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Why We Should Care About Limiting the Use of Infant Daycare

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Abstract: In this paper, I argue that the widespread use of daycare constitutes a serious harm to the development of parent-child intimacy. Children's own moral voices are rarely, if ever, the focus of parental decisions for utilizing daycare. What is more, I argue that self-deception plays a significant role in explaining why it is that so many parents utilize daycare to assist with childrearing. In the final section of this paper, I consider briefly reasons why I believe the Church should generally refrain from offering daycare services to its congregants and to the community at large.

Perhaps more than in any other preceding time in human history it is possible for adults to not have children. For one thing, technological advancements have made it possible for us to decouple sexual intimacy from procreation such that what was once widely understood as a natural consequence of fulfilling sexual desire can now be avoided in almost all cases. To be sure, this is not a reality for all human beings everywhere. Still, there is no gainsaying the truth that people have far more control over sexual reproduction, and this control is becoming more ubiquitous throughout the world. For another, the idea that having children is generally a good practice has been philosophically questioned in recent years. David Benatar, for instance, has recently argued that having children is almost always morally wrong.¹ Others have argued that parenting can be especially harmful to children, and thus ought to be regulated by the state.² Perhaps less controversial, there is the reality that having children can often stymie career aspirations—particularly those of women—and thus can hinder the promotion

¹ See: David Benatar, "Why It Is Better Never to Come into Existence," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 34(3) (1997): p. 345-355 and *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

² See: Hugh LaFollette, "Licensing Parents," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 9(2) (1980): 182-197 and Michael McFall, *Licensing Parents: Family, State, and Child Maltreatment* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009).

of gender equality, as well as seriously threaten the production of other non-fungible moral and social goods.³ All in all, what was once taken for granted—adults having children—has been practically and theoretically challenged in ways that few would have anticipated even fifty years ago.

These truths notwithstanding, many adults not only desire to have children, but also tend to assess the significance of their lives in terms of their perceived relationships with their children. Indeed, many adults value the intimacy that parent-child relationships can engender, even if they are not always clear about the procreative costs involved with having children or honest about the quality of the intimacy they have with their children. Since parent-child intimacy continues to constitute an integral component of what it means to have a flourishing life for many adults, it is incumbent upon us to reflect on the type and the quality of the intimacy that parents routinely have with their children. In this paper, I shall set out to make the case that those who decide to utilize daycare, especially infant daycare, to assist with childrearing rarely undertake this level of reflection. To make matters worse, I shall argue that parents are often profoundly self-deceived about the quality of the intimacy that they have with their children. Since it matters a great deal who performs the everyday tasks of parenting, I shall argue that the widespread use of daycare constitutes a serious harm to children, as well as an impediment to the production of parental love, and ultimately parent-child well-being. In the final section of this paper, I shall discuss briefly why I believe the Church should generally refrain from offering daycare services to its congregants and to the community at large.

I. Self-Deception and Parent-Child Intimacy

A key claim in this section, and indeed, in this paper, is that self-deception plays a significant role in explaining why it is that so many parents embrace daycare for their infant children. Before developing this further, I think a clear uncontroversial example of parental self-deception is in order. I came across such an example while listening to a podcast episode of NPR's *Snap Judgment*.⁴ In an episode entitled, "Picking up the Pieces: The Mission," estranged siblings set out to locate and to visit with their life-long absentee father. In the course

³ Allison Jaggar, "Feminism and the Object of Justice" in *Social and Political Philosophy: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. J.P. Sterba (New York, NY: Rutledge, 2001), p. 251-269.

⁴ National Public Radio, "Picking Up the Pieces: The Mission," Show 523, *Snap Judgment*. Accessed September 26, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/programs/snap-judgment/351734419/picking-up-the-pieces>

of the episode, the father routinely claims to have a robust love for his children, despite never visiting with them, nor attempting any other form of communication with them. The interviewer—more than a bit surprised—queries the father for any evidence to support such a claim. The father proceeds to explain to the interviewer, and to his children, that although he was not a perfect father, he was a good one, as he often thought of his children throughout the day, and his children were the subject matter of many of his works as an artist and poet. As an example, he recites a poem he had written about one of his daughters when she was very little and he was still present in her life. As to be expected, there is no reaction from the daughter. What is more, and as a most significant way of rebuffing this argument, she and the other siblings make it a point to let us know—and perhaps more painfully to let the father know—that the motivation of concern for their father stems from a general, impartial sense of moral obligation and duty to care and not from a motivation of familial love. Interestingly, the clip ends with no response from the father. We can certainly engage in speculation as to why this was the case. Whatever the reason, it is plausible to hold that this truth should have affected the father, and even though it may have affected him in ways that were left unsaid, I find that those who are so profoundly self-deceived rarely abandon their moral beliefs even when the truth is so plainly before them.

Now, to be sure, this level of self-deception has little parallel with most parents. For it is rather clear that most parents who utilize daycare to assist with childrearing are still involved and have a presence in their children's lives. And yet, by its very concept, daycare is the transferring of many of the daily responsibilities to willing others. So the question that presents itself is this: in what ways, if any, are parents who utilize daycare to assist with childrearing self-deceived? Does it really matter who performs the everyday tasks of caring for young children?

In an earlier essay, I argued that the moral legitimization of daycare on the ground that it doesn't really matter who performs the daily routines on behalf of children is unjustified.⁵ For one thing, I argued that this argument crucially depends on what developmental stage the child is currently in. For another, the performance of routine day-to-day childrearing tasks can serve as a conduit for the growth and development of parental love, and thus parent-child intimacy. And to the extent that a child's sense of worth is inextricably tied to the love he or she receives from a parent, such routine affirmation is an integral way for a parent to continue to nurture his or her child. Similarly, Elizabeth Brake has recently argued that parental obligation cannot be contracted out

⁵ Michael McKeon, "The Morality of Daycare," *Philosophia*, 41 (2013), 97-107.

without incurring significant moral costs.⁶ Essential to Brake's argument is the claim that "parents owe their children a rich, intimate, daily personal relationship."⁷ Consequently, she maintains that parents who routinely outsource the care of their children to willing others have done a wrong. Indeed, she writes "there is a serious question as to whether persons who send their children off at a young age to be cared for by others do inhabit the parental role."⁸

These arguments notwithstanding, there is no gainsaying the fact that for many parents the need to provide for their children by earning a wage requires them to send their children off to be cared for by others.⁹ Thus, it would seem that for many parents their decision to utilize daycare to assist with childrearing is one that is borne out of necessity. Although I have already addressed this argument more fully in a different paper, I think it is important to distinguish two things here: first, although it may be the case that the decision to utilize daycare is one that is borne out of necessity, this does not change the fact that parent-child intimacy is seriously jeopardized by this transferring of parental concern and care to willing others.¹⁰ Consider a businessman whose duties require him to spend considerable weeks at a time throughout the year apart from his family. Of course, he is aware that he must do so if he wants to keep his job. Even so, he should be made fully aware that this can be at direct odds with the development of familial intimacy. For the child's life often remains unknown to the father in his absence. Likewise, although parents may have to utilize daycare to assist with their childrearing, they should acknowledge that this comes at a cost to the development of parent-child intimacy, particularly with young children, as the foundational intimacy bonds have not been established and secured. Second, by having children, parents have to meet specific nurturing needs of their children. The nature and scope of these needs will be made clearer in a moment. So, the question remains: Is it truly

⁶ Susan Brake, "Willing Parents: A Voluntarist Account of Parental Role Obligations," in *Procreation & Parenthood: The Ethics of Bearing and Rearing Children*, eds. David Archard and David Benatar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p 151-177.

⁷ Ibid., p. 161.

⁸ Ibid., 161-162. Unfortunately, Brake does not go on to clarify or fill in what she means by "serious question."

⁹ In light of this reality, Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift ("Parents' Rights and the Value of the Family," *Ethics* 117 (2006), p. 80-108) have argued that poverty continues to constitute one of the most significant barriers to intimacy production in parent-child relationships.

¹⁰ McKeon, "The Morality of Daycare," p. 99-101.

significant that it is the parents who are present with their children throughout the day? Does it really matter who changes a diaper?

There is a salient truth that is grasped by nearly everyone: much of the day's activities are scripted and planned. It involves creating and performing daily routines that are anything but spontaneous. In the day-to-day routines, many parents can become convinced that such ordinary, mundane tasks are largely irrelevant. In fact, marketers rely on this ennui by promising us that romantic getaways are the conduit to forging deep intimate bonds with our partners. I submit, however, that the real issue here is not with the need for more spontaneity; rather, the mistake is in thinking that spontaneity amounts to taking romantic trips or engaging in some otherwise spur of the moment activity. If we reflect carefully here it should be clear that some of the richest moments in our relationships arose out of the most mundane of circumstances. These moments were often unplanned and unscripted. Indeed, life is full of routine activities that came to have tremendous significance precisely because people who care about one another are spending time together and something remarkable began to unfold. How many of us have had life-changing conversations with people the occasion for which arose out of a common need for food. As such, there is good reason for holding that the ordinary activities in our daily lives could potentially give rise to some wonderful moment of affirmation within our relationships. Now, if this is true with adult relationships, it is reasonable to think the same holds true for the parent-child relationship.

In the case of many couples with children, there is often a rich history of intimacy that can serve as an anchor for their relationships. Indeed, parents often had rich romantic experiences with each other prior to having children, and they can and usually do look forward to having them once more. However, things are different when it comes to infant children who spend most of their time away from their parents and in daycare. The reality of infant daycare is that a child learns from the earliest of moments that his or her daily care is not the primary concern of his or her parents. By transferring day-to-day caring responsibilities to willing others, parents have essentially compromised the production of parent-child intimacy, even if this compromise may be unavoidable for some parents. In the case of parents, their intimacy identity is not being initially formed—a foundation already exists—but in the case of infants, no such foundation exists yet. In the case of parents, there is the romantic story before children; with respect to infant children in daycare, there is the absence before the story. And this makes all the difference between a legitimate story of love and a fable of love.

Notice that no two romantic partners would ever think to apply to themselves so many of the arguments that parents give for why their child would be better off in daycare. Consider that at no point would we consider using a friend to substitute for us on a romantic date with our partner. Nor would we hire someone else to talk consistently to our partner in our place. If for anything else, we know that by ignoring our mates we run the serious risk of a premature exit from the relationship. For many of us, these non-negligible exit strategies often serve as a counter to ignoring the intimacy needs of our partners. Yet, there is no parallel when it comes to infant children who are sent off to daycare. For children cannot usually exit the relationship with their parents. Hence, the threat of exit does not provide a serious counter to curbing potential indifference to the intimacy needs of our children.

Aside from exit strategies, what is important to grasp here is that we know that there is something special about these moments. We want to be the ones who are there for our mates; we want to experience this for ourselves. When it comes to our romantic relationships, none of us would want to transfer the intimacy to willing others. Likewise, it is reasonable to assume that we also want to have intimacy with our children. Thus, it must be that parents who utilize infant daycare likely believe that they are not transferring their intimacy with their children to willing others, though they are transferring everyday caring tasks to willing others. Yet, if what I have said is true, namely some of the most wonderful moments of affirmation within relationships occurred during the performance of the most mundane of tasks, then we should acknowledge that by transferring these tasks to others, we may be essentially transferring the raw materials that make up the foundation for our relationships. What is necessary here is time spent with our children, and yet this is what parents who utilize daycare are not routinely acknowledging. This sharp distinction between everyday tasks and everyday intimacy is one they would not readily embrace in their everyday adult intimate relationships, though they readily embrace it in their parent-child relationships.

So one thing should now be clear: parents who routinely outsource the intimacy needs of their children to someone else likely fail to appreciate the gravitas of the intimacy within the parent-child relationship. Now, I submit that since children do not have similar exit strategies to adults, many parents are less inclined than they otherwise would be to come to see the wrongness of outsourcing the care of our infant children to willing others.

II. Infant Daycare and a Straw Man

It could be argued that I am constructing what amounts to a straw man argument. Is it not the case that nearly everyone who uses infant daycare has

little choice but to do so? Is it not the case that they have reflected deeply about it? While I have no doubt that a great deal of planning and time management routinely factors into parents' decision to utilize daycare, there is still the issue of parent-child intimacy production. Recall I have been arguing that the seemingly routine and mundane tasks can and often do serve as a conduit for some of the richest intimacy experiences in our lives. What I need here is agreement on the claim that most parents who utilize infant daycare believe that the separation of everyday caring responsibilities does not in any way jeopardize the development of their intimacy with their children. For if they thought otherwise, it is reasonable to hold that fewer of them would use daycare than they do now.¹¹ But to what do we attribute this belief concerning the separability of intimacy from daycare? I have argued that most of us have failed to appreciate that the root of the problem is that we have come to believe that it is largely irrelevant who engages in the everyday caring tasks of our children. Indeed, what we would never accept in our adult intimate relationships we routinely embrace in parent-child relationships, and it is precisely here that the problem of self-deception looms large.

In their paper, "Parents' Rights and the Value of the Family," Brighthouse and Swift point to an essential difference between adults and children with respect to intimacy:

The love one receives from one's children, especially in the early years, is spontaneous and unconditional and, in particular, outside the rational control of the child. She shares herself unself-consciously with the parent, revealing her enthusiasms and aversions, fears, and anxieties, in an uncontrolled manner. She trusts the parent until the parent betrays the trust, and her trust must be betrayed consistently and frequently before it will 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.¹²

The idea that intimacy flows naturally from children to their parents cannot be underemphasized. But is it that someone is a parent that elicits this trust? Or can it be that the one who carries out the everyday caring responsibilities elicits this trust from children? To be sure, many parents perform the caring roles themselves, and thus this is not an issue. But this is not the case with respect

¹¹ Here I am assuming that not all of those who use infant daycare do so because of reasons of economic poverty.

¹² Brighthouse and Swift, "Parents' Rights and the Value of the Family," p. 93.

to young children in daycare. If it is true that children share themselves openly and honestly with those that are invested in them on a daily basis, then it matters who performs the caring tasks and rituals. Children trust those who care for them without making moral and legal allowances for the fact that this is the job of the daycare worker. Even older children of divorce often trust and expect the new mate of their parent to love and cherish them, not just to provide material goods or provide loving support for the legal parent.¹³ Thus, when I say most parents who utilize infant daycare haven't reflected enough, I have this truth in mind. Children have moral voices that need to be considered. More often than not, parents have ignored the moral voice of children, and they have come to believe that it doesn't matter who carries out the everyday caring tasks. And since there is no exit strategy for children, there is usually no practical check on their beliefs. As Brighthouse and Swift termed it above, the "unself-conscious" sharing of children towards their parents is met with a reasoned release and separation of their everyday concern to willing others. In a sense, children in daycare, particularly from the moment of infancy, learn that their foundation of unconditional love needs to give way to a more adult intimacy characterized by a rational act of the will. Parents likely tell themselves that they hope in time that their children will come to understand their reasons for such actions, and, indeed, many children in fact do come to understand. Still, I cannot help but pause over the reality of an intimacy innocence that is lost; for there is little doubt that their worldview characterized by unconditional love is undermined and done so by their very own parents.

In the end, we need to ask ourselves an important question: Should we have children if we know that our access to them will be severely limited? I believe that parents and those who desire to become parents are obligated to meet certain child-centered expectations. Because of that, people who know in advance of having children that they will be severely limited in the amount of time that they can spend with their children should likely avoid having children. Naturally, the challenge can be raised that parents are not obligated to sacrifice all of their interests for their children, even if by doing so they will improve their child's welfare. I agree. But I have argued here that this defense is obscured by the fact that few of us reflect adequately from a child-centered focus as to the nature of our intimacy commitment to our children. I do not

¹³ I was reminded of this at a philosophical conference when an attendee stated in a conversation with me that he was dating a woman with several children. He reported that one child asked him bluntly if he would be her daddy. Surely, she did not mean to communicate to him her desire for him to pay the household bills. What she meant was something akin to the following: are you going to be there for me? Will you be my father? Will you love and nurture me? Will you love me as I love you?

take the objector to endorse that the production of intimacy with our children is not something worth sacrificing for. Surely, if a parent routinely chooses a hobby over his or her children, she has done wrong. But why stop there? Why not say that a parent who routinely puts his or her career before his or her children has done a wrong? To be sure, many parents say to their children that their working is for the children. Indeed, Walter White's character in the popular *AMC* Television show, *Breaking Bad*, justified his illicit activity by making that sort of claim throughout the series. It was only at the end that he realized that he was really doing it for himself; it was only at the end that he saw the depth of his self-deception. Interestingly enough, those around him saw it much sooner than he. This should be a lesson to us all. Our children are aware in more ways than we likely realize, and it is their voice that often goes unheard. Once more, self-deception needs to be cleared out before any justification for daycare can be grounded.

III. Daycare and the Church

Before we begin this brief section, I wish to announce a caveat: this part of the paper is directed to a specific audience, namely, the Christian Church and its members. In it, I shall apply some of the concerns that I raised previously about the widespread use of infant daycare to the question of whether or not the Church should involve itself in the business of providing daycare services to families and to the community. Even so, I do believe that non-churched persons could benefit from following the argument to come, as much of what I am about to say further illustrates the points argued above.

More and more churches have begun offering daycare services to their congregants and to the people in their communities. The reason for this is at least two-fold: first, there is the reality that daycare facilities are ubiquitous in our society, and the demand for better facilities with better care is ever increasing. Since churches can provide for these basic needs in a loving, caring environment, it is reasonable to suppose that many parents—Christian and non-Christian alike—would be interested in transferring the day-to-day care of their children to the Church and its daycare workers. After all, the workers in these facilities likely see their work as a calling and not just a job to perform. Second, many churches have viewed offering such services to unchurched families as a missionary outreach arm of the Church. There is little question that this may bring people and families into the Church who would otherwise disengage from it. Let me now briefly take these two in turn.

It is worth pointing out at the outset that neither of these rationales supports the view that it is better for children to be reared in a daycare setting. Rather, they start out with the idea that daycare is going to be used anyway, or

the belief that God can use parents' need for daycare for their children to draw families to Himself as the means of justification for offering it. I agree that if a child has to be in daycare, then it is reasonable to suppose that this would be a better option for families to make use of. Still, we need to be ever so careful here. As it is, many Christian families already outsource much of the spiritual and moral development of their children to the Church, to Christian Schools, to Youth Groups, and so on. And it seems that this would constitute yet another form of outsourcing, though potentially far more troublesome, as the foundation for parent-child intimacy has yet to be constructed in any meaningful way. I have no doubt that these church workers see their work as a calling, and thus are wholly committed to such work. Nevertheless, they are not committed to it in the sense that they love your child in a unique way. The intimacy discussed in this paper illustrates that the parent-child relationship is special; it is characterized by a unique kind of love. And no matter how committed the daycare worker is to his or her job, it would be strange to argue that they can substitutionally provide the kind of intimacy for your child qua daycare worker that you could provide for your child qua parent. In fact, if it is true children trust and love unconditionally, then children may be placing this love and devotion in someone they ought not to. What is more, we should not expect children to understand at such a young age that the daycare worker—the person they interact with everyday—does not love them as their parent does. This should be reason enough to make us balk from endorsing widespread use of church daycare facilities.

In regards to the missionary impulse defense for providing daycare services, I think it is important to reach out to the community and to attempt to ease their burdens. Providing childcare can be such a way to help those parents around us who are struggling mightily. Even so, we need to understand that while the Church has potentially eased their day-to-day burdens, it has not encouraged the production of parent-child intimacy to take place. In a sense, we would have taken away one burden without speaking to the larger issue that lies underneath, namely, the need to invest in our familial relationships. So while it is true that by providing daycare the Church may be providing for a general good to be actualized, there is no mistaking the fact that they may also unwittingly contribute to the intimacy fracturing of the family. Moreover, it is dubious to believe that daycare is going to be utilized only by those for whom it is a necessity. Thus, a salient problem remains: to what extent is it reasonable to assume that many parents would utilize the services simply because they have been made available, and not because they were already in the market for such services? Again, if we are concerned with the

cultivation of parent-child intimacy, we should consider how such an action could lead to an erosion of parental love.

In the end, I believe that parents and the Church ought to submit the decision to utilize daycare for children to a motivational test that takes the moral voice of children as the lens through which to look upon such a decision. Upon so doing, it will become clear that many of the justifications typically advanced for the extensive use of infant daycare would not pass such a test.

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