To what extent has childhood been viewed as a social and cultural process rather than a 'natural process'?
Illustrate your discussion with reference to Book 1, Chapter 1, 'Children and development'.

Childhood is such a fundamental and integral part of humanity that on first considerations, we may take it for granted as an entirely natural process. The biological journey of maturation is a universal shared experience. Yet even if childhood is recognised only in these limited biological terms, it is still influenced by social factors i.e. the health and life choices of the mother during pregnancy. In the civilised world, there are very few who would be prepared to argue that childhood should be viewed as an entirely natural process. Contemporary developmental theorists recognise the child as an active agent whom is developing both physically and psychologically; the individual experience of childhood is dependent upon how they interact with their environment and how that society understands their specific nature and needs. The attitudes to children and views of childhood vary dramatically between different periods in history and different cultures, and are also actively evolving within our own culture; therefore it is, currently, more accurate to view childhood as a social and cultural process rather than a natural one:

"The immaturity of children is a biological fact but the ways in which that immaturity is understood is a fact of culture….childhood is ….constructed and reconstructed both for and by children" (James and Prout, 1997, p.15)

Woodhead (2005) illustrates that historically, throughout Western culture, childhood has been viewed as both a natural process and as a social and cultural process. It has also been viewed as an interactive process between the two. These changeable and evolving attitudes confirm James and Prout's assertion that "childhood is constructed and reconstructed". By comparing and contrasting the origins of the four main Psychological perspectives of Child Development and acknowledging their legacies to modern day practices, I intend to conclude that childhood has probably been viewed to a greater extent as a social and cultural process than it has a *natural process*.

It has been proposed that 'childhood' is in itself a recent invention. Philippe Aries (1962) is chiefly accredited with underlining the socially constructed character of childhood. He studied the history of literature and paintings and concluded that in mediaeval times childhood didn't exist. Obviously younger members of the species existed but they were not granted any special or distinctive status. Once weaned, they were thrust into adult society. Aries claimed that the awareness of children's distinctive nature did not emerge until the end of the fifteenth century. This can de illustrated in the emergence and gradual rise of schooling and paediatrics.
Aries has been criticised for making general conclusions which rely on limited sources. The largest group of children would have been the poor, and they would not have been represented. However the broad framework of his argument (the socially constructed nature of childhood) is the foundation of subsequent studies:

"The idea of childhood must be seen as a particular cultural phrasing of the early part of the life course, historically and politically contingent and subject to change" . (James and James, 2001)

There are four main perspectives of child development. These theories stem from three opposing philosophies which attempt to define the essential nature of humanity as embodied in the newborn child. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) believed children to be inherently sinful. He believed that development should be shaped by *control and discipline*. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) believed children to be inherently innocent; his supporters advocate that development is shaped by following children's *natural stages*. The theories of Hobbes and Rousseau are classified as nativist theories; maintaining that childhood is a natural process. John Locke (1632-1704) didn't view children as either inherently sinful or innocent, but rather a *'tabua rasa'* (blank slate) to be written on by experience; those influenced by him maintain the chief factor of development is *experience*. Locke's Theory is classified as *empiricist;* advocating that childhood is a social and cultural process. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) believed children to be born with mental structures specifically designed to interpret information from the environment; the essence of development being *interaction*. Kant sets the tone for the '*transactional models'* of development; not viewing childhood as exclusively a natural or exclusively a social process, but a combination of the two.

Thomas Hobbes believed that all human beings were born with original sin, therefore all children were born evil and had to be *'saved'*. The prime factors of development were control and discipline. He was an important influence to the formation of the Methodist church. The theory that children were inherently sinful was very desirable and easily identifiable from an Armenian perspective; people believed that children learned obedience to God through obedience to their parents. Childhood was a time of strict parenting and harsh discipline:

"Severe beatings of children in the name of discipline were commo n occurrences. Heaven was sometimes described to children in Sunday school as "a place w here children are never beaten". (Newman and Smith, 1999)

This view was apparent in the early nineteenth century in Hannah More's evangelical writings on child rearing. She too argued that it was a fundamental error to view children as inherently innocent and it should be down to society to curb their evil dispositions. The omnipresence of God and Satan in every person's life was an unchallenged premise:

"*The hard line view of infants as limbs of Satan persisted throughout the eighteenth century".* (Ezell, M.J.M, 1984)

This harsh and unsentimental view of children was not just religiously, but also demographically and economically motivated. Infant mortalities were extremely high; between twenty and fifty percent of babies died within their first year. Many parents referred to their child as *"it"* until they reached an age when survival was probable. Although it is problematic to speculate, it seems plausible that parents were consciously detached from their children as a coping mechanism, should they not survive into adulthood.

Although Hobbes advocated a *nativist* perspective on the essential nature of children, the religious attitudes which he and his contemporaries would have taken for granted as truth are now dormant in the majority of Western societies (apart from some remaining puritan cultures). Any who did share the popular religious view would not have been recorded. This validates James and Prouts assertion that childhood is "constructed and reconstructed". Hobbesian views of childhood did not unfold naturally, but were constructed through social discourse.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed the exact opposite to Hobbes; that children are not inherently sinful, but are inherently innocent, and would develop naturally in positive ways if allowed to do so. He referred to children as *'noble savages'*, this romantic notion supposes that all humanity is born pure and good until corrupted by civilisation. The environment does not have a positive, but has a negative affect on development:

"Everything is good in leaving the hands of the Creator of Things; everything degenerates at the hands of man". (Rousseau, 1762)

During the eighteenth century, views of childhood began to change; children were seen as innocent and in need of protection, (not unlike the way we see them today) consequently though, they were also viewed as weak and susceptible to temptation. Along with the notion of protection came the notion of discipline, as parents taught their children to avoid the enticements of their social world. Until the late 1800s, child labour was commonly practiced and accepted. It is reported that up to half of all workers in northern factories were children under the age of eleven. Children worked as long and as hard as adults. Because of their small size, they were sometimes given difficult and hazardous jobs, like cleaning out the insides of narrow factory chimneys. In poor urban families, parents often forced their children to engage in scavenging and street peddling. Rousseau's observations were not surprising given that the desire to protect children was coupled with their seemingly inevitable exploitation. Although chiefly belonging to the realms of Romanticism, Rousseau's theory did have practical psychological applications. He is attributed with presenting the first truly developmental account of childhood, through his emphasis on maturation and stages of development. His book; "*Emile" (*On Education) (1762) suggests children should be allowed an '*Age of Nature'* covering the period from birth to twelve years. This should be a time in which children be allowed to play and have their natural innocence respected.

It is Rousseau's emphasis in allowing the child to indulge their natural stages of development which is his legacy to child development. Fredrich Froebel (1782-1852): the pioneer of the kindergarten movement and designer of toy building blocks shared Rousseau's vision:

"The child, the boy, man indeed should know no other endeavour but to be at every stage of development wholly what this stage calls for" (Froebel 1885).

The idea of natural stages of development sets the tone for contemporary teaching templates by setting guidelines for what is considered *'developmentally appropriate'* practice, especially the balance of play and teaching within early years education.

Although Rousseau's legacy can be illustrated in modern day views of childhood, it is his practical advice about nurturing the Childs natural development, and not his nativist perspective which persists.

John Locke's theory contrasts both Hobbes and Rousseau's. He didn't believe that children were born inherently evil or innocent, but rather a blank slate. He saw the character of childhood as extremely malleable; e*xperience* being the sole factor of development. He recommended parents as tutors, responsible for providing the right environment and offering moral guidance in which to shape and nurture their children into mature, rational adults. Locke was the pioneer of the Educationalist movement. His essay," *Some thoughts concerning education"* (1693) asserts that; "a Childs mind must be educated before he is instructed". Although some of his critics accused Locke of *"despiritulising"* childhood, his theory permeated throughout society:

"The root of all corruption is poor Education" (Osborne London Journal, 1732.)

Locke's theories echo contemporary debates concerning modern family values. The infamous *'Back to Basics'* conservative campaign of the early 1990's suggested that a breakdown in traditional family values was responsible for a degenerating Britain. In May 2002, Patricia Amos was jailed for sixty days because of her daughter's persistent truancy. Most recently, in response to a spate of teenage shootings in East London in February 2007, leader of the opposition; David Cameron controversially proposed that absent fathers are responsible for an emerging class of feral children. These attitudes don't assume that children are passive receivers of their environment as Locke believed, but do demonstrate the huge onus of social responsibility he proposed.

Immanuel Kant viewed the key influence on development to be *interaction*. He agreed with Locke that experience plays a crucial role in learning but argued that knowledge could not arise from what is taken in by the senses alone. Kant acknowledges the child as an active agent in their own development. He deems it unreasonable to assume that children are just passive receivers of external stimuli or blind followers of a pre-determined biological pattern. The precipitator of development becomes the continuous interaction between the two. Both nature and the environment are equally significant.

Kant creates the framework for the *transactional models* of development which assume the child to be an active autonomous agent in their own development and attempt to explain this relationship of cause and effect that they have with their environment. This is the most popular start point for modern child development theories, such as social constructivist theories.

The religiously dictated views of Hobbes and Romanticism motivated views of Rousseau are unconvincing to a modern audience. Their legacies are derivative of their child rearing advice and not their rigid perspectives. James and Prouts assertion that "childhood is constructed and reconstructed is convincing enough to dispel these solely nativist theories. Locke's emphasis on education (although not to the extent he proposed) is echoed by today's politicians. It seems reasonable to assume that the real character of childhood is an interactive process between the two as proposed by

Kant. . In the civilised world, the onus of social responsibility to our children has always been great and is growing. Underlining the socially constructed character of childhood has had a great influence on our attitudes; therefore childhood has probably been viewed to a greater extent as a social and cultural process than it has been viewed as a 'natural process'.

WORD COUNT: 2032 (excluding title and references)

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