



BUKS – Tidsskrift for Børne- og Ungdomskultur

Nr. 73 2026 • Årgang 42 • ISSN online 2446-0648 • www.buks.dk

Michał Wendland and Paweł Gałkowski

Neither Becoming Nor Being? Children's Subjectivity and Early Years Theater

Abstract

This article analyses traditional ways of conceptualising children's subjectivity. We trace historical approaches to children as 'becoming' (in the adult-centred tradition) and the later approach to children as 'being', arguing that both of these metaphysical categories are outdated and inadequate for contemporary research. Instead, we postulate the need for a new, less historically burdened ontological formula, which may be rooted in social ontology of childhood. As a potential source of guidance for such an alternative formula, we point to the practices of theatre for the youngest audiences (aged 0-5), which in fact strengthen children's subjectivity.



Keywords: *childhood; human becoming; human being; early years theater; subjectivity*

This article is philosophical in nature and concerns the issue of child subjectivity understood in the context of the concepts of »becoming« and »being«. For a long time, children were viewed as »becoming« (i.e., not-yet-adult); later, as a result of criticism of this concept and in response to the development of the idea of children's rights, the view of children as »being« was valued. From a contemporary perspective, including the new paradigm of childhood sociology, it is generally accepted that these two concepts should be treated as complementary characteristics of children. Our argument is primarily a critical one: we believe that the concepts of »becoming« and »being« – treated both individually and in conjunction – imply a number of methodological problems. After all, these are metaphysical concepts, strongly entangled in the history of European philosophy. In this article we argue that these terms are outdated and therefore inadequate. Contemporary research on children and childhood could benefit from exploring alternative conceptual foundations. In support of this claim, this article draws upon both philosophical inquiry and our previous empirical research into children's theatre.

In support of this claim, this article draws upon both philosophical inquiry and our previous empirical research into children's theatre. We are particularly interested in the subjectivity of children in the context of theatrical practices addressed to the youngest children (0-3 years old). Moreover, it is in theatrical practices that we seek clues to a possible alternative to the subject described as »becoming« and/or »being«. We assume that theoretical reflection, including philosophical reflection, should always refer to social practices. Our considerations therefore fall within the realm of practical philosophy. And if research on children and childhood is to include an ontological theme, it should primarily be social ontology, going beyond outdated metaphysical schemes.

In 2023-24, we worked on the project »Children as Agents in Early Years Theater Practice«, the results of which we published in a report published by ASSITEJ International. This article is not directly related to that project, but the research results have been an inspiration to us. We do not refer here to data collected on the basis of surveys and interviews with professionals involved in theater for children, nor do we repeat the conclusions contained in the aforementioned report. However, we outlined a theoretical perspective encompassing philosophy and cultural anthropology, and the results of empirical research inspired us to further reflect on children's subjectivity. It should also be noted that the article mainly concerns methodological issues, i.e., in short, it does not directly concern children, but rather ways of thinking about children, ways of strengthening their subjectivity, and the consequences of using specific concepts, which never turn out to be axiologically neutral.

In the text, we refer both to classical, sometimes very old philosophical concepts (Aristotle 2017; Rousseau 1975) and to contemporary research. The point of reference for the latter is mainly the new paradigm of childhood sociology (James & Prout 1990; Qvortrup et al. 1994; Wyness 2006) and its criticism (Lee 1998, King 2007, Ryan 2008). The works of Jens Qvortrup (2004) and Emma Uprichard (2008) have played a particularly important role in the discussion on the perception of the child as »becoming« and/or »being«. The publications of Spyros Spyrou (2018, 2019) have proved to be particularly inspiring. Among other things, he proposes that research on childhood should take into account the consequences of the ontological turn in the humanities and social sciences and make use of the possibilities offered in this regard by so-called relational ontologies (Deleuze & Guattari 2013; Latour 2005). And,

of course, there is also the contemporary philosophy of childhood, many aspects of which we take into account and draw inspiration from (Matthews 1996; Mullin 2007, 2014; Farquhar & White 2016; Kennedy & Bahler 2017).

Both in our research and in this article, we assume that the child is a subject. We see no need to discuss whether the child is a subject. However, we do consider it problematic that, firstly, definitions of subjectivity – which differ from one another but are all constructed by adults – have a specific impact on the way children are perceived and treated (in other words, these definitions are certainly not axiologically neutral). And secondly, although children are subjects, this does not mean, unfortunately, that they are treated as subjects everywhere and in the same way. Subjectivity can be taken away. Subjectivity can be fought for in one way or another, although the youngest children are in a very weak position in such a fight. Subjectivity can also be strengthened. We are interested in such concepts of subjectivity and the social practices resulting from them that strengthen children's subjectivity.

Child as Becoming

This article does not focus solely on the issue of children's subjectivity, although this is an extremely important issue, and not merely a philosophical one. We begin with a brief summary of the concept of subjectivity, because we treat the categories of 'being' and 'becoming' precisely as forms of subjectivity.

It is not easy to give a short and precise answer to the question: »What is a subject/subjectivity?« Indeed, in the history of philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, this question has been repeatedly answered, but no consensus has been reached, and the way subjectivity is understood also changes over time and space. It is easier to point to various aspects of subjectivity depending on the perspective adopted: legal subjectivity, cognitive subjectivity, moral subjectivity. Many influential and still relevant concepts of subjectivity were decidedly one-sided, e.g., the modern European theory of subjectivity, represented mainly by René Descartes and John Locke (Hamou 2018), almost exclusively emphasized human cognitive abilities (logocentric subjectivity). Some of these concepts have been rejected today for various reasons, and definitions of subjectivity have also been developed that did not include children, as well as women, people with disabilities, people of different skin colors, sexual, ethnic, and religious minorities, etc., the so-called »barbarians«, »savages«, »outcasts«, animals. (Todorov 1996).

On the other hand »individual« and »person« as potential equivalents of »subjectivity« reveal a bias towards the single, separate, particular, which is characteristic of the European, and especially liberal, belief system (Kymlicka 1989; Arneil 2002). A given social group, e.g., a class, nationality, or political party, can be a subject, but it can also be deprived of this subjectivity. Moreover, approaches to subjectivity rooted in modern European philosophy usually reduce the scope of this concept to »human«. John Locke defined a »person« as »A thinking, intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking« (Locke 1961, 280), but he excluded animals from this definition because he distinguished between »person« and »human animal«. It is only in modern times that it has become possible to broaden the definition of person to include animals (Francione 2009).

These and similar dilemmas also apply to children's subjectivity today. The second half of the last century was a period of attempts to reformulate the concept of subjectivity in general, and at the same time to grant and strengthen the subjectivity of children in particular according to various theoretical proposals. Certain ideas, stemming from the romantic-sentimental tradition, described the child as »Innocent« (Jenkins 1998; Garlen 2018); others, stemming from the liberal and neoliberal model of society, emphasize the »agency« of the child (Oswell 2013; Murray 2025).

Among the many attempts to define subjectivity, those that refer to metaphysical categories: »becoming« and »being« deserve attention. However, we do not intend to conduct the argument in this article in a *metaphysical* way. We are interested in »becoming« and »being« as specific forms of subjectivity (or lack thereof) along with the social consequences of their application. In other words, a »subject«, including a »child subject«, can be understood as something/someone that exists and/or is becoming.

In the 19th century, Georg W.F. Hegel proposed a formula for the relationship between being and becoming by introducing a third element: »Nothingness«, understood as the opposite of »being« (Hegel 2010, 59). For Hegel, »becoming« is the result of a dialectical relation between »being« and »nothingness«, it is the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the opposition between them, their synthesis. Hegel clearly overestimated becoming: »being« and »nothingness« alone mean »nothing« unless there is a dialectical dynamic of »becoming«. As a consequence of this fundamental metaphysical principle, Hegel perceives reality as essentially becoming, dynamic, and this applies to phenomena such as the state, art, and religion: reality appears as historical, and most importantly, this dynamic also encompasses subjectivity.

This way of thinking, based on the categories of »becoming« and »being«, also applies to children – either directly, in the form of a specific theoretical concept referring to these notions, or implicitly, and thus present in certain social practices regardless of theoretical identification.

It can be said that the child is »the great absentee« in the history of philosophy. Children and childhood appeared sporadically, in the context of metaphysical, ethical, or political considerations; philosophers took up the subject of education somewhat more frequently. The philosophically justified goal of education can be synthetically defined as »facilitating a child's becoming an adult«. This type of attitude can be described as an *adultist form of paternalism*. Its contemporary, liberal form derives from the concept of John S. Mill, who excludes children (and »barbarian peoples«) from the principle of freedom, demanding supervision for them (Mill 1963, 224).

The adultist form of paternalism seems to be based on at least two assumptions: *essentialism* and *teleologism*. By essentialism, we mean the idea of the existence of a certain constant determinant of subjectivity (Morton et al. 2009; Phillips 2010). Although essential subjectivity is also a social construct, it is treated as universal and indisputable by those who identify with it. It can also be said that such essential subjectivity tends toward hegemony (Gramsci 1992) and is exclusionary in nature. It encompasses various ways of defining »oneself« by pointing to »the Other«, or defining (someone/something) by indicating shortcomings. For example, the dominant type of subjectivity in medieval and modern Europe was characterized as, among other things, »white«, »male«, »Christian«, »wealthy«,

»rational«, and – most importantly here – »adult«. Anyone who did not meet these criteria was considered »Other«, and therefore »incomplete«, »flawed«, »inferior«, etc.

Essentialism goes hand in hand with *teleologism*. *Telos* – purposeful goal, fulfillment, completion – present especially in Aristotle's metaphysics and ethics, determines and justifies the process of »becoming« a specific form of existence. In this view, becoming is inevitable, and the transition from potentiality to actuality is determined by immutable divine or natural laws. That which is becoming is incomplete, unfinished, immature. In accordance with this, Aristotle (2017), in his ethics of virtue, recognizes that the title of a virtuous person belongs only to those who meet certain criteria:

»We must suppose that all [slaves, women, and children] necessarily partake of the virtues of character, but not in the same way: rather, in such measure as is proper to each in relation to his own function. Hence the ruler must possess virtue of character in completeness (...); while each of the others must have that share of this virtue which is appropriate to them« (Aristotle 2017, 1.13).

As a consequence such a narrative leads to strengthening practices of subordination, violence, and domination: men over women, whites over blacks, free people over slaves, believers over non-believers, aristocrats over peasants, the rich over the poor, the civilized over the »savages« – as well as adults over children.

It should be emphasized that paternalistic attitudes usually postulate a specific »mission« for themselves. The relationship of subordination is justified by some inviolable, eternal divine or natural laws, and paternalistic supervision is explained by »good will«. A »complete«, »full-fledged« subject perceives itself not only as privileged, but also as obligated to 'care' for the »incomplete«, »flawed«, »immature« Others. This is, so to speak, a perverse way of justifying a relationship of subordination. The »civilized« colonizer is convinced of the legitimacy of his own civilizing »mission« towards the »savages« (Todorov 1996). The Christian missionary converts 'pagans' believing that he is doing so—even by force—for their »salvation«. The classic theory of education is built on a similar principle: an adult (parent, teacher, educator, etc.) »disciplines« a child in order to 'shape' them, to bring them closer to maturity. Depending on cultural needs, the child becomes a »good Christian«, a »defender of the homeland«, a »law-abiding citizen«, and thus some desirable adult figure. The disciplining of a child by an adult is equivalent to a »civilizing mission«: the presumed future good justifies physical or symbolic violence (Wivestad 2021; Saugstad 2002).

The narrative of »becoming« was rooted in metaphysics and at the same time dictated by common sense observation. Its ethical and ideological consequences were either not realized or considered obvious and desirable. As a result, for millennia, children were disciplined according to Foucault's formula of »surveillance and punishment« (Foucault 1996), and in many cases were subjected to violence and abuse (DeMause, 1982).

Modern theorists are unable to break with the old ideas about children as Others, as beings in the process of becoming. Essentially, the 20th century brings direct recognition of the humanity of children – »There are no children – there are people«, postulates Janusz Korczak in the mid-1920s. Korczak directly criticizes the perception of the child as becoming: »Weak, small, poor, dependent – they will only become citizens in the future. Indulgent,

harsh, brutal, and always disregarded. A brat, merely a child. A future human being, not a present one. They will only become citizens» (Korczak 2012, 14).

In contemporary research on childhood, changes in the concept of childhood subjectivity as becoming have been criticized late. The new paradigm, consisting of childhood psychology and new childhood sociology, only emerged in the last two or three decades of the 20th century. In 1990, the book *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood. Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood* by Allison James and Alan Prout was published, considered to be the foundation of the then-emerging subdiscipline of childhood sociology and key to the new paradigm. In the perspective of the new paradigm, emphasis was placed on the image of the child as an agent, and in methodological terms, the child was to occupy a central position. What is particularly important in the context we are interested in is that the sociology of childhood strongly questioned the view of the child as becoming. In the discussion on the child as being and becoming, the positions proposed by Emma Uprichard (2008) and Jens Qvortrup (2009) proved to be particularly relevant.

In both cases, researchers concluded that the best solution was to construct a concept of childhood that combines becoming and being. There were also proposals to go beyond the binary opposition or at least the conjunction of becoming and being by, for example, adding a third concept – »been« or »have been« (Cross 2009; Hanson 2017; Kingdon 2019). Yet another option includes the concept of »belonging« added to »becoming« and »being« (Leggett, Ford 2015).

The very idea of a »new paradigm« or »new sociology of childhood« is sometimes questioned, among other things, because of doubts about its actual »novelty« (King 2007; Ryan 2008; Leonard 2016). It can be said that while the earlier (though not necessarily »old«) approach was based in a one-sided, reductionist way on the achievements of developmental psychology, the new approach (though perhaps not so »new«) is similarly one-sidedly based on sociology. In both cases, however, we are dealing with some form of reductionism (Spyrou et al., 2019).

Child as Being

From the viewpoint of the new paradigm of childhood studies, the perspective of »being« seems appropriate: »New sociological approaches to the study of childhood is the move to study real children or the experiences of being a child« (James et al. 1998, 207). The sociological-ethnographic point of view emphasizes the »child here and now«, who is an active participant in social reality (Banković 2014, 132).

It can be assumed that both the broader concept of »human being« and the resulting »child as human being« have played and continue to play a very important role, at least in the normative dimension, i.e., as the basis for formulating postulates that make up, among other things, the ideas of human rights and children's rights (Hága 2023, 4). If such rights are to be considered universal, it seems essential to base them on the category of »being«, not only in terms of terminology (»human being«) but also in terms of substance. The proposed universality (of the declaration, convention) requires an abstract subject. This is part of the legacy of Enlightenment philosophy, in which the universality of normative postulates in law, politics, and ethics was justified by reference to the universality of descriptive postulates in mathematics, physics, and biology. However, the abstract subject (»being«) raises a number

of theoretical and political problems, ranging from accusations of Eurocentrism to criticism of the failure to take cultural diversity into account (Müller 2012). We do not wish to answer the question of whether it is possible to maintain the postulate of the universality of human and children's rights without substantial universality, but we would like to point out that the phrases »all human beings« and »every child« are (for better or worse) rooted in specific philosophical ideas.

The concept of »being« – whether applied to a child or to anyone or anything else – is as deeply rooted in European philosophical tradition as it is problematic. Even medieval philosophers, mainly Pierre Abelard and William Ockham (see Hamelin 2015) realized that conceiving of the world based on the Greek formula τὸ ὄν (or the Latin *ens*, *entia*) from the writings of Plato and Aristotle inevitably leads to a number of metaphysical difficulties – so they tried to base their ontology on *res* (real things) rather than *ens* (being). In the 20th century, neopositivists including Rudolf Carnap and Moritz Schlick (see Bergmann 1954) demonstrated that as a philosophical term, »being« is essentially a hypostasis in the logical sense, i.e., an »empty« concept, and should only be used in a grammatical sense, not as a metaphysical postulate. In a completely different philosophical tradition, Jacques Derrida proposed deconstructing classical European »metaphysics of presence« as constructed around binary oppositions, mainly the opposition between 'being' and »becoming« (Derrida 1998). First of all, »being« itself implies a static perspective, and its abstract nature implies an ahistorical perspective. From both a biological and historical point of view, »being« itself proves to be inadequate. Due to its philosophical origins, »being«, treated only as an alternative to »becoming« also in relation to children and childhood, turns out to be a linguistic hypostasis in the sense of a logical fallacy.

How would these and similar criticisms apply to children and childhood studies? Certainly, the narrative of childhood from the perspective of »being«, like the justification for the universality of children's rights, proves to be methodologically more reliable and ethically less 'burdened' than the old narratives based on »becoming«. At the same time, if we were to simply replace one dominant concept with another dominant concept, we would quickly encounter further difficulties. If we were to uncritically apply the idea of the child as »being« within the new paradigm of the sociology of childhood, we would become entangled in contradictions.

How can we reconcile static »being« with the assumption that »Childhood is a social construction« (Prout & James 1997, 8)? Static, concrete, self-existent »being« in the entire tradition of European philosophy is precisely the opposite of something that constitutes a social construct (Kingdon 2018, 354). A significant part of contemporary philosophy and social sciences strongly rejects the concept of »being« in favor of 'becoming' – this applies, among others, to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (»becoming-child«: Deleuze & Guattari 2013), Bruno Latour (relational actor-network theory: Latour 2005), feminism (e.g., Rosi Braidotti's »nomadic subject«: Braidotti 2011, and Judith Butler's »performative subject«: Butler 1990), and new materialism (e.g. intra-active agency: Barad 2007). We would venture to say that, unlike in the 19th century, social sciences in the 20th and 21st centuries are based on the ontology of »becoming« – even independently of Hegel's earlier proposals. This also applies to the natural sciences: from the theory of evolution to quantum mechanics, the

contemporary scientific view of the world makes less and less use of the old static concept of »being.«

For about twenty years, we have been observing a so-called ontological turn in the social sciences and humanities. This turn does not mean a simple »return« to earlier ontological axioms (Spyrou 2019, 316). Of course, earlier ontologies, derived from ancient philosophy, were not focused solely on »being«, but also on, for example, processes, events, facts, things. However, the contemporary ontological turn is essentially focused on »becoming« and understands reality (including childhood) as »fluid«, multidimensional, and non-binary: »The world-humans, non-humans, and whatever—just is an indefinite multiplicity of performative entities endlessly becoming in decentered and emergent dances of agency« (Pickering 2017, 136), as Andrew Pickering puts it. Perhaps the most intensively developed form of the new ontology is the set of relational ontologies, which emphasize not »objects« but the relationships between them (Latour 2005; Thiele 2016; Bergstedt 2021; Szabó 2024). In classical ontologies, relations occur between »beings«, while in relational ontologies, entities are constituted from networks of relations, characterized more as »becoming« than »being«.

Of course, the sociological paradigm of »being-centered« childhood studies may in some way abstract from these clear trends, but in a broader perspective, this means at least a hindrance to interdisciplinary debate. On the other hand, the above-mentioned contemporary philosophical trends clearly oriented towards »becoming« are certainly not »naive« enough to ignore the ethical implications of the old, paternalistic narrative about children.

To organize and simplify the argument so far, we can consider at least the following three positions: we can assume that (1) the correct narrative about children and childhood is exclusively the perspective of becoming; we can assume that, on the contrary, (2) the correct narrative about children and childhood is exclusively the perspective of being; we can also assume that (3) when treated separately, both perspectives are flawed, so we should adopt a perspective that combines the view of children as »becoming« and as »being« (Cassidy & Lone 2020, 17). Usually, conjunction (option 3) is treated as a method of avoiding the problems arising from the two previous options (Banković 2014, 135). However, some doubts remain unresolved.

What would it mean for children's subjectivity to be both »being« and »becoming«? It seems that the problem of the relationship between »being« and »becoming« is an ontological analogy to the epistemological problem of the relationship between body and mind. In the past, numerous attempts were made to justify the dominance of one over the other or to demonstrate some form of complementarity between body and mind. In the second half of the 20th century, this dispute effectively disappeared as completely new concepts emerged, notably the theories of *embodied cognition* (Francisco Varela) and *extended cognition* (David Chalmers). From this new point of view, the traditional content of the old concepts of body and mind was invalidated (Peruzzo & Stoparo 2022) – treated as a binary opposition or in a complementary way, body and mind turned out to be outdated categories.

Perhaps, in addition to the three possible ways of dealing with the idea of child as being and/or as becoming, there is a fourth option, namely to recognize that (4) none of the above options is correct and that the most appropriate solution would be to abandon the concepts of becoming and existence altogether.

Children's Subjectivity in Theater Practices

From the outset of our research, we have assumed that theory (philosophical, sociological, psychological, pedagogical) should be strongly correlated with social practice, and that theory concerning children and childhood should be correlated with social practices involving children. In some areas of the humanities – including, and perhaps especially, philosophy – the tendency to theorize often takes precedence over the need to ground research reflection in real social practices. If we are looking for a philosophical formula for children's subjectivity, it is in order to strengthen that subjectivity (and thus to strengthen social practices that promote the development of children's subjectivity). We criticize some proposals for conceptualizing the child subject in order to avoid harmful prejudices hidden in many seemingly »innocent« concepts. The *ontology of childhood* seems important and interesting to us, as long as it takes the form of a *social ontology of childhood*. However, the reconstruction of the conceptual apparatus is not merely a technical exercise: we are looking for a way of thinking about childhood that allows us to emphasize the ethical aspect of the child's presence in the socio-cultural structure.

As we have seen, there are many reasons why the perspective of »being« and »becoming« in childhood studies poses a serious challenge. Moreover, it seems that none of the solutions is fully satisfactory in terms of theory. First of all, both concepts – taken separately and together – are old, or rather outdated. Of course, not every old concept becomes obsolete, but usually changes in theory or entire paradigms are associated with the modification of the conceptual apparatus or its abandonment in favor of a new one.

It is no surprise that in contemporary social sciences and humanities, especially in philosophy, many traditional concepts have been questioned. So if we agree with the postulate of distinguishing a specific type of subjectivity, namely childhood subjectivity, which for centuries has »eluded« philosophy and science, then this certainly requires a revision of key concepts. If a new paradigm for childhood research has emerged, why should we stubbornly cling to old metaphysical categories? Since we are postulating a change not only in the research attitude towards children, but also the need for changes in education, access to culture, strengthening children's agency, developing legal protection, developing a partnership-based, inclusive treatment of children, etc., – this certainly requires the application of concepts that are not burdened by centuries of tradition, which in this case plays no positive role. On the contrary, as in the case of animals, among others, for a very long time it has mainly served to maintain a state of subordination and domination.

As we know, social reality has not been kind to children for centuries and millennia. Children – the younger they are, the more so – can and even should be considered an oppressed group (Medina-Minton 2018; Smith 2024). The issue of childhood undoubtedly has cognitive, ontological, educational, and other dimensions, but in our opinion, it is primarily ethical. Postulating children's subjectivity is not only a methodological measure justified by various concepts, but also has ethical consequences. The choice of one ontological basis or another in theoretical considerations is not axiologically neutral.

This conclusion can also be drawn from the *Children as Agents* project mentioned in the introduction, which sought to provide a partial answer to the question of how very young children are perceived today in the context of performative practices. The starting point of the research was the assumption of the existence of a network of social beliefs regarding

children's agency and subjectivity as one of the important premises of children's subjectivity. The report's conclusions reveal a complex and often paradoxical situation regarding the perception of children as human beings among artists and theater professionals. Even though the youngest children are covered by legal protection, they are not universally recognized as equal entities in social space (Śliwerski 2017). The historically dominant and unfortunately still current belief is that the youngest children are human becoming, not human being. We believe that the legal context of protecting the rights of the youngest children (*Declaration and Convention on the Rights of the Child*) should be solidly strengthened by actively promoting the perception of the youngest children as not only active, but above all as different but equal participants in social practices. The social situation of the youngest child is a paradox. The historically dominant model of social relations, in which the recognized subject is an adult, and culture and social institutions have been and are created by adults and for adults and they do not take into account the ontological and psychophysical characteristics of the youngest children. On the other hand, their assessment and social expectations towards them are often formulated from the perspective of adults.

We therefore believe that, in order to effectively combat adultism (Adami 2024), we must not only dismantle outdated concepts and paradigms, but also seek new theoretical inspiration in social practices whose traditions and working methods are deeply rooted in the conviction that children are ethically equal individuals.

The uniqueness of Early Years Theater lies, among other things, in the belief shared by many artists that they try to treat the youngest child as equal and in the artistic process they are perceived as an equal partner. As an entity that Is, not just Becoming. While maintaining the perspective in which a specific child is Different from us, adults, but also Equal as a socially perceived entity. In this sense, EYT is one of the most important practices that has the power to strengthen beliefs about the subjectivity and equality of the youngest children as participants in social relationships.

Therefore, we assume that – perhaps – more attention should be paid to artistic practices, especially theatrical practices addressed to the youngest audience (i.e., children aged 0 to 3). Almost fifty years ago, theatre practitioners recognised that very young children, particularly those aged 0 to 3, were not merely the audience of tomorrow and future adults, but fully-fledged partners for whom distinct and separate methods of artistic work and communication on stage needed to be developed. And to this end, one should not simply simplify existing theatrical methods, but rather devise new ones (van der Water 2012).

The Italian theatre company *La Baracca Testoni Ragazzi* is often regarded as the cradle of theatre for very young children in Europe and remains its most influential force. It has its own distinctive working methods and aesthetic, and is the most active in promoting very young children as equal participants in social life. Scandinavian artists and institutions also deserve special mention in this context, as their work was instrumental in the early development of this approach and continues to be successfully pursued in many places to this day. In Sweden, in addition to the widely known Suzanne Osten and the *Unga Klara* group, mention should be made of, for example, *Theater Tre* in Stockholm and the long-standing work of Sara Myrberg as artistic director. In Finland, meanwhile, alongside the visual dance and mime theatre Auraco, it is worth highlighting the role of *Annantalo Art Center* in Helsinki and the *Bravo* festival organised by ASSITEJ Finland.

When we look at this practice as a whole, institutionally supported by the *Small Size Network*, which brings together creators and organizations working for the youngest audiences, where issues of subjectivity are discussed and thematized (Frabetti 2016) in relation to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Certain formulas of child subjectivity are implemented (reinforced) in practice preceding theoretical reflection, or – to put it bluntly – artists-practitioners do what theorists think (and talk) about. And looking at social practices can reveal solutions to theoretical problems that would otherwise be difficult to grasp.

Why theater? This practice has the potential to be empirically studied with a view to building new social ontologies. It seems to us, as theorists, that in the context of a conceptual crisis, we need insight into and observation of such practices that will allow us to set the direction for describing this ontology anew.

First and foremost, theater for the youngest is aimed at consciously and programmatically strengthening children's subjectivity. In addition, theater for the youngest has the value of building relationships in the sense of social interaction. This means that it is directed at real subjects existing »here and now« (children, parents/guardians, artists) and without the need to refer to outdated metaphysical categories. Theater also strengthens subjectivity by developing a partnership-based attitude towards children, listening to their voices, and giving them space and time to explore. Theatrical activities foster a sense of community, enabling the transcendence of the individual perspective in favor of a collective, communal experience. In other words, they are a form of social, public situation in which the child acts as a person, as a subject, fully equal to the other participants in the event. It can also be said that theater fulfills an emancipatory function. The phenomenon of theater for the youngest is not so much a »micro-scale picture of social behavior« as it is a set of practices that determine the direction of the child's empowerment processes; it is a kind of »laboratory of emancipation«, and thus serves not only a descriptive function, but mainly a normative (or even norm-creating) one. Importantly, theater for children, such as the examples given above, does not attempt to shape them according to the worst adultist models. It is not characterized by the didacticism that directly results from viewing the child as »becoming«. On the contrary, taking into account the difference between adults and children, it weakens adultism.

Looking at performances produced for the youngest audiences, we see neither »becoming« nor »being«. In this context—and many other contexts—such terms are not false or erroneous, but simply unwieldy and cumbersome.

Our previous empirical research on this phenomenon has shown that professionals involved in children's theater (directors, actors, set designers, etc.), regardless of the cultural circle in which they practice their art, share the belief that children are subjects. This is very often a so-called »silent assumption« that accompanies theatrical activities regardless of theoretical reflection. It is therefore primary: the very practice of empowering children precedes the deliberations of theorists. In this case, the task of researchers would not be to develop some abstract model of subjectivity, which could then be applied in the world of social practices, but to extract those applications that are already in use, describe them, and further strengthen them.

Our research also showed that although artists undertake activities already accepting an implicit idea of the child as a subject, these ideas are often vague, ambiguous, and unclear. Is the child a subject? Yes, practitioners agree. But what exactly does that mean? Is it »rational«?

Is it »causal«? Perhaps »autonomous«? Here, it is not so much doubt as uncertainty that arises. This is not surprising – an actor, for example, is not required to have a precise knowledge of philosophical, sociological, or other terms. A lack of conceptual precision in no way limits practical competence or hinders the realization of artistic projects. A given concept only begins to be perceived as problematic when questions about its meaning and context are raised.

In view of the difficulties indicated in the previous two parts related to the concepts of »becoming« and »being« understood as ontological forms of a certain concept of subjectivity, can the interpretation of theatrical practices for the youngest children help to resolve this dilemma? Yes – and probably not only in relation to this particular problem. It can be said that the method of philosophical interpretation of artistic practices presented here refers to the recommendation formulated by Ludwig Wittgenstein: »Don't think, but look!« (Wittgenstein 2009, 66). We would say: »Don't only think, but also look!«.

Conclusion

In this article, we have attempted to trace the origins and consequences of the concepts of »becoming« and »being« treated as specific forms of subjectivity. The starting point is the conception of the child as »becoming« – probably the oldest, most deeply rooted in culture, present implicate in common perceptions of children and explicate in old theories of childhood. Due to its harmful consequences, it has found an alternative in the form of the concept of »being« or in the form of the conjunction of »becoming« and »being«. However, both of these concepts belong to a set of terms that stem from classical metaphysics and are therefore clearly inadequate. Is there an alternative to these concepts? Yes, but in our opinion, it is not so much a matter of replacing one term with another, but rather of thoroughly reformulating the ontological assumptions on which contemporary research on childhood is based. We seek guidance primarily in theatrical practices addressed to the youngest audience. They are not »burdened« by traditional patterns of thinking, and their formal innovation is conducive to the development of alternative theoretical solutions.

Can we already draw any conclusions—albeit very preliminary ones—regarding the social ontology of childhood from our research on children's theatre to date? Perhaps, within the theoretical framework of philosophy and sociology, relational ontology offers an alternative to the concepts of »becoming« and »being«. Relational ontology is a relatively new position within the broader ontological turn in the humanities and has also emerged in childhood studies over the last few years (Benjamin 2016; Alanen 2017; Spyrou 2018; Deszcz-Tryhubczak & García-González 2023). It is therefore not entirely new, but we assume that it still requires further research and that it can be successfully applied to the issue of EYT.

We have only very briefly mentioned relational ontologies earlier in this article., but by way of conclusion we can formulate a working hypothesis according to which elements of relational ontology need not be »imposed« on practices (e.g. theatrical ones). Rather, relationality is already »embedded« in theatrical practices, as a kind of independent of any particular theoretical interpretations of these practices, and can be »extracted« from them by researchers. And then reinforced, which would be equivalent to strengthening children's subjectivity.

References

- Adami, R. (2024). *Childism, Intersectionality and the Rights of the Child: the Myth of a Happy Childhood*. Routledge.
- Alanen, L. (2017). Childhood Studies and the Challenge of Ontology, *Childhood* 24:2, p. 147-150.
- Aristotle (2017). *Politics*, tr. D. Reeves, Hackett Publishing House.
- Arneil, B. (2002). Becoming Versus Being: A Critical Analysis of the Child in Liberal Theory. In: (ed.) D. Archard, *The Moral and Political Status of Children*, Oxford University Press.
- Banković, I. (2014). Constructions of Childhood and the Concepts of Children as Beings and Becomings. *Practice and Theory in Systems of Education* 9:2, p. 129-135.
- Barad, K. (2007).
- Benjamin, A. (2017). *Towards a Relational Ontology. Philosophy's Other Possibility*. Suny Press.
- Bergmann, G (1954). *The Metaphysics of Logical Positivism*, Longmans Green.
- Bergstedt, B. (2021). The Ontology of Becoming: To Research and Become with the World. *Education Sciences* 11:9.
- Braidotti, R. (2011). *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Columbia University Press.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1997). *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford University Press.
- Byden, B., Thornqvist, Ch. (2015). *The Aristotelian Tradition. Aristotle's Works on Logic and Metaphysics and Their Reception in the Middle Ages*, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies,.
- Cross, B. (2011). Becoming, Being and Having Been: Practitioner Perspectives on Temporal Stances and Participation across Children's Services. *Children and Society* 25, p. 26-36.
- Cassidy, C., Lone, J.M. (2020). Thinking about Childhood: Being and Becoming in the World. *Analytic Teaching and Philosophical Praxis* 40:1.
- Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. (2013). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Bloomsbury Academic.
- DeMause, L. (1982). *The Foundations of Psychohistory*, Creative Roots.
- Deszcz-Tryhubczak, J., García-González, M. (2023). Ethics, Epistemologies, and Relational Ontologies in Researching Children's Cultures, *Children's Cultures After Childhood, Children's Literature, Culture, and Cognition* 16.
- Derrida, J. (1998) *Of Grammatology*, tr. G.C. Spivak, Chicago University Press.
- Emery, G., Levering, M. (2012). *Aristotle in Aquinas's Theology*, Oxford University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1996). An Aesthetics of Existence. In: S. Lotringer (ed.) *Foucault Live. Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, Semiotexte.
- Frabetti, R. (2016). 3003. For all the invisible of the world. For the children, the most invisible among the invisible; Stubborn Little Thumbings. 30! Years of theatre in the creches. (ed.) R. Frabetti, Edizioni Pendragon/La Baracca Testoni Ragazzi.
- Francione, G.L. (2009). *Animals as Persons. Essays on the Abolition of Animal Exploitation*, Columbia University Press.
- Garlen, J.C. (2018). Interrogating innocence: »Childhood« as exclusionary social practice. *Childhood* 26:1, p. 54-67.

- Godwin, S. (2020) Children's Capacities and Paternalism. *The Journal of Ethics* 24.
- Gramsci, A. (1992). *Prison Notebooks*, Columbia University Press.
- Hagá, S. (2023). Children: Dehumanized or Not Yet Fully Human? *Behavioral Sciences* 51.
- Hamelin, G. (2015). Nominalism and Semantics in Abelard and Ockham. *Logica Universalis* 9.
- Hamou, P. (2018). Locke and Descartes on Selves and Thinking Substances. In: P. Hamou, M. Pecharman (eds.), *Locke and Cartesian Philosophy*, Oxford University Press.
- Hanson, K. (2017). Embracing the past: 'Been', 'being' and 'becoming' children. *Childhood: A Journal of Global Child Research* 24:3, p. 281-285.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (2010). *The Science of Logic*, ed. G. di Giovanni, Cambridge University Press.
- James, A., Jenks, C., Prout, A. (1998). *Theorizing Childhood*, Polity Press.
- Jenkins, H. (1998). *The Children's Culture Reader*, New York University Press.
- King, M. (2007). The Sociology of Childhood as Scientific Communication: Observations from a social systems perspective. *Childhood* 14:2, p. 193-213.
- Kingdon, Z. (2018). Young children as beings, becomings, having beens: an integrated approach to role-play. *International Journal of Early Years Education* 26:4.
- Korczak, J. (2012). *Prawo dziecka do szacunku*, Instytut Książki.
- Kymlicka, W. (1989). Liberal Individualism and Liberal Neutrality. *Ethics* 99:4, p. 883-905.
- Latour, Bruno (2005). *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Lee, N. (1998). Towards an Immature Sociology, *The Sociological Review* 46:3, p. 458-482.
- Leggett, N., Ford, M. (2015). Group Time Experiences: Belonging, Being and Becoming Through Active Participation Within Early Childhood Communities. *Early Childhood Education Journal* 44:3, p. 191-200.
- Leonard, M. (2016). *The Sociology of Children, Childhood, and Generation*, Sage.
- Locke, J. (1961). *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, University of Virginia Press.
- Matthews, G. (1996). *The Philosophy of Childhood*, Harvard University Press.
- Medina-Minton, N. (2019). Are Children an Oppressed Group? Positing a Child Standpoint Theory. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 36:2, p. 439-447.
- Mill, J.S. (1963). *On Liberty*. In: *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, (ed.) J.M. Robson, University of Toronto Press. Qv
- Morton, T.A., Hornsey, M., Postmes, T. (2009). Shifting ground: The variable use of essentialism in contexts of inclusion and exclusion. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 48:1, p. 35-59.
- Mullin, A. (2007). Children, Autonomy, and Care. *Journal of Social Philosophy* 38.
- Mullin, A., (2014). Children, Paternalism, and Development of Autonomy, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 17, p. 413-426.
- Müller, F.S. (2012). Eurocentrism, Human Rights, and Humanism, *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 26:2, p. 279-293.
- Oswell, D. (2013). *The Agency of Children: From Family to Global Human Rights*, Cambridge University Press.
- Peruzzo, L., Stoparo, A.L. (2022). Dissolving the Self: the Cognitive Turn of the Extended Mind Theory. *Trans/Form/Ação*, 46: 2, p. 193-214.
- Phillips, A. (2010). What's wrong with Essentialism? *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 11:1, p. 47-60.

- Pickering, A. (2017). The Ontological Turn: Taking Different Worlds Seriously. *Social Analysis* 61:2.
- Prout, A., James, A. (1990). *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood. Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood*, Routledge.
- Qvortrup, J. (1994). Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics, Avebury.
- Qvortrup, J. (2004). The Waiting Child. *Childhood: A Journal of Global Child Research* 11, p. 267-273.
- Qvortrup, J. (2009). Are Children Human Beings or Human Becomings? A Critical Assessment of Outcome Thinking, *Rivista Internazionale di Scienze Sociali* 3:4, p. 631-653.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (1975). *Emile*, tr. B. Foxley, Everyman's Library.
- Ryan, P.J. (2008). How New is the 'New' Social Study of Childhood? The Myth of a Paradigm Shift. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 37:4, p. 553-576.
- Saugstad (2002), Educational Theory and Practice in an Aristotelian Perspective, *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 46:4, p. 373-390.
- Smith, K. (2024). Using Adultism in Conceptualizing Oppression of Children and Youth: More Than a Buzzword? *Taboo: The Journal of Culture & Education* 22:1, p. 227-255.
- Spyrou, S. (2018). *Reimagining Childhood Studies*, Bloomsbury.
- Spyrou, S. (2019). An Ontological Turn for Childhood Studies? *Children and Society* 33.
- Szabó, Z. (2022). *The Ontology of Becoming: A Phenomenology of the Infinite*, L'Harmattan.
- Śliwerski, B. (2017). The Right of the Child to His or Her's Rights, *Pedagogika Społeczna* 16:4, p. 37-58.
- Thiele, K. (2016). Of Immanence and Becoming: Deleuze and Guattari's Philosophy and/as Relational Ontology. *Deleuze's Studies* 10:1, p. 117-134.
- Todorov, T. (1996). *The Conquest of America*, Harper Collins.
- Uprichard, E. (2008). Children as 'Being and Becomings': Children, Childhood and Temporality. *Children and Society* 22.
- Waldemariam, K. (2022). Broadening Ontological and Epistemological Possibilities within Early Childhood Teacher Education for Sustainability. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* 47:5, p. 33-49.
- van de Water, M. (2012). *Theatre, Youth, and Culture: a Critical and Historical Exploration*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wittgenstein, L. (2009). *Philosophical Investigations*, Wiley-Blackwell.
- Wivestad, S.M. (2021). Thomas Aquinas and Education, *A History of Western Philosophy of Education* vol. 2, Bloomsbury.
- Wyness, M. (2006). *Childhood and Society: An Introduction to the Sociology of Childhood*, Palgrave Macmillan.

Biographies

Michał Wendland is philosopher, professor at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, since 2008 he has been working at the Faculty of Philosophy of AMU in the Department of Political Philosophy and Social Communication. Member of the Polish Society for Social Communication, the International Communication Association and the Culture and Communication Research Group. In 2012-2016, he was the head of the NCN grant 'The History of the Idea of Communication. Analysis of the Transformation of Communication Practices and their Social Conditions from the Perspective of the Philosophy of Culture'. He was participating in: 21st ASSITEJ World Congress and Performing Arts Festival 2024 (Havana, Cuba); Encuentro Internacional de Artes Escénicas para los Primeros Años: Infancia, Territorio de Paz (lectures in Mexico City, Tijuana, Xalapa); 15th Theatre Art Research Forum for Children and Youth (Subotica, Serbia). Co-author of the report Children as Agents in Early Years Theatre Practice (ASSITEJ, Theatre & Performing Arts for Young Audiences: Building Collective Resilience). Research interests: philosophy of childhood, history of modern philosophy, theories of subjectivity. Selected publications: History of the Idea of Communication (2014), What is Reflexive Historicising of Communication? (2017), Wittgenstein's Language Games as Communication Acts (2017), Three Demystifications of the Modern Concept of Natural Law (2020), Isaiah Berlin's Paradoxes (2021), Culture of Children or for Children? (2023), Natural Law and Nature in the Philosophy of Radical Enlightenment (2024).

Paweł Gałkowski – doctor of philosophy, cultural researcher, producer and project coordinator. For more than fifteen years he has been involved in the implementation of international projects in the field of culture. Employee of the Department of Music and Performing Arts Programmes at the ZAMEK Culture Centre in Poznań. One of the organisers of the Art Seeks Toddlers Festival, the oldest Polish theatre festival for the youngest audience. Member of the Board of Directors of the international association Small Size Network. President of the board of the Art Fraction Foundation. His research interests and publications are related to the philosophy of childhood and cultural history. Scholarship holder of the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage in 2021. From 2023 to 2024, substantive coordinator of the research project 'Children as agents and Early Years Theater' commissioned by ASSITEJ International. As part of it, he co-authored a report on the creative sector in the area of performing arts for the youngest audiences, involving 80 agents from 25 countries. He has given lectures and meetings at the invitation of many institutions in Poland and abroad. In 2024, among others, Argentina, Serbia, Cuba and Mexico.