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The Ethics of Childrearing and *A Theory of Justice*

Michael T. McFall
Department of Philosophy
University of Wisconsin-Fox Valley
Menasha, Wisconsin

Abstract: The ethics of parental childrearing is complicated in a liberal pluralistic society, and this is made more complicated when religion is considered. As part of a larger project, I here examine the ethics of Christian childrearing. I argue that Christian parents may seek to transmit their beliefs to their children and examine some boundaries. I first examine John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* and modify his veil of ignorance scenario. I then engage Rawls' developmental moral psychology and how it relates to the ethics of religious upbringing. After exploring Rawls's account of self-respect and how it relates to love, I conclude by examining the importance of parental love and how this is tied to intimacy and privacy.

I. The Modified Veil of Ignorance

If there is no way to rear children neutrally within the family, then it may be fruitful to examine the ethics of childrearing from one of the most powerful bias-removing thought-projects ever created: John Rawls's veil of ignorance. In Rawls's hypothetical example, "no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his future in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like. Nor, again, does anyone know his conception of the good, the particulars of his rational plan of life, or even the special features of his psychology, such as his aversion to risk or liability to optimism or pessimism."¹ The choices made by free and rational persons in such a hypothetical situation of equal liberty then yield for Rawls the principles of justice, free of any personal bias.

Yet Rawls also assumes that individuals behind the veil of ignorance know some general things, even though they know nothing about themselves individually: "They understand political affairs and the principles of economic theory; they know the basis of social organizations and the laws of human

¹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 118. I do not here examine later works of Rawls.

psychology.”² I thus modify Rawls’s example by asking what might change if individuals knew whether God existed. Specifically, what might change if God’s existence was taken to be a fact in the original position behind the veil of ignorance? Rawls would reject this, as he notes, “They are to presume that even their spiritual aims may be opposed.”³ Yet, as a thought project, this modification is not too unreasonable. After all, Rawls assumes knowledge of politics, economics, and psychology and these can be just as contentious as God’s existence.

What would change? Not much. After all, acknowledging God’s existence does not necessarily entail following His will or seeking to cultivate a relationship with Him. And even those who claim a commitment to following God’s will often fall short. Most importantly, this would not change the parenting-style of Christian parents. The reason for this points to the non-coercive nature of the Christian faith. As John Locke writes, “true and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind, without which nothing can be acceptable to God. And such is the nature of the understanding, that it cannot be compelled to the belief of anything by outward force.”⁴ In such a hypothetical society, parents could, with more justification, seek to indoctrinate their children coercively into a relationship with God. And they might, seemingly, be able to do so without fear of reprisal from others because all in that society would also recognize that God exists. Yet such coercive means could not ever force children to have a genuine faith and, more than likely, would push children further away from developing a relationship with God. And if Christian parents cannot justifiably indoctrinate their children coercively in a society in which there were universal agreement that God exists, then it follows that Christian parents cannot justifiably indoctrinate their children coercively in a liberal pluralistic society in which God’s existence is open for debate.

II. Self-Respect and Love

There is another element from Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*, which is helpful to understand regarding the religious upbringing of children – primary goods. Primary goods are “things that every rational man is presumed to want. These

² Rawls, 119.

³ Rawls, 12. Even if Rawls granted this, there would be for him a second and perhaps more difficult problem – how to adjudicate a particular interpretation of religious truth: “from the stand point of the original position, no particular interpretation of religious truth can be acknowledged as binding upon citizens generally; nor can it be agreed that there should be one authority with the right to settle questions of theological doctrines,” 191.

⁴ Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983), 27.

goods normally have a use whatever a person's rational plan of life."⁵ Even more important than rights or duties, Rawls takes a concept of the self, self-respect, as "very important," "essential," "main," and "perhaps the most important" social primary good.⁶ Self-respect is important because "it includes a person's sense of his own value, his secure conviction that his conception of his good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out... [and it] implies a confidence in one's ability, so far as it is within one's power, to fulfill one's intentions."⁷ Self-respect does not, however, develop in a vacuum, as is clear when Rawls writes: "Their [parents'] love is displayed by their taking pleasure in his presence and supporting his sense of competence and self-esteem. They encourage his efforts to master the tasks of growing up and they welcome his assuming his own place. In general, to love another means not only to be concerned for his wants and needs, but to affirm his sense of worth as a person."⁸

Yet the most important primary good cannot be self-respect. It is, rather, love.⁹ Rawls's own theory of self-respect depends upon it. Rawlsian individuals with self-respect and a sense of justice exist only because they successfully progressed gradually through Rawls's three stages (or laws or principles) of morality. And the first law is this: "given that family institutions express their love by caring for his good, then the child, recognizing their evident love of him, comes to love them."¹⁰ Rawls thereby assumes the following psychological principle: "the child comes to love the parents only if they manifestly first love him."¹¹ Love, because it is necessary to acquire properly in order to develop self-respect, is more important than self-respect.

The kind of love in question is parental love. More specifically, Rawls emphasizes the importance of unconditional parental love by noting that children are "made aware that he is appreciated for his own sake by what are to him the imposing and powerful reasons in his world. He experiences parental affection as unconditional love."¹² Acting justly or morally, even unconditionally, is insufficient for proper child-rearing. As Laurence Thomas argues, "From the standpoint of the development of our soul, parental love is

⁵ Rawls, 54.

⁶ Ibid., 79, 91, 477 and 286. See also 54 and 348.

⁷ Ibid., 386.

⁸ Ibid., 32.

⁹ In the Christian context, then, God would most accurately be the most important primary good because "God is love" (1 Jn. 4:8). All Bible references are to the New International Version, unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ Ibid., 429.

¹¹ Ibid., 406. Rawls states this formulation is drawn from Rousseau's *Emilé*, but I believe it has a more ancient source: "We love because he first loved us" (1 Jn. 4:19).

¹² Ibid., 32.

more basic than morality.”¹³ One major question that must then be asked in assessing whether a particular child-rearing practice is permissible is this: Is the child loved unconditionally?

Presumably, there can be cases of Christian parents teaching and encouraging their children in the Christian faith while showering them with unconditional love. Yet some parents might teach and encourage their children in the Christian faith but fail in providing love. The latter case would be an inappropriate form of child-rearing and the former appropriate, demonstrating that the content of a comprehensive system taught by parents can sometimes be irrelevant. Yet there is nothing inherently in Christianity which would preclude Christian parents from striving to love unconditionally. In fact, Christianity is well-suited for promoting love. After all, the core rules of Christianity are, at least according to Jesus when questioned about what is the greatest commandment in the Law, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself! All the Law and the Prophets hang on those two commandments’” (Mt. 22:7).¹⁴

Jesus recognizes a system built upon love, not on rules or morality. And because love is the core and love is inherently relational, the core of Christianity is inherently relational. This does not mean that morality or rules do not exist in Christianity, for they surely do and are important. Rather, love is the foundation and all else stems from love, including morality. Furthermore, the Bible provides exemplars of genuine unconditional love, namely God and Jesus. This is important to have in a comprehensive system to know how to strive towards true unconditional love. Also, though we casually talk about unconditional parental love, technically, due to a lack of perfection, no human, not even parents, can truly love unconditionally. In addition to demonstrating what unconditional love looks like in the Bible through God’s interactions with humans, the Bible is filled with narratives about failures and successes in love. So, children taught and encouraged in the Christian faith gain further experience with genuine unconditional love. And if their parents are faithful, then children will also receive profound amounts of love as their parents strive to love God and others, including them, unconditionally.

I now pause to examine unconditional love more closely. I believe there are at least four major aspects of unconditional love, two quantitative and two

¹³ *The Family and the Political Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 19.

¹⁴ For more on the primacy of love in Christianity, see: Lk. 6:31, Jn. 3:16, Jn. 13:34-35, Jn. 15:11-18, Ro. 12:9-10, 1 Cor. 13:1-13, 1 Cor. 16:14, Gal. 5:6, Eph. 3:18-19, Col. 3:13-14, 1 Tim. 1:4-5, 1 Pet. 4:8, 1 Jn. 3:11-24, and 1 Jn. 4:7-21.

qualitative. The first quantitative feature of unconditional love is its *omnipresence* – love that is always there. This is comforting to receive from parents, even when parental love falls short of this ideal. Yet those encouraged in the Christian faith further understand that God loves all humans unconditionally in this sense simply because all humans are His creation and are image-bearers of God.

The second quantitative feature of unconditional love is that it is a *non-zero-sum* good. So, for example, parents can strive to love their children unconditionally even if they have multiple children: “Parental love for one child does not entail less parental love for another child.”¹⁵ Their love is not necessarily watered-down with multiple recipients, though in extreme cases exhaustion might limit how effectively this is expressed. Interestingly, some people object to the possibility of God’s being all-loving due to a concern that such love must be watered-down. But if it is possible to a high degree with fallible and mortal human parents, then it is not difficult to imagine it possible for an all-powerful and all-good Father.

There are two qualitative features of unconditional love. The first is that it is a *gift* when given to those who do not merit it.¹⁶ And because no human is perfect, no human, of herself, deserves unconditional love. So, children need not strive for their parents’ love when their parents love them unconditionally. Many children do strive for their parents’ love, but this indicates a lack of unconditional love or the child’s failure to understand it. Children raised in the Christian faith have further powerful examples in this area. The first is that God loves everyone regardless of who they are or what they do: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Ro. 5:8). A second gift, eternal salvation, is further given to anyone who puts their faith in Jesus’s redemptive death, burial, and resurrection. Christians, in this sense, are adopted and become re-born after accepting the invitation of a loving Father to join His family based upon the salvific work of His Son.¹⁷ The gift aspect of religious upbringing is important

¹⁵ Thomas, 107. See 107-122 for Thomas’s full account.

¹⁶ Strictly speaking, it need not be a gift if it were bestowed from one completely perfect being to another perfect being, as it would then be deserved. But I leave aside the metaphysical problems of this. Also, though a gift, parents still have an obligation to provide this love to children as a duty. *Contra* Kant, I believe one can have a duty to love (and, likewise, a duty to provide the gift of love). I will not develop a defense of this here, but the following essays defend this nicely: Barbara P. Solheim, “The Possibility of a Duty to Love,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 30 (1999); Matthew Liao, “The Right of Children to Be Loved,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 14 (2006); Matthew Liao, “The Idea of a Duty to Love,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 40 (2006).

¹⁷ See. Ro. 8:14-17, Gal. 4:1-7, Jn. 3:1-21, 2 Cor. 5:17, and 1 Pet. 1:23.

in childrearing because some parents may not treat their love as a gift but as something that must be earned by their children. This would be an impermissible instance of childrearing, seeking to use one's behavior or beliefs on the conditionality of one's love. Yet the Christian model of parenting would be to love all, including one's children, unconditionally – regardless of their behavior or beliefs.

The second qualitative aspect of unconditional love is a *cherished sense of uniqueness*. Laurence Thomas develops this point at length and writes, “parental love paves the way for having the proper appreciation of one's moral worth. And it does this by bestowing a sense of cherished uniqueness upon the child without feelings of superiority. It is equally significant in this regard that invidiousness is not an inherent feature of partial love.”¹⁸ To receive the full effect of unconditional love, it is insufficient to know that love is always there and is there fully and undeservedly. Those three alone may yield a profound, yet generic and impartial, love. Unconditional love also requires an element of partiality, which cherished uniqueness provides. Parents should recognize and appreciate the uniqueness in each child. The apostle Paul writes that love “does not envy” (1 Cor. 13:4), and envying in love indicates a desire to have the love of another while also willing to take this love away from a recipient of it if need be. But if one is already secure that one is loved uniquely then such envy should not arise. Children reared in the Christian tradition are able to understand that God also loves perfectly in this manner, for example, when Jesus says, “Indeed, the very hairs of your head are numbered” (Lk. 12:7). This can also be witnessed in the parable of the lost sheep (Lk. 15:1-7), lost coin (Lk. 15:8-10), and prodigal son (Lk. 15:11-32).

III. Intimacy and Love

If love is important, then there is more reason to respect privacy within families regarding the religious upbringing of children because intimacy requires privacy. Not all relationships require privacy, but intimate loving relationships do. As Robert S. Gerstein argues, “intimate relationships simply could not exist

¹⁸ Thomas, 36. I am indebted to Thomas' development of this account. For the whole account, see Thomas, 19-48. J. David Velleman objects to this feature in “Love as a Moral Emotion,” *Ethics* 109 (1999), but I believe Thomas confronts it satisfactorily on 20-21. The kind of radical and healthy self-confidence derived from such affirmation is, in a Christian context, explained as humility by Robert C. Roberts: “a self-confidence so deep, a personal integration so strong, that all comparison with other people, both advantaged and disadvantaged, slides right off of him,” *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of the Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 90.

if we did not continue to insist on privacy for them.”¹⁹ One species of intimacy is the experience of religious ecstasy. Gerstein writes,

“...we cannot continue to be immersed in the experience of intimacy if we begin to observe ourselves and other things around us...One who has been lost in the intimate communion of prayer can, when he becomes self-consciously aware of what he is doing, continue to understand what the true prayer is about, just as the outsider could. But now he is observing, considering, and appraising his own actions from the point of view of his understanding of prayer.”²⁰

This brings attention to the relational virtue required in prayer directly between a human and God. Call this first-order intimacy.

Second-order intimacy involves sharing elements of one’s faith. This might entail, for example, teaching a child a religious paradigm. Yet third-order intimacy involves not merely teaching about something with another but a joint intimate encounter. For example, Ferdinand Schoeman writes, “Ideally the relationship between the parent and infant involves an awareness of a kind of union between people which is perhaps more suitably described in poetic-spiritual language than in analytic moral terminology. We *share our selves* with those whom we are intimate and are aware that they do the same with us.”²¹ This third-order intimacy between parent and child in the Christian tradition is important because the parent is not merely seeking to transmit a value-system. Doing merely that might warrant less privacy and justify more exposure to competing views due to being less intimate. Rather, in third-order intimacy the parent engages in a relationship *with* her child in the context of her seeking to provide her child with the capability to experience first-order intimacy with God independently.

Part of the beauty of third-order intimacy is that it requires a high level of vulnerability. Yet where there is vulnerability, there exists a risk of harm. Vulnerability can be heightened in the power dynamic of the parent-child relationship, making potential harm more worrisome. This, I take it, should be the foremost concern of those skeptical about the religious upbringing of children. There is always a risk. Yet risk must be weighed alongside other considerations. Precluding the existence of deeply-intimate relationships

¹⁹ “Intimacy and Privacy,” *Ethics* 89 (1978), 76.

²⁰ Gerstein, 77-78. This intense focus also helps to explain why, “An intimate relationship is one we value for its own sake,” 79.

²¹ “Rights of Children, Rights of Parents, and the Moral Basis of the Family,” *Ethics* 91 (1980), 8. This account is influenced by the work of Martin Buber.

because they might go astray seems overly risk-averse given the integral role that intimate loving relationships play in a meaningfully good life. The parents also have a perceived duty to God to share, and if done properly the benefit to children is powerfully positive. Also, parental flourishing can be minimized if parents are deprived of intimate aspects of relationships with their children.²²

Conclusion

It is impossible to provide children with a completely neutral childrearing. The real questions, then, are who gets to transmit beliefs and which beliefs. Given that parents have some justification for their beliefs, it is reasonable that parents should have a presumptive right to transmit their beliefs. Unconditional parental love serves as the foundation of the most important social primary good, self-respect, in *A Theory of Justice*. Yet love requires several things. One thing, in intimacy, is privacy. Another, in order to be genuine, is autonomy. Consequently, privacy and autonomy must exist in families if love is to develop and thrive there. But love develops in stages. Children do not have the developmental capacities to make use of autonomy fully to their benefit, so it is the responsibility of parents to increasingly respect their children's autonomy appropriate to their maturity. Until granting children complete autonomy, however, parents should love their children unconditionally and provide them with what they believe to be the best framework for beliefs and values. If these are presented lovingly and respect appropriate boundaries of autonomy, then such parenting practices are justified.²³

Michael T. McFall is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Fox Valley in Menasha, Wisconsin.

²² For arguments pertaining to the benefits of child-rearing for parents, parent-focused models, see Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, "Legitimate Parental Partiality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 37 (2009) and Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, *Family Values: The Ethics of Parent-Child Relationships* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014). The Bible also notes the value of children to parents, in addition to parental obligations to children. For example, "Children are a heritage to the Lord, offspring a reward from him" (Ps. 127:3).

²³ I thank Chris Johnson and Naudy Suarez for helpful feedback on this essay.