

## ONTOLOGICAL DEFINITION OF CHILDHOOD: FROM THE PLURALISM OF IMAGES OF CHILDHOOD TO THE UNIVERSAL CONCEPT OF CHILDHOOD

(Competition of civilizations for the authentic model of the child)

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**Abstract.** It is not always clear why, but under normal conditions, most adults evaluate childhood as, albeit a short life study, but full of instructive and attractive meaning. Perhaps this perception of childhood plays the role of one of the essential motives for creating a “normal” adulthood. From this ontological position, the “child” does not disappear safely and completely into the world of “grown-up men”. “Childhood” is valuable in itself not only for itself, but it is the reputation of the entire human civilization, which, however, managed at certain periods of its history to fall into “infanticide” and cause the “disappearance of childhood”...

**Keywords:** *ontology, childhood, civilization, the authentic model of the child.*

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*Leo Tolstoy once said to M. Gorky:  
«I can't believe you were a little kid too».  
E. Erikson. Childhood and society*

*“Competition between different countries and regions  
is moving towards competition in the field of childhood”  
A. Radchenko*

### 1. About the possibilities and relevance of the ontological approach

Why are we talking specifically about the ontological definition of the phenomenon of childhood? The most obvious answer is that the classical virtues of the ontological definition today have turned out to be unforgivably forgotten and have given way to a postmodern approach with all the ensuing problematic consequences in theoretical and practical terms.

An ontological attitude towards surrounding phenomena presupposes a question and a feasible answer, what is the essence or nature of a particular phenomenon. Despite the banality of such an “ontological” claim, the matter is not as simple as it seems. It so happened that recently the “ontology of things” most often, at best, is understood as

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simply the “being” of these things in contrast to say a concentration on the peculiarities of cognition (epistemology) of the same things, not to mention the interest in their ethical and aesthetic modality. It is clear that this focus on “simply being” does not oblige research scrupulosity to strive for the “authenticity of things”: the matter is limited to “facts”, “actual existence” or as they now say, “facticism”. In this regard, it remains to recall that ontology is not about the actual existence of things, but about their “true” and “authentic being”. Or since such “ontological existence” is grasped in concepts, then the ontological case is the case when “a thing corresponds to its concept/notion”.

When does this “ontological occasion” occur? Social objects are observable essentially, ontologically, not in every form of their existence. The classics of ontology consist in the statement that the “openness of being” of things appears only at a mature and full-fledged stage of development of anything. “A thing is not when it begins...” (Hegel). In other words, “actual being” can also represent immature, deviant, false forms of existence of things. The inauthenticity of being becomes obvious when the thing itself acts as a witness at the stage of realizing its essence. “In being itself it was discovered that, by virtue of its nature, it goes deeper inside and [...] through this entry it becomes an essence” (Hegel, 1971). This is the oldest and most durable thought of classical ontology, which dates back to the era of Aristotle: “The question of what a being is is the question of what an essence is”.

And in fact, returning to the “ontological definition of childhood”, we can and should say that this definition serves as an essential guideline among “today’s” problems surrounding childhood. The essential definition of the concept of “childhood” includes those ontological constants and universals of this phenomenon that we can observe in those cases when childhood in one or another fullness and maturity is presented in Modernity as the latest “edition” of Civilization. At the same time, it would be naive to believe that our Modernity is so rich and capacious that CHILDHOOD is presented in it in the full scale of its truth and authenticity.

In History itself, as a prelude to Modernity, one can observe full-fledged juvenile worlds “sunning up in steps and extinguishing in steps”. However, a “happy childhood” in privileged conditions often does not last long: as they say, “you have to pay for everything”. This is how history pays for the “canons of childhood”, when the privileged conditions of a particular class or estate become an anachronism and a brake on the historical route of social “progress” of society. Rare advantages in raising a child, observed, for example, in the Russian “noble estate” of the second half of the 18th century and a significant part of the 19th century, end with the death of these “noble nests”.

Here, from a methodological point of view, it would be appropriate to say that it is easier for an ontologically oriented researcher to determine whether he is dealing with quasi-childhood, which can actually include almost any empirical childhood or on the contrary, with its full-fledged format. In this regard, a completely relevant remark would not be out of place: in postmodernism there is no such fundamental dilemma. All childhood options are supposedly equivalent. Everything has a “right to recognition” because of “the very fact of its existence”, ipso facto. What falls short of ontological significance, from a postmodernist point of view, is simply designated as “other” childhood. As a result, the difference between “deviance” and “authenticity”, “existence” and “essence”, etc. disappears. It is clear that this type of relativistic classification leaves no room for deontology - the problem of choosing what is due. It seems obvious that if you have an idea of the truth of childhood, then the choice of the proper “program” for the development of a child lies in the plane of “this” (true) and not “other” childhood.

And this mentality, until relatively recently, was the ABC of ontological classics: “The worst madness is to see life as it is, forgetting what it should be” (M. de Cervantes).

The latest “masterpiece” of postmodernist “fashion” is to attribute ought to the area of moralization, subjectivism and simply to the arbitrariness of value judgments, about which authors who resort to this kind of argumentation should supposedly always add almost in an apologetic tone - they say “this is just my “value” judgment”. This is against the backdrop of long-standing and well-known discoveries that Truth and Evaluation (with a capital T) do not contradict each other (K. Jaspers, M. Lifshitz, etc.).

## 2. About the ontological imperative of childhood

In the history of social philosophy, there has developed a tradition, not particularly thoughtful, of viewing human “progress” as a linear and endless process, inevitably reminiscent of “bad infinity”, as Hegel sarcastically criticized it. The idea that human history has a different type of “route” and results in a full-fledged reproductive and irreversible state (in Hegel - a kind of “triumph” of the world mind, in K. Marx - “communism”, in V. Kojève and F. Fukuyama - “the end of history”, among modern sociologists - “global civilization”) - this idea is related to the conceptual apparatus of later times. In this regard, a useful analogy can be traced when you begin to delve into the understanding of the “institution” of childhood - childhood in the sense that, in the course of history, it also results in a stable and mature reproduction of itself that is, realizing in society and for society the entire set of its potential functions and properties.

As it turns out, in human society that has reached a civilized level, one of the main “claims” of childhood is its universal “claim” to be “present” in one way or another in the structure of adult life. As one Russian author recently put it, the image of a child has the meaning of “a positive beginning in the world”. Observations of this kind are made today by many other authors:

“Children from conception to death touch the essence of what a person is and this essence is always with them” (Dolto, 2010).

“Teleologically, a child carries with him something that an adult should not lose... Modern culture recognizes not only the intrinsic value of a child, but also the deep ontological need of a child for an adult... It requires the constant presence of the world of childhood within the world of adults”

([https://pikabu.ru/story/v\\_kanade\\_pridumali\\_obedinit\\_doma\\_prestarelyikh\\_s\\_detskimi\\_priyutami\\_6238998](https://pikabu.ru/story/v_kanade_pridumali_obedinit_doma_prestarelyikh_s_detskimi_priyutami_6238998)).

“That endless, truly absolute, that “eternal childhood”, which is the guarantee of true human existence” (Dariyuchuk & Zvereva, 1987).

“Childhood is the most ontological segment of the biography of an [adult] person” (Kislov, 2002).

“Childhood [...] is too important a stage in a person’s self-awareness. [To the world of childhood] “a person, as a rule, turns throughout his life as a source of dear memories, in which he learns that kindness, sympathy and understanding are the norm and evil and loneliness are an ugly deviation from it (Lotman, 1995).

“In Canada they came up with a brilliant idea - to combine “Nursing Homes” with “Children’s Shelters”. The result exceeded all expectations. Elderly people found loving grandchildren, orphans for the first time felt what parental love and care is. Doctors noted an improvement in all vital functions in older people, bright eyes and a strong interest in

life. Before the children came from the orphanage, the old people were more like mummies with faded eyes” (Chekhov, 1976).

### **3. Ensemble of universal constants of childhood**

“Today there is a reason that forces us to speak emphatically about the juvenile world in terms of a full-fledged and mature model of childhood. This reason is the dominance of the principle of postmodern “pluralism” regarding the child’s world. This “pluralism” noticeably overestimates the importance of historical, primordial, ethno-cultural determinants and even political motives for choosing a “multiple” picture of childhood as the most supposedly advanced and final. In this case, we inevitably have to remember that “advancement” and “finality” are achieved not so much by the specific “learning” of specialists, but by the often-unhurried chronology of reality itself and social existence (ontology). So in this rather motley historical chronology of childhood options and the geography of these options, it can be difficult to see signs of the growing universality and universal content of the same phenomenon of childhood. “Everything is drowning in pharisaism” - everything is drowning in the false persuasiveness of the empirical pluralism of childhood. “Reality is very plausible”, F. Nietzsche quipped about this.

A similar methodological “drama” is being played out today regarding the scientific definition of culture/civilization. In particular, the “relativistic” recognition of any “social community”, registered either along the lines of History or Modernity, as almost a “civilization” of its kind, *sui generis* or simply by the fact of its existence, sometimes easily leads to the fact that The classification “civilization” includes “communities” that, by (ontological) definition, are not such a civilization. For example, “civilizations” in which children were ritually sacrificed or when a wife could be buried alive along with the deceased husband cannot be called “civilization”, at least for the period of such “negative practices.” It is clear that for such “cases” another taxonomy is used - “savagery” / “barbarism”. The trend of civilization is historically realized not through the synchronous or parallel existence of many “sovereign communities,” but rather through large centers of increasing “civilization” in the precise sense of the word. In this sense, the historical “European project” is quite unprecedented. Yes, Europe sinned against the principle of civilization, but to elevate this fact to justify “Europonihilism” would be a miscalculation of a methodological and practical order. Mich spoke about this at one time. Lifshitz, who has done a lot to rehabilitate social ontology in our social science: “Eurocentrism, which does not take into account the identity of the peoples of the world, is dangerous, but “Europonigilism” is three times dangerous, combining modern spiritual reaction, gorged on too fine food and raving about new barbarism, with real lack of culture, Asianism and Smerdyakov’s rebellion. Drawing lessons from this experience, modern social thought will learn [...] dialectics, which rejects both the metaphysical abstraction of abstract progress and insignificant relativism, devoid of the backbone of objective truth (Letyagin, 2002). But let us return, however, to the list of those attributes of childhood that form a critical mass of the civilized phenomenon of childhood and the phenomenon itself is an irreversible canon and a universal role model in all human communities that claim civilizational significance.

Today there is no need to complain about the paucity of the material from which one can draw the already mentioned list or “ensemble of universal constants of childhood”. This material is sufficiently represented not only in the scientific literature.

Where science lacks resources for imagination, intuition and imagery, art and fiction provide sufficient material. Of course, any collection of mentioned qualities of a child's world cannot be complete or exhaustive. But if behind these "accidents" there are the meanings of the principle, then with this approach we are most likely on the right path.

In the most general form, the (ontological) characteristics of childhood begin already at the border of the biosocial, are recorded in repeated childhood practices and receive their generalized expression in terms of metaphysics.

The fundamental fact to be noted first is: "Man has a long childhood and a civilized person has an even longer one" (Tolstoy, 1970). "It cannot be accidental that a person must live a quarter of his life in order to become completely independent" (Erickson, 2019). The reasoning of one famous German ethologist revolves around this: "Most of the features that distinguish domestic animals from their distant ancestors [...] remain [in domestic animals] for life [...] As for behavior, one of its youthful manifestations, What has become constant in our dogs is a passionate individual attachment. The same affection that the puppies of wild ancestors had for their mothers and which disappeared without a trace in them in adulthood, is preserved in truly civilized dogs as their characteristic psychological feature" (Lifshitz, 1985). The question that follows from this is: how appropriate is it to reduce childhood due to such "fruits of enlightenment", such as, for example, "advanced" socialization, professionalization, technicalization and of course, futurization in the spirit of Mayakovsky - "I want the future today!" In this regard, the sad, if not gloomy, irony of J.J. Rousseau, known for his not always friendly disposition towards the successes of civilization, comes to mind: "A French teacher prepares his pupil to shine for a moment in childhood and then forever remained a nonentity". More than a hundred years later, V. Nabokov, in the novel "Other Cities", will repeat himself in the style of the same desperately mournful edification: "Pamper your children, gentlemen! Nobody knows what the future holds". What should we do if some right things are sometimes clearer to us if they are spoken about indirectly, but in a distorted form?!

Almost all authors with constant insistence talk about that feature of childhood that is in obvious deficiency in adults and therefore can be called in Latin as desiderata (desired, what is lacking). It is clear that we are talking about such an essential mode of the child's state as spontaneity. And if we mean specifically adult recipients, then we should add - disarming spontaneity. "The first ten to twelve years of a child's life correspond to the full flowering of spontaneity" (Dolto, 2010). This state of immediacy is justified by a factor that, if desired, can be defined as an independent ontological characteristic of childhood: if in adulthood a person lives in the modality of "having", then a child lives in the modality of "being".

The fact is that "to have" in principle excludes being naive and spontaneity. "To have" presupposes having means, tools, property, etc. burdens that in one way or another infringe on our freedom. Not at all in individual cases, a person can generally exchange "means of subsistence" for "existence" itself. In a child, this case is excluded "by definition". "Directness" means "without mediation". The little man represents himself "directly", "without mediation", "without tricks". It is clear that you cannot live "without tricks" in adulthood, but this does not mean that "spontaneity" cannot be written into the lives of adult men and women. Their life can be built not only according to the principle "thanks to" (the means), but also "despite" (these means). Some of us are endowed with an incorrigible "childhood" or "idealism".

Another prominent feature in the ontological anatomy of childhood - a feature without which we have a nominal rather than an essential picture of the infant world - is

the child's attitude towards himself. In the case of human consciousness, self-referentiality is a rather insidious field; in the case of childhood, it is doubly insidious. Understanding oneself for a child is an event of irresistible force. The fact is that in the "normal version" by such "understanding" we do not mean any idea of the young creature about himself, but a more or less adequate one. Moreover, in reality, most often, we have to talk not so much about the abstract process of self-knowledge, but in terms that reflect the level of demands on oneself, satisfaction/more often, dissatisfaction with oneself, "mania" for self-improvement, etc. And even in the best In this case, on this path the child is doomed to climb out of his organic nature, from his own narcissism and egocentrism.

In Russian fiction, so rich in "stories about childhood", this critically important aspect of a child's life is most ontologically insightful and objectively reproduced in L. Tolstoy's trilogy (Shklovsky, 1963). The author of the trilogy considered this platform for "self-assembly" of a young personality, this "reliance on oneself", this "childhood from the first person" to be the most important battle in which the little person fights with himself "for himself". Shklovsky with real research thoroughness and depth studied this plot based on the materials of the great Russian writer. In particular, he wrote: "Tolstoy values most of all a person's ability to change and thus, grow spiritually" (Zenkovsky, 1924). Lev Nikolayevich himself confessively interpreted the meaning of this gift: "This voice of repentance and passionate desire for perfection was the main new spiritual sensation at this time of my development (emphasis added by us. - A. Shch.) and it laid new foundations for my view on yourself, on people and the world of God. A good, joyful voice, so many times since then, in those sad times when my soul silently submitted to the power of life's lies and depravity, suddenly boldly rebelling against all untruth [...] Will you ever stop sounding?" (Shklovsky, 1963). Actually, turning to this order of thoughts, whether of the hero or the author of the story, should not give reason to think that we are dealing with an exceptional case of idealistic exaltation and abstract abstraction. As one holder of the very specific and practical profession of astronaut said: "Ideals are the basis of survival".

A demand for oneself formulated in the language of ideality is a demand from the heights of the normal. To adhere to an ontological-essential orientation is to adhere to the norm, beyond which the zone of deviation and pathology extends. When the poet says that he, as a person, cannot fit entirely between shoes and a hat, he is talking about the same thing: everyday life is not "development" at all, "they [simply] live in it and [banally] die". "Normal" childhood is prescribed development, transcendence, going beyond the given. And if this is not only and not so much "carried away", but "carrying away" development, then this is a case of ontology, that is, genuine, true "development" in the precise and beautiful sense of this concept. In our case, it is "development" that we can observe in childhood, which is "self-reliant", childhood, which is "from the first person", etc.

It must be said that this is not news for professional childhood psychologists. Among these, Bozovic (1908-1981) has always stood out. For her, as her colleagues themselves noted, the main thing in the psychological development of a child was to emphasize the young creature's ability to self-determination, i.e., to understand oneself as a person who maintains himself in irreversible integrity, as well as such characteristically independence, which even while forming in awkward circumstances does not sacrifice himself to them (Bozhovich, 1968).

About one "paradoxical ontology of childhood or why do children love parents who may not love their children? - It doesn't take long to look for the answer: the true nature

of childhood does not fit well into the logic of the everyday life of an ordinary person (authenticity most often exists “not because of, but in spite of”), which is why the ontology of childhood looks so paradoxical: children love their parents even when the same is not tell me about your parents. And this does not speak of a child’s masochistic inclination, but rather of a more durable and reliable embodiment in him of the need not only to consume, but also to build human relationships. As he grows up, he wants to give the love he did not receive in adolescence to his parents. Two examples: Chekhov and Pushkin.

Chekhov left us a confession that is as pressing as it is provocative: “As a child, I had no childhood.” It is well known that the father of the future writer entrusted the care of the grocery store entirely to his sons. It was almost a hard labor regime. The shop traded from 5 am to 11 pm. But the most difficult and offensive thing was, of course, the frequent floggings. In one of his letters, Chekhov wrote: “I was caressed so little as a child that now, as an adult, I accept caresses as something unusual, something I have not yet experienced much” (Tolstoy, 1970). And yet, we observe that the adult Chekhov did not answer his father “symmetrically” at all. He understood and appreciated his father in many ways. And the caring attitude towards him was not an expression of a biological instinct, but a consequence of a civilized “need for a father” without any conditions. Already as an adult, the writer, as a creative and independent person, sought solitude for work and life. Nevertheless, he buys the Melikhovo estate with the expectation that his father and mother will live there and that his father will indulge in his favorite business - managing the acquired household. And when Pavel Yegorovich dies, Chekhov only then sells Melikhovo and buys a plot of land in Yalta and builds his mansion there.

The relationship between little Sasha Pushkin and his mother cannot be called touching. Nadezhda Osipovna Hannibal was a hot-tempered and eccentric woman. She was irritated by the clumsiness, absent-mindedness and unrefined appearance of her eldest son. A “beautiful Creole” and “spoiled” woman (as her contemporaries characterized her) was hardly a treasury of maternal virtues. In her pedagogical arsenal there were “conspiracies of silence” against her son that lasted almost a year and punishments when she tied the future poet’s hands behind the back for the whole day. A. Pushkin did not repay his mother with insult and coldness.

Let’s repeat. It is precisely the great nature of childhood that children feel a stronger need not just for parents, but for love for their parents. Pushkin became especially close to his mother when she fell ill for the last time. He was the only member of the family who accompanied his mother’s body for burial to the Svyatogorsk Monastery. There, next to his mother’s grave, Alexander Sergeevich bought a plot for himself.

What had to be called here “paradoxical ontology of childhood” would be more correctly designated as “normal paradoxicality”. Why, however, do we see such “normality” in “everyday”, “real”, etc. life so rarely or rather, in general, extremely rarely? All for the same reason. In human affairs, the Essence does not always coincide with the Phenomenon. True development proceeds from phenomenon to essence and does not always “reach” this “essence”. In “human Palestines” it is not at all easy to stay at the level of “entities”. It is easier to indulge in flight from the “ideal” - “normal” - “ought”; it is much more tempting to indulge in desertion from “ontology”, from the authenticity of being...

The “ensemble of universal constants of childhood” presented here for review, naturally, cannot claim to be an “exhaustive list” and in another version or version it may look different and more convincing. The main ontological question remains, however,

unchanged. The question is whether such a set of such “universals” can, in the course of the history of childhood, “gather” into a sufficiently full-fledged and mature form of the phenomenon of the child as it [the phenomenon] is presented in modern civilization. The history of childhood itself “begins” with such “negative practices” as infanticide and child sacrifice and only much later does childhood begin to develop to the (realization of) its essence, to the fullness of the concept of “childhood” or as they say in an ontological manner, “to the point of equality with oneself.” However, there is, of course, no need to even talk about a significant embodiment of his true existence in modern childhood. Human society not only “discovered” childhood in modern times (Aries, 1999), but already in modern times placed it in conditions tantamount to its “disappearance” (Postman, 2004). In this regard, it can be noted that childhood as a stable phenomenon flourishes in those historical and social periods when society “guesses” this ontological nature of the child. And vice versa: the crisis of childhood in today's developed world reflects the fact that the bias of modern civilization does not best correlate with the true needs and capabilities of the child. The “gentleman's set” of these problems is known. Here is the “cultural” unpretentiousness of the postmodern era (and child-free and the early sexualization of the child and the excesses of gender radicalism and not at all existential, but an experimentally simple attitude towards marriage and the excessive filling of the space of early childhood with (leisure) digitalization, etc. And something else that seems not to be understood in large “ontological” terms: virtuality is an auxiliary, conventional means and not an independent world worthy of a person being in it, especially a child lost in it. The border between the “natural” and the “artificial”. “As the border between “human” and “posthuman” remains fundamental.

#### **4. Civilization as a condition of childhood - childhood as a condition of civilization**

Childhood as a social and cultural phenomenon has as a prerequisite a human community that has emerged from the stage of savagery and barbarism and has entered at least the period of civilizational development. This obvious thesis has its dialectical continuation: childhood itself has such significance for characterizing the civilization of a society that a society with a deformed childhood does not openly “rhyme” with civilization. No matter from which side we approach the topic of “the child and civilizations,” as well as the priority of each of these subjects over each other, it is important to realize that only with an ontological approach we avoid the relativistic “trap” of the equivalence of the existing forms of childhood and civilization. What's interesting? The public consciousness is more likely to fall into this trap even when it is not trying to deal with the enigma of childhood. The essence of childhood seems to lie on the surface and here the likelihood of error is not so great. More problematic is the essential definition of “civilization”. The fact of the existing “competition” of civilizations only aggravates this problem. “Competing” civilizations can each curate and promote “their own” models of childhood, ignoring the universal nature of the child as a child, which hardly lies in the interests of childhood itself.

Therefore, in this vein, it is more correct to raise the question not only and not so much about the “competition” of civilizations among themselves and against each other, but about their win-win “competition” for the full and true authenticity of the “world of childhood”, for providing the child with conditions and patterns in which the truth and authenticity of childhood is formed and preserved, for the methodology of constructing

such a “children’s world” with its paradox and even secrets. Pedagogical and psychological thought of the West, East and Russia has repeatedly confirmed its unique contribution towards this common, pan-human perspective. Of course, the mini-anthology of “recipes and tips” proposed in the conclusion and collected almost at random does not prove anything; it is enough that these extracts, in their classical literary form, remind us of the eternal and the sacred. They will remind us (from different sides) of the enduring and universal routes of formation and preservation of childhood, no matter how tempting the most diverse techniques and practices of the postmodern demiurges of childhood. The main thing remains the main thing: children - today, tomorrow - they are full-fledged subjects of a full-fledged civilization with its both self-discipline and openness to freedom.

J.J. Rousseau (1712 - 17780): “If you want to spoil a child, give him everything and ask nothing”.

S. Vivekananda (1863 - 1902): “Treat your children as strangers, and strangers as your own”.

N.I. Pirogov, (1810 - 1881): “To be and to appear: A parent or mentor, allowing [...] to expose youth in a distorted form to public [view], does not it introduce into the receptive soul the beginnings of lies and pretense [...] A noisy praises given to that pretense that has become natural [...] and in what soul? - not yet briefly familiar with the science of being and seeming [...] Wait, let [the child] develop, give time to begin the struggle with himself and get stronger in it. Then, whoever feels a calling in himself, perhaps, let him be an actor: he still will not cease to be a person” (Pirogov, 1985).

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