

Writing Philosophically About the Parent-Child Relationship

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Introduction to the Extract

This is an extract from our book *The Claims of Parenting: Reasons, Responsibility and Society* in which our main concern is to show how the parent-child relationship has been claimed by certain languages and forms of reasoning, to the extent that it has become difficult to find other ways of talking about it and exploring its significance, at both an individual and a societal level. The idea of writing the book emerged partly from our experience as parents, and our sense that dominant accounts of “good parenting” in both policy discourse and popular literature for parents were raising significant conceptual and ethical questions that, as philosophers, we should have something to say about. Yet at the same time, we felt a dissatisfaction with many discussions of families, parents and children in philosophy of education, moral philosophy and political philosophy, where parent-child relationships seemed to be framed as a sub-category within a broader moral or political theory rather than seen as a subject for philosophical exploration in its own right. Our central premise is that childrearing and the parent-child relationship are ethical all the way down. Though this may seem like a fairly obvious thing to say since, surely, there is nothing new in asserting the ethical significance of raising children, articulating what exactly this means involves putting the experience of being a parent in contemporary conditions at the centre of our philosophical enquiry, while at the same time exposing the limitations of some of the languages within which contemporary “parenting” is conceptualized and discussed. In probing the ethical and conceptual questions suggested by this experience we hope to open up a space for thinking about childrearing and the parent-child relationship beyond and other than in terms of the languages which dominate the ways in which we generally think about it today

Extract: Good Enough Parenting?

One of the main problems with the scientific discourse that dominates discussions of parenting is that it implies that there is a clearly-defined, objectively valid end-point of the parenting process and that the core of “parenting” consists of forms of interaction that are causally related to achieving this. Implied in the language of this account is the idea that there is a right and a wrong way of parenting, and thus, in principle, a possibility of “closure” or “achievability” whereby one can be deemed to have succeeded as a parent. The alternative picture which we sketch out involves a focus, instead, on the particular quality of individual parent-child relationships, on the open-endedness of the process of being a parent, and on the sense in which the aims and goals that parents have cannot be unproblematically captured in a neutral, descriptive language, as they are infused with values and inseparable from the experience of individual parents within the shifting and dynamic context of their lives.

Doing, Being and Closure

It is important to note here that emphasising the aspects of the parent-child relationship that we have been addressing here, in contrast to the scientific account, is not a question of positing a kind of process-oriented rather than goal-oriented account of the parent-child relationship; rather, it is about showing the impossibility of identifying any single point, from outside the relationship, at which one can acknowledge that it has “worked”. Although it is instructive to contrast the distinction between “parenting” as a verb which connotes action and *doing* with the notion of “*being* a parent”, which brings out the relational and non-task-specific aspects of the term, we are wary of approaches which posit a dichotomy between instrumental and existential or relational attitudes. [This dichotomy is addressed in an earlier chapter of the book where we discuss feminist work in the ethics of care and related work].

Parents, as we have discussed, have, and cannot help but have, a somewhat instrumental attitude towards their children, to the extent that part of the experience of being a parent is to want one’s child to be and do certain things. As Sara Ruddick puts it, “Even before a baby is born, a mother is likely to daydream about the kind of person her child will become.” (Ruddick, 1990: 105) For care theorists, this kind of thinking represents a form of paternalism that, while they acknowledge its role, they find somewhat distasteful and in tension with the essentially responsive and receptive ethical stance of caring (see Goodman, 2008: 237) As Goodman notes, their solution to this perceived tension is to argue that parental assessments of needs are acceptable if reflected through the prism of attentive love. But as Goodman comments on Ruddick’s above-quoted remark, “such dreams are not irrelevant to parenting; they spur the process” (2008: 237). We want to suggest, on the basis of our analysis of the current scientisation of parenting, that Goodman’s account can be taken further. Goodman identifies a problem within care theory that has to do with the tension between the demands on the parent to satisfy the child’s needs and the demand to shape them, and suggests a conception of parenting which resolves this tension by

blending the “receptive-intuitive” and “objective-analytic” [Held, 2006b] as it does connectedness and separateness. Her [the mother’s] empathy motivates while her rationality evaluates. Parents are not engrossed by the child, they do not abandon themselves to the child’s needs; sympathy is modulated by reflection. Once this fusion is recognized, the artificial choices between loyalty and impartiality, emotion and rationality, relationship over individuality, and context over rules are diminished if not eliminated. (2008: 246)

We agree, to an extent, that these tensions are at the heart of what it means to be a parent. Yet as we have begun to suggest, we see them not as something to be resolved, either in theoretical analysis, or through prescriptive recipes for good parenting, but rather as something that is lived with and explored by individual parents in the daily experience of being a parent. Undoubtedly,

this experience will at times be difficult and frustrating, and will be so partly because of this inherent tension: the 18 month-old baby screaming in the supermarket aisle presents a problem not just because the parent wants to effectively stop the screaming, but because the parent may want all sorts of other, possibly conflicting things: she may want the child to be a certain way, and may want to be a certain kind of parent; she may want her relationship with the child to be a certain kind of relationship; she may want her child not to be the kind of child who has tantrums whenever she is unhappy or frustrated; she may want her to be able to ask for what she wants without screaming; she may want to feel in control; she may want to be able to calm her child down without feeling she is controlling her and repressing her individuality; she may want her child to be assertive; she may want her to be considerate; she may want to be able to model sensitive, empathic behaviour; she may want to be able to model assertiveness; she may want to be thought of as a good mother; she may want reassurance that the child loves her; ... The list is, quite literally, endless, and not necessarily consciously articulated. Any of these desires and perceptions, or a combination of them, could be going through any parent's mind at any given moment with their child, who is behaving in a way that demands a response. To explore them, to identify what ideas, values and motivations are behind them, which of them are in tension with others, which seem more important to the parent and why, requires an attention to the meaning of the terms in which we describe and think about what we do with and for our children.

This kind of thinking, though, cannot be done independently or in advance of the first person relational experiences of particular moments of parent-child interaction. And it is precisely this kind of practical reflection and response that is blocked, we argue, by the dominance of the scientific language. In posing as a neutral and independently valid account of what children need or which developmental goals are most important, without acknowledging that these goals reflect evaluative choices, the science of parenting obscures the point that all aspects of the process in question are infused with values and interpretation. What the scientific account asks parents to do, in other words, is to see their child as "a child" and thus to bracket out the specific commitments and understandings they have about how they want to be as a person in their relationship with their individual child. To make a choice as a parent about what to do, or what not to do, in any given situation with one's child, indeed to describe the situation in a certain way as a particular kind of situation demanding a particular kind of response, is to make a human choice, an ethical choice. The scientific account of parenting frames discussion of "good parenting" in terms of the causal relationship between certain parenting behaviours and certain "outcomes" for children. But this is deeply problematic not only because, as Kagan (1998) has warned us, and as critics such as Furedi (2001) reinforce, citing his account, this rests largely on "the myth of parental determinism", but also because it assumes that there is a logical point from where we can assess

whether parenting has been successful or not, and a logical line we can draw around certain parts of our experience as parents that we can then describe as causally linked to such a point. The issue here is not a simplistic (and obviously false) rejection of the claim that there is any causal link between parental behaviour and child development. The point, rather, is that parents, like children, are agents acting in a social world infused with meaning, and that there is no self-evident way in which a particular part of their complex and infinitely varied interaction can be carved off from the rest and assigned moral significance from the outside. There is no simple sense, in other words, in which to capture this causality and reduce its inherent complexity.

In David Grossman's novel, *To the End of the Land* (Grossman, 2010), Ora, a middle-aged mother of two sons, is reflecting back on her life and her children's childhood, telling and retelling the story of her 21-year old son, now serving in the army, in a kind of magical attempt to preserve him. At one point, she pauses in her telling, struck by the force and the almost terrifying wonder that she expresses in the following words: "Thousands of moments and hours and days, millions of deeds, countless actions and attempts and mistakes and words and thoughts, all to make one person in the world..." (Grossman, 2010: 454). Part of what the scientific account does, it seems, is to organise and make sense of this infinite, awe-inspiring reality, telling us which actions matter most, which mistakes we cannot afford to make; and what kind of person we will make if we do the right deeds and use the right words. The consequence of this process, however, is a loss of meaning. The contrast we want to draw out here, then, is not so much between "process" and "outcome", as between perspectives which offer us closure and pre-defined assessments of either the process or the outcome, and perspectives which acknowledge their intrinsic open-endedness and multiplicity of meaning. One obvious way in which a great deal of policy and practitioner guidelines based on scientific research on parenting offers a kind of artificial closure on the process of parenting is through the use of the term "parenting styles". We discuss this here with reference to the above points.

Parenting Styles

The literature on parenting styles is too vast to cover comprehensively here, but the basic findings of the original research by Diana Baumrind are now so ubiquitous as to have become almost part of our everyday vocabulary. The prototypes of the parenting styles referred to were first identified by Baumrind (see 1966, 1967), and their description has changed little since her original work. Some of the relevant literature cites three styles: "authoritarian, authoritative and permissive (or indulgent)", since the fourth category later identified by Baumrind, "neglectful" parenting is, arguably, not a "style" but an indication of failure on the part of parents to adequately care for their children. What we want to draw attention to here is the way in which this research has been

taken up and presented in the context of policy and popular advice on “good parenting”, especially in relation to the above points about closure. What we are referring to is the effect on how we think about parent-child relationships, and how parents think about their own relationships, of a language that implies a kind of closure regarding what aspects of our life with our children constitute a “parenting style” and how this will affect the kind of person our child will become.

[...]

The problem we want to emphasise here is that the infinite number of moments and the complexity of the experience of being a parent – the “thousands of moments and hours and days, millions of deeds, countless actions and attempts and mistakes and words and thoughts” – do not fit neatly into any pre-existing account of parenting. Most descriptions of parenting styles, for example, focus on specific incidents to do with disruptive behaviour, bedtime, mealtimes or violence in the playground. These incidents, like multiple-choice problems, come pre-packaged and neatly delineated.

Analysis of the Extract

This extract illustrates both the context in which our work was undertaken, and the distinctive methodological approach that we adopted – an approach that, while perhaps overlapping with work in other disciplines, has an important affinity with the philosophical endeavour described by Wittgenstein as “supplying remarks on the natural history of human beings” (Wittgenstein, 1953: I, #415). Indeed, many sociological, historical and cultural stories can be and have already been told about why it is that parents in post-industrial, western societies face an often overwhelming array of advice on how to bring up their childrenⁱ. At the same time, there have been several philosophical treatments of the legal, moral and political issues surrounding issues of procreation, the rights of children and the duties of parentsⁱⁱ, as well as some philosophical accounts of the shifts in our underlying conceptualisation of childhood and adult-child relationshipsⁱⁱⁱ. While our discussion in the book partly builds on the insights of this literature, and while we are indebted to the thinkers and writers who have addressed questions such as what it means to educate children, the nature of human flourishing, the idea of introducing children into a common world, and the significance of intimate relationships, we see our project as significantly different in that it offers a philosophically-informed discussion of the actual practical experience of being a parent, with its deliberations, judgements and dilemmas.

The discussion in this extract is illustrative of the approach we adopted in our initial conversations that led to the preparation of the book proposal, and later throughout the whole process of writing the book. In collecting material throughout this process, we often found ourselves sharing

examples of descriptions of parenting (for example in magazines and websites aimed at parents, in parenting guides and self-help books, or in policy documents and media reports on the role of parents) and expressing our frustration at the broad-sweeping generalisations that seemed typical of such accounts (e.g. the tendency to make statements beginning with "children are...", "parents should..." or "research shows that..."). In trying to express this frustration, we found ourselves reaching towards an articulation of what it was that these kinds of accounts left out in their depiction of the experience of being a parent, and how they seemed to be failing to do justice to the complexities of the daily lived experience of being a parent. At the same time, we found ourselves drawn to first-person accounts of the experience of being a parent that we encountered in novels, magazines, or simply in the process of talking to other parents and to each other about our own experiences. Our actual writing process, then, often began with simply describing such experiences and sending our descriptions to each other so that we could comment on what we thought was significant or valuable in them, and then seeing how they fitted in with the general critical view we were in the process of developing. So for example in the above extract, imagining the scene of a mother with a screaming toddler in the supermarket, which we describe in everyday language, allowed us to make the conceptual points about the irreducibly ethical significance of parents' daily interactions with their children, and the impossibility of imposing any definitive model of choice or closure on the ways in which parents respond to such situations, in a concrete and accessible manner.

In the above extract, this tension is shown through our juxtaposition of the third-person, scientific account of "parenting styles", with the nuanced and particular first-person description of the protagonist in the novel. What creating this tension does is to show that the first-person experiential account is irreducible to the neat empirical categories of the third-person scientific account. This also allows us to bring out the ways in which significant philosophical, particularly ethical, questions about being a parent arise from the first-person account itself. Once these philosophical questions and issues are developed and articulated, partly through drawing on the work of philosophers like Arendt, Cavell, Williams, Nussbaum and others, as we do throughout the book, it then becomes clear how little can be conveyed through the language of the dominant, third-person accounts.

As this discussion shows, the "data" for our work consisted of a wide range of literature, including policy documents, reports of empirical psychological research, and first-person accounts, both from the popular press and from novels. We therefore do not consider our work to be non-empirical; nor do we find it helpful to draw a sharp distinction between "philosophical" and

“empirical”. Indeed, the work we do is about the empirical world and is based, in part, on empirical sources.

Our “methodology”, then, to use a word which most philosophers are uncomfortable with, consisted in discussing this wide variety of different sources and the philosophical problems and insights that they threw up, with the aim of developing some helpful ways of thinking about the significance of the parent-child relationship. The literary and autobiographical sources (such as Grossman's novel) that we drew on were, we found, particularly fruitful in helping us to develop a central distinction that runs through the discussion in the book: that between the “first-person” and the “third-person” account. This distinction, we believe, is a way to remind readers that neither typical “third-person” accounts that purport to be based on a neutral, objective account of “what children need” or what “parenting style” leads to the “best outcomes”; nor a philosophical approach which defends the ontological and ethical priority of experience or relationships as opposed to a form of instrumental rationality, can get at the full significance for parents of what it means to be a parent, nor can it ultimately offer any valid prescriptions for what they should do in particular situations with their children. Our work thus offers an important challenge both to policies which prescribe a one-size-fits-all approach to good parenting, and to criticisms of such policies which imply that whatever parents choose to do is, by definition, morally acceptable. Walking the middle ground between these two extremes is a difficult project, but one which, we hope, our book has gone some way towards developing and defending.

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ⁱ See for example Dekker, 2010; Edwards and Gillies, 2004; Furedi, 2001; Lareau, 1989; Phoenix *et al.*, 1991; Schaubroeck, 2009, to name but a few.

ⁱⁱ See Archard, 1993; Blustein, 1982; Brighouse and Swift, 2006; O'Neil and Ruddick, 1979.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Kennedy, 2006; Stables, 2008.