

BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN
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Some Moral Dimension In Parent-Child relations

We tend to take it for granted that there are certain moral dimensions to the parent-child relationship. Such concepts as parental authority, child abuse, the duty to obey, and so forth suggests this plainly enough. We also distinguish between the legal and the moral dimensions of parent-child relationships when, for example, we refer to the legally enforceable duty of child support or children's rights that may be protected by law versus a parent's moral responsibility to teach values and the child's responsibility to help around the house.

Yet it is not entirely clear just how these moral components of the parent-child relationship arise. So what if children are begot ten by parents? Why does this obligate parents to do anything special? And what if the child refuses to obey his parents? What is wrong with that besides a kind of recklessness inviting untoward repercussions from the parents? Certainly much of the law across the civilized world affirms the obligation of parents and children but that is insufficient for purposes of understanding what is going on. For example, when children challenge a parent, or when a parent is merely considering how to behave toward children, these questions need to be answered independently of the law. Since much of family life is carried on behind closed doors, mere legal guidelines would not suffice to steer people in the right direction.

I want here to suggest an understanding of the moral dimensions of parent-child relations that has not only the virtue of making this matter clearer than it may be now but also the virtue of making the matter accessible to the participants. In short, I wish to propose a way to answer the relevant questions that can be understood by most participants - ordinary parents and children. In particular I am concerned to explore why children should obey their parents and what parents owe their children and why.

An Implicit Contract

It seems that one way to understand parents' authority over their children and its limits - which includes why children should obey their parents - is by answering the question, "What would one's child have wanted one to do for (and may be to) him or her when she turns out to be a grown person?" Then if one wishes to know what one's obligations are to one's children, we may take it that upon accepting the role of parents one has agreed to deal with one's children according to what the answer to this questions would have been. It is implicit in the answer to this question what it is that children would want their parents do to and for them - that is, what it is that parents owe to children.

Moreover, I suggest also that this is a fruitful way to go about discovering why parents have authority over children that children ought to accept.

Would a grown person wish that his parents have guided him in certain ways when he was young? Would he ask for some sternness in this guidance - e.g., the parents should not permit him to take up smoking, make him go to bed at a reasonable hour so as to get sufficient rest for the next day, insist on his doing his homework, etc.? More specifically, say a child has

discernible musical talent. Would the grown up who had been this child have wanted his or her parents to have applied reasonably stern discipline about developing this talent? If so, and if what parents ought to do is rear their children to grow into mature and fulfilled adults, then this would inform them about what they ought to do for and even to their children. In general terms, it seems that parents ought to rear their children as they could figure a grown version of the same child would ask them to.

The same would appear to hold about general moral standards and mores as with measures pertaining to individual development. Parents or guardians would seem to owe their children what the adult version of the child would rationally propose they should have done. (Notice that this rationality limitation includes not demanding the impossible - e.g., what would have been economically unfeasible or beyond the parents other capacities.)

Personal Autonomy and the Child

Why does this appear to be a fruitful approach to determining the obligations parents have toward their children? Because it takes into account what a grown adult would want to have been done for and to him as a child takes into account the individuality of the child.

A crucial element of self-development is becoming who one will be by choice, not because one has been molded into what someone else decided one will have to become in life. This rational reconstructive approach to child-rearing does justice to that point. That is, this approach does justice to a human being's essential autonomy or free will. If we keep in focus what the adult version of our child would want us to do about is or her development, we give early recognition to the role of autonomous choice, if only in a surrogate fashion. We, as parents, stand in for the adult version of our child and thus give the child a kind of self-direction.

In addition this approach also ensures the requisite amount of socialization or moral teaching from parents. A grown person would not reasonably desire that he or she would have been brought up without regard to sound moral standards. Since moral teaching involves disputed notions - especially if complete moralities are being taught rather than common sense moral ideals - parent moral teaching would always have to be somewhat provisional, aware of the likelihood of eventual challenge and thus willing to defend moral teaching by references to reasons the child could understand and eventually evaluate. It would be evident that either mere indoctrination or indifference to moral issues would constitute, at least in part, neglectful child rearing.

As to what children owe their parents and why, the issue might be approached by way of what parents need from children to make a feasible household and a developing child possible. A child should obey the parents because this is the child's best option for development, so long as parents are endeavoring to promote the child's development. Yet, since children are not able to assess this readily enough, the general prescription "Obey your parents" can make sense for most parent-child relationships. Once the child rearing experience ceases to be the best alternative - e.g., if unnecessary beatings occur, if talents are neglected, if wildly irrational moralities are promulgated - and the child or someone representing his or her interest can grasp this, obedience is no longer owed and the child ought to run away to seek a better situation. Since that is difficult for a child to know about, let alone do, some kind of public awareness of parents' child rearing techniques would have to be available to remedy any abuses. Thus if a

child is persistently hidden from public view, that may be prima facie grounds for closer public scrutiny of the family situation.

Here, too, something like a rational reconstruction takes place so as to get at what is morally justified. As a rational adult I can imagine how I would have wanted to be brought up. Indeed, we often figure this out in our later years, sometimes with the aid of a therapist or friends, sometimes entirely on our own. One's parents ought to have insisted on eating nourishing food, doing one's home work, exercise, good manners, education, etc. They ought not to have forced one to follow father's trade, mother's tastes in clothes, etc. And some matters would probably be left quite optional - e.g., where to vacation, what novels one ought to read, etc.

What about such matters as religion and politics? Here rearing would have to involve handing down some values but with the understanding that these are going to be available for personal choice later in the child's life. It would not be rational to expect parents to avoid imparting their values to their offspring - indeed, it is part of their responsibility to do this. But it is sensible to insist, also, that parents make it evident to a growing child that there will be challenges they will have to face and that some of these may turn out to be successful. This is merely to prepare the child for some changes upon adolescence and avoid the extreme shock of experiencing the changes out of the blue.

Children, we may assume, would want to be successful adults and would, therefore, want to have their parents rear them for such success. Is the assumption rational? Yes, since the interest children take in living communicates this message to parents. Do well by me since I have embarked on the project of living well - something you, my parents, ought to have expected of me once I join the human race.

It seems, then, that a kind of teleological ethics makes the best sense of parental authority and children's obedience. Given the rational assumption that children would want to be brought up in certain ways, the conditions for such rearing are authorized for parents. And they also provide the limits to which parents may go.

Children's Rights

There is a final topic to be considered. Clearly, children are not without rights - indeed, some positive rights (e.g., being fed). First, they have the rights that adults do, to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, albeit the exercise of these rights occurs via the judgment and help of parents. A child is a dependent being and thus lacks the full sovereignty that is required for the independent exercise of one's basic rights. Yet, even as young human beings, children do possess the rights of human beings via the direction of their parents. They may not be killed, assaulted, stolen from, etc. Yet what they do with their lives, what actions they take, and how they dispose of their property or seek their happiness is largely under parental supervision. That supervision, in turn, must conform to the provisions implicit in our earlier discussion about parental obligations.

As a young human being, some measure of autonomy is deserved by every normal child. Children are not zoo animals, to be barred from exploring the neighborhood, to make contact with other people. Furthermore, because children have been invited into the parents' lives, and since they are children (indeed, initially totally dependent infants), parents have committed

themselves to provide for their children. May these be enforced by the government? Yes. Here is the reason why. When people have children, they enter into a compact with them - or, rather, with the adults the children will be. This may be difficult to appreciate because it is a unique relationship, one that is only possible with human children. Since parents have children as their offspring and not adults, and since children are for the larger portion of their lives dependents - i.e., their parents can only be understood as making a promise or taking a kind of oath to supply for them something they need to grow up. And thus to such support they are entitled to from their parents. Let me spell this out a bit.

Children are young human beings, normally on their way to adulthood at which time they will become moral agents in need of a normal upbringing so as to have the capacity to do well in their lives, to be able to make good choices. This is something that parents-to-be would themselves be expected to know. So when they undertake to become parents, they may be expected to know that they will be assuming the responsibility to bring their children up so that they may become sound or able adults. It is arguable, in this connection, that failure to fulfill the implicit promise of rearing one's children would expose parents to tort law. They could be sued for parental malpractice, negligence, abuse, etc.

Children, in turn, may be taken to have the (positive) right to being so treated that they will become sound or able adults. This right they have by virtue of the parents' choice to have them as the kind of beings who will as adults have the right to be able to choose to live right. If they are not enabled for that purpose, they will not have that right, they will fail to become persons. That means that the parents' promise or oath will not have been properly carried out.

Now in a civilized society the parents can expect their government to see to it that the contract they have entered into is being upheld - on both sides. Their authority should gain official support, and their abuse of their authority should gain official rebuke. In turn, there must also be official backing in support of obedience to parents by children. Run away kids should be returned home, provided no proof of child abuse is available. Children should not be protected by law in case they behave as adults - e.g., in the purchase of goods and services, entering contracts, etc. Everyone ought to be on notice that children are dependents and may not be counted upon to act otherwise.

Parents, too, must be held accountable to provide for their children the (contextually) necessary support that it would take to rear a child toward enabling him or her to embark upon successful adulthood. If there is clear and present danger that children are not being provided for, law officers would have the authority to investigate. From the time a child is born - perhaps even from an earlier time, depending on how the dispute about when personhood begins is resolved - his or her citizenship would be recorded and all the protection he or she is entitled to be would also be provided. Because of the special status of children as dependents - moving from a state of total to gradually diminishing dependency - those entrusted with the protection of their rights would have certain legal leeway toward parents not accorded them toward adults without children.

We can easily see why this again would be a proper way to handle parent-child relations. Children are not ordinarily belongings - they are not the property of parents but their offspring, namely, young human beings taken in for the purposes of rearing them toward maturity. That is

a legally enforceable promise made by parents to children and whether the promise is being conscientiously fulfilled is in part a public policy question.