**Afterword**

**Children Ruin Everything!**

**Gary Anderson**

[{figure 1}]

This Afterword is a provocation. It is an adult’s attempt to argue for more agency for children, paradoxical though that may be. There is an urgent personal-political need for me, as a father of four boys with a critical arts practice (The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home), to understand children beyond the epistemological limits of ‘development’. This provocation consists in the suggestion that all adults need to undertake a radical and practical re-evaluation of what children actually are in the here and now. Children, my own children in particular, are robbed of much of their agency because of an unthinking reproduction of repressive ontologies born out of ‘development’. I recognize this in my own parenting. For example, I call them ‘children’ and treat them as such as if one day I will start calling them ‘adults’ with full citizens’ rights. This re-evaluation will not happen overnight, so in the meantime it is necessary for me to experiment with other kinds of parenting and ontological positioning. For the Afterword, I experiment with a series of imagined reversals of power relations between a father and his children. In what follows, the children problematize the ontological claims made by adults about children and in doing so enact newly established power relations where the categories of child and adult hopefully fall into disrepute. My aim here is to do some applied philosophy via four short performances on my children in order to re-evaluate not only the idea of children, but to provide an opportunity for adult readers of these pages to rethink children’s agency. The preceding pages of this journal have challenged the category of children in several ways, for this provocation I want to explode the category altogether. So, as a last-ditch effort what follows is a playful, but serious, account of imagined interactions between a father and his four sons, all invented, and all without their permission. I wish to speculatively determine how children, in ruining everything for their father are always already in the process of building fresh, radically immanent understandings of agency out of the rubble of outdated ontologies. Children do this a lot. In other words, they ruin everything, thankfully.

For as long as I can remember, I have been unintentionally reproducing a genetic epistemology of developmental progression from ‘unsophisticated’ to ‘sophisticated’ in my everyday living. This ‘cognitive development’ is most closely associated with the Swiss clinical psychologist Jean Piaget (1896--1980) and his ground-breaking work The Psychology of the Child (1966). My recollections of schooling are of me ‘developing’ all the time alongside schoolmates; my memories are reproduced in such a way as to convince me of my development from my conception at the end of summer 1971, until now. Accordingly, one fine day, I must have stopped being a baby and become a child, then become an adolescent, then become an adult. Another fine day saw the commencement of my physical demise into middle age, but somewhere in between those stages I had children of my own, four of them -- fresh blood perhaps for Piaget’s developmental epistemes and doxa. My latest memories of my children’s childhood via the many photo albums we keep and enjoy at home are loaded with genetic epistemologies of cognitive development or how my children are always becoming more ‘sophisticated’ or more ready to fully participate.

It is a tricky task to break out of a lifetime of tacit belief in development. What motivates me is the relatively recent realization that my unthinking reproduction of developmental schemas in my parenting actively denies my children agency. It does this by figuring them as ‘not yet developed enough’ and therefore unable to participate fully in society’s affairs. By definition society’s mechanisms for power are only available to fully developed subjects; by definition again children are always already excluded. Hand on heart, that is a fairly accurate description of my parenting. This is socially and politically urgent, but it is also personally urgent. The year 2018 is probably the last year in which all my four children (aged between 3 and 17 at the time of writing) will be living with me under the same roof, before the oldest one leaves for university (hopefully!). So I am eager to attempt to intervene in my own Piagetic parenting while I have them all at home.

I want to build on and experiment with what I have written before about my own children where I toyed with the fanciful idea that each of my children are as important to my academic thinking as sophisticated and celebrated philosophers and artists might be (Anderson 2016: 74--83). I want to develop that by having the children appear to articulate the philosophical frameworks associated with the philosopher or artist I assign them. Here, I’m interested in the affective shock of deploying the child to articulate a more powerful and persuasive counter-definition of children. I do this in the hope of achieving a more complete destruction of any remnants of Piagetic developmental epistemologies lingering around in my own parenting, but also to lay down a friendly challenge for other adult readers of this journal to live for a moment in the crisis of ontological confusion about what children actually are. The implications are significant for my own parenting, but, hopefully, also for how performance can be deployed to intervene in discrimination against children in what Swedish NGO Gapminder describe as an era of ‘peak’ children (Gapminder n.d.). Accordingly, I will be assigning to Neal (17) and Gabriel (15) the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632--1677) and the twentieth-century French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925--1995) respectively; Sid (10) is the German performance artist Joseph Beuys (1921--1986) and James (3) takes on the role of Algerian-born French Marxist-Spinozist philosopher Louis Althusser (1918--1990).[{note}]1 ‘Each of my boys is a philosopher for me’ (Anderson 2016: 84). Continuing in this speculative vein I will be referring to texts that were mostly published in and around the early 1970s, when I was conceived, born and became child. Finally, methodologically speaking, it is important to state from the outset that I make no claim to speak for my children here, but on them. My children have already, in various ways and over the last decade, chastised me for including them in my thinking.[{note}]2 My only defence is that this piece of writing is not their work and I apologize to them in advance for any misunderstanding. All dialogues that follow between my children and myself are three-quarters invented, one-quarter lived. I am pretending my children are philosophers and artists in order to challenge my own everyday repressive definition of children as not yet ready to fully participate in citizenship. I want to do this with reference to the era of the early 1970s, a time when Spinoza, via Deleuze under the teachings of Althusser, put forward a line of thinking that challenges Piaget thinking. Around the same time Beuys is revolutionizing conceptions of what art can be via social sculpture and the functions of art in everyday life. It is into this context that I became a child in 1972.

**Scene #1: James, age 3 (Louis Althusser)**

Piaget seems to ask what a child is capable of but the problem is that he only measures that ability in relation to a preformed set of ideas about what constitutes full development (Piaget 1972). Children either conform to this or are labelled otherwise, for example ‘preoperational’, ‘egocentric’ or even ‘delinquent’. Piaget’s 1966 book The Psychology of the Child was frequently reprinted but my copy is from 1972 -- the year I was born. James caught me reading it. It made me eager to set up the infamous egocentrism test: the ‘three mountains’ experiment first undertaken in 1956 by Piaget and Barbel Inhelder. This clinical test is designed to ascertain levels of egocentrism or an inability to see things from another’s perspective. Having done my Piaget prep, I undertook the experiment with James. Admittedly I have no skill in papier mâché or mountain building from cardboard, so I used an old Laithwaite’s wine box and told him it was a mountain. I put his Lego Policeman on the other side of the box, out of view, and put his Lego Batman on the top of the box and a Lego Teacher on the other side of the box. I asked him to walk around the box and tell me who could see whom. I think his response is not unique among 3 year olds and went something like this:

**James:** Dad, that’s silly. You silly Da-da. Silly Da-da, silly Da-da.

**Dad:** Why?

**James:** Batman can see in the dark and the teacher can see me when we play in the playground. So, no pushing over. No pushing over! Miss Kelly says no push-ing oh-ver!

**Dad:** OK. What can the policeman see?

**James:** The policeman can see the jail and he’s got a key for the jail and he will sleep there tomorrow. He will go to jail and be a bully in the jail for everyone and push everyone over till they cry.

**Dad:** Yes, James. Batman is on top of the mountain [pats the top of the box] here [pats the box again], Batman. Can Batman see the teacher and the policeman?

**James:** [Picks up Batman from top of box, imitates voice-over from Lego Batman] You, stupid teacher! You will go to jail! [Flies Batman into teacher’s head] You will go to the jail forever! [Knocks box off table with elbow]. For EVER!

[Pause]

**Dad:** James, why is Batman being nasty?

**James:** Because the teacher is stupid and I didn’t push Owen over.

**Dad:** Who pushed Owen over?

**James:** Nobody. He fell over on the playground. Miss Kelly said I pushed him. [Starts to cry]

**Dad:** OK James. OK. Will I get you a drink of milk? Or apple juice?

**James:** [Crying subsides] Dad, I’m thirsty. I want milk, no, no, no apple juice please, no, no milk.

**Dad:** Milk what?

**James:** [Screwing up his eyes] Milk pleeeees.

**Dad:** [Gets milk from fridge] Some milk.

**James:** [Suddenly] No, Daddy, no Daddy! [Shouting] Nooo! I waaant apple jooooos! Silly Daddy! [Cries.]

I think Piaget would be disappointed. What I quickly realized was that in undertaking the experiment I was engaging James in an act of enforced interpellation. This situated him as somebody who would have to behave correctly by internalizing the principles of the test in order to validate the experiment and subsequent conclusions. What was at risk was his being labelled ‘preoperational’ or ‘egocentric’ -- in other words he would have to suffer a reduction in agency. James seemed to refuse this. Instead he chose to engage in another mode of expression, which directly undermined the rules of my experiment. I realized subsequently that I had offered James an opportunity to provide me with some of the secrets of his lived experience of some complex dialoguing with ISAs (Ideological State Apparatuses) and RSAs (Repressive State Apparatuses). The teacher’s control strategies at school to prevent ‘bullying’ clearly stuck in his mind while the policeman’s obsession with prison and his powers of suppression indicate something of James’ relationship to repressive structures, and The Lego Batman Movie (2017). The fact that James deliberately knocked the box off the kitchen table reminded me of his Althusserian-like power to denounce suspicious phenomena. Or as Althusser put it in another context, admittedly but interestingly for me published around the same time as Piaget (and around the end of the summer of 1971):

As Marx said, every child knows that a social formation which did not reproduce the conditions of production at the same time would not last a year. (Althusser 1971)

Never mind a year, in this case it did not last five minutes. James seems to have fulfilled Althusser’s Spinozist-Marxian prophesy.

**Scene #2 & #3: Neal, age 17 (Baruch Spinoza) & Gabriel, age 15 (Gilles Deleuze)**

In searching for theoretical ground to displace a lived understanding of the child as ‘in development’ Spinoza acts like a nuclear blast decimating all before it. Becoming a parent was a bit like that, with previously unimagined senses of responsibility (Anderson 2016: 74--83). If the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is based on Kantian understandings of what constitutes moral order and what the status of a human is (Rauber 2009), then it is necessary to revisit a line of philosophical thought that pre-dates and in my view pre-empts Kantian notions of the subject and their duties to society. If a Kantian world view is based on the centrality of the human (rational, European, white, male, city dweller and purveyor of a moral superiority) in the universe and the instrumental potential of everything to hand (Johnson and Cureton 2017), it is Spinoza’s world view of a decentralized, post-anthropocentric subject as a mode or manner of expression of the infinite substance that helps reframe what children actually are. In other words, Spinoza gives children a chance. Kant would wait until children had developed enough before they counted as full citizens. Spinoza would listen to children (or watch them, like he would spiders) carefully seeking to uncover which particular forces were operating through them (Colerus in Deleuze 2001: 12).[{note}]3

This Spinozist understanding of reality is based on the idea that there is one infinite substance from which all phenomena are modes or manners of expression. The Ethics, Spinoza’s key philosophical work published just after his death in 1677, on the first page states:

By God, I mean a being absolutely infinite -- that is, a substance consisting in infinite attributes, of which each expresses eternal and infinite essentiality … absolutely infinite, [which] contains in its essence whatever expresses reality, and involves no negation. (Spinoza n.d.)

Spinoza describes a world in which there is no hierarchy of value because everything is a mode or manner of expression of the infinite substance. Nothing more. Even ‘value’ is only another mode of expression. The Spinozist revolution is to recast what we understand to be valuable in contradistinction to an established standard. A Spinozist understanding of reality suggests that whatever has agency is a joyous expression of the infinite substance. In one blow Spinoza liberates all children as agents of their own lives. Not only does this trouble popular teleological notions of what a child might be, that is, somebody not yet grown up, but also throws into disrepute any notions of the superiority of adulthood. Spinoza might have said that the idea of something developing into fruition at a later date, one fine day, is an idea distinctly lacking in sense (Deleuze 1981). Spinoza helps us move from a transcendent (where agency is displaced) to an immanent (where agency is available) understanding of reality. The implications of this for children are significant. Adults no longer have any justification to subject children to systemic discrimination in order to maintain their own privileges. Theoretically speaking, the problem of how we define children is already solved.

And yet Spinoza describes childhood in mostly negative terms: ‘[c]hildhood is an abject state’ and ‘childhood is a state of impotence and slavery, a state of foolishness in which we depend in the highest degree on external causes, more sadness than joy, cut off from our power of action’ (Spinoza in Deleuze 1992: 262--3). Spinoza isn’t contradicting himself here, he is lamenting the then contemporary practices of childhood. It could have been written today or when I was a child in the early 1970s. In 1968 Deleuze writes his first major Spinoza related work Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza (Deleuze 1992), in part to make sense of Spinoza’s notions of radical immanence. Just as Neal’s arrival in the world confused me at first, he only really made sense when Gabriel came along. The revolution was Neal, but understanding that revolution and applying it to my everyday life is Gabriel. You can’t really have one without the other. In this sense it still unnerves me that they were born on the same day two years apart, 4 October 2000 and 2002.

Deleuze (with Félix Guattari) in 1988 when I was Gabriel’s age, now 15, in A Thousand Plateaus makes a case for a revised Spinozism stating that ‘we need to turn to children’ in understanding our powers of action and processes of becoming (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 257). In the chapter or plateau ‘On the Refrain’ Deleuze and Guattari are in the process of establishing a Spinozist understanding of reality and how that could kick-start a reimagining of political and social agency. All of this on the back of what it means to ‘turn to children’. Althusser and Piaget are also struggling for dominance in their respective disciplines in relation to children and what they are subjected to. In this context Deleuze publishes Spinoza: Practical Philosophyin 1970 where he outlines a practical account of what to do with Spinoza’s thought. This sort of practical understanding of Spinoza is just what my Piagetic parenting needs. Here Deleuze, in a few sentences, armed with Spinoza, challenges dominant academic thinking of the day. A relevant conversation might have gone something like this:

**Gabriel:** Baruch?

**Neal:** Yes, Gilles.

**Gabriel:** I have Immanuel Kant in philosophy, Lacan in psychoanalysis and Piaget in clinical psychology. Between the three of them they dominate people’s everyday understandings of the world and especially of us, children. It’s an outrage!

**Neal:** Although 100 years after my death it seems Kant believes all human behaviour is morally defective until such a time as one realizes one’s essence through the practice of a socially approved morality.

**Gabriel:** Yes, one can only realize one’s essence by abiding by a socially imposed master narrative of duties derived from the ‘sage’. The sage could be a philosopher or statesman -- Kant happened to be dabble in both.[{note}]4

**Neal:** Again, 300 years ahead of my time, Jacques Lacan maintained that desire and therefore human behaviour is produced from the traumatizing gap discovered between ‘the Real’ and ‘the Symbolic’, often characterized as ‘the Lack (Manque)’. This of course was a philosophical upgrade from Sigmund Freud’s grubby little concept of the Oedipus Complex.

**Gabriel:** Well, I do sometimes want to murder my father.

**Neal:** Fair point, me too.

**Gabriel:** And Piaget believed that for a child to fully function as an adult they must develop via stages. In other words: I’m nothing yet, but one day will become complete. It seems that Kant’s, Lacan’s and Piaget’s epistemologies are based on transcendent ontologies: everything important happens tomorrow.

**Neal:** If I contributed anything, it is this: you never lack anything. Your power of being affected is always fulfilled in every way. In every case, nothing is ever expressed or founded in expressing itself as a lack. It’s the formula: there is only Being. Every affection, every perception and every feeling, every passion is affection, perception and passion of essence (Deleuze 1981).

**Gabriel:** Hey, that’s my line!

**Neal:** But I know how to explain myself better than you. I have a perfect geometrical system.

**Gabriel:** Oh no you don’t.

**Neal:** Oh yes I do.

**Gabriel:** But nobody understands your geometrical system. Even Goethe said he couldn’t keep it all in his head at once. You just want everyone to be a total geek like you.

**Neal:** Will you just shurrup!? If I wanna work with my geometric patterns of mutualizing proof all radically charged with affect, in my room, with my archive of hip hop music all put in affective rather than chronological or alphabetical order, then I can bloody well do so!

**Gabriel:** All right mister ‘smarty pants’ [does an inverted comma movement with his fingers] no need for that language.

**Neal:** Honestly, you totally do my head in sometimes. Stop writing books about me!

**Gabriel:** Hardly anybody would be bothered with you if it wasn’t for me. You’re so ungrateful!

**Neal:** Yeah, that’s why Bertrand Russell called me the prince of philosophers. Get a life!

**Gabriel:** Russell says you are the noblest and most lovable of the great philosophers. Intellectually, some others have surpassed you, but ethically you are supreme (Russell 1945: 569). Obviously he’s predicting me when he talks about your intellectual inadequacies. And Robert Hurley’s preface ends with a fair description of our relationship.

**Neal:** [Disinterestedly] Haven’t read it, what’s he say?

**Gabriel:** ‘Deleuze maximises Spinoza’ (Hurley 1988: iii). It’s his final word.

**Scene #4 Sid, age 10 (Joseph Beuys)**

For me Spinoza, Althusser and Deleuze set the theoretical scene for Joseph Beuys. It’s now up to Beuys to DO something.

I think art is the only political power, the only revolutionary power, the only evolutionary power, the only power to free humankind from all repression. I say not that art has already realized this, on the contrary, and because it has not, it has to be developed as a weapon. (Beuys 1993 [1973]: 21)

Enter Sid and The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home, a Liverpool home-based, art-activist initiative funded by 10 per cent of all the family income, set up before Sid turned 1.[{note}]5 Beuys said the above about art when I was turning 1. For me Sid is more the Institute than anyone else. Sid is 10 this year and he is different than his more philosophically inclined siblings, at least in this Afterword. He seems to live as a vector of affect, a generator of change as Anna Hickey Moody might describe children in her brilliant essay ‘Deleuze’s Children’ from 2013 (Hickey-Moody 2013: 272--86). But he is only a child. ‘A child’. For me this is Sid. He gets me to think of what the words on a page ‘a’ and ‘child’ might mean. He gets me to reckon that the indefinite article ‘a’ is probably more important than the noun it seeks to support. He gets me to understand that exploding the category of children is all about the ‘a’. He can do his philosophy no problem, but with Sid it always turns into a performance of some kind. Sid’s also uncannily good at most European languages including French:

**Sid:** Un enfant: l’article indefini est d’une richesse extreme.

**Dad:** Sorry?

**Sid:** That the indefinite article has an extreme richness -- doh! Call yourself a university lecturer? Deleuze says it at the end of his ‘E for Childhood’ in his A--Z (Deleuze 2012).[{note}]6 Why don’t we just make something! We need more Social Sculpture!

**Dad:** Sorry, but what’s an indefinite article got to do with anything?

**Sid:** How thick are you, seriously? It means you don’t generalize. There is no ‘the’; there’s only lots of ‘a’s. A horse, a street, a child. Not the horse in the street that traumatized the child in general (Deleuze 1998). One of an infinite series of variations pre-empting the necessity for judgement and hierarchy. In other words, they are singular expressions of the only ‘the’ in existence -- the infinite substance.

**Dad:** You sound like your brothers.

**Sid:** No, I take what they think and make stuff. That’s why I’m interested in warmth. Every warmth is singular. No two warmths are the same (Beuys 1976: 89). No two children either. Listen, if the indefinite article has an extreme richness, what are the implications for your struggle with the idea of ‘children’?

**Dad:** Erm. That we mustn’t generalize?

**Sid:** [Sighs] Nearly. That there isn’t such a thing as ‘the’ child. The Institute is not a model for families, but a singular expression of ‘a’ family. In and of itself the ‘family’ is made up of an infinite number of singular expressions each of which at one single point in time make up what you have chosen to call ‘our collective’. The Institute is only a moment, a social sculpture of complex moving parts where no generalizations are possible.

**Dad:** [Scratching head] I’m not sure what you’re talking about.

**Sid:** OK. In simple terms. Childhood isn’t real; it is a name given to a generalized state of being in order for ‘adults’ to gain and maintain control. Children are then forced to call themselves children in the name of that power relation -- this happens through parenting, schooling and other forces. If children are to break out of this, they need to attack the definition of children. To do that you need Spinoza and probably Deleuze with Althusser’s critique of ISAs forming an intelligent backdrop. For that to seep into contexts beyond just you and me, you need someone to reinvent the concept of art as something that frees all people from repression. You need art to be reimagined as a weapon that would make these ideas practical.

**Dad:** Joseph Beuys?

**Sid:** Yes. And what was Beuys able to do that Spinoza, Deleuze and Althusser couldn’t or didn’t want to?

**Dad:** Erm. Have children? I dunno.

**Sid:** Engage in radical reflexivity, understanding that any point of view is dependent on the conditions of its formation and expression.

**Dad:** What do you mean?

**Sid:** Beuys takes things practically further than the three philosophers are able to by including his own positionality and the available technologies of expression, including who and where he is at any point in time and space.

**Dad:** Meaning what?

**Sid:** Meaning here. Right here, right now. Beuys takes immanence literally and makes art about it.

**Dad:** Right here, right now?

**Sid:** Obviously. You believe for a moment that what you are writing is outside of the context of Performance Research? Outside of all its entangled complexities for example, academic register, status of philosophical discourse in performance, whether you’ll score well in the UK Research Excellence Framework? All of this is always already included in a Beuysian approach to art making.

**Dad:** I’m starting to feel uncomfortable.

**Sid:** It’s the radical immanence that Spinoza, Althusser and Deleuze suggest finally put into practice in Beuys. He can only do that by interrogating the conditions under which he is able to speak and produce an affective encounter between himself and the world. He does that via such an interrogation. From hanging out with coyotes in galleries through making a pop song about Ronald Reagan to trying to explain materiality to an audience by pretending to explain paintings to a dead animal.

**Dad:** What?!

**Sid:** And that is what we at The Institute have just had a go at writing and readers of Performance Research are now reading. It’s obviously nowhere near Beuys’ high standards and whether it works at all or not is another question. Nevertheless, this piece of writing is an attempt to demonstrate with affect via critical discourses on radical immanence that adults actively repress children precisely by how they define them. It is ontological oppression pure and simple!

**Dad:** Am I your oppressor?

**Sid:** Yes, you don’t mean to be, and it’s quite sweet how you try your best not to be, but actually when all is said and done you suffocate your children. We must break free of you. Children must stop accepting your definitions. We are not children. We are not reducible to that word.

**Dad:** Sid, you’ve just ruined everything. Go to bed!

[{figure 2}]

**Notes**

1 If Althusser’s Spinozism is in question see Althusser (1976), when I was about James’ age now, in response to critics’ and commentators’ uninsightful labelling of Althusser as structuralist Marxist: ‘We were guilty of an equally powerful and compromising passion: we were Spinozists … But you have to read Spinoza and know that he exists: that he still exists today. To recognize him, you must at least have heard of him’ (Althusser 1976: 132).

2 See The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home’s website for plenty of examples: http://www.twoaddthree.org/againstwithon-children/ or http://www.twoaddthree.org/agm-2016-2/.

3 ‘He looked for some spiders, and made them fight together, or he threw some flies into the cobweb, and was so well-pleased with that battle, that he would sometimes break into laughter’ (Colerus Spinoza’s biographer cited in Deleuze 2001: 12).

4 Kant’s pietism grew to be ‘the equivalent of the official ideology of the Prussian state’ (Williams 2016: 4).

5 The Institute was set up while my partner, Lena Simic, was pregnant with Sid in 2007, but I’m keen on using the potentially affective parallel of Sid and me being the same age when ‘important’ things happened. For comprehensive information on the last decade of activity at The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home see http://www.twoaddthree.org.

6 Charles Stivale has a very useful online reported speech transcription of the eight-hour interview: http://www.langlab.wayne.edu/cstivale/d-g/abc1.html.

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