom of any human living too seriously. Thus, the real crisis is not a loss of childhood but a loss of resiliency overall, our lack of ability to teach ourselves and our children to rage, to create, and to reach out to others.

DEVELOPING RESILIENCY

This final part of the argument rests on an interpretation of Beauvoir's closing lines and chapter of *Memoir*s. Here she ends her childhood with the death of her childhood friend, Zaza. After positing that she does not believe it was an illness but rather exhaustion and anxiety which destroyed her young friend, she closes with these words, "… for a long time I believe that I had paid for my own freedom with her death."[23] Closing the memoir with the story of this death and of her feelings of guilt, Beauvoir moves away from a chronological story of her life, instead embarking on an ethical project. Zaza's death serves as the impetus for Beauvoir to inquire into how one grows toward or against freedom. Or, to put it another way, how she managed to escape the anguish of anxiety in childhood while her best friend did not.

The child of Beauvoir's writing (Beauvoir) escapes anxiety's grip (death) only when she is guided by others to view the world as a set of relationships between others, to recognize that others do provide limits and boundaries, and to practice within these relationships choices is to live freely. For Beauvoir the development of her resiliency was situated and developed by both her material world and her own relationships. She recognizes that the tempers of her childhood, her own response to the "sickening void" served her well. They were the well-spring of understanding what it meant to live freely, even within a particularly situated life. They were the beginning of her development towards freedom, a development that in later years that would also include unbarred access to literature, studying to become a teacher, and her love affair with philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. So too also was the response of her family members, who provided a foundation in which to resist and to practice her rages.

By acknowledging Zaza's death as tragic, we know that unlike her male

philosophical counterparts Beauvoir understands intimately the risk of anxiety, particularly when felt in childhood. Rather than fearing anxiety in childhood however, she makes the case that we must offer children spaces in which to practice feeling this anxiety and to then allow them to practice their freedom, not by letting them turn away from society but by encouraging their resistance to their experiences of being bound. We do this by creating space and allowing for their expressions of frustration, of anger, and of injustice. We do this by preparing them to engage with questions of philosophy, allowing them space to develop words, concepts, and practices that make possible revolt in their adolescence. And, as Beauvoir tells us, when we endeavor to develop children's own freedoms, we will make ourselves free.

What would it mean to apprentice children to freedom rather than to the life of the serious? Part of the task is guiding them to engage in philosophy as lived experience, creating spaces for questions and inquiry about life's joys, fears, and pain. Zaza and Beauvoir had a remarkable friendship and it is telling that Beauvoir ends her childhood memoirs with her death. This is Beauvoir engaged in philosophy, asking—*What does it mean to be a friend? Can a good person die? Can a good friend live without their friend? Who is responsible for cultivating a friend's self?* Though these are serious philosophical questions they don't often surface in a history of philosophy class. But, they are common questions that begin inquiries led by children engaged in philosophical communities of inquiry—places where children are learning to think philosophically with one another, perhaps as friends. This is not the traditional philosophy of the academic classroom, but it is the philosophy of lived experience for many children and adults who struggle with what it means to build, shape, and create relationships that help them to flourish. In quite a different way there are children and adults who make music together in open music jams, forming a small community of music makers and asking one another—*What should we create today, how should we move our bodies, what sounds can we make in this space*? In still another place a teacher might ask of the students in a literature class—*What are we worried about in the world today, and how might we learn more about that problem?* These are only some examples of what it means to engage children in the apprenticeship of learning to live freely,

allowing them to ask questions of their world, of themselves, of each other, making space and time to engage in dialogue and creative acts. It is these kinds of responses that get cultivated when we ask philosophy to critically respond to anxiety in childhood—we get responses that focus on education and building shared worlds together.

Beauvoir might tell us in 2018, yes, your children are anxious, but so are you! Accepting both anxiety and rage as a normal response to the difficulty of being human is to recognize in children, their humanity. Hence, our responsibility as an adult is to also support children's development towards their most free selves, no matter their fortune or accident of birth. This includes creating space for the education of and the development of strategies in childhood in which to understand the anxiety of living. If Beauvoir is correct, making philosophical inquiry a part of our education and interactions with our children, may be an appropriate ameliorative response to the crippling presence of the goddess of anxiety in our lives.[24]

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1 17.1 million children in the United States have or have had a mental disorder diagnosis. "Children's Mental Health Report," *Child Mind Institute*, 2015, https://childmind.org/2015-childrens-mental-health-report/.
2 Jean M. Twenge, "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?," *The Atlantic*, September 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/.
3 Challenges to this narrative do appear, most forcibly from scholars looking at the experiences of historically disadvantaged children. As Steven Mintz asks, whether or not minority, poor, or immigrant children ever had an idyllic American childhood to lose is a serious question and one that the "loss of childhood" narrative conveniently forgets, as it romanticizes and privileges an imagined white, middle-class child. Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (United States: Harvard University Press, 2006).
4 Moreover, David Kennedy argues, the "loss of childhood" thesis itself signifies something how modern culture understands, not only the child but itself, qua adult. Instead, what we are seeing is the possibility of a transformative shifting of the boundaries between "child" and "adult." Rather than a loss we are in the midst of a transformation of the child seen as marginalized "other" to that of a subject possessing knowledge and agency. For Kennedy, the loss position does not take into consideration the dynamic relationship between adults and children and threatens any conception of children's agency to choose aspects of their own childhood expe-

rience.

5 Simon Critchley, "Being and Time, part 5: Anxiety," *The Guardian,* July 6, 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jul/06/heidegger-philosophy-being.

6 Perhaps the clearest articulation of this in Western philosophy comes from the work of Kierkegaard, who embraces anxiety as that which funds human creativity and potentiality. Dera Sipe, "Kierkegaard and Feminism: A Paradoxical Friendship," ed. Edward Pettit, *Concept: an interdisciplinary journal of graduate studies* 27 (2003), 21, https://concept.journals.villanova.edu/article/view/146

7 "In other words, the way the adult narrator narrates the child reveals the degree of alterity — yet degree only, since alterity is by definition inevitable in writing for children." Maria Nikolajeva, "Theory, Post-Theory, and Aetonomative Theory," *Children's Literature Studies and Literary Theory Today* 36, no. 1 (2009): 13-24.

8 In the rest of the article I will use Beauvoir to discuss some implications for all children, though Beauvoir herself often situates the child in her texts as female.

9 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, ed. Dawn Gaitis (Webster University Philosophy Department, 2006), http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/de-beauvoir/ambiguity/.

10 Beauvoir's emphasis on men here is important for she will make the case that women's lived experience may be already shackled due to the material constraints the social and physical world presents as woman. For Beauvoir, *woman* is constructed.

11 This alternative reading of freedom for Beauvoir makes necessary a different kind of philosophical inquiry. Rather than a philosophical treatise, Beauvoir's philosophy necessitates inquiry into lived experience using autobiography.

12 William C. Pamerleau, "Making a Meaningful Life: Rereading Beauvoir," *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 6, no. 3/4 (1999): 79-83.

13 Elaine Holveck, *Simone de Beauvoir's Philosophy of Lived Experience: Literature and Metaphysics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 92.

14 Deborah Berghoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997), 99.

15 Simone de Beauvoir, "Literature and Metaphysics," in *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons, trans. Veronique Zaytzeff and Frederick M. Morrison (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 273.

16 Sally Scholz, "That All Children Should Be Free: Beauvoir, Rousseau, and Childhood," *Hypatia* 25 no. 2 (2010): 401-402.

17 Miranda Fricker, "Life-Story in Beauvoir's Memoirs," in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Claudia Card (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 225.

18 Susan Bredlau, "Simone de Beauvoir's Apprenticeship of Freedom," *PhaenEx* 6, no. 1 (2011): 42-43; Scholz, "That All Children Should Be Free."

19 Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, trans. James Kirkup (Cleveland, OH, and New York, NY: The World Publishing Company, 1959), 14.

20 Beauvoir, *Memoirs,* 17.

21 Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity.*

22 Like Rousseau she accepts that a life founded in necessity will turn the child

towards the positive *amour de soi* (love of the self) from the negative and harmful *amour de propre* (love based on how others love you). However, unlike Rousseau this movement is ensured not through a social contract predicated on sexual desire and the heteronormative family but a relational acceptance that one must and should live with others that you desire to make more free.

23 Beauvoir, *Memoirs*, 382.

24 The goddess of anxiety in Greek myth is Oizys. "Oizys," *Wikipedia*, December 9, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oizys