Gillick competence: An unnecessary burden

Nigel Zimmermann  
*The University of Notre Dame Australia*, nigel.zimmermann@acu.edu.au

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**Abstract:**
This study of the ethical significance of childhood is situated within the context of adolescent decision-making and childhood is treated as a neglected topic of ethical reflection. It is argued that Gillick competence is an unnecessary burden with an unethical foundation. The ethics of adolescent medical decision-making is a fraught area for medical ethics because it deals with the threshold boundaries between childhood and adulthood and Gillick adds a burden upon adolescent patients that is unwarranted and through which damage is done to integral human relationships.
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Nigel Zimmermann

*University of Notre Dame Australia, Sydney, Australia*

*Nigel.Zimmermann@nd.edu.au*

Nigel Zimmermann is Adjunct Lecturer with the Institute for Ethics and Society at the University of Notre Dame Australia and Sessional Lecturer with the John Paul II Institute for Marriage & Family Studies in Melbourne, VIC. He is author of *Levinas and Theology* (2013) and *Facing the Other: John Paul II, Levinas, and the Body* (2015), among other writings in theology and bioethics.
Gillick Competence: An unnecessary burden

This study of the ethical significance of childhood is situated within the context of adolescent decision-making and childhood is treated as a neglected topic of ethical reflection. It is argued that Gillick competence is an unnecessary burden with an unethical foundation. The ethics of adolescent medical decision-making is a fraught area for medical ethics because it deals with the threshold boundaries between childhood and adulthood and Gillick adds a burden upon adolescent patients that is unwarranted and through which damage is done to integral human relationships.

Keywords: Gillick; competence; childhood; child; adolescent; decision-making; ethics

Childhood as an ethical problem and the emergence of two radical positions

Children in any kind of need can inspire a personal empathy in a range of circumstances. Images of children in difficult circumstances have universal appeal, and there is an epi-phenomenal experience of shared responsibility for a suffering child; even one in a different country and culture to one’s own. This was epitomized on a grand scale when the image of one deceased child moved countless people to become emotionally invested and politically mobilised over the European refugee crisis (The Huffington Post: This Photo Shows the Horrific Toll of Europe’s Refugee Crisis, 2 September 2015). Moreover in children’s literature the loyalty and imaginative power of childhood can be contrasted with adults, even in situations where children are faced with great danger or moral opposition. For example, a character in the first of CS Lewis’ Chronicles of Narnia series comments, ‘Children have one kind of silliness, as you know, and grown-ups have another kind’ (CS Lewis, The Magicians Nephew, 6). The difference between the child and the adult becomes less clear or polarized when considering adolescence, the Latin root *adolescere* of which means ‘to grow up’, a developmental stage (or stages) from puberty to the age of majority, during which a child transitions towards adulthood. Ethical attention upon the child tells us something of the inherent power of the narrative of childhood as a vehicle for directing discussion
about how we make major decisions in health care, and it tells a story about shared humanity and personhood.

What is meant by ‘childhood’ or a ‘child’ will be largely framed by age but also indicates a social and mental spectrum of development that is finding its way towards maturity. This is not merely about finding an adequate means of caring for our shared future, which is one obvious way of understanding the significance of children and childhood, but about understanding better what children mean for us now. If childhood carries a significance in its own right, such logic would have us consider those adults with a child-like mentality (for example those with learning disabilities or some form of cognitive impairment), who bear childhood as a reality that is experiential and unavoidable, but not bound to age per se. A change in approaches to the young child and the adolescent child can be apparent in which expressions of affection or protection to the smaller child, both disabled and those who are not, are more common than for the adolescent disabled person. See for example a case in the US in which a disabled child’s parents wished her to receive surgery to maintain her childish looks (CNN: *Report: ‘Pillow angel’ surgery broke law*, 8 May 2007). A nine year old girl with the condition known as static encephalopathy was sterilized and the treatment, insisted upon by both parents, resulted in her growth being stunted (‘growth attenuation therapy’), actions which ultimately were deemed to be illegal by the State of Washington. In this case parents had insisted that the actions, including a hysterectomy, were designed to prevent further suffering to their daughter, and the artificial stunting of growth would allow the child to be more positively involved in family love and affection.

What then of the factors involved in the decision-making around medical care for children themselves?

In light of recent developments, two radical positions are apparent and in need of critical attention. These will be referred to as dependency and autonomy, which at first glance might seem to sit in opposition. It is argued below that they are not in opposition or even in simple contradiction, but are oriented against each other in a way in which they feed off and depend on one another, and in some respects overlap:

The first radical position is that of dependency, a significant component of childhood that includes psychological, emotional, physical and intellectual dimensions, that will be assessed as the typical social and economic means in which a child normally relates to family and other social structures, including that of medical care. Dependency has a healthy aspect and is not to be rejected simplistically. Again, the way in which
dependent persons are treated is not equal; the disabled adolescent child can be treated
differently from the very young disabled child, the latter of which might draw an
affectionate and benevolent form of pity, and the former, who might be louder, larger,
stronger, receiving less overt affection and more of a grim tolerance. Not a new reality
in itself, the assumption of dependency has always been found in healthcare delivery,
although in the context of widespread paternalism it may have been more the norm than
the exception. In many ways the voice of the child is being heard more clearly now
despite the radicalized dependency that still takes place, for example the case of Hannah
Jones, a 13 year old with a hole in her heart who refused a heart transplant in 2008
(BBC News: Girl wins right to refuse heart, 2008). Jones’ parents were taken to the
High Court by her hospital, the Herefordshire Primary Care Trust who wished the
parents decision overturned, but the case was ultimately dropped. The girl’s parents are
on the record as deferring the decision to their daughter on the basis that she was mature
enough to decide on her own medical treatment (or refusal), whereas the hospital had
taken the view that this was the wrong decision and the girl should be overruled for her
own good. Dependency, when not radicalised, can be given a positive account, such as,
for example, in the work of Robert Spaemann, who views dependency as a means of
maturity in the human person (see especially Persons and summarised helpfully in a
shorter article When does the Human Being begin to be a Person?). Any child is—
legally and socially—dependent upon primary carers (in most cases parents but other
kinds of legal guardians and carers serve in a similar capacity) for its basic care and
sustenance, as well as for its social and moral formation. At this broad level,
dependency is more a fact than a position or a concept at play, however it has
increasingly become a vehicle by which childhood is held back and the natural
development of maturity is interrupted. Moreover, the ‘shady area’ of later adolescence,
while still treated as a component of childhood, is increasingly viewed as a period of
development in which children may have obtained the knowledge and maturity to make
their own decisions on medical treatment, eg ‘Gillick competence’ (Gillick v West
Norfolk & Wisbeck Area Health Authority (1986) AC 112 House of Lords.).
Dependency has become utilised as a position radicalised in the situation of medical
decision making such that children, from a very young age, are restricted from raising
their own voice in answer to questions about their health and wellbeing.

In contrast to dependency is that of radical autonomy, described by some as a
fundamental feature of ethical health care in modernity and in contemporary Western
medical contexts, such as in the influential text, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*, where a new way of guiding medical decisions was laid out by Tom Beauchamp and James Childress that focused on nonmaleficence, beneficence, autonomy and justice (2001; first edition published in 1979). For Beauchamp and Childress, these four principles provide a framework for identifying and reflecting on moral problems, and not for generating a new moral theory as such (2001: 15). However, autonomy is viewed as more than a simple principle and can be treated as an ideal for each human being, and some children are granted a form of partial autonomy in decision making at an age that, until recent years, would have been thought too young for such a level of responsibility.

Generally, a child might be considered to have a competence for a particular decision (such as contraception) and not for another (such as whether or not to receive a heart transplant). Children are considered as human beings (usually) who have not reached a mature capacity to express their autonomy, which with recent changes can be granted to children at a sudden and unprepared age or point in time (later in this article the age of 18 will be discussed as well as the less clear ages of 16-18 and those under 16). A typical age for this, legally speaking, is that of the sixteenth year, at which point many jurisdictions recognize a full complement of powers over one’s decision-making capability. This, alongside the problem of dependency above, makes childhood something of an aberration in the modern and postmodern mind; a process on its way to an adequate level of autonomous self expression rather than a positive stage of development carrying its own ethical significance.

These two radical positions have become enshrined in various legal contexts and in medical practice, indicating that two positions are gaining strength that, on the face of it, have little middle ground. They disregard possibilities for a holistic account of childhood as ethically significant in its own right, whereas a better rounded position can be found in the thought of Alasdair MacIntyre who advocates for an integrated vision of human maturity. In MacIntyre’s view, human growth constitutes a spectrum of developmental stages that require a social ecology of mutual responsibility and a keen sense of the right of a child to grow into maturity (See MacIntyre’s works *Dependent Rational Animals* and *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays*, Volume 2). Overlooked between the two positions is, ironically enough, the child itself, as a distinctive person who requires a kind of medical attention and care that respects the particular stage of development being lived through, and the uniqueness of that individual experience of health and wellbeing. It may be that it is this position to which healthcare professionals
are drawn, and which they naturally feel an allegiance, but the literature does not necessarily reflect this.

The underlying assumption that mitigates against such a social ecology in our ethical vision will be challenged and this article considers both radical positions as, at root, relying on the same negation of childhood as ethically significant according to its own logic and in its own right.

Contemporary bioethics indicates a strong desire to provide for the principle of autonomy in patient care and this can be equally applied to the expectations placed on adolescents (see for example Beauchamp and Childress, 2001; Taylor, 2009; Roubaix, 2008). In itself, autonomy has significant moral value because it can be a cultivation of each human person as an individual whose dignity is owed respect and liberty; it is the ethical principle concerned with the matter of self-governance and of the liberty to think and act independently (Wrenn, 2015). Autonomy can be understood in this broad way, although the limits on autonomy will become evident later in what follows. In the case of pre-adult patients, the matter becomes complicated because in the case of embryos and young children, there is no autonomy that can be manifest. Quite literally, the unborn have no voice, and in the infant and the very young there is no clear verbal articulation of one’s views and desires. In the case of adolescents, the principle of autonomy enters murkier territory, because the adolescent patient can indeed be asked what they wish, and they may be able to articulate a clear and thoughtful answer, but the level of their formation and understanding of the risks and opportunities for their health are uneven. Not being able to ask the infant does not mean the infant is marginalized; simply that autonomy cannot be extended to them. Being able to ask the adolescent child is a healthy activity, but if it is done at the cost of other important relationships shared by the child (such as parental and sibling relationships), autonomy becomes not so much a healthy principle that respects human dignity but a principle magnified disproportionately from other principles at stake, regardless of one’s view of the actual medical outcome. Illustrative of this danger is an example of a practicing Jehovah’s Witness family in the US, in which the parents’ refusal of a blood transfusion to their eight year old child was overturned by the Court of Appeals in Boston (In the Matter of Elisha McCauley. 409 Mass. 134). Here, following a similar pattern in other US jurisdictions, the Court decided that while parents had both responsibility for their child’s health and a constitutionally protected liberty of religion, the State had an interest in the health of the child not precluded by the rights and interests of those
parents. Because of her age, the child was not considered to be adequately mature to have powers of autonomy.

Also of particular relevance is a 2002 study by Kiek Tates et al, ‘Doctor–parent–child relationships: a ‘pas de trois’’. In Tates’ study of a meeting between under age patients, a parent and a doctor, the parents repeatedly over-ruled and interrupted their child when the Doctor asked he or she directly how they were feeling. Even at a young age, children showed a self-awareness of their condition and state of health that could inform the process of medical diagnoses, but their natural desire to participate in the decision-making process was thwarted by their parents. Autonomy, when not isolated from other principles such that it is radicalised and almost idolised, has a positive good to which it can orient a patient, that being the independent practical reasoning of a person who takes responsibility for their own health. Blame cannot be placed at the feet of the medical community or doctors, and has to be viewed within a broader cultural complicity in working against the good of the child, albeit unintentionally. There is apparent here a lack of imagination as to what a child, in its own right, might be able to teach others about its own health.

**Gillick competence and the question as to what is a child?**

The influence of a doctor, in their style of address, tone, manner of instruction, and enthusiasm for a proposed medical procedure, can have an effect upon the choices of their patients, both you and old. This is important in the context of young patients, especially in their teenage years, during which a great deal of physiological development and other social pressures might be at work, including that of peer pressure, all with implications for their ethical choices (See Santor et al, 2000).

There are a number of factors which impede the sense of absolute freedom such as the notion of the common good, such as legal restrictions against self-harm or assault. This was made clear in the case of Leslie Burke, a 45 year old gentleman with a degenerative brain condition known as cerebellar ataxia, through which he would lose coordination and control over his speech and limbs, although his mental faculties were likely to remain unaffected (BBC News: Patient loses right-to-food case, 28 July 2005). Mr Burke requested that his doctors be prevented from withdrawing artificial nutrition and hydration when the ability to express his own wishes was impeded by his condition, which he feared. The General Medical Council (GMC) successfully appealed against a ruling in the patient’s favour, arguing that doctors would be forced by this decision to
provide artificial nutrition even in cases where it would be against their best interests, although this latter feature of the ruling was *obiter dicta* (R Burke v General Medical Council - [2005] All ER (D) 445 [Jul]). Even where a presumption for the sanctity of life is maintained and, as it happened in Burke, the GMC gave assurances to the patient that there was no intention to discriminate against him based on his disability and withdraw what, in effect, is food and hydration, the Court of Appeal sided with the GMC’s request that doctors not be forced to do so in every circumstance. Not only are there legislative restrictions on the freedom of patients, but there are presumptions against their freedom which take place in the doctor-patient relationship, and there is a curtailing of freedom apparent in common law.

Since *Gillick v West Norfolk* (1986), British Common Law has sided with the right of a child under the age of 16 to be prescribed artificial contraception, in agreement with a healthcare professional, without knowledge or consent of his or her parents, constituting an increased accentuation of the principle of autonomy. In the statement supporting his decision, Lord Fraser said that given the legal recognition of a child’s right to enter a contract, be sued, and give evidence under Oath, he could see no basis ‘merely on account of her age’ to prevent a legal provision for what was deemed decision making power over the child’s personal medical care (*Gillick v West Norfolk & Wisbeck Area Health Authority* (1986) AC 112 House of Lords). At the time, it was immediately recognized how significant a decision this was, and subsequent courts have referred to ‘Gillick competence’ as a measure of the ability of a child (under 16) to make under-age medical choices. Three important factors must be present for the measure to have been met, namely the child’s maturity, understanding, and the nature of the treatment (Kerr: 1984, 185). However, the measure has been liberally applied and these factors generously assigned, constituting at the age of 16 what one writer has called ‘something magical’ for underage patients in the United Kingdom, in that the previously creeping increase in responsible faculties of decision-making is assigned in totality at this age, with no regard for the particulars of maturity, understanding, or the nature of the treatment from the age of 16 onwards (Purssell: 1995, 623). There is in effect an event of suddenness in the allocation of full decision-making powers to the young person, whether they are ready or not. The same comment can be made of 18 or indeed any particular age, and it has been assumed that the need for an agreed legally binding age of majority is unavoidable. The fact that the age of 16 has become significant to autonomy indicates an element of gradualness but only marginally.
Gillick competence became an important precedent for countries like the USA and Australia, bringing with it a difference in the way that an adolescent child is treated under the law, at least in terms of medical decision making. Competence is granted through various tests, which at their most comprehensive can become interrogative in the number and detail of questions put to a particular child patient (Trowse: 2010, 207). Understanding what the likely results are for a particular treatment must always be, in principle, understood alongside possible risks, and this can be a lengthy consultation if it is to avoid a subjective granting of Gillick competence. This is so because informed consent is already a fraught area, even before the difficulties of age are brought into the equation. The Gillick case came about because a mother of ten children, five of them daughters, had wished the courts to side with her in protecting parents from being excluded from medical decision making in the case of children under the age of 16. She was concerned that the contraceptive pill could be prescribed to one of her daughters without her knowledge or consent, and ultimately the House of Lords decided against her, albeit with the above conditions attached. The question of contraceptives are obviously linked to the arena of sexual activity and the question as to whether a doctor could, by prescribing such an item, be complicit in an action that might be illegal (Ie a girl under 16 engaging in sexual intercourse with someone over the age of 16 etc), but by extension, this is linked to the larger question about freedom to give informed consent to any kind of medical intervention. And what status does a parent have who withholds consent to a particular action? British Courts and legislation have protected any child between the ages of 16-18 from interference from parents who might disagree with their choices, but it is the adolescents below the age of 16 for which various questions can be raised.

Gillick is an important Rubicon moment in modern approaches to adolescents because the court gave preference to a child’s ability to make decisions for itself, and reserved the right of overturning said decision to itself against the parents or guardians. In his statement, Lord Fraser stated:

Provided the patient, whether a boy or a girl, is capable of understanding what is proposed, and of expressing his or her own wishes, I see no good reason for holding that he or she lacks the capacity to express them validly and effectively and to authorise the medical man to make the examination or give the treatment which he advises. After all, a minor under the age of 16 can, within certain limits, enter into a contract. He or she can also sue and be sued, and can give evidence on oath. I am not disposed to hold now, for the first time, that a girl aged less than 16 lacks the power to give valid consent to contraceptive advice or treatment, merely on account of her age.

(Gillick v West Norfolk)
Notwithstanding that Lord Fraser referred to a ‘minor’ and then to the person concerned by their gender, a ‘girl’, a complicated question arises at this point as to what is meant by the term ‘child’?

On the face of it, the question of defining what is meant by childhood can appear simple, and even obvious. Instinctively, we might think of a young child, say, earlier than their teenage years and certainly pre-pubescent, who lives with a certain level of immaturity and near-total dependence on its parents and adult carers. Such a person can be designated a child, and not simply on the basis of immaturity, for there are adults who show degrees of comparable immaturity. Nor is the child designated as such exclusively because of its dependence on others, for such a dependence also appears in situations of adults with various forms of disability. Conversely, there are those who are below the age of majority for whom we cannot assign any sense of dependence on adults. (See for example children with no home or those fleeing desperate and violent situations. An excellent account of real crises in this regard is presented in The Silver Sword by Ian Serrailler, in which Polish children flee Nazi Germany and must live and make choices as if they were adults). Legally, nations like the United Kingdom of Great Britain define a person as a child or a ‘minor’ until the age of 18, which is not uncommon in comparable countries (data on the legal status of children in the UK here is taken from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children [NSPCC], A Child’s Legal Rights: Legal Definitions, 2015). Under 18, there are different levels of rights concerning different kinds of responsibility, such as the age for driving, performing military service, consenting to medical treatment, purchasing alcohol etc. This reflects a long tradition of legal practice in Western nations that defines a particular marker year as the recognized boundary between childhood and adulthood. What has come to be called the ‘age of majority’, is the obtaining of years at which a person is recognized as having full faculties to make decisions as an adult, other things being equal. While 18 is the number in most countries, there are notable exceptions, such as in Iran and Saudi Arabia where the age of majority is 8 for females and 14 for males, or where it is 19 (Algeria, Botswana, some States in Canada), 20 (Japan, New Zealand, Taiwan, Thailand), or 21 (various nations in North Africa, Africa, South-East
Asia and the Middle East). In every country there might be varying rights obtained upon reaching the age of majority, such as marriage, voting and so forth. Notwithstanding other cultural norms and expectations, as well as familial responsibilities and marriage traditions, the age of majority designates a person as having both a set of freedoms and responsibilities recognized by the law. These can include the legal freedom to engage in sexual relations with other adults, the right to apply for a driver’s license, and conversely carries responsibilities such as the payment of income tax when drawing a salary and the burden of care for minors conceived by one’s sexual congress. In Western countries, the age of majority brings with it a full compliment of associated legal rights over medical decisions, notwithstanding other differences in the quantity and quality of medical freedoms available in various nations.

In jurisdictions shaped by a Western European culture, a distinction has been employed to define two states of legal maturity, as it were, these being childhood and adulthood. Childhood in the United Kingdom has been defined as that state of life up until the age of 18 (General Medical Council, Definitions of children, young people and parents, 2015), at which point a full compliment of rights and responsibilities pertaining to adulthood are conferred. The GMC defines children as young people who do not have the ‘maturity’ and ‘understanding’ to make decisions themselves, and young people as, ‘…older or more experienced children who are more likely to be able to make these decisions for themselves’ (GMC, 2015). As the GMC also acknowledges, in the UK young people are recognized as having a right to make their own decisions at the age of 16. In most nations that use this distinction (largely now common globally) an intermediary period is recognized (usually somewhere in the vicinity of 14-18) in which various rights and responsibilities are conferred dependent on other factors such as evidence of reason and a capacity to form a coherent understanding of basic ethical norms and requirements of the law. This follows a long and complicated cultural development around the child/adult relationship, and a generally recognized need to protect the young from exploitation from others and from the mistakes and bad judgments they might make due to immaturity and ignorance.

1 The NSPCC also includes information about other jurisdictions such as these, with the proviso that local and national laws are not applied equally or without discrimination. It might also be noted that on occasion, a law and local custom can be in contradistinction.
Historian Colin Heywood has commented on the relatively modern interest in children and the period of life referred to as childhood, which has largely been of passing interest for philosophers and writers up until the 19th century (Heywood, 2001, 2). The account of Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) is illustrative, in which he identifies an ideal period of moral maturity in the human being between the ages of 25 and 45 (gioventute), couched on either side by periods of inadequate moral stature (adolescenza 0-25; senettute 45-70 (Heywood, 2-3). The earlier stages of adolescence were mere growth towards adulthood and the older years of decline a series of movements away from a moral peak at the ideal of age 35. This topic can slide easily between the ideal and the pragmatic depending on cultural norms and aspirations.

At a superficial level, the law recognizes a demarcation between childhood and adulthood through the mechanism of the measurement of age and at 18 a person is no longer considered a child. This has pragmatic merit and occasions the time at which most people will have concluded or be concluding late adolescence, and it means that childhood ceases the second a person turns 18 years of age. Notwithstanding the ages of 16-18, the law does not test the childhood of a particular person by a set of character traits or quantifiable scales of knowledge, skills, understanding, or moral accountability, for example. The age of a person – let us say 18 as in Great Britain – is recognized in its universal simplicity as the chief marker that, in most cases, serves as a useful boundary line for the good order of legal rights and responsibilities (18 is the universal marker for adulthood in the UK although 16 is the point at which decisions on matters such as healthcare can be made independently). A child is not so designated by any attendance to the level of its ‘childishness’, any more than adulthood is measured by the ‘adultishness’ of a human person. A person over the age of 18 can display any number of immaturities and an associated abundance of childish traits, but with no identifiable mental impairment will still be recognized as having the full set of normal freedoms and responsibilities of an adult. This is an important first step in beginning to answer the question as to what is a child, because it allows us to see the pragmatic arbitrariness of the law.

The less clear, and altogether less arbitrary area of medical decision making rights is the murkier set of stages in the years immediately prior to 18 (or any designated marker for obtaining the age of majority). In the late teenage years, the ‘child’ is approaching the age of majority, and moves through a set of developmental stages which, cumulatively, are gathered towards what is called adulthood (conflicting
theories pervade childhood studies on what are the precise stages of development that can be universally recognized, if any, see: Ruthus Childhood: Voyages in Development, 2011; Hoboken (Eds). Childhoods in Context, 2003; Cannella & Soto (Eds), Childhoods: A handbook, 2010). The notion of a child is made difficult to conceptualize clearly by other signs of maturity, including physical development, mental awareness, social engagement and so forth, which will occur at different rates for particular individuals at differing ages. With a complication of factors at play in the late adolescent or immediately pre-adult age, it is not altogether surprising that courts have, in an age in which autonomy is assumed to be of particular value to human flourishing, tended to move the recognition of rights in the direction of an increase for persons in this age bracket.

As referred to above, in the UK the boundary age at which medical decision-making is granted almost universally is not 18 but 16, when the State considers a young person capable of giving informed consent to medical treatment (this is protected in England and Wales by the Mental Capacity Act 2005 which was introduced by a supporting document by the Office of the Public Guardian titled Making decisions...about your health, welfare or finances. Who decides when you can’t?; in Scotland the age of 16 is protected by The Age of Legal Capacity (Scotland) Act 1991; Northern Ireland and other jurisdictions such as Australia have separate legislation, but were receptive to Gillick competence from 2005 onwards). As was outlined above, one writer refers to this milestone rather provocatively as an event in which ‘something magical happens as far as the health service in the United Kingdom is concerned’, because of its seemingly arbitrary nature (Purssell, 1995, 623). For Edward Purssell, the notion that a particular age can be designated as universally a commonly agreed moment at which the capacity to give informed medical consent is nonsensical. It might be remembered also that at the age of 16 the presumption becomes the norm rather than a verifiably legally recognition that can be taken for granted. In other words, it is not full recognition so much as a presumption unless it is proved otherwise. That is not to say Purssell rejects the idea of 16 year olds or persons of a younger age giving consent; merely that the use of any particular age is unsatisfactorily informed by the experience and evidence of children, some of whom are ready to give informed consent at a younger age and some who appear, on reaching the age of 18, not to have reached such maturity. Purssell takes his lead from an argument made in 1992 that the problem with our approach to granting such faculties of medical decision-making is not confined to
healthcare, but has its roots at a deeper societal level. Margaret Crompton’s suggestion, endorsed by Purssell, is that ‘we need to consider children as complete entities rather than simply immature adults’ (Crompton, 1992). This highlights the need to address the fundamental basis upon which we approach this question in the first place, which is not bound to age. It is not so much a question as to whether a child should be recognized as having a capacity to give informed consent, but whether a person, who happens to be a child, bears such a capacity. There is a subtle and important difference here, because in the latter the emphasis is on persons, implying an equal dignity without discrimination. The child is not an aberration from personhood, but one who shares in human nature fully and manifestly, albeit in the particular stages of development which belong to children. This is why Purssell wishes to honour approaches to child-patients that are able to explain clearly and, in a relatable manner, what a particular medical treatment will involve, which are not always the ways of explaining that doctors are either trained in or in which they have experience. While he sarcastically comments that ‘something magical’ happens when a person turns 16 in the UK, Purssell makes a serious point that there is a great deal of wisdom in leaving it to health practitioners who have a relationship with a child and its family already to discern whether informed consent can be given in any particular case. This can be a fraught question given the pressures on time and resources in health care, the various needs for consultation processes, waiting times, and larger more expensive medical delivery institutions. An obvious group that might have a better hope of delivering such a personal service is that of specialist pediatric nurses where, advantageously, they might know the child and family well and have built up a trusting relationship (Purssell, 623). Also, ‘context’ is the crucial factor that can be argued for and against granting MDM to children (MacDougall, ‘Rawls and the Refusal of Medical Treatment to Children’, 2010, 142). Even this does not overcome the limitations of a medical situation that comes up suddenly or the context of a crisis, in which no long-term relationship between a nurse and the family has been established. On the other hand, a strong case is made by Sheila McLean who believes that the onus should be on parents to explain why a child does not have the capacity to give informed consent, rather than presuming against the child in the first place.

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2 A risk here should be apparent: If the culture in which we find ourselves takes something like euthanasia to be a valid medical option, then granting MDM to adolescents opens up the possibility that the pre-adult patient might be granted the right to choose a legally sanctioned death, at the expense of the choices of parents or guardians.
(Purssell, 623; and Alderson 1990). This of course carries a risk that the normal responsibilities of bringing up, educating and protecting their children becomes for parents second tier to the will of the child, and ultimately constructs a situation in which parents and children are pitted against one another. This could be viewed as more radical still, but it provides a counter-narrative to that which is assumed in the Children Act 1989 that makes doctors responsible for deciding if a child patient has the capacity to understand the nature of a proposed treatment, a burden of knowledge that might be well beyond their competence.

Developmentally speaking, children are complex agents of change, and the field of childhood studies has grown exponentially in recent decades. A major focus of study has been that of language, not merely speech development, and the means by which children learn and communicate their own thoughts, and this is a richly contested arena of research. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein had observed of language:

> Language disguises thought. So much so, that, from the outward form of the clothing, it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it, because the outward form of the clothing is not designed to reveal the form of the body, but for entirely different purposes.  

Wittgenstein had noted the manner in which language, despite its external appearance and use, can be as much a cloak to meaning and thought as it is a revelation. If language is understood to be skills of knowledge, comprehension and communication, the stages through which children grow express distinct kinds of such skills, which indicates an important connection between the ‘play’ of children and the more ‘formal’ kinds of skills expressed in young people (Alison Johnson, *Childhood Studies*, 2002, 99). The world of literature, imagination and play are inscrutably linked to the successful processes of learning grappled with daily by educators. The very fact of childhood research as a recent phenomena sits within a much larger historical narrative which in turn is also open to debate. The pioneering work of Philippe Ariés had argued childhood was not discovered as a separate ‘thing’ until the seventeenth century (Ariés, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, 1960). Ariés has drawn criticism for overlooking the problems of class and social division, aspects of the medieval family, and changing gender roles, but he has the mark of first attempting a history of childhood that focused on the child as a phenomenon worthy of study in itself, and a lens through which we can understand the societies in which we live (Scraton offers a helpful
overview of the secondary literature critical of Ariés while honouring the important
milestone his work achieved, 1997, 2-4). Academic debate about the place of the child
at both the macro historical level, and at the micro social and domestic levels of
development, is likely to offer a wealth of different perspectives as related fields
develop, all of which have perplexing consequences for medical ethics. In healthcare,
children are at once present to some degree in most medical contexts, while expertise in
attending to them can vary.

The reality is that many doctors lack consistent or long-standing experience of
working with children, and some have made professional decisions against spending
more time with child patients. In the UK, pediatricians provide a certain level of
specialist attention, but this is not necessarily the case everywhere. It is altogether
simpler for doctors and for children if we adopt the standing position of assigning a
specific age at which consent is universally recognized; whether or not such simplicity
serves patients and society and provides for successful outcomes. With Gillick, there is
a new context in which we find ourselves because competence was determined by the
Courts as a threshold in British medical care. Its effects have been broader than the UK,
and in comparable jurisdictions such as Australia, legislation has been introduced that
follows the same basic logic as to protecting what is deemed a child’s right to
autonomous medical decision making (Eg Consent to Medical Treatment and Palliative
Care Act 1995 (SA)).

Moreover a new awareness of the needs of children from irregular domestic
contexts has taken place, with broader acknowledgement that patient groups such as
homeless children, the offspring of inaccessible or incompetent parents, siblings who
have experienced family breakdown and so forth, are in need of a means of accessing
their ability to give informed consent, because, in a way, they have no personal or
familial advocate of any maturity who can give consent on their behalf.3 Such
recognition was of course developing in the lead up to Gillick v West Norfolk AHA
[1986], but it is important to recognize that Gillick provides a rule for informed consent
in Common Law and not through a Parliamentary process. This is not unusual in the
Westminster system, but the ramifications are significant because it means that children

3 This illustrates why the Court of Protection, established by the Mental Capacity Act 2005, is an important, albeit imperfect, forum of advocacy for some children in situations where no other advocate is available.
have obtained a legal protection to the recognition of informed consent (with its accompanying character of privacy) via the courts and not via Parliament and its presumption of the carriage of public opinion. In fact, Gillick competence encompasses both consent and the refusal of medical treatment (albeit in the latter case law tends to presume against a child’s absolute right to refuse on the grounds that a refusal poses a risk to the child’s health and survival) (See the Family Law Reform Act [1987] and in the case of Gillick Competence it must be remembered that parents cannot overturn the decision of a Gillick Competent child whereas the Court can. This was re-asserted in Re JM [A Child] 2015).

Gillick Competence is not merely a form of competence parallel or commensurate with the competence recognized in an adult, but a burden that imposes an unnecessary and problematic set or responsibilities upon children. Moreover, it has been granted in a time of broader debate and discovery about the significance of childhood. In most respects it places a child in the same range of competence, but it can also, inadvertently, place a burden of competence upon a child greater than that of an adult. *Gillick v West Norfolk AHA* includes the provision that a child demonstrates sufficient maturity and intelligence to ‘fully understand’ the treatment proposed for them (*Gillick v West Norfolk AHA* [1986] AC 112, 189), not something asked of the average adult patient. The Case Law normally demands that an adult be informed in broad terms of the nature of the treatment (*Rogers v Whitaker* [1992] 175 CLR 479, 489) and the idea of ‘fully’ understanding is an onerous burden upon which few patients, children or adults, could truly make a claim. This concerns not only the nature of the treatment but, in fact, it must be shown that a child has the ‘sufficient maturity to understand what is involved’, in the words of Lord Scarman (*Gillick* 1986, 112, 189), which entails a conceptual grasp of the various consequences of what risks are involved, not to mention the long-term problems involved in the emotional and relational consequences of the medical treatment under consideration.

**Conclusion**

Gillick competence addresses the adolescent as a child *on its way* to becoming an adult. To some extent, it is appropriate to include the adolescent as an individual capable of having the competence to make decisions on his or her own behalf, but it is neglectful of the child as person to relegate parents and carers to the margins of the
adolescent child’s life. This is because the human person is not an individuated monad who is perfectly autonomous, but a dependent animal who learns to become a individual through its maturing interactions with other human beings, and this must necessarily include adult parents or carers who are responsible for the moral formation of the child. With Gillick, the Courts have jurisdiction to overturn a child’s decision to the detriment of parental rights, and this magnifies the autonomy of the adolescent in conflict with their social and family relationships, a move that is unwarranted. Gillick in advertently has become a burden that is unnecessary and detrimental to a holistic and integrated ethics of medical decision making and to a comprehensive ethics of the child.
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