

## greta thunberg – a unique voice in a post-truth era

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### abstract

Since the turn of the millennium, a new phenomenon has arisen on the global stage, as girls have increasingly begun to raise their voices. In an effort to achieve new philosophical understandings of contemporary childhoods in a post-truth era, the present article examines this Girl Rising movement from an existential perspective. In doing so, the article aims to problematise children's right to be heard and listened to, as enshrined in Article 12 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. More specifically, the article explores children as rights-holders and their rights-subject position and how these positions are supported (or not) by adults in different ways. Throughout the analysis, Greta Thunberg is used as a case study to illustrate the phenomenon under study. This new movement highlights children's right to be heard as a valuable right. The defence of this view relies on the claim that at the heart of adult's acknowledgement lies the uniqueness of each child and the implications of this uniqueness. Taking into consideration the realisation of children's rights, powerful stakeholders who seek to silence children's voices are also identified, as are worldwide adult acknowledgements intended to empower girls to exist 'in' and 'with' the world in a 'grown-up' way.

**keywords:** children's rights; Girl Rising movement; post-truth; existential paradigm; acknowledgements; grown-up way.

## greta thunberg - una voz única en una era de posverdad

### resumen

Desde el cambio de milenio, ha surgido un nuevo fenómeno en el escenario mundial, en tanto las niñas han empezado a alzar cada vez más sus voces. En un esfuerzo por alcanzar nuevas comprensiones filosóficas de la infancia contemporánea en una era de posverdad, el presente artículo examina el movimiento *Girl Rising* desde una perspectiva existencial. Al hacerlo, el artículo pretende problematizar el derecho de los niños y las niñas a ser oídos y escuchados, consagrado en el artículo 12 de la *Convención sobre los Derechos del Niño*. Más concretamente, el artículo explora a los niños como titulares de derechos y su posición como sujetos de derechos y cómo estas posiciones son apoyadas (o no) de diferentes maneras por los adultos. A lo largo del análisis se apela a Greta Thunberg como caso de estudio para ilustrar el fenómeno estudiado. Este nuevo movimiento resalta el derecho de los niños a ser escuchados como un derecho valioso. La defensa de este punto de vista se basa en la afirmación de que en el corazón del reconocimiento por parte de los adultos se encuentra la singularidad de cada niño y las implicaciones de esta singularidad. Considerando la materialización de los derechos del niño, también se identifican los poderosos grupos de interés que intentan silenciar las voces de los niños, así como los reconocimientos de los adultos de todo el mundo que pretenden empoderar a las niñas para existir "en" y "con" el mundo de una manera "adulta".

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**palabras clave:** derechos de los niños; movimiento *Girl Rising*; posverdad; paradigma existencial; reconocimientos; manera adulta.

### **greta thunberg - uma voz única numa era pós-verdade**

Desde a mudança do milênio, um novo fenômeno surgiu no cenário mundial, à medida que as meninas começaram a levantar cada vez mais a voz. Em um esforço para alcançar novos entendimentos filosóficos da infância contemporânea em uma era pós-verdade, o presente artigo examina este movimento *Girl Rising* (Ascensão das Meninas) a partir de uma perspectiva existencial. Ao fazê-lo, o artigo visa problematizar o direito das crianças a serem ouvidas e escutadas, como consagrado no artigo 12 da Convenção sobre os Direitos da Criança. Mais especificamente, o artigo explora a ideia das crianças como detentoras de direitos, e sua posição de sujeitos de direitos, e como esta posição é apoiada (ou não) por adultos, de diferentes maneiras. Ao longo da análise, Greta Thunberg é utilizada como um estudo de caso para ilustrar o fenômeno em estudo. Este novo movimento destaca o direito das crianças a serem ouvidas como um direito valioso. A defesa deste ponto de vista baseia-se na afirmação de que no cerne do reconhecimento do adulto está a singularidade de cada criança e as implicações desta singularidade. Levando em consideração a concretização dos direitos das crianças, os poderosos implicados que procuram silenciar as vozes das crianças também são identificados, assim como os reconhecimentos de adultos em todo o mundo destinados a capacitar as meninas a existir 'dentro' e 'com' o mundo de uma forma 'adulta'.

**palavras-chave:** direitos das crianças; movimento *Rising Girl*; pós-verdade; paradigma existencial; reconhecimentos; forma adulta.

## greta thunberg – a unique voice in a post-truth era

### 1. *Girl Rising movement*

Since the turn of the millennium, a new phenomenon has arisen on the global stage. During the first two decades of the 2000s, young girls around the world have begun to raise their voices in an effort to highlight essential topics in their lives, a phenomenon that has come to be known as the *Girl Rising* movement<sup>2</sup>. I argue that this *Girl Rising* movement requires rethinking childhood and children's rights. In my attempt to explain the phenomena, I take an existential perspective, where I particularly engage with Biesta's (2022) theoretical concept 'grown-up' way of trying to live one's life.

This movement began when the 11-year-old Pakistani girl Malala Yousafzai started her fight for girls' right to education. The local Taliban issued an edict that banned girls from attending school, which prompted the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC Urdu) to find a schoolgirl to blog anonymously about her life. Malala volunteered to do this dangerous work. Her blogging and campaigning led to numerous death threats against her, which culminated in a murder attempt in 2012 (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013). In 2013, after recovering from this horrific and devastating experience, Malala established herself as an international advocate for human rights and gained widespread international recognition for her work. The young education activist marked her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday by giving a speech at the United Nations (UN) concerning the importance of education, wherein she emphasised the following:

So here I stand, one girl among many. I speak not for myself, but for all girls and boys.

I raise up my voice – not so that I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard. Those who have fought for their rights:

Their right to live in peace.

Their right to be treated with dignity.

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<sup>2</sup> *Girl Rising* (retrieved 2022-07-15). 'Girl Rising is working for a world where all girls can learn, thrive and rise.' <https://girlrising.org>

Their right to equality of opportunity.  
Their right to be educated.

(Yousafzai, UN, 2013-07-12)<sup>3</sup>

The following year, in 2014, Malala and Kailash Satyarthi were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their fight against the oppression of children and young people, as well as their work to protect the right of all children to education. When announcing the award, the Nobel Committee emphasised that ‘Children must go to school and not be financially exploited... It is a prerequisite for peaceful global development that the rights of children and young people be respected’. At only 17 years of age, Malala was the youngest ever recipient of a Nobel Prize.

The Girl Rising movement continued to grow on the international scene through the work of Anoyara Khatun from India, who was trafficked and enslaved as a child maid before coming into contact with *Save the Children India*<sup>4</sup> (Save the Children, 2017-03-16). Through her collaboration with this non-profit organisation working to improve the lives of marginalised children, Anoyara displayed ‘girl power’ and initiated a pragmatic programme focused on rescuing children from child labour, reuniting trafficked children with their families and stopping child marriages. In her role as a children’s rights advocate, Anoyara was invited to speak at the launch of the *Every Woman, Every Child* initiative at the UN (The Better India, 2016-10-07)<sup>5</sup>. In 2017, she was awarded the Nari Shakti Puraskar, India’s highest civilian award for women, in recognition of her contribution to fighting against child marriages and child trafficking (Telegraph India, 2017-03-11)<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Malala Fund (2013-07-12). ‘Malala Yousafzai: 16<sup>th</sup> birthday speech at the United Nations.’ <https://malala.org/newsroom/malala-un-speech>

<sup>4</sup> Save the Children (2017-03-16). ‘Indian government confers Child Champion Anoyara Khatun with Nari-Shakti Puraskar.’ <https://www.savethechildren.in/news/indian-government-confers-child-champion-anoyara-khatun-with-nari-shakti-puraskar/>

<sup>5</sup> The Better India (2016-10-07). ‘This 20-year-old survivor of trafficking is now India’s crusader for child rights at UN.’

<https://www.thebetterindia.com/70941/anoyara-khatun-un-child-trafficking-west-bengal/>

<sup>6</sup> Telegraph India (2017-03-11). ‘Girl champ & her fans.’

<https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/girl-champ-amp-her-fans/cid/1398770>

In addition, Indonesian sisters Melati and Isabel Wijsen, then aged 10 and 12 years old, respectively, launched the *Bye, Bye Plastic Bags* (BBPB) organisation in 2013<sup>7</sup>. After noting the massive amount of rubbish in the water around the island of Bali, the sisters launched a campaign against plastic bags (CNN, 2017-08-17)<sup>8</sup>, although Made Mangku Pastika, the governor of Bali, did not respond to their request for a hearing regarding such pollution. Frustrated, the sisters began a hunger strike, and twenty-four hours later, they were escorted to the governor, who then signed a memorandum asking the population of Bali to reject the use of plastic bags. In 2017, Melati and Isabel made an appearance at the UN during a special event commemorating *World Ocean Day*. Based on their vision—‘We envision a world free of plastic bags and where the young generation are empowered to take action’—the BBPB organisation has grown into an international movement raising awareness of the harmful impact of plastics on the environment. The Wijsen sisters were named two of the *25 Most Influential Teens of 2018* by TIME (TIME, 2018-12-10)<sup>9</sup>.

Another urgent and serious existential matter at the forefront of young people’s lives concerns the devastating occurrences of school shootings in a number of countries worldwide. In the United States, Emma González survived the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida, on 14 February 2018, where 17 people were killed and many more were severely injured. Three days later, Emma gave a fiery speech in which she problematised ways to prevent school shootings. Moreover, just a month after the shooting, she launched a political campaign advocating for gun control and, together with other students, became central to the organisation of a powerful grassroots gun-reform movement<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Indosole (retrieved 2022-07-15). ‘Bye bye plastic bags.’ [https://www.indosoleeurope.com/blogs/good-humans/113113541-bye-bye-plastic-bags?gclid=Cj0KQCjwntCVBhDdARIsAMEwACkGPQkXEfasqmFsOHYSkneSDgSSTbyBDqrH0g4mmUoBKu4FCLIIYqsaAuA1EALw\\_wcB](https://www.indosoleeurope.com/blogs/good-humans/113113541-bye-bye-plastic-bags?gclid=Cj0KQCjwntCVBhDdARIsAMEwACkGPQkXEfasqmFsOHYSkneSDgSSTbyBDqrH0g4mmUoBKu4FCLIIYqsaAuA1EALw_wcB)

<sup>8</sup> CNN (2017-08-17). ‘The teenagers getting plastic bags banned in Bali.’ <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/16/asia/melati-isabel-wijsen-bali/index.html>

<sup>9</sup> TIME (2018-12-10). ‘TIME’s 25 most influential teens of 2018.’ <https://time.com/5463721/most-influential-teens-2018/>

<sup>10</sup> BBC (2018-02-18). ‘Florida student Emma Gonzalez to lawmakers and gun advocates: We call BS.’ <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/02/17/us/florida-student-emma-gonzalez-speech/index.html>

Furthermore, in August 2018, 15-year-old Greta Thunberg from Sweden began a school strike in an attempt to urge the Swedish government to act on climate change. Her worldwide activist work inspired people of all ages and developed into the international *School Strike for Climate* movement, which mobilised approximately 6 million people around the world during a one-week period in September 2019 (The Guardian, 2019-09-27)<sup>11</sup>. In light of this remarkable event, I engage with the question, How is it possible that a teenage girl started an international movement that just a year later resulted in arguably the largest climate demonstration ever held? In the same year, Greta was named *TIME Person of the Year* (TIME, 2019-12)<sup>12</sup>.

Yet, despite the monumental efforts of these young women, I argue that there remains little knowledge regarding the new phenomenon of young girls raising their voices on the global stage. Therefore, from a philosophical viewpoint, the present theoretical article adopts an existential perspective to problematise children's right to be heard and listened to, as enshrined in Article 12 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) (United Nations General Assembly, 1989), when considering the realisation of children's rights (UNICEF, 2007). I especially engage in exploring children as rights-holders and their rights-subject positions and how these positions are supported (or not) by adults in different ways. My claim is that Greta Thunberg can be used as a case study to illustrate this phenomenon.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. First, the article briefly introduces the historical background of the development of childhoods in the new millennium's post-truth era. Second, from a philosophical view existential theory is clarified in order to elucidate the phenomenon of girls raising their voices worldwide concerning issues that matter in their lives. Third, international mass media and social media resources regarding Greta's school strike over a period of one and a half years are presented. Finally, from a philosophical perspective, I

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<sup>11</sup> The Guardian (2019-09-27). 'Climate crisis: 6 million people join latest wave of global protest.' <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/sep/27/climate-crisis-6-million-people-join-latest-wave-of-worldwide-protests>

<sup>12</sup> TIME (2019-12). 'TIME 2019 Person of the year-Greta Thunberg.' <https://time.com/person-of-the-year-2019-greta-thunberg/>

conclude the article with a brief reflection on the existential values of young girls raising their voices on a global stage and their rights as rights-holders.

### 1. *Diversity of childhoods*

Inclusion is not only the main point of democracy but is also ‘the question that has haunted democracy from day one’ (Biesta, 2007, p. 19). In my discussion, inclusion is strongly related to the key democratic question: Who is to be included in the demos? The inquiry regarding the nature of inclusion goes back to the city-state of Athens, where the majority of the citizens – that is, the more than 60% of the population that consisted of women, children and slaves – were excluded (Held, 1987). In Ancient Greece, Aristotle upheld the view that children were not citizens on an equal level with grown-up men (Aristotle [Everson], 1996), with the only group authorised to hold citizenship comprising Athenian men over the age of 20. It follows from this history of inclusion and exclusion, that children have been seen to represent a category that could be termed ‘pre-rational’ or ‘pre-democratic’ (Biesta, 2007). During the Middle Ages, young people were considered to undergo a short period of transition before quickly passing into adult life. Girls were historically denied formal education and had to take on adult responsibilities at the very early age of 10. An unusual example of a young woman’s voice being heard in the medieval world concerns Joan of Arc, a French girl without any formal education who participated in military conflicts against the English (Castor, 2015). After a couple of years, Joan of Arc was considered a political threat and put on trial, which led to her execution in 1431 at just 19 years old. In the years preceding the French Revolution of 1789, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s work (1991) was considered radically egalitarian and democratic (Cummings, 2020). Rousseau’s view of children highlighted the unique qualities of each child; the concept *childhood* can be traced back to his work (Cummings, 2020, p. 46). Another early pioneer was Ellen Key (1909), who proclaimed the 20<sup>th</sup> century the *Century of the Child*. From the age of 10, the modern child was now viewed as almost his own master (Bourne, 1971, p. 33). Bourne (1971) also stated that young people’s scientific interest and curiosity can offer society a great deal when it

comes to radical critique and visions of the future, and he summarised the philosophy of youth in one word: *Dare!*

By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the CRC (UN, 1989) had been ratified by 196 nations. Yet, three decades after the world's governments agreed on the CRC, there remain both conservative and radical critics of the convention. For instance, Pupavac (2001) described the CRC as displaying a Western/Northern cultural bias against Eastern/Southern systems, while Cummings (2020) argued 'that conservative critics of the CRC privilege the libertarian rights of adults over communitarian requirements... and they deny children equal political rights with adults' (p. 33). What I seek to express in this article is that even though children's rights are now recognised in law; it is still necessary to rethink *childhood*. The insight I wish to suggest is that our understanding of *childhood* is an essential philosophical question. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the relationships between children and adults have been influenced by understandings of *childhood* as an unstable period of incompleteness and *adulthood* as a time of stable completeness, which are closely tied to the concepts of authority and power (Lee, 2001). These historical roots of youth development and growth gave rise to the contrasting notions of children as *human becomings* and adults as *human beings*. However, what constitutes adulthood versus childhood is not biologically given (Cummings, 2020), and the dominant framework whereby children are identified as *dependent becomings*, with childhood being seen as on a journey towards being fully human, has been criticised for not recognising children as fully human. Conversely, through the CRC and the special range of rights it conveys to those under 18 years old, each child is provided with an identity as a global citizen in the present. Relevant to my argument is that children are increasingly becoming subjects of concern in their own right, which implies that their identity as a global citizen abrogates traditional adult authority over children. The CRC has been problematised in relation to globalisation and dependency in the following way:

Children may still be seen as dependent, but they are no longer dependent on states for that dependence. In the age of uncertainty, children can be considered in independence of state government for the first time. (Lee, 2001, p. 34)



This leads us to an alternative approach to the dominant framework of treating children as *human becomings* rather than *human beings*, instead recognising all persons as social agents in their own right (Lee, 2001, p. 47). My discussion recognises this emergent paradigm, which sees childhood as a social phenomenon with a *diversity of childhoods*, including different experiences of social class, ethnicity and gender. This alternative option for the organisation of thinking about childhood allows us to see all humans—children and adults alike—as being involved in *multiple becomings* without an end (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). According to this view, I problematise aspects of *multiple becomings* in which the mass media and social media serve as platforms for spreading young girls’ voices in relation to adults’ acknowledgements on the global scene. Exploring the Girl Rising movement, which is a youth-led model of youth participation (Lansdown, 2014), the spotlight is directed towards children as rights-holders and their rights-subject position; my interest lies in examining how these positions are supported (or not) in different ways by adults. Thus, from an existential perspective, I acknowledge the Girl Rising movements unique voices.

## 2. Greta Thunberg - an example

In the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I argue that the activist Greta Thunberg is a unique voice on the global scene, challenging adult norms and strategies of infantilisation that silence young girl’s voices. Relevant to my argument is that ‘Generation Greta’, the generation born after 2000, contends and drives social change (Gorman, 2021). From an intersectional analysis, youth researchers highlight how the mobilisation of climate strikes has been driven predominantly by girls (Gorman, 2021). However, in relation to global issues on children’s resistance, there is little existing research from a gender perspective (Holmberg & Alvinus, 2020). Moreover, in children’s struggle for global justice, I highlight a ‘double bind’ wherein young girls must not only give voice to their experiences in a patriarchal context but are also very often considered not yet competent (Josefsson & Wall, 2020). A literature review (Neas et al., 2022) on young people’s climate activism emphasises the importance of exploring concepts,

forms and practices of activism in order to better endorse children's voices. To understand Greta's performance and co-performance, research (Olesen, 2022) distinguishes the pre-digital era from the new social media ecology in which young girls are now active co-performers. In a quantitative article (Jung et al., 2020) comparing American and Swedish user characteristics in relation to Greta on Twitter, the results showed a negative attitude towards Greta due to some people's opinions of climate change, as well as their views on age and gender. This means, importantly, that in the existing public sphere, young activists like Greta are constantly subject to critique and attack.

In response, it may be argued that the Girl Rising movement calls for immediate social and political change, and I underscore the importance of research making visible the space where young people are creating alternative ways of life. I particularly engage with a childist perspective and discard the philosophical assumption that it is adults who must teach children how to prepare for a better future (Biswas & Mattheis, 2022). In line with Josefsson and Wall (2020), I advocate for new avenues of children's inclusion and active engagement with lived experiences in ways that can transform global norms and practices.

As a consequence, this children's rights study, which is based on an existential understanding of children's participation (Ljungblad, 2021), problematises girls' situations in a specific context—the global scene—and tries to engage in reflexive critiques (Bendo, 2020). In doing so, I assess the 'theoretical arguments for the claim that children do not lack anything that is needed to uphold rights' (Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014, p. 121) due to being 'full holders of rights in their present moment' (Mansikka & Lundkvist, 2022, p. 252).

### 3. *Post-truth era*

Arguably, childhood has not disappeared in the contemporary globalised world; rather, children are now perceived as both beings and becomings in an ambiguous and complex society (Buckingham, 2000). In an age of uncertainty where the future is unknowable, childhood can also be described as a *political minority* not being included in society's decision-making processes (James & Prout, 1997). From a philosophical perspective, Rosanvallon (2009) problematises social

justice and how modern democracy is based on the complexity of reality, with the core of politics being grasped in moments and situations, thereby elucidating how life in a democracy involves solving different problems. In terms of the political landscape, Rosanvallon (2009) highlighted a tension, as citizens' participation in the *political space* can imply tough tribulations, during which adults have the choice to speak to children and young people as equals. At the same time, children's participation includes the right 'to have a voice in establishing a healthy and meaningful life on this planet, in accordance with principles of ecological sustainability and in balance with the need of all others, including future generations' (Hart, 1997, p. 192).

I argue that the arrival of the *post-truth* era has dramatically changed the global political scene. The Oxford Dictionary has defined the concept of post-truth as 'relating to circumstances in which people respond more to feelings and beliefs than to facts'<sup>13</sup>. In other words, post-truth is the 'contention that feelings are more accurate than facts, for the purpose of the political subordination of reality' (McIntyre, 2018, p. 174). While the post-truth movement has resulted in the decline of traditional media, the rise of social media has facilitated and filtered the availability of free information, which has in turn led to both polarisation and fragmentation. As a form of resistance to this development, other forces have underscored that 'the goal of objectivity is not to give equal time between truth and falsehood' (McIntyre, 2018, p. 81); rather, it is to facilitate truth. Relevant to my argument is that the globalised world is changing rapidly, but the gap between young people's political participation and conventional political parties, which rarely understand the relational aspects of young people's lives, is not a new phenomenon (Collin, 2015). In today's digital society, children account for a third of all internet users, leading to the dilemma of how they can be equipped to navigate a society in which objective facts are becoming less influential (UNICEF, 2019-03-28)<sup>14</sup>. Digital approaches provide quick and convenient ways of

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<sup>13</sup> Oxford Dictionary (retrieved 2022-07-15). 'Post-truth.'  
<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/post-truth?q=post+truth>

<sup>14</sup> UNICEF (2019-03-28). 'Are children equipped to navigate post-truth societies?'  
<https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/children-equipped-navigate-post-truth-societies/>

connecting with other people all around the world. Thus, because online participation is a key aspect of today's young citizens' lived experiences, they can be described as 'expert citizens' or 'everyday makers', where the former way of participating is mainly connected to expert knowledge and the latter is embedded in their everyday routines (Bang, 2005).

One influential political voice on both mass media and social media platforms is former President Donald Trump, whose approach of being hostile to the truth, including an ego defence, certainly qualifies as post-truth (McIntyre, 2018, p. 9). Indeed, Trump is known for presenting his opinions in the new communication arena with media commercialism and trends that produce 'forms of public discourse that are emblematic of post-truth politics and partisan hostility' (Waisboard, Tucker & Lichtenheld, 2018, p. 31). Cummings (2020, p. 36) has argued that 'youth empowerment is no friend of global capitalism, and it typically comes in alliance with adult resisters', with youth activists and supportive adults working together. In the exploration of the Girl Rising movement, I suggest taking the new post-truth era seriously, as citizens need insight into the fact that post-truth does not deal with reality, being instead concerned with how humans react to reality when someone lies. It is reasonable that if we are truly living in a post-truth era, the key question is how humans can respond to the challenges created in today's media flow, which features *alternative facts* and different world views (McIntyre, 2018). My discussion in this section concludes with the most salient example of the denial of scientific facts, which can be seen in the dismissal of climate change.

#### **4. *An existential orientation***

The defence of this view relies on a claim that for today's young generation, the global climate change crisis has given rise to the feeling of facing an existential crisis (Thunberg, 2019). Relevant to my argument is that some 30% of the world's population are children and young people, making them the largest group of people currently affected by climate change:

Save the Children estimated in 2009 that, over the next decade, around 175 million children will be hit by climate-related disasters

every year, and that climate change could ultimately lead to an additional 250,000 child deaths a year in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa alone. (UNICEF, 2014, vii)

Consequently, young people are vulnerable to the harmful effects of climate change, although they have traditionally been ignored when it comes to climate negotiations. This can be justified with distinct thoughts about how human beings exist in life, which is a fundamental question from existential perspectives, with the essential inquiry concerning 'how we, as human beings, exist 'in' and 'with' the world, natural and social' (Biesta, 2022, p. 3). Moreover, Arendt (1958) beautifully expressed the existential challenge as one of trying 'to be at home in the world'. It follows from my argument that the ecological crisis has led to the troubling insight that our engagement with the world is infinite. At the same time, as we address the issue of what the world is asking of us, it is important not to 'lose sight of the fact that children and young people are human beings who face the challenge of living their own life, and trying to live it well' (Biesta, 2022, p. 3).

In a view of the present, Rancière (1999) emphasised *equity* as the starting point because it has no pace to achieve. Acknowledging one's right to equity with all others in an unequal society enables a human being to speak with their own voice as a unique subject (Rancière, 1999). Fundamentally, it is only human beings who can acknowledge each other's equity in the present. 'The fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world' (Arendt, 1958, p. 9) gives rise to the question of how we can exist as subjects (not as objects) and create new forms of co-existence (Gergen, 2009). In addition, Arendt (1958) underscored an existential concern about subjects in their own right. Accordingly, in keeping with Biesta's (2022) existential perspective, I consider childhood to be concerned not with biological phases but with *acknowledgements* (Biesta, 2022). How cross-generational meetings turn out between people of different ages is related to how adults bring the subjectness of the child 'into play' (Biesta, 2022, p. 7). However, when the world and its problems come calling, existing as a subject of one's own life is an existentially complex work:

The 'I' who is trying to be, who is trying to be someone, who is trying to flourish, grow and learn *into the world...* to call the 'I' into its *own* existence, bearing in mind that it is entirely up to the 'I' to decide how to respond to the call. (Biesta, 2022, p. 37)

We begin thinking about how Biesta (2022) problematises the fact of existing as a subject and how human beings try to lead their own lives, including making choices and saying ‘Yes’ to opportunities. Then, we can follow Biesta (2022) using the example of Rosa Parks versus Adolf Eichmann, underscoring the human being’s ability to say ‘No’ in certain situations. This means that when Adolf Eichmann claimed that he was only following orders, his ‘I’ was ultimately not involved. By contrast, Rosa Parks, who no longer wanted to be part of the established social order, stepped forward as an ‘I’. I suggest taking Biesta (2022) seriously when he emphasises that the possibility of saying ‘No’ is not a question of identity but rather of *how we exist*; thus, it represents an existential crucial difference between what we do with who we are as human beings.

In the post-truth era, when problematising children’s rights, it is also reasonable to highlight how Levinas (1969, p. 35) used the concepts of ‘non-ego-logical’ and ‘ego-logical’ ways of trying to exist and trying to lead one’s life. These concepts can be viewed in light of the distinction between an ‘infantile’ and a ‘grown-up’ way of trying to live one’s life, with the latter concept not necessarily connected to age:

If the infantile way of leading one’s life is characterised by a disregard for what is real – just pursuing one’s desires, just doing what one fancies to do – the grown-up way of trying to lead one’s life is characterised by the desire to give one’s intentions and desires a ‘reality check’, so to speak, so as to come into relationship with what and who is other, and not simply overrule or deny it. (Biesta, 2022, p. 49)

Ultimately, the gap between ego and self represents the difference between phantasy and reality maps. When adults and young people are able to discuss and share ideas and views, respecting the views of children is not the same as agreeing with each thought and idea (Cummings, 2020). My main claim is, that the key issue concerns giving the new generation a fair chance to exist as subjects ‘in’ and ‘with’ the world (Biesta, 2022, p. 13), which includes dual responsibility for the child and for the world (Biesta, 2015). Relevant to my argument, the child participation examined in the present study should be understood as a coming into existence through acknowledgements from adults. Overall, from an existential

perspective (Biesta, 2022), the issue is how young girls' beginnings are taken up (or not) in different ways by adults.

## 5. Method

To explore the phenomenon of girls raising their voices worldwide, using the case of Greta Thunberg as an example, this theoretical article examines girls raising their voices from an existential perspective (Biesta, 2022), supported by international mass media and social media material. Personal communication with Swedish Television (SVT, 2022-01-13), the Swedish public service television company, revealed that the first article about Greta in their archive was published on 21 August 2018. Thus, the timeline for this study runs from that date until the beginning of 2020, when the World Economic Forum was held in Davos just before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world. During this one-and-a-half-year timeline, media resources were collected to reveal the main activities that Greta participated in, including meetings, conferences and demonstrations in several countries. Approximately 200 news articles were collected from different media sources, such as CNN, TIME, The Guardian, BBC, RFI, Fox News, SVT and Twitter. One radio programme from Sveriges Radio (SR) is a podcast by Greta – *Humanity has not yet failed* (SR, 2020-06-20)<sup>15</sup>. This podcast is included in the analysis; in the timeline Greta's own voice is presented within quotation marks. Generally, Greta's activities were described in similar ways in different media resources around the world. To obtain an overall picture of the phenomenon of interest, articles including adult support or resistance were chosen from among the 200 initial articles.

Furthermore, a one-hour interview was conducted with a minister from the Swedish government to develop a deeper understanding of politicians' support of Greta (or otherwise) during the period of interest. Due to ethical concerns, the minister is referred to as 'the Government Minister'. To clarify certain details that could not be found in the media articles, personal communications were entered

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<sup>15</sup> Sveriges Radio (2020-06-20). 'Greta Thunberg: Humanity has not yet failed.' <https://sverigesradio.se/avsnitt/greta-thunberg-humanity-has-not-yet-failed-sommar-p1-swedish-radio-2020>

into with the Associate Spokesperson for UN Secretary-General António Guterres and with Andreas Norlén (the Conservative party), the President (Talmannen) of the Swedish Parliament. The analysis of Greta raising her voice and adults' acknowledgements of this in the media resources was conducted on the basis of theoretical binary concepts: *childhood–adulthood*, *human becomings–human beings*, *infantile way–grown-up way* of trying to exist (Biesta, 2022) and *non-ego-logical way–ego-logical way* of trying to exist (Levinas, 1969). In the exploration, I do not strive for exact or simple but fruitful explications of the concepts that can help us understand how adults can acknowledge children's existence in the world.

In the next section, the one-and-a-half-year timeline concerning Greta's activities is presented, followed by an existential discussion of the phenomenon of girls from today's young generation raising their voices on the global stage in relation to adults' acknowledgements (or not) of their doing so.

## 6. Greta Thunberg's activities 2018–2020

### 6.1 Activities in 2018

Greta Thunberg, a 15-year-old Swedish girl, began her school strike on 20 August 2018, three weeks before Sweden's general election (SVT, 2018-08-21)<sup>16</sup>. She skipped school and protested in front of the Swedish Parliament about the fact that the government was not giving the issue of climate change higher priority. While understanding their daughter's decision to protest, Greta's parents, Malena Ernman and Svante Thunberg, did not support her absence from school (Ernman & Thunberg, 2018; Thunberg, 2019). On the first day of the strike, journalists asked Greta about compulsory school attendance, while Minister of Education Gustav Fridolin went to see her and brought a schoolbook (SvD, 2019-03-18)<sup>17</sup>. Fridolin's

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<sup>16</sup> SVT (2018-08-21). 'Greta, 15, sittstrejkar för klimatet: Vår tids ödefråga [Greta, 15, sit in for climate: The fate of our time].'  
<https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/stockholm/greta-thunberg-15-klimatfragan-ar-var-tids-odesfraga>

<sup>17</sup> SvD (2019-03-18). 'Ångerfull Fridolin avrådde Thunberg från att strejka [Repentant Fridolin dissuaded Thunberg from striking].'  
<https://www.svd.se/a/e1bBJg/angerfull-fridolin-avradde-thunberg-fran-att-strejka>



first reaction upon hearing of Greta's school strike was not positive, an attitude he later came to regret. Despite starting the climate protest on her own, Greta was joined by more teenagers on day two. On 8 September 2018, Greta gave her first speech at the People's Climate March in Stockholm, where she announced that she would continue her strike every Friday until Sweden fulfilled the requirements of the Paris Agreement. Around the time of the general election, the Government Minister interviewed in this study felt that 'among the politicians there was no discussion about the young climate activist sitting outside the Parliament. However, people on the street started noticing her, hearing her simple existential message – Adults ignore my future'.

During the autumn of 2018, Greta was invited to speak at Rise for Climate in Belgium and the Climate March in Finland, while on 31 October she spoke outside Parliament Square in London (We Don't Have Time, 2018-10-31)<sup>18</sup>, having been invited by different grassroots environmental organisations. Subsequently, a shift took place, and she began to receive frequent invitations to conferences, such as the UN's Climate Action Summit in Katowice, Poland, in December, where she met with Secretary-General António Guterres. In her speech at the conference, Greta underscored, 'Since our leaders are behaving like children, we will have to take the responsibility they should have taken long ago... We have to make our voices heard... You are not mature enough to tell it like it is' (The Guardian, 2018-12-04)<sup>19</sup>. Thus, early in her activist performance, it is worth distinguishing how Greta highlights the importance of children raising their voices due to the failure of some powerful adults to behave in a grown-up way. Over the autumn months, more than 20,000 students worldwide joined Greta's climate protest, and her school strike spread to 270 towns across the world as part of the global Fridays For Future movement, which included people of all ages. At the end of the year,

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<sup>18</sup> We Don't Have Time (2018-10-31). 'Greta Thunberg: The rebellion has begun.' <https://medium.com/wedonthavetime/the-rebellion-has-begun-d1bffe31d3b5>

<sup>19</sup> The Guardian (2018-12-04). "'Our leaders are like children," school strike founder tells climate summit.' <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/dec/04/leaders-like-children-school-strike-fo-under-greta-thunberg-tells-un-climate-summit>

Greta was invited by the powerful gatekeeper TED Talk to give a speech—*School strike for climate—save the world by changing the rules* (TED Talk, 2018-12-12)<sup>20</sup>.

## 6.2 Activities in 2019

In January 2019, Greta was invited by another important gatekeeper, the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, where she gave her famous ‘Our house is on fire’ speech while criticising participants for coming to the conference in private jets (CNN, 2019-01-25)<sup>21</sup>. During the spring, she made a trip to Italy and spoke at the Senate and met with Pope Francis (Italian Insider, 2019-04-19)<sup>22</sup>. She then continued on to the European Union (EU) Parliament in Strasbourg, where Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven praised her work and said, ‘We have to listen to Greta’ (DN, 2019-04-03)<sup>23</sup>. At the same time, in Sweden, the Government Minister interviewed in this study noted a general desire for Greta to speak at the Swedish Parliament. However, this request was denied by Andreas Norlén, the President of the Swedish Parliament, who gave the following reason Greta was not asked to speak at the Swedish Parliament: ‘According to the Parliament’s rules of procedure, it is not permitted for anyone other than members of the Parliament and ministers to speak in the House... Despite this, it has occasionally happened that, for example, the UN Secretary-General has spoken in plenary’ (personal communication, 2022-07-01). Hence, based on this old tradition, the President of the Swedish Parliament denied Greta the opportunity to give a speech. At the same time, the interviewed Government Minister described the consequences of Greta’s voice spreading around the world:

Now, at this time, Greta’s voice is so big that her voice reaches every single classroom in Sweden. It also affects the tone of politics. This young girl’s voice is of specific interest because of its

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<sup>20</sup> TED Talk (2018-12-12). ‘School strike for climate – save the world by changing the rules.’ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAmUIEsN9A>

<sup>21</sup> CNN (2019-01-25). ‘Teen activist tells Davos elite they’re to blame for climate crisis.’ <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/01/25/europe/greta-thunberg-davos-world-economic-forum-intl/index.html>

<sup>22</sup> Italian Insider (2019-04-19). ‘Greta Thunberg leads Fridays For Future rally in Rome.’ <http://www.italianinsider.it/?q=node/7984>

<sup>23</sup> DN (2019-04-03). ‘Rättvisa och Greta för Löfven i EU [Justice and Greta for Löfven in the EU].’ <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/politik/lofven-hyllar-greta-i-bryssel/>

very strong global impact. I think it has to do with what commitment looks like today, with the positive aspects of the digital world. It does not stop at national borders. (The Government Minister)

In May, Greta addressed 150 members of the United Kingdom's Houses of Parliament, asking, 'Can you hear me? Because I am beginning to wonder' (Thunberg, 2019; TIME, 2019-05-16)<sup>24</sup>. Her message was clear: as adults were not acting in time, the young generation would have to bear the consequences of climate change. During the spring, members of the *Fridays For Future* movement increased their activities around the world, with Greta's voice serving as an inspiration. In May, Greta also received an honorary doctorate from the University of Mons, Belgium, due to her work 'raising awareness on sustainable development in her own way' (Brussels Times, 2019-05-16)<sup>25</sup>.

When the summer of 2019 arrived, Greta decided to take a sabbatical year, as she was invited to speak at both the UN Climate Summit in New York and the UN's yearly climate conference in Santiago de Chile by another international gatekeeper, Secretary-General António Guterres (personal communication, 2022-07-01). Greta searched for an alternative way to travel to the United States than flying, finding a solution in the zero-carbon sailing yacht *Malizia II* (BBC, 2019-08-19)<sup>26</sup>. From here, we can begin to see obvious adult resistance, when French right-wing media criticised the fact that Greta was sailing on the *Malizia II*, which they said was sponsored by BMW (France24, 2019-08-18)<sup>27</sup>, in response to which she clarified that she was not sponsored by the German carmaker or any private Swiss bank. While Greta was sailing across the Atlantic, the British

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<sup>24</sup> TIME (2019-05-16). 'Now I am speaking to the whole world.'

<https://time.com/collection/next-generation-leaders/5584902/greta-thunberg-next-generation-leaders/>

<sup>25</sup> Brussels Times (2019-05-16). 'Belgian university will honour young climate-activist Greta Thunberg.'

<https://www.brusselstimes.com/56837/university-of-mons-to-honor-greta-thunberg-nicolas-hulot-nicolas-terne>

<sup>26</sup> BBC (2019-08-19). 'Greta Thunberg: Teenage climate change activist has set sail on zero-carbon journey aboard *Malizia II*.' <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/49341692>

<sup>27</sup> France24 (2019-08-18). 'CO2 row over climate activist Thunberg's yacht trip to New York.' <https://www.france24.com/en/20190818-co2-row-over-climate-activist-thunberg-s-yacht-trip-to-new-york>

businessman and political donor Arron Banks tweeted a threatening message: ‘freak yachting accidents do happen in August’ (The Guardian, 2019-08-15)<sup>28</sup>. In her podcast—*Humanity has not yet failed* (SR, 2020-06-20)<sup>14</sup>—Greta bore witness to the increased levels of hatred and threats towards both her and her family. The film *I Am Greta*, directed by Nathan Grossman, showed how her father Svante Thunberg, prior to their trip to the United States, attended a first aid course that covered how to deal with gunshot wounds. The voyage across the Atlantic took 14 days, and Greta arrived in New York Harbour on 28 August, where she was welcomed by the UN, which sent out 17 small boats with different coloured sails symbolising the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UN, personal communication 2022-07-01). In the United States, Greta met former President Barack Obama and gave a speech to Congress in which she underscored the importance of listening to scientists (The Guardian, 2019-09-18)<sup>29</sup>. Furthermore, she led a group of 16 young people in presenting a complaint to the UN, accusing five countries of not doing enough to fight climate change (Bloomberg Law, 2019-09-23)<sup>30</sup>. The complaint challenged the five countries under the Third Optional Protocol to the CRC. French President Emmanuel Macron criticised the complaint, accusing Greta of being radical and going too far (RFI, 2019-09-24)<sup>31</sup>. On 23 September, Greta addressed the UN’s Climate Action Summit in New York with the following existential message: ‘How dare you! You have taken away my dreams and my childhood with your empty words... People are suffering. People are dying!’

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<sup>28</sup> The Guardian (2019-08-15). ‘Arron Banks jokes about Greta Thunberg and “freak yachting accidents”.’

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/aug/15/arron-banks-jokes-about-greta-thunberg-and-freak-yachting-accidents>

<sup>29</sup> The Guardian (2019-09-18). ‘Listen to the scientists: Greta Thunberg urges Congress to take action.’

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/sep/18/greta-thunberg-testimony-congress-climate-change-action>

<sup>30</sup> Bloomberg Law (2019-09-23). ‘Greta Thunberg leads young people in climate complaint to UN.’

<https://news.bloomberglaw.com/environment-and-energy/greta-thunberg-leads-young-people-in-climate-complaint-to-un>

<sup>31</sup> RFI (2019-09-24). ‘Macron hits back at Greta Thunberg for antagonism.’

<https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20190924-macron-hits-back-greta-thunberg-antagonistic-activism-despoir-un-climate-conference>

(Thunberg, 2019; TIME, 2019-09-23)<sup>32</sup>. The adult responses to Greta's speech were diverse. On the one hand, President Macron switched to a more positive tone and praised her touching speech, while on the other hand, President Trump tweeted insultingly that Greta had to 'Chill' and work on her 'anger management problem' (The Guardian, 2020-11-05)<sup>33</sup>. Moreover, Fox News host Tucker Carlson criticised the 'use of kids to gain power', which might be a greater 'existential threat' than climate change (Fox News, 2019-09-24)<sup>34</sup>, and the media channel also invited a guest who labelled Greta as 'mentally ill' (Fox News, 2019-09-23)<sup>35</sup>. In response to these strong attacks, comedian Mark Humphries came up with the idea of a helpline for adults who felt angry at a child (Twitter, 2019-09-26)<sup>36</sup>. Globally, while this media discussion was taking place during the week of 20 to 27 September 2019, the *Fridays For Future* movement gathered around 6 million people worldwide, which likely represented the largest ever climate strikes (The Guardian, 2019-09-27)<sup>10</sup>.

Greta and her father then left New York for a trip to Los Angeles, before continuing on to the conference in Santiago de Chile. In her podcast (SR, 2020-06-20)<sup>14</sup>, Greta described how they borrowed an electric car from Arnold Schwarzenegger, as well as how they were frequently invited to stay with 'activists, scientists, authors, doctors, journalists, hippies, diplomats, film stars and lawyers'. During this trip, Greta was advised against visiting Alberta, Canada, one of the world's largest oil-producing regions, due to the 'strong oil lobby that does not hesitate to resort to aggressive methods to silence those they consider a

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<sup>32</sup> TIME (2019-09-23). 'You have stolen my dreams and my childhood. Greta Thunberg gives powerful speech at UN Climate Summit.' <https://time.com/5684216/greta-thunberg-un-climate-action-summit-climate-speech/>

<sup>33</sup> The Guardian (2020-11-05). 'Chill: Greta Thunberg recycles Trump's mockery of her as he tries to stop votes.' <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/nov/05/greta-thunberg-donald-trump-twitter-chill>

<sup>34</sup> Fox News (2019-09-24). 'Tucker Carlson: Pols who use kids to gain power may be a greater "existential threat" than climate change?' <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/tucker-carlson-kids-threat-climate-change-politicians>

<sup>35</sup> Fox News (2019-09-23). 'Fox news guest calls climate activist Greta Thunberg "a mentally ill child".' <https://www.mediamatters.org/fox-news/fox-news-guest-calls-climate-activist-greta-thunberg-mentally-ill-child>

<sup>36</sup> Mark Humphries, Twitter (2019-09-26). 'The Greta Thunberg helpline. For adults angry at a child.' <https://twitter.com/markhumphries/status/1177178666402365440>

threat’ (SR, 2020-06-20)<sup>14</sup>. Despite these increased threats, Greta displayed a willingness to take on personal risks. At this time, Greta bore witness to how she and her father had, on several occasions, needed ‘to call for police protection when the level of threats and the sheer harassments become too serious’ (SR, 2020-06-20)<sup>14</sup>. While continuing the trip, Greta received news that the UN climate conference had been moved from Santiago de Chile to Madrid, Spain. Suddenly, finding herself on the wrong side of the world, Greta had to find a solution to a new travel dilemma. Both the Spanish and French governments reached out to help her, although it was unclear what could be done. Greta considered different options, ‘but everything I do and say gets altered and turned upside down, which leads to mockery, conspiracy theories and organised hate campaigns. Which in turn leads to death threats towards me and my family’ (SR, 2020-06-20)<sup>14</sup>. The solution to the problem came when a couple of Australian YouTubers, Riley and Eleyna, who were sailing around the world on their catamaran, reached out and offered to take Greta and her father to Europe. After crossing the North Atlantic, which was a risky prospect in the November storms, they arrived in Madrid on 3 December. In her speech at the climate conference, Greta underscored the following:

In just three weeks we will enter a new decade, a decade that will define our future. Right now, we are desperate for any sign of hope. There is hope—I’ve seen it—but it does not come from the governments or corporations, it comes from the people. The people who have been unaware are now starting to wake up, and once we become aware we change. We can change and people are ready for change. And that is the hope, because we have democracy.

As was the case in New York, the adult responses to Greta’s conference speech were diverse. On the one hand, the UN highlighted how Greta and a group of other young people were now playing a leading role in climate change discussions (The Guardian, 2019-12-09)<sup>37</sup>. On the other hand, the President of

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<sup>37</sup> The Guardian (2019-12-09). ‘COP25 climate summit: Put children at heart of tackling crisis, says UN.’  
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/dec/09/cop25-climate-summit-put-children-at-heart-of-tackling-crisis-says-un>

Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, insulted Greta and labelled her ‘a little brat’, questioning why the press would give her ‘space to speak’ (Reuters, 2019-12-10)<sup>38</sup>.

At the end of 2019, Greta was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for sparking youth-focused worldwide action on climate change. She was also nominated alongside Donald Trump for the *TIME Person of the Year*, an honour that she went on to win:

For sounding the alarm about humanity’s predatory relationship with the only home we have, for bringing to a fragmented world a voice that transcends backgrounds and borders, for showing us all what it might look like when a new generation leads, Greta Thunberg is Time’s 2019 *Person of the Year*. (TIME, 2019-12-04)<sup>39</sup>

Trump called Greta’s win ‘ridiculous’ (Fox News, 2019-12-12)<sup>40</sup> and Fox News ran several articles in which they problematised this ‘predictable outcome’, questioning the activist who is ‘telling kids it’s cool to get famous by not going to school and protesting’ (Fox News, 2019-12-11)<sup>41</sup>. However, TIME underscored how,

Greta is a reminder that the people in charge now will not be in charge forever, and that the young people who are inheriting dysfunctional governments, broken economies and *an increasingly unlivable planet* know just how much the adults have failed them. (TIME, 2019-12-04)<sup>39</sup>

### 6.3 Activities in 2020

At the beginning of 2020, Greta was invited to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. This time she was placed on the official list of speakers ahead of Donald Trump, with both speaking about the climate crisis. During her climate activism, Greta has been clear about the fact that ‘the climate and ecological emergency is not primarily a political crisis. It is an *existential crisis*,

<sup>38</sup> Reuters (2019-12-10). ‘Brazil’s Bolsonaro calls activist Thunberg a “brat”.’ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-climate-change-greta-bolsonaro-idUSKBN1YE27L>

<sup>39</sup> TIME (2019-12-04). ‘The choice.’ <https://time.com/person-of-the-year-2019-greta-thunberg-choice/>

<sup>40</sup> Fox News (2019-12-12). ‘Trump criticizes teen climate activist Greta Thunberg after Time magazine honor.’ <https://www.fox5atlanta.com/news/trump-criticizes-teen-climate-activist-greta-thunberg-after-time-magazine-honor>

<sup>41</sup> Fox News (2019-12-11). ‘Dana Perino. Choice of climate activist Greta Thunberg as Time’s “Person of the Year” was predictable.’ <https://www.foxnews.com/media/dana-perino-greta-thunberg-the-five-time-person-of-the-year>

completely based on scientific facts’ (SR, 2020-06-20)<sup>14</sup>. In her speech in Davos, Greta emphasised, ‘Don’t listen to me, listen to science and facts’, whereas Trump made 30 false claims in his speech (CNN, 2020-02-01)<sup>42</sup>. In addition, US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin minimised Greta’s work by asking ‘is she the chief economist?’ and stressing that ‘after she goes to college and studies economics in college, she can come back and explain to us’ (Fox News, 2020-01-23)<sup>43</sup>. Jacob Wallenberg, a Swedish risk capitalist, also participated in the conference. However, he considered the global elite to be unfair to Greta when they demanded solutions from her (SvD, 2020-01-22)<sup>44</sup>. Wallenberg stressed that Greta should not be expected to have solutions; instead, she challenges others to find solutions. Greta herself said in her podcast, ‘Of course I don’t know how we are going to solve the climate crisis. The fact is that no one knows’ (SR, 2020-06-20)<sup>14</sup>. Shortly after the conference, in February 2020, news spread about the COVID-19 pandemic, the whole world closed down and the climate strike turned into a digital climate strike.

## 7. Discussion

In this article, my concern relates to the CRC (UN, 1989) and the right of all children to be heard in relation to decisions that affect them. The growing children’s rights movement worldwide is currently dealing with Article 12 and children’s right to express their opinions on things that directly relate to them. According to this view, I explore the phenomenon of girls raising their voices, being rights-holders and being positioned as rights-subjects, as well as how these positions are supported (or otherwise). I suggest taking four core dimensions of Article 12 seriously: *space, voice, audience and influence* (Welty & Lundy, 2013).

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<sup>42</sup> CNN (2020-02-01). ‘Facts first. Trump made 30 false claims on Davos trip, 44 total last week.’ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/01/politics/fact-check-late-january-trump-impeachment-davos/index.html>

<sup>43</sup> Fox News (2020-01-23). ‘Mnuchin says Greta Thunberg should study economics before calling for fossil fuel divestment.’ <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/mnuchin-says-thunberg-should-study-economics-in-college-before-calling-on-divestment-of-fossil-fuel>

<sup>44</sup> SvD (2020-01-22). ‘Wallenberg: Eliten i Davos är orättvis mot Thunberg [Wallenberg: The elite in Davos is unfair to Thunberg].’ <https://www.svd.se/a/50lLjE/wallenberg-eliten-i-davos-ar-orattvis-mot-greta>



Examining the space from an inclusive perspective (Ljungblad, 2021, 2023) and using Greta as an example clearly shows how these dimensions are intertwined: the space in this case is the global stage, which features international media constructions of Greta's voice and adult responses to her.

I argue that an inquiry into Greta's voice can achieve new philosophical understanding of contemporary childhoods in a post-truth era. Greta started her school strike *all alone*. The focus of her strike was the existential issue of climate change, which places everyone at risk, although the younger generation is more vulnerable to it (UNICEF, 2014). Both technically and legally, Greta was a child when she started her activism, and at the beginning of her climate strike, she had no adult support. Her approach gave rise to concerns from parental organisations, politicians and school authorities, as a strike can be viewed to go against the system, which in this case rendered her age a central factor. However, in just a short period, Greta went from being an ordinary schoolgirl to being an environmental activist—an international power broker described as having *the Greta effect* (The Perspective, 2019-05-24)<sup>45</sup>. This global icon's protest influenced a worldwide movement that is making a real difference. Indeed, in September 2019, around 6 million people gathered all over the world, collectively participating in what was probably the largest ever climate demonstration (The Guardian, 2019-09-27)<sup>10</sup>.

Problematizing how children's voices can be heard from an existential perspective (Biesta, 2022) shows how the mass media and social media provide young girls with new opportunities, which means their voices are not stopping at national borders. Arguably, these platforms can be a battlefield (Jung et al., 2020) embedded in the tension between political and social dimensions. Traditionally, the mass media was based on the notion of publicist responsibility. In contrast, in the post-truth era, Twitter and Google are gigantic enterprises that, alongside Fox News, deviate from this norm by not covering the world with a strong principle-oriented agenda (Yglesias, 2018). Fox News 'prefers opinions to facts',

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<sup>45</sup> The Perspective (2019-05-24). 'The Greta effect.'  
<https://www.theperspective.se/2019/05/24/activism/the-greta-effect/>

meaning that it does not strive to be objective (Financial Times, 2016-09-23)<sup>46</sup> and thus filters free information, focusing on listeners' opinions, presenting strong emotional content and feeding polarisation. Relevant to my argument, in the gathered articles, there is a consistent pattern of presenting both Greta's voice and adults' voices, regardless of the international media sources in question. However, Fox News gives space mainly to adult voices on the conservative spectra and from the financial sector, sometimes differing in terms of the interpretation of Greta's voice. These powerful stakeholders are mostly elderly men who insult and minimise Greta and attribute character traits to her (see also Jung et al., 2020), which can be viewed as a form of 'cyberbullying' (Srivastava, Gamble & Boey, 2013). As a central example in my argumentation in the post-truth era, Greta emerges as an 'expert citizen' (Bang, 2005) because she bases her arguments on science. This places her in contrast to former President Trump, who made 20,000 false or misleading claims (The Guardian, 2020-07-13)<sup>47</sup> in an approach based on an 'ego-logical way' of acting (Levinas, 1969, p. 35) involving little reality checking (Biesta, 2022). Moreover, importantly, I highlight how some powerful stakeholders' resistance to Greta has culminated in death threats and an urgent need for police protection. Given these inapprehensible and forceful actions from adults in relation to a child's vulnerability, a clear philosophical question arises: Who is the adult in the room?

Continuing the analysis of the interactions among generations, the spectra of adult voices are wide, and in each new way of talking lies the potential for a new way of relating (Gergen, 2009). Greta has strong grassroots support among people of all ages, as well as from celebrities, which creates space for a youth-led model of youth participation (Lansdown, 2014). These supportive adults are listening and collaborating with the young climate activist, opening their houses and helping to solve concrete transport problems during her journeys. From here,

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<sup>46</sup> Financial Times (2016-09-23). 'Twenty-years of Fox News – and "post-truth politics".'  
<https://www.ft.com/content/0acbe884-7feb-11e6-8e50-8ec15fb462f4>

<sup>47</sup> The Guardian (2020-07-13) 'Tsunami of untruths: Trump has made 20,000 false or misleading claims – report.'  
<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/13/donald-trump-20000-false-or-misleading-claims>

we can begin to see how the existential landscape is dominated by respectful adult acknowledgments of the child's right to be heard and taken seriously. This reveals how Greta's beginnings were taken up by adults, providing her with both space and opportunity to initiate her own activities and engage in advocacy (Lansdown, 2014). Greta also has a lot of support from powerful stakeholders, such as politicians, scientists and businesspeople. One interesting shift in this regard can be seen in the case of President Macron, who changed from a critical attitude to a positive approach to Greta's activism. Furthermore, some venture capitalists have stated that they support her work (SvD, 2020-01-22)<sup>44</sup>. However, there is a question of whether these stakeholders' positive responses are of an opportune nature, as it is better for them to be seen to support the fight against climate change, or whether these responses are authentic, and this question can be answered only by their future political and economic work. Exploring children as rights-holders from the perspective of equality, it is also interesting to highlight how high-level stakeholders serve as gatekeepers when it comes to creating space (or not) for girls' voices to be heard. Relevant to my argument is, that fact that Greta has been invited to speak in many parliaments around the world, although she has not yet been permitted to raise her voice in the Swedish Parliament, being denied access by President Andreas Norlén. Yet, Greta has been invited to the UN by Secretary-General António Guterres himself (personal communication 2022-07-01), who has recognised Greta as person and an active subject. Consequently, when young girls call out the adult world, the adults around them can make active choices in light of their dual responsibility for the child and the world (Biesta, 2015).

As I argue above, when searching for new understandings of contemporary childhoods (Lee, 2001) in the post-truth era, it is essential to explore the relational conditions of children's meaningful participation (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Ljungblad, 2021). More specifically, I have engaged with the existential question of how adult acknowledgement can bring the subjectness of the child 'into play' (Biesta, 2022, p. 7) and how adults can encourage children to 'take up' their subjectness in different ways that make a 'grown-up' existence in the world

possible (Biesta 2022, p. 49). A final comment I wish to make in exploring how Greta exists ‘in’ and ‘with’ the world reveals similarities between her climate strike and Rosa Parks’ bus protest in 1955. Just like Rosa Park (Biesta 2022, p. 29), Greta stepped forward as an ‘I’ and said ‘No’, thereby breaking through the social order. An important claim I make is that Greta does not put her own desires to the forefront; rather, she responds to the existential challenges that come her way, existing ‘in’ and ‘with’ the world in a ‘grown-up’ way. Her ‘non-ego-logical’ way of being emerges as a unique voice in a post-truth era. Overall, my argument is that our ages do not tell us *how we exist* and what we do with who we are as human beings. ‘Ego-logical’ and ‘non-ego-logical’ ways of being (Levinas, 1969, p. 35) are two accessible alternatives for both adults and children. It is only subsequently a specific situation that we can determine if we have tried to live our lives in an ‘infantile’ or a ‘grown-up’ way (Biesta, 2022). Thus, Greta is addressing the adult world emphasising, ‘You have taken my childhood away... Let us be children. Do your part... Then we can go back to “being children”’ (Thunberg, 2019, p. 104). Thus, Greta’s ‘grown-up-ness’ is not a matter of development but of the quality of her way of being (Biesta, 2022). This illustrates how the Girl Rising movement consists of young girls flourishing, existing as subjects in meaningful ways and trying to make the world a better place. Consequently, adult acknowledgements can give these children a fair scene in which to participate, including opportunities to be subjects in their own right—for the present and for the future. Remarkably, these young civil rights activists show their potential to offer society a vision of a sustainable future.

## 8. Conclusion

The CRC (UN, 1989) has been ratified by 196 countries, making it the most widely endorsed convention. As a consequence, involving children in decisions that affect their lives (Article 12) is now a legally binding obligation. Relevant to my argument above, this global vision of a better world for children, bridging into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is leading into a *Century of the Rights of the Child*. An essential point I wish to make is that the implementation of the CRC requires continual critical review, as there remains limited awareness of how the conditions that characterise

the post-truth era may affect children's place in society. Moreover, at the international level, when examining the Girl Rising movement from an existential perspective (Biesta, 2022), I highlight a pattern of global adult acknowledgements that are emerging as a positive example of the realisation of children's rights. However, given the complexity of today's world and the uncertainty regarding what the future will hold, my concern relates to negative consequences that can be derived from clear signs of threats when adults seek to silence children and claim to know best. The central point I wish to make—from the perspective of a new kind of ethic based on existential human values and given the fact that today we determine the future for coming generations—is that it is vital to make visible stakeholders who are attempting to silence children in relation to matters that are important in their lives. This brings us to an understanding that although children can now be considered independently of the actions of state governments (Lee, 2001), the latest developments in Afghanistan represent an example of the devastating backlash concerning children's vulnerability, with girls being denied education and silenced. Thus, an important conclusion is that when striving towards the realisation of children's rights, both setbacks and successes provide insights into the reality that democracy cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, inclusion is the main point of democracy that has to be lived every day (Biesta, 2007; Ljungblad, 2021).

This article makes the case for participatory inclusion, with children being situated as subjects of their own rights who are entitled to active participation in the realisation of those rights. Generally speaking, if one has rights, one should also be allowed to have an opinion regarding those rights. Thus, advocating for the rights of children as citizens of the present, not only as beings on the way to an adult position, brings us to an understanding of the necessity of adopting a *positive rights approach* that requires active engagement and acknowledgement from adults. The new Girl Rising movement offers insights into the fact that adulthood and the attempt to live one's life in a 'grown-up' way are existential matters rather than developmental ones (Biesta, 2022). Finally, based on an existential argument, I

want to raise greater awareness that adults' means of empowering or limiting young generations' existential conditions are essential.

I conclude with a brief reflection on the philosophical values of Greta and other young girls raising their voices on a global scene. The argument that adults' understanding of childhood in a post-truth era requires rethinking childhood, was made visible from an existential viewpoint. The Girl Rising movement clearly gives new insight into the philosophical assumption that adults must teach children, instead rethinking childhood allows us to see all humans—children and adults alike—as being involved in *multiple becomings* without an end (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). This new movement highlights children's right to be heard as a valuable right. The defence of this view relies on the claim that at the heart of adult's acknowledgement lies the uniqueness of each child and the implications of this uniqueness. The children's initiatives seen around the world at the start of the new millennium, which have frequently revealed the power of girls to raise their voices, highlight the existence of a *youthquake* (Cummings, 2020), that is, 'a change that is coming' (Thunberg, 2019, p. 100) and that will shape the future in a new way.

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