

Original citation:

Brighouse, Harry and Swift, Adam Goods of parenting. In: Baylis, Françoise and McLeod, Carolyn , (eds.) Family-making : contemporary ethical challenges. Issues in biomedical ethics . Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 11-28. ISBN 9780191019289

Permanent WRAP URL:

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/78503>

Copyright and reuse:

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:

Brighouse, Harry and Swift, Adam. Goods of parenting edited by : Baylis, Françoise and McLeod, Carolyn., 2014, reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/family-making-9780199656066?q=9780199656066&lang=en&cc=gb>

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk

Families: Of Parents and Children

Chapter 1

The Goods of Parenting¹

Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift

Introduction

This chapter aims to identify the distinctive contribution that parent–child relationships make to the well-being or flourishing of adults.² The claim that those relationships are very important for children—perhaps especially for their emotional development—is widely accepted; we subscribe to that consensus. But the idea that adults benefit from parenting children, while no less familiar, warrants more careful attention than it has generally received.³ By giving it that attention, we hope to challenge some conventional ways—often so taken-for-granted as to be unstated—in which parents think about their children. In particular, we query the significance of the biological connection between parent and child.

Though rarely conceived in such terms, it is widely believed that adults who get to parent children enjoy goods in their lives that are not realizable through alternative

¹ This chapter draws on material in our *Family Values* (Brighouse and Swift, forthcoming).

² In this chapter we treat “well-being” and “flourishing” as synonymous, varying our usage only to avoid repetition. For us, anything that “benefits” a person makes her life better for her and should be understood as contributing to her well-being or flourishing.

³ In addition to the works cited later, see Austin (2007) and Richards (2010).

relationships however intimate or loving, such as those with lovers, friends, or pets.

Certainly many adults who desire strongly to become parents would reject the view that these other relationships can be adequate substitutes. They could be wrong: people can want things that do not in fact make their lives go better. This is not just a matter of their discovering, with hindsight, that something they wanted turns out to be something they would rather not have had. People can spend their whole lives believing things in it were good for them when, in fact, those things made their lives worse. So some of those who want to be parents may be mistaken about what will be good for them—perhaps, for them, other relationships would be as good or better—and some who are parents and think that being a parent is good for them may be mistaken about that too. Also, and perhaps more interestingly, people can misunderstand what is good about the things they are right to value. Parenting is indeed special, and especially valuable. But what makes it special is not necessarily what those who want to be parents think is special about it; some, we suggest, value parenting for the wrong reasons.

Why Parents?

It's easy to see why children should be looked after by *adults*, but we could imagine a system in which different adults were in charge of them at different ages—specialists in dealing with young babies being replaced by experts on toddlers, who in turn would cede authority to those with advanced qualifications on the development of 4–5 year olds, and so on. Or if we thought continuity of care was important, new-born babies could be handed over to state-run childrearing institutions staffed by well-qualified professionals. Or perhaps groups of twenty or thirty adults living together in communes could share the tasks of childrearing between them, with no particular child being the particular

responsibility of any particular adult. In none of these alternatives would children have *parents*, as we will understand that term, and societies that reared their children those ways would not have *families*.

How does one go about evaluating childrearing arrangements? Some philosophers think that there are things that societies must (or must not) do to or for people irrespective of whether doing (or not doing) those things will make people's lives go better. But we focus on the well-being interests of the different parties who have a stake in the matter. First, and most obviously, there are children; their vulnerability, and the fact that, however they are raised, they cannot be thought to have had any say in the matter, are so glaring that it is hard to hold that their interests play no role. Second, there are adults; adults too may flourish less or more depending on their society's rules about how they may and may not be involved in the process of childrearing. Third, there are third parties; whether or not an individual is herself directly involved in raising children, she will surely be affected by the way her society goes about it, since childrearing arrangements are bound to have what economists call externalities.

Though useful for analytical purposes, this tripartite division doesn't identify distinct people. Not all children become adults, alas, but all adults were once children; and all people, both children and adults, suffer or enjoy the negative or positive externalities of other people's childrearing arrangements. This framework is an intellectual tool for thinking about the distinct ways in which we are all affected by decisions about how children should be raised. Any individual, thinking just about what is best for herself, will seek to combine these different perspectives and come up with an all things considered judgement about which childrearing practices would be, or would

have been, best for her overall. We can approach the social decision in essentially the same way.

This chapter focuses on the value of parenting to parents because that is relatively unexplored territory, not because we think adults' interests are more important than children's, nor because we think the interests of third parties are irrelevant. If the kind of relationship we are going to describe were not also good for children, then it could not justify the practice of parenting. If childrearing arrangements that were valuable for parents and children were damaging to third parties, then that too would count importantly against them. But the idea that, generally speaking, children are better raised if they experience this kind of relationship is well established: basic attachment theory and other staples of child development all point in that direction (Waldfogel, 2006). It is conventional also to regard parent-child relationships as crucial for turning children into law-abiding, cooperative fellow citizens. (Witness the popular concern that young people's lack of discipline is due to parental failure: Morse, 1999.)

The fact that people want something doesn't mean they should be allowed, or helped, to get it. Perhaps, instead, the activity of parenting should be distributed only to those who would do it best. Would there be anything wrong with a system that distributed children to adults in a way that maximized the realization of children's interests, even if it left out some adults who would be willing, and adequately good, parents? We think there would. To be a parent is to have a certain kind of relationship with a child, and in our view many adults have a weighty interest in enjoying that kind of relationship. The relationship contributes extremely valuable and non-substitutable benefits to adults' lives—goods which we call “familial relationship goods”. For many, parenting a child

makes a distinctive and weighty contribution to their well-being as adults. It is distinctive in that it cannot be substituted by other forms of relationship, and, we claim, the goods in question are important enough to impose a duty on others to allow, and indeed to enable, adults to enjoy them

What's Special about Parenting?

For most people, intimate relationships with others are essential if their lives are to have meaning for them. Rather than being alone in the world, seeking to fulfil their own pleasures, people thrive when they are connected to other human beings with whom they enjoy deep and close relationships. These relationships are challenging—in an intimate relationship one does not fully control the response of the other person, and one has to discern her interests even when she does not necessarily articulate them well, and act to further those interests and come to share some of them as one's own. The love and voluntary compliance of others in a relationship, when recognized, results in a sense of well-being and self-worth, as does successful attendance to the well-being of those others. A life without such relationships, or in which they all fail, is usually an unsuccessful life.

But our intimate relationships are not all the same—they are not substitutable one for another. People need more than one kind. Most need, usually, a romantic lover, someone to whom we can bare our raw emotions and whom we are confident will love us anyway, with whom we share sexual love. We need close friendships that last, if not a whole lifetime then some long part of it, with people on whom we can rely for support when in need and who we know can rely on us, with whom we can share our joys and interests. We also need more casual relationships—relationships of trust with people

whose lives we do not know intimately but with whom we form bonds around some particular shared interest, project, or adversity. A successful life is a life with a variety of successful relationships, including a variety of successful intimate relationships.

We believe that many, perhaps most, adults need to be involved in an intimate relationship of a very particular kind in order to have a fully flourishing life. The parent–child relationship is not, in our view, just another intimate relationship, valuable to both sides but substitutable for the adult by an additional relationship with a consenting adult. The relationship is, on the contrary, *sui generis*, a relationship that involves the adult in a quite unique combination of joys and challenge; experiencing and meeting these makes a distinctive set of demands, and produces a distinctive contribution to well-being. Other intimate relationships have their own value, but they are not substitutes for a parenting relationship with a child.⁴

The parent is charged with responsibility for both the immediate well-being of the child and the development of the child’s capacities. The child has immediate interests in being kept safe, enjoying herself, being sheltered and well nourished, having loving relationships with proximate others, etc. She has future interests in many of these same things, but also in becoming the kind of person who is not entirely dependent on others for having her interests met, and the kind of person who can make her own judgements about her interests, and act on them. The parent’s fiduciary duties are to guarantee the child’s immediate well-being, including assuring to her the intrinsic goods of childhood

⁴ Frederick Schoemann (1980) puts the interest in intimacy central but fails to recognize the distinctive features of the intimacy specific to parent–child relationships. An account that shares some of the features of ours can be found in MacLeod (2002).

(see Brennan, in this volume), and to oversee her cognitive, emotional, physical, and moral development. Four broad features of this relationship combine to make the joys and challenges of parenting different from those that attend other kinds of relationship, including other kinds of fiduciary relationship.

First, obviously, parents and children cannot have equal power. Children are not in the relationship voluntarily and, unlike adults they lack the power to exit the relationship at least until they reach sufficient age to escape (which age will be culturally sensitive, since different societies will monitor and enforce parental power with different levels of enthusiasm and effectiveness). Children are vulnerable to the decisions and choice-making of their primary caretakers, and, initially, wholly dependent on them for their well-being. An adult supervising a child has the power of life or death; and this is not, at least when the child is young, reciprocated. But, more importantly, and less spectacularly, they have the power to make the child's lives miserable or enjoyable (within limits, at least at the enjoyable end).

The second difference between this and most other fiduciary relationships concerns the paternalistic aspect. The parent-child relationship routinely involves coercing the child to act against her own will, or manipulating her will so that it accords with her interests. So, for example, we might lock away the bleach so that she cannot get at it, even though she has displayed great interest in it, or prevent her from having a third helping of ice cream, on the grounds that neither the bleach nor the ice cream will serve her interests. We might persistently serve whole-grain pasta in the face of her frequent (and accurate) complaints that it is tasteless, in order to habituate her to frequent intake of whole grains. We might engineer her social life in order to diminish the significance of a

destructive friendship. Although in relationships with other adults we are obliged to take their interests into account, we do not have fiduciary responsibilities of this kind towards them. Indeed, if one saw one's relationship with, say, one's spouse, in this way, one could reasonably be accused of being overbearing, disrespectful, or unloving. In intimate relationships with other adults one might advise and even argue but one does not routinely coerce and manipulate, even in the other's interests. To do so would be to fail as a spouse or friend, just as to refrain from doing so with one's children would be to fail as a parent. And where we do have distinctively fiduciary relationships with other adults—even with ageing parents—coercing or manipulating them may sometimes be required but it is not itself a key part of the job.

A third difference concerns the relationship of the fiduciary (the parent) to the interests of the principal (the child). When the parent-child relationship begins, the child does not have specific beliefs about what is good for her. Later, when she *does* have beliefs, they have been formed in response to the environment structured by the parent and, if the parent has been caring for the child, by someone whose capacities have been shaped by the parent. The parent has a good deal of latitude in shaping the child's emerging values, values that will guide her in her own life. In other fiduciary relationships what the fiduciary should pursue on the principal's behalf is typically fixed by reference to the principal's own beliefs about what is good for her, sometimes expressed directly to the fiduciary, sometimes (as in the case of advanced directives) expressed previously. But the parent does not have and could not have such a standard to guide her. The parent should be guided, rather, by those interests of the child that it is the parent's fiduciary duty to respect and promote. Of course there will be differing accounts

of what those interests are but, in our view, one important parental duty is to try to ensure that the child will become an autonomous agent, someone capable of judging, and acting on her judgements about, her own interests. This is a lengthy process, and one that does not just naturally occur but requires active support. It is, for most parents, emotionally as well as practically challenging to prepare a child who has been entirely dependent, and whom the parent loves deeply, to become her own person, capable of effectively challenging the parent and the parent's values; capable, ultimately, of rejecting the adult if she thinks it appropriate. Three natural inclinations are frequently at odds with trying to ensure the child's genuine independence: the inclination to be protective of the loved child, the inclination to promote her well-being according to one's own view of what that would amount to, and the inclination to hold on to her for one's own sake. To overcome these inclinations successfully, when one really loves one's child, is emotionally demanding. Successful parenting is, in this respect, an exercise in maturation because, while the parent has the control that he needs in order to carry out his caring and fiduciary tasks for the child, he simultaneously learns that one *should not* control another person in the way he might like, and learns how not to exercise some of the control he does indeed have. For example, the parent must give the child opportunities for emotional and physical independence, putting the child in situations where she is at risk of failing, but in which the stakes of failure are sufficiently low that the child will be able to bear, and learn from, failure if it happens.

The fiduciary responsibilities of parenthood constitute a distinctive moral burden. But, of course, along with the moral burden come distinctive sources of satisfaction of a much less complicated kind. What children need from parents is not simply the judicious

exercise of expertise and authority, of the kind one might hope for from a lawyer or doctor or teacher. What's needed is a *relationship*, and the kind of relationship children need from adults—a parent–child relationship—is also the kind that yields good things to the adults doing the parenting. There is the enjoyment of the love (both the child's for oneself and one's own for the child), but also the enjoyment of the observations the child makes about the world; the pleasure (and sometimes dismay) of seeing the world from the child's perspective; enjoyment of her satisfaction in her successes and of consoling her in her disappointments.

The final difference from other relationships, then, concerns the *quality of the intimacy* of the relationship. The love a parent normally receives from his children, again especially in the early years, is spontaneous and unconditional, and, in particular, outside the rational control of the young child. She shares herself unselfconsciously with the parent, revealing her enthusiasms and aversions, fears and anxieties, in an uncontrolled manner. She trusts the adult in charge until the trust is betrayed, and trust must be betrayed consistently and frequently for it to be completely undermined. Adults do not share themselves with each other in this way: intimacy requires a considerable act of will on the part of adults interacting together. But things are different between parents and children. The parent is bound by his fiduciary responsibilities for the child's emotional development to try to be spontaneous and authentic a good deal of the time, both because the child needs to see this modelled and because the child needs to be in a loving relationship with a real, emotionally available, person. And, of course, the parent will often be inclined to be spontaneously loving. But his fiduciary obligations also often require him to be less than wholly spontaneous and intimate (despite the child's

unconditional intimacy with him). The good parent sometimes masks his disappointment with, sometimes his pride in, the child, and often his frustration with other aspects of his life. He may sometimes hide his amusement at some naughtiness of the child, preferring to chide her for the sake of instilling discipline; conversely he may sometimes control his anger at similar behaviour, substituting inauthentic kindness for the sake of ensuring a better end to the child's day, or because he knows that his angry reaction is, though authentic, inappropriate. He does not inflict on the child, as the child does on him, all of his spontaneous reactions, and all of his emotional responses.

These four features combine to make the relationship between parent and child unlike other intimate relationships, and unlike other fiduciary relationships. Children have a weighty interest in the kind of relationship that will meet their needs and promote their vital interests. Given what that involves—given how complex, interesting, and conducive to the adult's own emotional development it is to be the adult in that relationship—adults too have a weighty interest in being in a parenting relationship. The interest is distinctive, because what the relationship requires of the adult, and allows the adult to experience, is unique. It cannot be substituted even by other intimate relationships where those are consensual on both sides and in which the parties are symmetrically situated. The relationship as a whole, with its particular intimate character, and the responsibility to play the specific fiduciary role for the person with whom one is intimate in that way, is what adults have an interest in.

The fiduciary aspect to the parental relationship with children has been widely acknowledged since Locke, and is given particular emphasis by so-called “child-centred”

justifications of the family.⁵ Our claim is adult-centred: many adults have an interest in being in a relationship of this sort. They have a non-fiduciary interest in being in a relationship in which they act as a child's fiduciary. That relationship enables them to exercise and develop capacities the development and exercise of which are crucial to their living fully flourishing lives. The parent comes to learn more about herself, she comes to change as a person, and she experiences pleasures and emotions that otherwise would be unavailable.

We need to tread carefully here. It should be clear that the adult's interest in playing the fiduciary role is not entirely independent of the content of that role. It's because of *what* children need from their parents that adults have such a weighty interest in giving it to them.

Imagine a world in which human children didn't need much more looking after than guinea pigs, or those Tamagotchi toys that were so popular a while back. Imagine that they could fully develop into autonomous, emotionally adjusted adults, and enjoy the intrinsic goods of childhood, with that kind and level of input from adults. We think that, even in that hypothetical world, there would be *some* value to being the person

⁵ Locke (1988) says "parents were, by the Law of Nature, under an obligation to preserve, nourish, and educate the Children they had begotten; [though] not as their own Workmanship, but as the Workmanship of their own Maker, the Almighty to whom they were to be accountable for them" (p. 180, sec. 56). Contemporary theorists who emphasize the fiduciary interest, despite giving otherwise different accounts of the relationship, include Reich (2002: 148–51); Galston (2002: 101–6); Callan (1997: ch. 6); Dwyer (1999); Brennan and Noggle (1997); and Archard (2004).

responsible for ensuring that children's interests were met. One would be responsible for the development of a human child, which is a weighty responsibility indeed, and it is good for people, it makes *their* lives go better, to take on that degree of responsibility. So when we say that, in our world, playing the fiduciary role contributes importantly to the flourishing of (most) adults, the sheer fact of being the person responsible for the child is part of the story.

But only part of it. Properly to see the weight of the adult interest in parenting, we need to keep our eye not on the plain fact of being the fiduciary but on the content of what children need from those who are their fiduciaries. Adults have an interest in being the fiduciary, and parents' serving as fiduciaries affects the significance, and hence the value, of so much else that happens in the relationship. But what's really valuable here is not being the fiduciary *per se* but having the kind of relationship that, in fact, is in children's interests. It's that kind of relationship which presents a distinctive challenge, and that kind of challenge that gives adults unique opportunities for flourishing.

Adults can be involved in any number of fiduciary relationships. In our professional lives, as lawyers or social workers or doctors or teachers, we take on duties to serve the interests of our clients or patients or students. In our personal lives, too, we may find ourselves acting as fiduciaries for our ageing parents, for example, if they cease to be able adequately to protect and promote their own interests. If we think about the difference between these other kinds of fiduciary relationships, and the particular case of the parent-child relationship, we can see that some elements in what is special about being a fiduciary for a child concern the fact that what we're talking about here is a *child*. Relevant here is the moral standing of the person for whom one is acting as fiduciary: her

possessing the capacity to develop into an autonomous adult, her degree of vulnerability to one's judgements, her involuntary dependence on one, and so on. Failing adequately to discharge one's fiduciary duties to a child would be different from failing to discharge those owed to a client or patient, or even to an ageing parent, even if what was involved in fulfilling the duties were the same. But of course they are not the same. Other elements in what is special about being a fiduciary for a child concern *what* it is that children need from their fiduciaries. They need a special kind of *relationship*—a relationship in which the adult offers love and authority, a complex and emotionally challenging combination of openness and restraint, of spontaneity and self-monitoring, of sharing and withholding. It's that kind of relationship that many adults have an interest in.⁶

To be sure, the fiduciary aspect remains central. Grandparents, uncles and aunts, parents' friends, or nannies, can have close relationships with children, and when they go well those relationships will be conducive to the child's interests and valuable to the adults too. Reading bedtime stories, providing meals, and so on will be contributing to the well-being of both. But there's something distinctively valuable about being the person who not only does those things oneself but has the responsibility to make sure they get done, sometimes by others, and the authority to decide quite how they get done.

⁶ It's an interesting question how many parents a child can have consistent with this kind of relationship. Single-parent families clearly qualify, and we see no reason why three or four parents should not share the parenting of a child. More than that and we would start to worry about the dilution of intimacy and authority inherent in "parenting by committee". For discussion see Brennan and Cameron (n.d.).

The challenge is different, and the adult who meets that challenge enjoys a special, and especially valuable, kind of human flourishing.⁷

Is our Picture of Parenting Too Rosy?

Our emphasis on the fiduciary aspect of parenting points to something paradoxical about the widespread desire to be a parent. That is a desire to take on burdens, voluntarily to put oneself in the position of owing things to others that severely limit one's capacity to pursue other goals.⁸ We have tried to explain what adults get out of the relationship, as it were, in a way that helps to make sense of the paradox, but we suspect that some readers will find our account of the joys of family life somewhat naïve or complacent, and suspiciously optimistic in its neglect of the burdens that accompany parenthood.

For many, parenthood is indeed a source of deep anxiety and frustration. It is a vital source of flourishing only if it is carried out in a social environment that renders its challenges superable. So, for example, poverty and the multiple disadvantages that accompany it can easily create a micro-environment in which it is very difficult even to develop, let alone to exercise, the cognitive and emotional skills that successful parenting requires. Meanwhile children raised in poverty are typically at much higher risk of very bad outcomes than more advantaged children, so that parents seeking conscientiously to

⁷ Nannies sometimes experience an almost complete variant of the full package—effectively doing most of the parenting. In our view, one of the tragedies in that relationship is that its security is vulnerable to the arbitrary power of the child's official "parents".

⁸ That is why Alstott (2004) argues her case for financial support for parents by appeal to the idea that they should be compensated for their loss of autonomy.

protect their children from such outcomes require greater internal resources than are needed by the parents of more advantaged children. Adults have a weighty interest in parenting a child in circumstances that will indeed enable them to realize the goods we have identified. In another context, we might follow this thought through to explore the implications for social policy of our account of “family values”.⁹

But parenting a child is not all-consuming. It’s true that, done properly, raising a child severely limits on one’s opportunities to do other things. Some people choose not to be parents for precisely that reason. It’s true also that raising a child is likely to be one of the most important things one does with one’s life. As Eamonn Callan (1997: 142) says, “success or failure in the task, as measured by whatever standards we take to be relevant, is likely to affect profoundly our overall sense of how well or badly our lives have gone”. But although the interest in the fiduciary aspect of the role is important, parents should not be slaves, entirely and continually subordinating their own interests to those of their children, or always putting their children first. We cannot here set out in any detail what rights parents should have with respect to the children they parent, but it may be helpful to outline briefly two different ways in which parenting is not like slavery.

On the one hand, parents are not only parents. Quite how much of one’s time and energy parenting demands will of course vary with the age and particular characteristics of the child, but generally speaking it is perfectly possible to parent well while performing other roles and pursuing other interests. It is common to talk about the “best interests” of the child, and that may indeed be an appropriate practical criterion for adjudicating custody disputes where things have gone wrong in some way and the child is

⁹ For some thoughts in this direction, see Brighouse and Swift (2008).

likely to be at serious risk of serious harm. But it is not plausible to demand that parents always and single-mindedly pursue their child's best interests. Adults who parent also have lives of their own to lead and it is quite appropriate for them sometimes to weigh their own interests, and those of others, against those of their children. Imagine someone who, as well as being a parent, and accepting our view of the fiduciary duties that attend that role, also believes—let us assume rightly—that he has a moral obligation to take part in a political demonstration. Imagine further that he cannot find alternative childcare, so he has to choose between taking his child with him or not going on the demonstration. He accepts that going on the demonstration is not in his child's best interests; those would be better served by their staying home, or going to the zoo instead—the child is not old enough for going on the demonstration plausibly to benefit her in any way at all. As long as going on the demonstration does no harm to the child, bringing or leaving her below some level we might think of as 'good enough', he does indeed have the right to go with her on the demonstration. That is not a right he has qua parent. But it is a right that makes a difference to what he may do with his child.

But we can go further. It is in *children's* interests that their parents have their own, independent, interests and pursuits, and in children's interests too that their relationship with their parents be one in which their parents are not required always to act with their children's best interests in mind. Someone who was only a parent—someone for whom "parent" was the entire content of their identity—would not be providing the kind of experience that children need, and the parent-child relationship would surely implode in a kind of self-referential black hole. (Of course, that can happen even when the parent *does* have other identities and interests—if he fails to get the balance right—

but it looks inevitable if he doesn't.) It is important for children to experience their parents as independent people, with their own lives to lead, not as people whose sole purpose in life is to serve them. So the task of parenting, although indeed extremely demanding, by its very nature allows parents discretionary time and energy: having a life of one's own is, in fact, part of the job description. The point here is not simply that it's good for children if parents get some time off for themselves, or good for children that they have a sense of their parent as having independent interests. The parent's non-parental interests will, and indeed should, manifest themselves, at least sometimes, in the interactions between parent and child. Parents must allow themselves some space, free of self-monitoring, to experience and express to the child their authentic emotions and attitudes. A parent who never said or did anything to or with his child without first asking himself whether it would be in his child's interests would not be spontaneously sharing himself with his child, there would be a lack of genuine intimacy, and he would thus be failing to provide the kind of relationship that *was* in his child's interests. Paradoxically, the kind of parent-child relationship that is good for children is one in which the parent cares about things other than his children, and doesn't spend all his time thinking about, and then trying to deliver, what would be good for them.

Four Clarifications

Four further points of clarification are important. First, we are not saying that there are many adults who cannot flourish *at all* without relationships of the kind we have described. People do indeed go to great lengths in order to raise children, and some consider the inability to do so as a profound blight on their lives, but few who miss out conclude that their lives are thereby worthless. Nonetheless, many regard themselves as

having missed out on an experience that would have been necessary for them fully to flourish. Our claim is of that kind—about the contribution parent–child relationships make to a fully flourishing human life.

But, second, this is not true of *all* adults. A significant proportion of people have no desire to raise children, and for many of them the absence of this desire is not an epistemic failing—they are not making a mistake. We are not claiming that all adults need to raise children fully to flourish, and we recognize, further, that there are some for whom parenting would make no contribution to their well-being, and some for whom it would make their lives go worse. That the relevant relationship goods contribute importantly to the flourishing of the rights holder does not imply that those goods are good for everybody. In this respect the contribution of this kind of relationship is like that of a romantic sexual relationship. Many people are such that they could not flourish fully without it: it contributes something to their flourishing that nothing else could contribute. Others, however, have no need for it. Similarly there may be people who do not need to be parents: those who, although they might really enjoy parenting, could indeed flourish fully without it, and those whose lives would actually be diminished by being a parent. In some cases that might be because the person lacks the capacities needed properly to discharge the fiduciary duties (Cassidy, 2006). This does not contradict our general claim about the significance of the relationship.

Third, it may be objected that some parents abandon their children and have little contact. Indeed, even in the nuclear family that emerged after industrialization, fathers have often had very limited time and intimacy with their children. But none of this shows that adults can live well without parenting relationships, for we can ask whether they

have really have enjoyed fully flourishing lives. In our terms, such people have not in fact been *parents* at all—they may have helped to create the child, and, in the latter case, they may have provided the financial support necessary for someone else (usually the biological mother) to fulfil the parenting role. (Imagine a society in which the costs of raising children had been fully socialized, so that the citizenry as a whole supported children and those raising them. The job of *parenting* would still exist, and parent–child relationships would be just as important, but it and they would have been separated from financial provision.) The traditional gendered division of labour, in addition to being unjust towards women, has tended to deprive men of something very valuable—a parenting relationship properly understood.

Finally, some parent–child relationships lack some of the features that contribute to the flourishing of the parent, while other kinds of relationship contain some of them. So, for example, the parent of a child with severe cognitive impairments might experience loving intimacy, and the joy in seeing the world reflected through the eyes of someone for whom she acts as fiduciary in some respects, but her fiduciary obligations do not include preparing her child to become an autonomous adult. Maybe some children, perhaps those on the far end of the autism spectrum, cannot be intimate with the parent in the way that we have described as being so important and rewarding. Pet owners take on fiduciary obligations, and some have emotionally rich relationships with their pets, as do many who care for adults with severe cognitive impairments, and for the infirm elderly. So not only does our account of the relationship at stake fail to capture every parent–child relationship, but the contrast between it and other caring relationships is not always as stark as we might have been taken to think. Our conception of the parent–child

relationship describes something that many adults have a very strong interest in participating in. Other relationships that resemble it to a greater or lesser degree will yield some of the benefits, but not all. Some of those other relationships will yield benefits for some of the carers that are not made available by our conception of the parent–child relationship.

Alternative Accounts

Our “familial relationship goods” approach to the value of parenting can usefully be contrasted with other approaches. Our analysis is unusual in separating (i) why children should be raised by parents at all and (ii) which children should be parented by which adults. It offers, in Archard and Benatar’s terms, an “indirect” justification of any answer to the second question, first justifying the institution of parenthood and then distributing parental roles within that institution (Benatar and Archard, 2010: 18–21). Most answers to the second question, and certainly those prevalent among non-philosophers, offer a direct justification—for example, by appeal to a causal relation between the child and the adult who, it is argued, has a claim to parent her. That kind of answer makes no appeal to the “value” of parenting, at least not in the sense that we have been conceiving it: there is no invocation here of the idea that the parent–child relationship makes a distinctive contribution to human well-being. The thought is more likely to be that the person who brought the child into existence has a right to be its parent, in our sense, with that right not being grounded in any claim about the goods or benefits likely to accrue from that way of justifying or distributing parenthood. From that perspective, whether parenting is valuable, for either parent or child, plays no role in answering either question.

Some of a libertarian persuasion may see the right to parent a child one has procreated as an application of the more general right to own that which one has produced with one's own body. The relationship that matters here is the ownership relationship, which gives the procreative parent certain control rights over the child that in some sense "belongs" to the parent. Another view that also makes biology central points rather to the investment that biological parents, especially gestating mothers, make in "their" children. Bearing the costs and labours of pregnancy gives one a right to parent the child one has worked so hard to produce. This variant on the proprietary perspective—the idea that the parent "deserves" to parent the child in return for past labours—again gives no special weight to the kind or quality of the relationship between parent and child once it is born nor to the value of that kind of relationship to either parent or child.¹⁰

But it is also possible to accept the structure of our argument, and our emphasis on "familial relationship goods", while giving it and them different content. For example, some believe that there is a particular value to an adult in having a relationship with a child in which one is able to pass on some aspects of oneself to that child—perhaps one's genes, perhaps one's values, perhaps one's property. The adult interest in parenting, on such a view, does derive from something about the value of a distinctive connection between parent and child; there is something important that one is able to achieve by parenting a child that would not otherwise be available. That may be passing one's

¹⁰ For discussion of various views about the (alleged) interest in procreation, see Overall (in this volume). For a view that emphasizes the significance of the gestatory relationship, rather than genetic connection, see Gheaus (2012).

deepest religious or cultural commitments on to future generations, extending oneself beyond death, achieving a distinctive kind of connection to posterity, or seeing the fruits of one's labour enjoyed by those whom one loves.

By way of illustration, let us focus on the first of these. Colin MacLeod (2010) identifies a motive of "creative self-extension" which "arises out of the special opportunity. . . . parents have to express their own commitment to ideals and ground-projects by passing them on to their children. . . . We can see ourselves carried forward in another self we played a significant role in creating" (p. 142). MacLeod seems to endorse this, which brings together two, distinct, motives: one concerning expression of one's own commitment to one's projects and values, the other concerning the carrying forward of one's own self through a creative process. While accepting that parents may often find acting on both motives successfully can be a profound source of "satisfaction", and that in practice parents may often act on these motives, we doubt that they should play any role in grounding adults' claims to parent children.

There are many ways to express commitment to projects and values, and for many projects and values influencing other people to take notice of them, take them seriously, or adopt them, is part of what it is to be committed to them, or a natural accompaniment to being committed to them. One's children are, like other people, potential adopters. But, as our account of the specificity of the parent-child relationship emphasizes, to parent a child is to have a special kind of power over the emerging values of another human being. The kind of relationship that will deliver the goods we have identified is indeed one in which parents will have some scope to influence their child's emerging values—they will do this as an unintended by-product of the spontaneous sharing of themselves

with their children, and they may do it deliberately to the (in our view limited) extent to which the relationship's yielding its benefits requires some degree of shared values between parent and child. The parent's concern to promote her child's well-being may also have implications for the ways in which she may act to shape the child's emerging values—for example, where the parent believes that her child's endorsing a particular project or value will be important for the child's living a successful life.¹¹ But for a parent to ensure that her child in particular shares some specific value or project *out of commitment to that value or project* rather than *out of commitment to the child and the relationship* strikes us as a case of using the child as a means to the realization of the parent's own goals in a way that has nothing to do with the value of relationship. On inspection, then, this aspect of MacLeod's claim turns out not to appeal to relationship goods after all.

By contrast, the second thought, that “we can see ourselves carried forward in another self we played a significant role in creating”, does seem to put something special about the relationship between parent and child centre stage. The claim that there is something distinctively and importantly valuable, for an adult, about raising a child as an unsubstitutable act of “creative self-extension” does have the same form as our appeal to “familial relationship goods”. Though the content differs, the thought is that it is only by raising a child that adults can realize this particular, and weighty, contribution to human flourishing.

¹¹ For the view that, when it comes to improving their children's lives, it is wrong for parents to be guided by reasons that their children could come reasonably to reject, see Clayton (2006, 2012).

Let us explore this alternative specification of the value of parenting by looking at Edgar Page’s account, which is the fullest articulation of such a view that we are aware of.¹² Page is concerned to identify a conception of parenthood that is robust and attractive enough plausibly to ground a set of parental rights. That is a project with which we have a good deal of sympathy (and pursue elsewhere).¹³ Here we confine ourselves to Page’s approach to the value of parenting, with which we disagree strongly. For him:

parents have a positive desire to influence the course of a child’s life, to guide the child from infancy to maturity, a desire to mould it, to shape its life, to fix its basic values and broad attitude, to lay the foundations of its lifestyle, its priorities, its most general beliefs and convictions, and in general to determine, to whatever degree is reasonable and possible, the kind of person the child will become. It would not be going too far to say that parents have a general propensity to try to send their children forward in their own image, not in every detail, but in broad outline. (Page, 1984: 195)

We do not dispute this as an empirical claim about a “general propensity” on the part of parents. The question is whether the desire of adults to shape a child in this way—to determine the kind of person she will become—should count as an interest weighty

¹² For a more recent (though more subtle) account along these lines, explicitly presented as a critique of our view, see Reshef (2013).

¹³ Our theory of familial relationship goods yields a radically different account of parents’ rights from that implied by Page’s approach. See Brighthouse and Swift (2006, 2009, forthcoming).

enough to constitute a parent-centred justification of the practice of children being raised by parents. If somebody proposed that children should be raised collectively, say in state-run childrearing institutions, there would indeed be compelling objections, appealing to the interests of both children and adults. But would the fact that those collective arrangements denied adults the opportunity creatively to extend themselves via their children be one of them?

As before, it is important carefully to identify the specific claim at stake. Parents inevitably influence, even though they don't "determine", the people their children become. Our own account of the adult interest in the parent-child relationship describes a relationship in which there is plenty of room for such influence to occur, whether as unintended by-product, deliberate concern for shared values, or parental concern for the child's well-being. With respect to the last of these, Page (1984: 196) is admirably clear:

We can normally expect parents to pursue their interest in shaping the child's future with a clear regard for its good. But this does not mean that the parental interest in shaping the child can be reduced to this affection. . . . The propensity of parents to exercise control and guidance over their children, the propensity to determine the development of the child, far from being aimed simply or primarily at the child's good, is the manifestation of a fundamental and unique interest which lies at the heart of human parenthood and at the foundation of parental rights.

To our minds, this clarification, emphasizing the extent to which the motive in question views the child as a vehicle for the realization of the parent's own selfish, and indeed somewhat narcissistic, interests, brings out the latent proprietarianism in the "creative

self-extension” account.¹⁴ The child is seen as a canvas on which the parent may objectify herself, or a block of raw marble to be shaped into a future version of herself. But children are entirely separate people from their parents. If collective childrearing arrangements were better for them, the fact that such arrangements would deny adults this particular opportunity for creative self-extension hardly constitutes a ground for insisting that children should be raised by parents.

As he develops his view, Page also articulates well what we take to be a common belief about the importance of adults’ parenting children they have physically produced.

For him:

The parental aim is not simply the creation of a person, but rather the creation of a person in the parents’ own image. . . . One aspect is that in raising their child parents do much to shape the person it will become. This they would do in any case, even if it were not part of their design, but I have argued that parents characteristically have a positive desire to determine the kind of person their child becomes. The other aspect is that natural parents produce from their own bodies the material to be shaped, the organism that is to become a person. (Page, 1984: 200)

For Page, then, the creative dimension of parenting would not adequately be acknowledged by childrearing arrangements that allowed parents to determine the kind of people their children become but allocated children to parents in ways that gave no fundamental importance to any genetic connection between parent and child.

Physically producing the child is itself an essential part of the creative process:

¹⁴ Cf. Austin (2004: 507–9).

The motive, or the end, of parenthood is surely the creation of the whole person, and this takes within its grasp both the begetting and the raising of the child. . . . The two parts—begetting and rearing—are clearly complementary to each other and neither is entirely intelligible, as a form of human activity, without the other. (Page, 1984: 199–200)

An obvious problem for such an account, as for all that attach great significance to biological connection, is that it seems to rule out the possibility that adoptive parents can fully realize the value of parenting. Even if they were indeed engaging in the kind of creative self-extension that comes through raising a child, they would inevitably be denied the aspect that comes from having physically created the child they are raising.

His response is worth quoting at length:

If all parents were in the position of adoptive parents, i.e. if there were no connection between parenthood and generation, as might be imagined in “science fiction” worlds, parenthood would not have a place of special value in human life, or not the place it now has. Adoptive parenthood is modelled on natural parenthood and the commitment of adoptive parents to the child is parasitic on the special bond characteristic of natural parents. Without this model there would be a question as to the intelligibility of a commitment of adoptive parents to young babies, particularly in conditions which severely test them, and indeed as to the intelligibility of their desire for parenthood. (Would it be comparable to the desire for pets?) For most people, I suspect, adopting a child falls short of being a perfect substitute for natural parenthood, but when they

undertake it they can at least borrow from and follow the established patterns and practice and attitudes of parenthood grounded on the physical relation. It is difficult to know what adoptive parenthood would be without this. (Page, 1984: 201)

Where Page believes we can only make sense of adoptive parenthood by thinking of it as parasitic on a parent–child relationship that is grounded in a physical (i.e. biological/natural) connection between parent and child, we have tried to explain the value of parenthood in ways that make no reference to that connection. We accept that, in a world where there were no connection between parenthood and generation, parenthood would have a different significance from that which it has for most people today. But we reject the claim that, in such a world, raising a child would be like keeping a pet. Our aim has been to highlight the specificity of the parent–child relationship, and to identify the distinctive and weighty contribution it can make to human well-being. If we are right, there is no reason for adoptive parents to model themselves on anybody, for what is special about the practice of parenting does not depend on a biological or natural connection between parent and child.

References

- Alstott, A. (2004). *No Exit: What Parents Owe their Children and What Society Owes Parents*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Archard, D. (2004). *Children: Rights and Childhood* (2nd edn). London: Routledge.
- Austin, M. (2007). *Conceptions of Parenthood: Ethics and the Family*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

- Austin, M. W. (2004). The Failure of Biological Accounts of Parenthood. *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 38, 499–510.
- Benatar, D., and Archard, D. (2010). Introduction. In D. Archard, and D. Benatar (eds), *Procreation and Parenthood: The Ethics of Bearing and Rearing Children* (pp. 1–30). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brennan, S. and Cameron, B. (n.d.). How Many Parents can a Child Have? Philosophical Reflections on the Three Parent Case. Draft available at http://works.bepress.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1066&context=samantha_brennan
- Brennan, S., and Noggle, R. (1997). The Moral Status of Children: Children’s Rights, Parents’ Rights, and Family Justice. *Social Theory and Practice*, 23(1), 1–25.
- Brighouse, H., and Swift, A. (2006). Parents’ Rights and the Value of the Family. *Ethics*, 117(1), 80–108.
- Brighouse, H., and Swift, A. (2008). Social Justice and Family Policy. In G. Craig, T. Burchhardt, and D. Gordon, *Social Justice and Public Policy* (pp. 139–56). Bristol: Policy Press.
- Brighouse, H., and Swift, A. (2009). Legitimate Parental Partiality. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 37(1), 43–80.
- Brighouse, H., and Swift, A. (forthcoming). *Family Values*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Callan, E. (1997). *Creating Citizens*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cassidy, L. (2006). That Many of us Should Not Parent. *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 21(4), 40–57.

Clayton, M. (2006). *Justice and Legitimacy in Upbringing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Clayton, M. (2012). Debate: The Case Against the Comprehensive Enrolment of Children. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 20(3), 353–64.

Dwyer, J. (1999). *Religious Schools and Children's Rights*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Galston, W. (2002). *Liberal Pluralism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gheaus, A. (2012). The Right to Parent one's Biological Baby. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 20(4), 432–55.

Locke, J. (1988). *The Second Treatise of Government*, ed. P. Laslett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MacLeod, C. (2002). Liberal Equality and the Affective Family. In D. Archard, and C. MacLeod, *The Moral and Political Status of Children* (pp. 212–30). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MacLeod, C. (2010). Parental Responsibilities in an Unjust World. In D. Archard, and D. Benatar, *Procreation and Parenthood: The Ethics of Bearing and Rearing Children* (pp. 128–50). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Morse, J. R. (1999). No Families, No Freedom: Human Flourishing in a Free Society. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 16(1), 290–314.

Page, E. (1984). Parental Rights. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 1(2), 187–203.

Reich, R. (2002). *Bridging Liberalism and Multiculturalism in American Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Reshef, Y. (2013). Rethinking the Value of Families. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 16(1), 130–50.

Richards, N. (2010). *The Ethics of Parenthood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schoemann, F. (1980). Rights of Children, Rights of Parents, and the Moral Basis of the Family. *Ethics*, 91, 6–19.

Waldfoegel, J. (2006). *What Children Need*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.