

The Claims of Parenting

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The Claims of Parenting

Reasons, Responsibility and Society

 Springer

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Introduction

Our main concern in this book is to show how the parent-child relationship, the importance of which is universally acknowledged, 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. There is, in fact, an intentional ambiguity in the title *The claims of parenting*. First of all, this is meant to capture the idea that parents today have various claims made *on* them in the sense that they are expected to perform in certain ways and to achieve certain outcomes. Moreover, and connectedly, there are the various claims, in the public domain, *about* parents and parenting. And finally, there are the claims *of* parenthood, in the sense of what it is that parenthood demands of us when we come to see it as a human activity in a rich ethical sense of the word. Importantly, this ambiguity is reflected not just in our conceptual distinctions but in our lived experiences, where, as we discuss throughout the book, these very distinctions can often become blurred in the sense that the claims that are made *about* and *on* parents can eventually become claims that are made *by* parents themselves, as parents gradually come to see themselves in the ways implied in the predominant languages of ‘parenting’.

We begin by exploring and discussing some examples of these languages, the most prominent of which are the languages of psychology, particularly certain forms of developmental psychology, that have come to dominate popular and policy literature about and for parents in a very particular way, with significant implications for how we talk and think about childrearing and the parent-child relationship. The focus of the first chapter of the book, and the basis for the thematic discussion which we take up again in later chapters, is an account of the conceptual and ethical aspects of childrearing and the parent-child relationship that are suggested by and, perhaps more importantly, that are left out by, these dominant ways of speaking.

Our starting point for this exploration is the present experience of being a parent at a particular moment in history and in a particular part of the western world. While our discussion is primarily philosophical rather than historical or sociological, we make no claims to universality; indeed, it is part of our argument about the parent-child relationship that this relationship is always situated within and mediated by

particular contextual values and meanings. Nevertheless, there are, we believe, certain significant and troubling features of our current dominant ways of talking about childrearing and the parent-child relationship that represent a particular emphasis and understanding, and that raise important questions worthy of rigorous philosophical exploration. These are manifested and reflected in the current proliferation of advice, manuals, classes, literature and TV programmes aimed at parents, which go hand in hand with an unprecedented burgeoning of policy initiatives in the area of families and parents. More often than not, these initiatives are explicitly designed to address perceived problems such as lack of discipline amongst children, a rise in teenage pregnancies, increasing levels of drug and alcohol abuse amongst teenagers and children, eating disorders, childhood depression, and so on – at the root of which, it is claimed, are issues to do with how parents relate to their children. In short, ‘parenting’ is on the public agenda. And while it is certainly true that experts and literature on childcare have been around for a long time, the normative assumptions and the logic of the arguments behind the language in which parent-child relationships are, overwhelmingly, addressed in our current climate, represent a significant shift in emphasis. This is, perhaps, most evident at the policy level where, whether through parenting support classes, ‘parenting orders’, or proposals for ‘home-school agreements’, and the like, there seems to be a growing consensus that accumulative evidence has indicated the undisputed role of early parenting patterns on children’s social, emotional and intellectual development, and that to abstain from intervening in family life in order to disseminate this evidence and optimise outcomes accordingly would amount to a moral and political failure. It is, indeed, the very ubiquity and moral force of this consensus and of the scientific language on which it relies, that, we argue, makes it difficult to critically examine the evaluative and conceptual assumptions behind this language and to think about the parent-child relationship in different terms, drawing on different languages.

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 children (see for example Dekker 2010; Edwards and Gillies 2004; Furedi 2001; Phoenix et al. 1991; Schaubroeck 2010, to name but a few). 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 parents (see Archard 1993; Blustein 1982; Brighouse and Swift 2006; O’Neil and Ruddick 1979), as well as some philosophical accounts of the shifts in our underlying conceptualisation of childhood and adult-child relationships (see Kennedy 2006; Stables 2008). While this book partly builds on the insights of this literature, we see our project here 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. As philosophers of education, we are part of a tradition of rich and rigorous thinking and writing on questions such as what it means to educate children, the nature of human flourishing, the idea of introducing children into a common world, preparing them for an independent and fulfilling life and the significance of intimate relationships. However, while we are indebted to the thinkers and writers who have addressed these questions, many of whose insights are reflected in this book, we feel

that the parent-child relationship and its educational significance is an area that has not been sufficiently addressed by philosophers. In probing the ethical and conceptual questions suggested by this relationship, 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. The central premise of the book 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, we feel it is important, especially today, to start by affirming this point because articulating what exactly is meant by the phrase 'ethical all the way down' is a project that, we believe, gets to the heart of the experience of being a parent in contemporary conditions, while at the same time exposing the limitations of some of the languages within which contemporary 'parenting' is conceptualised and discussed.

Following from this, then, the book has two central strands. The first is to offer an account of what it means to be a parent so as to capture the complexity of that experience in contemporary conditions. We develop this account in dialogue with contemporary discourses in a way that will enable us to offer a conceptualisation of the parent-child relationship that goes beyond what we see as the often narrow and impoverished ways in which this relationship is conceptualised in popular and scientific discussions. The first stage of this project thus consists of exploring the languages and conceptual landscape that have come to characterise much contemporary discussion of 'parenting'. As stated above, we explore this language and its significance in detail in Chap. 1, although its features and manifestations involve themes that we revisit and discuss throughout the entire book. While we do not want to suggest that our identification of or indeed our critique of this language is entirely new or original, we do believe that the perspective we develop in the following chapters sheds new light on this area. Some objections to contemporary policy and popular discourses of 'parenting' take the form of problematising the use of the term 'skills' within policy and practice aimed at supporting parents; others reflect a scepticism about the very viability of the project of articulating a normative account of 'good parenting'; others, while acknowledging the potential defensibility and value of such an account, are concerned with the possibly damaging consequences of attempting to implement it in a top-down, state policy context. What we want to suggest here is that articulating reservations about various prescriptive accounts or interventions on the part of the government and its agencies does not really resolve any of the philosophical questions raised by the parent-child relationship and its place in contemporary culture. On the contrary, the more we probe these questions, the more we come to feel that ethical and conceptual issues come into the discussion at all levels.

In discussing the problems we are facing today, in a climate of increasing government intervention in family life, Paul Smeyers expresses the hope that his analysis will enable people

to foster recognition that the practice of parenting involves complex considerations that exceed simple articulation within a discourse of skills, of effectiveness and output, as well as of risk and control, and within a particular sense of rights. (Smeyers 2010, p. 283)

In the chapters to come, what we are doing is, in fact, articulating and discussing just such complexities, their significance and the myriad ways in which they are manifested in the day-to-day experiences of parents raising their children. While one could see this approach as one of offering an account of ‘parenting’ from a philosophical perspective, we find this description a bit misleading as we do not understand our project to be one of developing ‘a philosophical perspective on parenting’, or a distinct philosophical position from which we (then) try to analyse the experience of being a parent. This is true both in the sense that the philosophical elements of our discussion emerge from, and are intertwined with, other, existing accounts (philosophical or otherwise) of ‘parenting’, and in the sense that we do not find it helpful to situate ourselves within a particular philosophical tradition. Throughout the process of writing this book and the discussions that preceded it, we have found ourselves drawing on a variety of philosophical sources, combining and integrating insights, and making use of the tensions between different perspectives, in an effort to make sense of the claims of parenting – in all senses of this phrase – today. Yet while not perhaps offering a distinct philosophical *position* on parenting, our discussion throughout the book does reflect our conviction that it is impossible to say anything about the experience of being a parent without this inevitably being, to some degree, philosophical in nature.

Our way into this discussion involves the recognition that part of the very attempt to say something about the parent-child relationship must come from within the relationship itself. In explaining and articulating just what it would mean to ask questions about the parent-child relationship from the inside, as it were, we develop and draw on a distinction between the first-person and the third-person perspective. This distinction, again, while connected to existing philosophical work, is used here in a particular way, as discussed primarily in Chap. 2. Crucially, it is through probing and exploring the insights yielded by what we refer to as the first-person perspective, articulated throughout the following chapters by means of both philosophical analysis and discussion of ‘thick’ examples, that we draw attention to some significant aspects of the parent-child relationship that, we believe, are all too frequently overlooked or obscured in today’s climate.

The second strand in the book is, alongside and as part of the attempt to articulate an account of the ethical and conceptual complexities involved in being a parent in contemporary conditions, a defence of a perspective on the parent-child relationship in which the political significance of this relationship, and of the family in general, is reaffirmed and valued, albeit in a very different sense from that which characterises a great deal of familiar contemporary discussion on the politics of parenting. Specifically, we offer an account of being a parent that reconceptualises the family as a site of political action and reflection in a way that goes beyond the narrow sense of ‘politics’ that characterises those critical discourses that are suspicious of government intervention in family life. This account is explicitly discussed in Chap. 6, although the possibilities and potential suggested by different, philosophically informed and possibly less restrictive notions of the political form part of our general approach of probing and challenging the words and concepts we use to describe what parents do and should be doing with and for their children, and of

suggesting other languages with which to describe and explore this central area of our lives as individuals and as a society. It is precisely this current use of language and its pervasive effects throughout public discussions of ‘parenting’ that, we argue, stands in the way of spelling out what exactly it means to say that childrearing and the parent-child relationship are ethical all the way down.

It is probably worth stating at the outset that our aims, as articulated above, may be seen as fairly modest and may even seem somewhat disappointing if one expects ‘aims’ to lead to specified ‘outcomes’. In writing this book, we do not wish to inform policy in the direct sense of the term; nor do we want to say that current policy is simply ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’. If anything, what we hope to achieve is that anyone involved in helping parents, setting out directives for those helping parents, or producing policy guidelines in the field of parent support, will exercise far more caution in doing so. We are not arguing that offering parents advice on how to bring up their children is a bad thing in and of itself and should thus be generally abandoned. What we wish to convey is something that, in a sense, goes beyond the question of whether or not parents ‘need’ expert advice, and whether or not it is appropriate or even acceptable to give them such advice about raising their children. Our point is that whatever it is that is communicated to parents through such advice does not, and cannot, capture the complexity involved in raising one’s children; that is, it does not, and cannot, capture the complexity of the ethical issues and questions that are inevitably bound up with being a parent. To put this differently, while there is undoubtedly a role for advice to parents, this does not trump personal judgement and personal responsibility. Importantly, though, in saying this, we are not just referring to personal judgement and responsibility in the sense of assessing the applicability of the advice in question to a particular situation with its unique features – in other words, this is not simply a version of the familiar philosophical point about what is entailed in applying a rule; rather, what we want to draw attention to is the unique meaning and value of personal judgement and responsibility within the context of the parent-child relationship; within the context of the question of what is important for *me*, here, now, in relation to *my child*.¹ This theme will recur at several points throughout the book, but it is addressed explicitly in Chaps. 2, 5 and 6. It also connects to our central argument that it is not sufficient to just demand that we reject the mass of expert advice and instate something else in its place (‘muddling through’, maternal instinct, intuitions), since this, again, fails to address the particular ethical complexities of the parent-child relationship (see especially Chaps. 3 and 6 for a discussion of this point). In short, we do not claim, nor would we aspire, to be offering a full account of the parent-child relationship, but we see our work as a contribution to an ongoing and multidisciplinary discussion of these issues; a discussion in which, so we argue, the kind of perspectives we articulate here have been all too frequently ignored.

¹It is important to note that we do not intend with this phrase, which we use frequently throughout the book, to ascribe any special status to biological parents, as opposed to adoptive parents.

Given this perspective, we hope that the book will contribute to discussions of parents and families within various disciplinary arenas and by various different audiences. The critical line we develop here does, we think, suggest important insights for two broad audiences. The first such audience is that of policy makers in the field of ‘parenting’, parenting support practitioners, parent practitioner trainers and maybe even teacher educators, who may all, in one way or another, draw on theoretical work on families, children and parents that, our account suggests, is often *not broad enough*. In other words, the assumptions, logic and language of this work tends to obscure significant ethical, existential and political dimensions of the parent-child relationship. The second such audience is that of philosophers of education, political philosophers and moral philosophers writing about families, parents and children, where often, the theoretical perspectives and conceptual frameworks drawn on and articulated are in a sense *too broad*, in that the parent-child relationship is frequently treated as a subcategory of moral relationships or an instance of a tension within political or moral theory, and thus not considered as a relationship with its own unique ethical and philosophical significance.

It seems necessary, in a book on this topic, to address the issue of gender. While we do not want to ignore the importance of this issue, we do not discuss it systematically in the following chapters. Specifically, we will speak about parents and parent-child relationships, not about fathers, or mothers, and their relationship with their children. By doing so, we do not want to deny that there are differences between the experiences of mothers and those of fathers, nor that any first-person experience of being a parent is, amongst other things, always an embodied experience in which issues of sex and gender cannot but play a part. But focusing on this aspect of the experience and positioning of mothers and fathers and their different relationships with their children would, we feel, detract from our central concern here, which is to articulate what it is that is at stake in what we refer to as the first-person perspective of being a parent, as against what we refer to as a third-person perspective. As we hope will become clear throughout the book, in taking the lens of the first-person perspective, what is foregrounded is not so much one’s experience as a member of a particular gender, but one’s experience as a parent, here and now, in relation to one’s own child.

In developing our own account, we acknowledge a debt to the kind of experiential accounts by women that have played such an integral part in the feminist struggle, whereby women’s first-person articulation of their everyday experience (as opposed to third-person accounts of the legal, political or socio-economic status of women in society) served as a way of exposing the conceptual and ethical assumptions underpinning the conceptualisation of categories such as ‘woman’, ‘wife’ and ‘mother’, and thus of challenging the political power structures that were reproduced within the family and other intimate relationships. As Sarah Ruddick put this in 1989: ‘Maternal voices have been drowned by professional theory, ideologies of motherhood, sexist arrogance, and childhood fantasy’ (Ruddick 1989, p. 40), and her own work belongs to the tradition of reclaiming a voice – ‘naming the nameless so that it can be thought’ (Lorde, quoted in Ruddick 1989, p. 40) – championed by feminist writers and multicultural theorists. In a sense, what we are doing here can be seen as revisiting this approach in the light of current discourses which, on the face of it, no

longer seem to embody such a blatantly universalising, oppressive language that ignores mothers and their experience. Yet while acknowledging that it might, at times, matter very much in one's experience of being a parent to one's child that one is the mother, and not the father, of that child, and vice versa, it does not necessarily, on our account, *have* to matter, or to determine the experience. As we will argue later, to take the first-person perspective in thinking about parenting is to acknowledge a radical pluralism when it comes to the experience of being a parent; which is also to acknowledge that there is no self-evident way to identify a set of experiences and actions that determine what it means to be a parent; rather, what it means to be a parent will have to be decided and, in a sense, claimed for anew in every instance.

A similar point applies to issues of social class. We are acutely aware of the fact that in speaking in the first-person throughout this book, we are speaking as members of a particular social class in a particular developed part of the world. However, while not wishing to play down the significance of this point, we do want to insist that in trying to understand the parent-child relationship from the first-person perspective, the matter of there being *differences* between social classes, in a sense, disappears, since what is at stake is not one's experience as a member of this or that class, but to repeat the point made above, one's experience as a parent, here and now, in relation to one's own child. This does not preclude one's belonging to a particular class being highly significant in one's experience of being a parent, but it should not, we argue, become a narrative in its own right, as in doing so it would in a sense function as a type of third-person account, thus possibly silencing the first-person account of being a parent.

A note on methodology may be appropriate here. It is notoriously difficult for philosophers to talk of methodology in their work, and we share the distaste of many of our colleagues for the use of this term. Nevertheless, a few words are in order here. In a sense, we take ourselves to be doing something closely related to what Wittgenstein says about 'supplying remarks on the natural history of human beings':

What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings; we are not contributing curiosities however, but observations which no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark because they are always before our eyes. (Wittgenstein, PI, I, # 415)

What we are trying to foreground and to expose in our discussion, particularly in Chap. 1, is what has become natural to us today in relation to childrearing and the parent-child relationship; so natural, in fact, that we seem to hardly even notice it anymore. We take ourselves to be 'supplying remarks' on what has, in recent years, become part of our nature when it comes to childrearing and the parent-child relationship. We do this mainly through presenting and discussing several detailed examples. To a certain extent, this may come close to what in another field of study is called a history of the present:

Studies of the history of the present start from an unease with the values of the present, and by historicizing and denaturalizing the taken-for-granted notions, practices, and values of the present, such studies can open up a space out from which one can revise and reformulate other possible ways of reasoning and practicing pedagogy. [...] research within a history of the present can be seen as a form of critical engagement of the present, as making the production of discourses open for scrutiny and denaturalization also makes them open for revisions. (Dahlberg 2003, p. 262)

Thus Dahlberg examines, for example, ‘what kind of ethic the *norm of autonomy* embodies’ (Dahlberg 2003, p. 262). By historicising and denaturalising the way the norm of autonomy currently works, she hopes to destabilise the present, which in turn would enable one ‘to explore if there are other possible ways of conceptualising the child, teacher and pedagogy than in terms of the norm of autonomy’ (Dahlberg 2003, p. 262). In a sense, this approach describes what we will be doing throughout the book.

Finally, a note on language. Firstly, we have chosen throughout this work to use, where possible, the gender-neutral term ‘parent’ or ‘parents’ rather than ‘father’ or ‘mother’. This is largely because, as indicated in the above discussion of gender, in our analysis of our contemporary linguistic and conceptual landscape, we wish to draw attention to other, non-gendered aspects of the discourse and practice of ‘parenting’. However, in doing so, we are not trying to ignore the point that, as Ruddick warns, ‘To speak of “parenting” obscures [the historical fact that] [...] even now, and certainly through most of history, women have been the mothers’ (Ruddick 1989, p. 45). This point notwithstanding, we generally use the feminine pronoun ‘she’ to refer to the parent in our examples. This is in order to avoid the clumsy, gender-neutral alternatives.

Secondly, though this might at first sight be a bit confusing to the English-speaking reader, we use the expression ‘*the pedagogical relationship*’ at several points throughout the book. This is a literal translation of the Dutch term ‘pedagogische relatie’, and it is important to note that the term ‘pedagogical’ here has a far broader sense than the narrow, somewhat didactic connotations of the word as it is commonly used, in English, in the context of discussions of teaching. Although appropriately applied to teachers, the original Dutch term also refers to parents and, importantly, it denotes something like the development of the child, in a sense that goes beyond the narrow notion of teaching. The concept ‘pedagogical relationship’ was actually introduced some time ago into Anglo-Saxon philosophy of education by Ben Spiecker, although it has had limited consequent usage amongst English-speaking philosophers in the field. In his 1984 article *The pedagogical relationship*, Spiecker conceptually developed the idea of the pedagogical relationship as foundational in educational theory, especially in the ‘*geisteswissenschaftliche*’ tradition. For Spiecker, the pedagogical relationship is, in its most general formulation, that particular relationship within which a child can become a person (Spiecker 1984, p. 208). Put in this general way, a number of particular kinds of relationships count as pedagogical relationships: the relationship between parent and child, between teacher and pupil, between master and apprentice, etc. since in all of these relationships a child can come to develop as a person, or can come to develop aspects of what (at a particular given time) is meant by ‘person’. The relationship between parent and child is probably the archetypical instance of that relationship in which children can grow up to become persons given the (generally) long-term relationship between parents and their children. To complicate matters even further, there is in Dutch another concept used to speak about the relationship between parents and their children in as far as this concerns the process of what is commonly referred to as bringing up or raising children: *opvoeding-srelatie*. Literally translated, this would be something like ‘childrearing relationship’.

This is clearly a concept that is not used in the English language. In English, the concept most commonly used in this context is ‘parent-child relationship’ – and this is, in fact, the concept that we generally employ throughout the book, in preference to the more common term ‘parenting’.

As regards the word ‘parenting’ itself, although this word is now part of everyday English, it is not, we argue, either ‘innocent’ or ordinary since it is expressive of a shift in our way of thinking and speaking about childrearing and the parent-child relationship.² Part of our project of denaturalising this usage could be read as an attempt to recover the now somewhat unfashionable English term ‘upbringing’. While this older term is obviously not without its own problematic evaluative connotations, the currently pervasive term ‘parenting’ epitomises the particular understanding of childrearing and the parent-child relationship as pervaded by scientific knowledge and the need for expertise that forms the focus of our discussion in Chap. 1 and the rest of the book.

To reflect these insights, the term ‘parenting’ appears in inverted commas within this Introduction and in Chap. 1, but will appear without them in the subsequent chapters. Although the reader may find this a little annoying, we believe it is justified as what we want to highlight in these chapters is the ways in which the very usage of this term has contributed to common assumptions and implications about the meaning, nature and significance of the parent-child relationship.

In summary, and to follow on from the above points, one way to express what we are trying to do through this book is to say that we are trying to speak and to encourage the speaking of other languages – other, that is, than the ones that hold us captive through the ways in which we conceptualise and speak about childrearing and the parent-child relationship. This is not an attempt to construct a ‘new’ language, but, rather, an attempt to voice an ‘old’ one. Or better yet, it is an attempt to (re)introduce certain words into our ways of conceptualising childrearing and the parent-child relationship that are perhaps bound to be perceived as ‘old’, or even, perhaps, as ‘philosophical’ or ‘esoteric’ – but nonetheless words, we think, that allow us to shed a different light on what childrearing is, or could be, and what it means, or could mean, to be in a relationship with one’s own child. This is not to be understood as just reviving or invoking the old meaning of these words and taking them as authoritative, but rather using these words here and now, in contemporary contexts, allowing the friction between these words and our current taken-for-granted terms and conceptualisations to work in such ways as to generate a different understanding of childrearing and the parent-child relationship. Such a move might, we hope, not only inspire us to rethink certain practical issues such as the very notion of advice and support for parents, but help to reframe the central area of our lives that is the parent-child relationship as a fundamentally moral and political aspect of human social practice.

²For an illuminating discussion of the historical origins and context of this usage, see Smith (2010).

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