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The Objective Value of Childrearing

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ABSTRACT

Most countries legally recognize the right and duty to raise the child one has carried and given birth to, (i) reflecting a traditional legal presumption (despite widespread abuse and neglect) that parents should be granted wide-ranging legal rights with respect to their minor children. What interests me here is the moral aspect of the right to childrearing: does childrearing have a value that is objective, and if so, why? In this paper, I explore a theory of intrinsic value that is consistent with an objective stance on childrearing. The theory enables us to make sense of the belief that something can be objectively good as an end-in-itself even if a person derives no pleasure from it, thus grounding the distinction between the good of childrearing and the pleasure one might gain from it. This paper is divided into three parts. Section 1 explores the concept of intrinsic goodness. I explain what I mean by 'childrearing' as distinguished from procreation, and argue that childrearing is both an objective and intrinsic good. Section 2 clarifies how this works, maintaining that the intimate relationship between parent and child makes the parent's life richer and more worthwhile. (ii) I argue further that childrearing is a component of well-being rather than an instrumental cause of it. Section 3 sketches three types of theories outlined by Derek Parfit (iii) regarding what is good for a person: hedonistic theories, desire-fulfilment theories, and objective-list theories (iv).

1 | Introduction

Most countries legally recognize the right and duty to raise the child one has carried and given birth to,[1] reflecting a traditional legal presumption (despite widespread abuse and neglect) that parents should be granted wide-ranging legal rights with respect to their minor children. What interests me here is the moral aspect of the right to childrearing: does childrearing have a value that is objective, and if so, why? In this paper, I explore a theory of intrinsic value that is consistent with an objective stance on childrearing. The theory enables us to make sense of the belief that something can be objectively good as an end in itself, even if a person derives no pleasure from it, thus grounding the distinction between the good of childrearing and the pleasure one may gain from it.

This paper is divided into three parts. Section 2 explores the concept of intrinsic goodness. I explain what I mean by "childrearing" as distinguished from "procreation," and argue that childrearing is both an objective and intrinsic good. Section 3 clarifies how this works, maintaining that the intimate relationship between parent and child makes the parent's life richer and more worthwhile.[2] I argue that childrearing is a component of well-being rather than an instrumental cause of it. Section 4 sketches three types of theories outlined by Derek Parfit [6, p. 4] regarding what is good for a person: hedonistic theories, desire-fulfillment theories, and objective-list theories.[3] I argue that the third type best captures the sense in which childrearing is good for parents. Of course, childrearing is not constantly pleasurable; nor is being desired what makes it good. However, all else being equal, the parent–child relationship does make an individual's life better.

2 | Childrearing as an Objective, Intrinsic Good

2.1 | What Is Intrinsic Goodness?

The concept of intrinsic value is somewhat troublesome; philosophers have debated not only its content but also its coherence.[4] One way of determining value is to say that intrinsic goodness is

an objective, non-relational property of an object. This follows G.E. Moore's view of objectivism, according to which goodness is in an object, and therefore we ought to be interested in it. The value that a thing has is independent of anyone's desire, interest, or pleasure in it [15, p. 225]. Some philosophers have attempted to understand this kind of value by suggesting that it is the value that an object would have even if it were the only thing that exists in the universe. Such value, if it indeed exists, depends on an object's intrinsic properties alone.[5]

I accordingly understand intrinsic value as the value that an object has by virtue of its intrinsic properties. Something has intrinsic value when it is valuable for its own sake—not because of what it affects, causes, or relates to in some way, nor merely for its usefulness in obtaining or leading to something else that is intrinsically valuable or desirable. Without wishing to depart from Moore's account of intrinsic value, I believe that it can be supplemented with some insights from Shelly Kagan and Christine M. Korsgaard. One may object that their respective accounts are ultimately in tension with both one another and that of Moore. This is true up to a point. But while I do not entirely agree with either of them, they bring out two distinct contrasts for intrinsic value: *instrumental* value and *extrinsic* value. I shall ultimately claim that while childrearing may share in both of these values, it also possesses an objective value that cannot be reduced to either of these things.

Kagan shows us that if something is valuable for its own sake, as an end, then there is reason to promote it [8, pp. 278, 290]. In his article "Rethinking Intrinsic Value," Kagan questions the sort of Moorean account I endorse, raising doubt over whether there is *anything* that can be valued as an end [8, pp. 278, 290]. While I do not share Kagan's skepticism, I find his claim that if something is valuable as an end, then there is reason to promote it to be a pertinent one.

Christine Korsgaard, for her part, distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic goodness and between ends (final goods) and means (instrumental goods) [16, p. 170]. Two distinctions apply with respect to goodness according to Korsgaard: one is between things valued for their own sake and things valued for the sake of something else, and the other is between things that have value in themselves and things that derive their value from some other source. Korsgaard maintains that when we say that something has intrinsic value, we mean that it is valued for its own sake; but strictly speaking, to say that something is intrinsically good is to say that it has its goodness in itself. According to Korsgaard, the contrast between intrinsic and instrumental value is therefore misleading because the natural contrast to intrinsic goodness—the value a thing has "in itself"—is *extrinsic* goodness: the value a thing gets from some other source [16, p. 170].

Rather than siding with either Kagan or Korsgaard, I wish to hold on to a Moorean account that takes their insights on board to distinguish goodness that lies in an object itself from goodness that is either instrumental *or* extrinsic value (as Kagan and Korsgaard, respectively, do). This distinction allows us to clarify whether childrearing has intrinsic value. I can make the distinction, for example, by asking whether an object is valued as a means for other objects, is valued only because it may prove useful in obtaining other things of value, or merely leads to something else that is intrinsically valuable or desirable.[6] As we shall see in the next section, the correct contrast case may vary depending on the nature of what is being valued.

This paper is not about intrinsic value per se. What ultimately interests me is whether childrearing is an objective good in itself and, if so, why. I shall argue that childrearing has intrinsic and objective worth. This does not imply that childrearing has no instrumental value; on the contrary, it does. But what interests me is the value of childrearing for its own sake. The intimate relationship between a parent and her child makes the parent's life richer and more worthwhile: in other words, better.

This section has introduced a theory of intrinsic value that is consistent with an objective stance on childrearing. Such a theory enables us to make sense of certain beliefs, such as that something can be good as an end in itself even if a person derives no pleasure from it. In this case, we can distinguish between the good of childrearing and the pleasure one might gain from it.

2.2 | Is There a Normatively Relevant Connection Between Childrearing and Procreation?

Let me begin by clarifying the concept of childrearing. Many people treat childrearing and the act of procreation as a single concept,[7] but they should be addressed separately. Certainly, there is a normatively relevant connection between the two, encompassing intention, anticipation, continuity of care, and desire. But while childrearing has objective, intrinsic worth (in addition to any instrumental value), I maintain that the value of procreation is not intrinsic.

While intrinsic value is often contrasted with instrumental value, extrinsic value may be the better contrast with intrinsic value to describe procreation as opposed to childrearing. To summarize Korsgaard's previously mentioned explanation, the difference between extrinsic and instrumental value lies in the difference between the *source* of the good and the *way* we value things. Extrinsic value places the source *outside* the good itself, while instrumental value is value *for the sake of* something else. There can be relations to intrinsic goods besides the instrumental relation of being a cause or tool of its production, such as being part of an intrinsically valuable whole. J. S. Mill, for example, regards happiness as an intrinsically valuable whole, some of whose elements themselves have intrinsic value [19, p. 39]. Childrearing is similar to happiness in this respect. It involves personal success, restricting one's ego, conscientiousness, unselfishness, a unique attachment, and so on, all of which are of value in themselves but also part of the essence of childrearing as an intrinsically valuable whole. Whatever other merits it may have, childrearing has an objective, intrinsic, non-psychological worth (it may also have instrumental value; for instance, raising good children and so forth).

Intrinsic value is often judged against *instrumental* value, but in the case of procreation versus childrearing, *extrinsic* value is also pertinent. The difference between extrinsic and instrumental value lies in the source of the good rather than in how we value things. Instrumental value is of value for the sake of something else, whereas extrinsic value contributes in other ways. There can be other relations to good ends besides being the cause or tools of their production; for example, by being part of an intrinsically

valuable whole. Mill, for example, regards happiness as an intrinsically valuable whole that is comprised of several elements, some of which are of intrinsic value in themselves. I believe that childrearing is similar to happiness in this respect. Childrearing involves personal success, restricting one's ego, conscientiousness, unselfishness, a unique attachment, and so on, all of which are of intrinsic value in themselves, but are also part of the essence of childrearing as an intrinsic, valuable whole.

In contrast, procreation is an extrinsic good, deriving its value from outside itself. It contributes to other goods, principally the parent–child relationship. It is *part of* an intrinsically valuable *whole*, making contributions to childrearing such as creating readiness, forcing people to engage in future planning, and creating blood ties (this can also be considered instrumental). It can also contribute to the relationship between the procreators or, in certain cultures, to the survival or status of women. Contributory value is often called a contributory good; according to R.G. Olson,[8] the value of a contributory good derives from the intrinsic value of the whole to which it contributes. Thus, despite its other contributions, many people measure the importance of procreation in terms of the highest whole it contributes to: childrearing.[9] My aim in this section has simply been to sketch an idea and indicate a direction. Having clarified what I mean by childrearing and what distinguishes it from procreation, I now proceed to my central argument: childrearing has objective, intrinsic value.

3 | The Value of Childrearing

Philosophers have written about various aspects of family life, such as the decision to form a family and the parenting principles that individuals invoke.[10] Part of this discourse addresses the nature of parental obligations and such dilemmas as whether parents have an unrestricted moral right to procreate. Much of it focuses on what is good for children. Less attention has been paid to the role and value of childrearing in parents' lives. My aim in this section is to discuss childrearing as an action that is intrinsically good, particularly for parents. Specifically, I focus on intrinsic goodness and theories about self-interest; namely, theories about what it means for someone's life to have more well-being. I argue that having an intimate relationship with one's child[11] makes a person's life richer and more worthwhile and is thus a component of well-being.

In Section 4, along with Parfit, I ask what makes a person's life as good as possible. Parfit distinguishes three conceptions of self-interest: hedonistic theories, desire-fulfillment (or preference-satisfaction) theories, and objective-list theories (according to which there are listable goods that are objectively in people's interests) [6, p. 493]. Given my view that childrearing is good regardless of whether it is pleasurable or desired, I defend the third approach.

3.1 | What Is Childrearing?

The parent–child relationship has a complex moral quality. Parents are responsible both for their children's immediate well-being and for their physical, cognitive, emotional, and moral development. However, parents also have a non-fiduciary interest in being in a relationship of this nature. As I think, perhaps controversially, that the primary feature of childrearing is the intimate parent–child relationship, I shall confine my argument to this relationship. If I were to define what an intimate relationship between parent and child consists of,[12] I would tend to focus on the fact that children become distinct beings only gradually.[13] This makes the parent and child not entirely separate individuals. Aristotle viewed the child as a part of the "parent"-self:

> The justice of a master and that of a father are not the same as the justice of citizens, though they are like it; for there can be no injustice in the unqualified sense towards things that are one's own, but a man's chattel, and his child until it reaches a certain age and sets up for itself, are as it were part of himself, and no one chooses to hurt himself.[14]

Aristotle's argument that parents have ownership rights over their children is based on the view that a child is a part of the parent.[15] Most children are brought into being by their parents, develop slowly, and initially lead lives that resemble those of their parents. Later in life, they can become their parents' equals.[16] However, the parent–child relationship is not a producer–product relationship whereby parents produce children and children are their parents' property.[17] When all goes well, parents can give their children a good life. They contribute to their children's well-being through experiences, guidance, and the nature of the communication and intimacy they share. Parents should prepare their children to make optimal choices for themselves when they reach independence.[18] This relationship constitutes an attachment. Attachment with respect to persons is the pursuit and preservation of proximity, of closeness and connection—physically, behaviorally, emotionally, and psychologically—that is fundamental to our survival [32]. Attachment has been shown to be an absolute need; children must be attached to their parents emotionally until they can stand on their own two feet and determine their own direction. Disruption to this attachment causes physical illnesses later in life [32]. One conspicuous element of the relationship is that parents shape the lives of their children according to their own personal beliefs and goals. These circumstances and conditions ideally facilitate a unique, intimate, and committed relationship.

3.2 | What Is Good About Childrearing?

My contention that childrearing is inherently good is not based on the values of any particular kind of community. Childrearing is objectively an intrinsic good regardless of social position or societal context. It is not, however, morally obligatory. While it is a moral (as opposed to non-moral) action, regardless of motivation or its impact on the parent's life, it has non-instrumental value by virtue of its intrinsic properties, specifically the intimate parent–child relationship.[19]

Childrearing is good by virtue of the vulnerability, sensitivity, moral thinking, selflessness, and other qualities it encompasses as parts of its essence [34, pp. 267, 303–332], rendering it worthy of being chosen. The kind of vulnerability I am

concerned with here is *volitional vulnerability*—that is, vulnerability to the will and actions of the other. In the case of the parent–child attachment, this takes a particular form: I invite my son to open up to me and be vulnerable to my actions, and he does the same. In so doing, I voluntarily create vulnerability and need to accept responsibility for the vulnerability that I acquire in this way. If my child is vulnerable to my actions, I have power over him—a power that is not incidental but is of moral consequence; with that power comes responsibility for how I exercise it. Vulnerability is not merely a state of exposure or risk, but is a morally significant feature of relational life. By virtue of who I am to my child and by the very nature of our attachment, I bring into being something that is good. Even for those drawn to detachment or asceticism, the presence of another's vulnerability can break through the ego's defenses. It commands our attention, softens our vision, and awakens in us a sense of moral reality—a demand not to harm, and if possible, to care. From the condition of vulnerability arises—not by accident but by a kind of moral necessity—a disposition toward selflessness, a delicate attentiveness to others, and a readiness to respond, forming part of its very moral substance, inseparable from the inner structure of human goodness. Vulnerability is not *always* good, but its goodness characterizes intimate relationships.

Joseph Raz argues that morality can conflict with self-interest; for example, when the moral reasons to rear one's child conflict with one's need to separate from the other parent. In such cases, (co-)rearing one's child can diminish the parent's well-being. Thus, actions are not always good for their agents merely by virtue of being moral. The good of the child is *not always* the good of the parent. But even though childrearing is not good for all parents all of the time, there are cases in which it *is* in the parent's interest, even when it is painful [35, pp. 294–299]. This raises questions since one of the reasons for the value of childrearing is the selflessness it evokes. I claim that selflessness (among other qualities) is in the parent's interest because it develops the parent as a person and makes the parent's life richer. Yet, selflessness implies a willingness to act *against* one's own interests for the sake of another. The conclusion seems to be that it can be *in* one's interest to act *against* one's interest.[20]

3.3 | Why Is the Value of Childrearing Intrinsic?

We consider some things to be good because they contribute to certain outcomes or provide valuable information.[21] In contrast, we ordinarily use "intrinsic value" to mean value that is *not* dependent on other objects (see Section 2.1 for complications). It is worth emphasizing here that I am not concerned with arguing that childrearing possesses some particularly high value. Rather, I aim to show that whatever value childrearing does possess, it is an intrinsic one. Childrearing constitutes but *one* of the things that can make a person's life richer, more worthwhile.

Some of childrearing's elements are valued for their own sake; their value is not determined by or enhanced by virtue of their being a part of that whole. These elements, such as selflessness, conscientiousness, and other similar qualities, are valued independently of the whole, yet they are essential to it. Childrearing consists of elements that have intrinsic value, but this alone is not the only reason for its overall value. Childrearing is not valued for its relation to the intrinsic values of its parts. Childrearing may lead to the liberation of a person's true desires or thoughts, or perhaps prompt more moral conduct such that, together with its intrinsic properties, these goods compose or form an intrinsically valuable whole that is the parent–child intimate relationship, an attachment relationship that is essential for child development. This whole is a part of what constitutes a good life for an individual.

The goodness of the parent–child relationship is not embodied in a specific consequence—not even in happiness [16, p. 174]. After all, childrearing has not always made all parents happier.[22] Childrearing is a good not because childrearing is pleasurable or virtuous in itself but because of what it *requires* of the person: it can make one less selfish, more vulnerable, more patient, and more considerate. Childrearing is a transformative experience in this sense. It makes one's life richer but not necessarily happier.

Determining that childrearing bears intrinsic value does not imply that all aspects of childrearing are intrinsically good; some may be instrumentally good and some intrinsically bad. Good and bad ingredients can form a whole of great value, such that it is deemed intrinsically worthwhile. Childrearing embraces good and bad elements that possess intrinsic and extrinsic value, but overall, it is of intrinsic value. When I say that the parent–child intimate relationship has an intrinsic value, I am not saying that it is valuable because it *makes* you happier or even because it *makes* you vulnerable or less selfish. All of these things may or may not be true. Regardless, childrearing is also good because it *consists of* such things as vulnerability, selflessness, appropriate tolerance, support in developing moral thinking, and so on, all of which contribute to eudemonia.

Not everything that is intrinsically good must be desirable, pleasurable, or satisfying. Certain things are good whether or not we want to have them or enjoy them. Childrearing is something good to be desired, rather than merely being good when it is desired. It is good not only instrumentally. It is childrearing itself—not the pleasure that it causes nor the satisfaction it provides, but the relationship itself—that, under any circumstances, makes a person's life richer and more worthwhile.

Both the parent and child attachment and the act of childrearing possess objective value that is of intrinsic value; however, the former holds a greater moral weight. Even parents who fail to display the qualities previously mentioned continue to uphold the inherent value of the act of childrearing, which remains morally significant in itself.

Childrearing has essential elements that are valued for their own sake, such as selflessness and conscientiousness.[23] It may also lead to the liberation of a person's true desires or thoughts, or perhaps prompt more moral conduct. Such good, together with the essential, intrinsic properties of childrearing, make up the intrinsically valuable whole that is the parent–child intimate relationship and is part of what constitutes a good life for an individual. What is intrinsically (and extrinsically) good about

childrearing lies in the intimate parent–child relationship; it is not merely a result to be achieved. Rather, it is good by virtue of the vulnerability, sensitivity, moral thinking, selflessness, and other qualities it encompasses. It has the kind of goodness that marks a thing as worthy of being chosen.

Ascribing intrinsic value to childrearing does not imply that all aspects of childrearing are intrinsically good; some may be instrumentally good or even intrinsically bad. Such ingredients can nevertheless form an intrinsically worthwhile whole. According to Moore's principle of organic unity, the value of a whole is not equal to the sum of its component values (nor does the components' belonging to the whole affect their values) [12, p. 28].

What makes things good intrinsically is not merely or necessarily that they give pleasure or enjoyment, which is contrary to Brand Blanshard's claim that "nothing is good for us if we can take no satisfaction or pleasure [in it]." Blanshard understands what is good for us to be a combination of need fulfillment and the satisfaction it provides [37, p. 337], thus combining hedonistic and desire-fulfillment theories of what makes life good. However, taking pleasure in things and satisfying desires are not the only good, nor do they alone determine what makes life good. Not everything that is intrinsically good must be desirable, pleasurable, or satisfying. Certain things are good whether or not we want or enjoy them.

The value of childrearing is not based only on its being—at least ideally—enjoyable, desirable, or appreciated. Childrearing is something good to be desired rather than merely being good when it is desired. It is childrearing itself, not only the pleasure it causes or the satisfaction it provides, that, under any circumstances, makes a person's life richer and more worthwhile. The relationship is characterized by an intimacy that does not presuppose pleasure but is valuable nonetheless. Other things being equal, an intimate relationship with one's child makes one's life richer, more worthwhile, and therefore better in terms of one's well-being.

3.4 | Alternate Accounts of Childrearing

It may be worth, at this point, to contrast my view that the good of parenting is largely based on the intimate parent–child relationship with those of Christine Overall, Rivka Weinberg, and Luara Ferracioli, who appear to make similar claims.

According to Overall, the only satisfactory answer to the question, Why have children?, is that parenting is an act of creation: of a new individual, a new relationship, and a potentially better self [38]. Childrearing, she holds, affords and promises parents (and potential parents) the opportunity to know themselves more deeply, to discover their limits, and to undergo self-transformation. I agree with her view of the value of childrearing, although not with her reasons for procreation. Moreover, her concern is directed chiefly toward the decision to become a parent rather than the condition of being one, and this is not the focus of my argument. Nor, for my purposes, does it matter by what means one becomes a parent: whether by procreation, adoption, or surrogacy, the considerations are the same. My position then is somewhat different from Overall's in that she focuses on becoming a parent (rather than being a parent), and, more specifically, only on becoming a parent through procreation. She also holds that the choice to procreate needs justification and focuses a great deal on procreation and pregnancy [39, 40].

In her book *The Risk of a Lifetime: How, When, and Why Procreation May Be Permissible*, Weinberg observes that one cannot procreate "for the sake of the child," but only for other reasons. However, one acceptable reason she allows is the wish to enter into the parent–child relationship [41].[24] In this view (which I am largely sympathetic with), the value of childrearing lies in goods that are peculiar to that relationship: intimacy, care, the chance of moral growth, and a kind of love not easily found elsewhere. Although Weinberg acknowledges that parenting can be deeply meaningful, she denies that its value could ever license unlimited procreation. The risks borne by the child—suffering, harm, death—set hard limits on when procreation may be permissible, and thus on when childrearing may be rightly undertaken. The value of parenting is genuine but never overriding; it must be weighed against the hazards inseparable from bringing someone new into existence (while I am in full agreement with this, nothing in this paper hinges on it).

Finally, Ferracioli holds that the value of childrearing is to be found, first and foremost, in the distinctive goods of childhood itself [43, 44]. These goods—carefreeness, the chance to pursue curiosity for its own sake, the play and friendship that mark a child's world—are not mere stepping stones to adulthood but are things of value in their own right, and the task of parents is to make them possible (perhaps true, but not relevant for my argument). Parenthood, in Ferracioli's view, is not grounded in biology but in a moral commitment: to stand by the child and to foster her flourishing. Childrearing thus acquires its worth through the relationship it sustains, a relationship that, while it can also bring meaning and growth to the parent, is not justified by those benefits. Nor is it simply a private matter, since the raising of children capable of trust and cooperation bears the possibility of a just society. While I am in great sympathy with these points, for Ferracioli, the center of the value of childrearing lies with the child and the distinctive shape of her life. Accordingly, she takes the good of childrearing to consist of helping the child to realize that life. My position, in contrast, addresses the intrinsic value of childrearing from the perspective of the parent(s).

While all three authors share *some* of my intuitions and arguments, there are some important differences between their projects and mine. First and foremost, my focus in this paper is on the parent—her wellbeing and the weight of childrearing within it—rather than on *becoming* a parent through procreation (Overall), the reasons for procreation (Weinberg), or the good of childhood (Ferracioli). This brings us to parental well-being.

3.5 | Parental Well-Being

Childrearing as a moral factor in a person's well-being is more than a question of subjective perception; it is of final value objectively. Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift assert that a successful implementation of the fiduciary role (i.e., the parent–child

relationship) contributes to the parent's well-being (and, conversely, its failure detracts from it) [4, p. 95]. They write that a parent–child relationship is a "crucial contribution to the flourishing of the adult" and that "there is something distinctive about this kind of relationship and ... for many people nothing will fully substitute [for it]." For example, parents come to learn about themselves, develop personally, and derive satisfactions that would otherwise be unavailable [4, p. 100]. However, childrearing does more than raise the level of an individual's well-being by contributing to her flourishing—it makes her life richer, as stated earlier, because of the vulnerability, sensitivity, moral thinking, selflessness, and other qualities it encompasses. Its goodness does not come from being wanted; it is something people have reason to want because it is a good.[25]

It is a plain truth—however unpalatable—that some mothers, and indeed some parents more broadly (I use the terms more or less interchangeably throughout), fall short of the affection and selflessness that the role ideally entails. Instances do occur where a mother's love is contingent, where her conduct is marked by impatience or a certain self-absorption. In some cases, such deficiencies may even result in lasting harm to the child in her care. Yet, notwithstanding these regrettable realities, the concept of motherhood—as a moral relation, not merely a biological or social one—carries with it an intrinsic appeal to both humility and moral responsibility.

To be a mother is not simply to occupy a role; it is to stand in a relation that imposes duties that are neither arbitrary nor externally imposed but arise from the nature of the relationship itself. One becomes, through this relation, answerable to another in a particularly intimate and irrevocable way. That such a position entails vulnerability is beyond doubt—one is exposed to loss, failure, and the painful awareness of one's own insufficiency. But it is precisely this condition that calls forth a certain moral seriousness, a vigilance against harm, and an acute sense of one's obligations.

This awareness of potential harm is not hypothetical; it is an ever-present aspect of moral life. It is this awareness that renders the mother cautious and reflective, not from fear alone, but from a recognition that the stakes of her conduct are irreducibly moral. This is not simply a matter of sentiment or instinct, though both have their place. It is a rational apprehension of duty, a recognition that she is bound by more than feeling—she is bound by what is right.

That said, love must also be acknowledged, although not in the merely emotional sense. It is love understood as a steady disposition of care and concern, a willingness to act for the good of the child, irrespective of the personal cost. When thus conceived, love is not opposed to duty, but is its natural ally. It sharpens the sense of obligation and lends warmth to what may otherwise be mere compliance with moral law.

This heightened awareness—though often difficult and not without moments of real sacrifice—constitutes, I contend, a deepening of the moral consciousness. It does not remove suffering from the moral life, but recontextualizes it, allowing it to become part of a coherent moral framework. Herein lies the essence of the good: not in the pursuit of pleasure or ease, but in the faithful discharge of duty, even in the face of hardship. The good is not always accompanied by happiness, but it is nonetheless intelligible to reason and binding upon the will.

Intuitively speaking, the parental response to child loss is often more severe than the response of a person who prematurely loses her spouse.[26] Both cases are extremely devastating, but something about losing a child renders the bereaved parent particularly inconsolable. Studies have shown that for bereaved parents, a normal mourning process followed by a meaningful and balanced life is far from assured [48]. Many bereaved parents remain preoccupied with the loss and their relationship to the lost child [49]. Without diminishing the value of adult relationships, this highlights the uniqueness of the parent–child relationship and its impact on a person's well-being.

4 | Childrearing, Goals, and Well-Being

What makes someone's life go better? This is ultimately a matter of well-being.[27] Other things being equal, people are better off when their basic needs are satisfied (they are healthy, warm, in a productive environment, etc.). Well-being is thus connected to needs.[28] Goals, too, are an essential element of a good life. Self-interest theories (following Parfit [6, p. 3]) seek to give a systematic account of what makes people's lives go better.

Parfit explores three types of theories about what makes a person's life go better. I argue that childrearing is best described by the last type: objective-list theories.

4.1 | Hedonistic Theories

According to hedonistic theories of self-interest, "what would be best for someone is what would give him most happiness" [6, p. 4], with happiness defined differently by different hedonistic theories.

4.2 | Desire-Fulfillment Theories

According to desire-fulfillment theories of self-interest, the fulfillment of an individual's desires throughout her life is what is best for her [6, p. 4].

Some of the reasons people care about childrearing are obviously psychological, including the desire to be loved. The love of one's child is unique in being given regardless of one's efforts or qualities. People are also thought to desire children for genetic reasons—to wish for a child-like themselves.[29] Another unique aspect of the parent–child relationship is the intuition or belief of many parents that their child has a distinctive ability to fulfill their own personal desires or to pursue and achieve their goals. Parents often expect their children to accomplish this in a way that no other individual can, no matter how intimately related. One explanation may be parents' perceptions of their children as continuations of themselves or even improvements—a kind of second chance.[30] To a certain extent, children raised by their parents are the parents' creations; if all goes well, the children somehow reflect the parents' personal success.

For these and similar reasons, childrearing could be said to be in one's interests because of the desires it fulfills. However, reducing interests to desires can lead to some puzzling cases.

Suppose Annie's deepest desire is to be a mother and to experience a close bond with her child, but her attempts to become a mother are repeatedly unsuccessful. According to desire-fulfillment theories, abandoning this desire is not in her best interests even though it may spare her considerable frustration. Some, particularly hedonists, may find this counterintuitive.

Whether or not this consequence is intuitively satisfactory, it points to a complication for the desire-fulfillment approach: desires are dynamic—they change. Consider a change in the opposite direction. Suppose Emma, who prefers to avoid childrearing, becomes a parent. Will her life necessarily get worse? According to the desire-fulfillment theory, yes: if an unwanted thing happens to someone, that person is worse off. But in fact, some originally unwanted things that come into our lives may then create new desires in us. Perhaps Emma did not want to become a mother, but now that she is one, she has all sorts of other desires because of that, and satisfying *them* may be good for her. Which desires should be satisfied to make Emma's life a good one, according to the desire-fulfillment approach?

Hedonistic theories would judge both these cases entirely by what, on balance, would cause more pleasure or pain. But, as we have seen, this seems to miss the intuitive value of qualities encompassed by childrearing that may bring as much pain as pleasure, such as moral thinking, selflessness, vulnerability, and sensitivity.

The objective-list point of view, with its insistence that certain things are good or bad for people whether or not they want or take pleasure in them, better captures the intuitive value of such qualities.

4.3 | Objective-List Theories

This brings us to the last type of theory to be addressed—objective-list theories—which I believe make the strongest case. Both the hedonistic and the desire-fulfillment approaches are subjective, being based on people's feelings or preferences and not necessarily referring in any way to objective value.[31] In contrast, objective-list theories claim that certain things are objectively good or bad for people [6, p. 4].[32]

Consider music. Not everyone takes pleasure in music or is interested in learning to play it or understand it. Yet somehow, appreciated or not, music contributes to well-being. It has value in itself. The experience of *tones* (rather than mere pitched sounds) as being in a "musical space"—bearing in specific relations to other tones—increases well-being.

4.3.1 | The Precondition of Being Wanted

Can anything be an ultimate rational end—truly good in itself—for one person but not another? Moore's claim that if something is good, then everyone has reason to pursue it (and if it is not good, then no one does) initially seems intuitively compelling [54, pp. 152–153].

Some would argue that music is objectively good *only* for those who enjoy it: not that it is good merely because it is pleasurable, but that the realization of its goodness has a precondition of pleasure. While I hesitate to agree that the goodness of anything has a precondition of either pleasure or desire, such a position is plausible in certain cases—and some may propose that childrearing is good only for those who want it.

It is difficult to argue that the well-being of people who do not want to have children will actually increase if they ultimately do have children. It is easier to argue simply that the lives of people who do choose to have children will indeed be richer for the parent–child attachment, even if it is not always a positive experience. This "hybrid" position combines an objective condition with a subjective one in the manner of Raz's theory of personal well-being as the wholehearted, successful pursuit of worthwhile projects [35, pp. 288–320]: To improve my life, something must be (a) objectively good *and* (b) something that I want or take pleasure in.

There is something to be said, then, for the suggestion—contrary to or at least modifying the objectivist account—that while rearing children is an intrinsic good, it is a good that must be desired to be realized.

If this objective good indeed has a precondition of being wanted, then this precondition applies only to childrearing, not to having an intimate relationship with one's child. Let us agree that people are not always better off for rearing their children; a person who dislikes children may not be better off for rearing them, and indeed, there are people who *should* not raise their own children—or any children, for that matter.[33] Nonetheless, people who do have an attachment to their children are, in general, better off for it—their lives are more worthwhile for all the reasons listed previously. This claim gains support from the fact that when the attachment to a child is lost, most parents will do anything to restore it.

4.3.2 | Goals and Well-Being

How, if at all, does having or not having childrearing as a goal affect the objective value of its contribution to a good life, a life characterized by well-being?

I consider pursuing and attaining personal goals to be part of what well-being is. Doing so constitutes a fundamental human need, in a sense of a "need" that includes both wanting something and it being necessary for one's well-being. Consequently, with all other things equal, the conditions necessary for pursuing our goals should be made available where possible. However, the value of the goal makes a difference. We can misjudge the value of a goal or wish for it for immoral or ill-considered reasons. In such cases, goal achievement may not genuinely enhance our well-being. Nor, conversely, does failing in something that we falsely think is good for us necessarily make us worse off. We may be disappointed, but well-being is not entirely dependent on the absence of hurt or hardship. So the value of the goal is more important than its attainment.

When I say that childrearing is objectively good, I do not mean to disregard the range and variety of human experiences and desires. I simply mean that the value of childrearing does not depend on subjective elements such as desire, and that even though the experience may be different for different people, its moral qualities and inherent virtue remain the same across instances. These universal, inherent qualities are the reason why childrearing forms part of a person's well-being.

What constitutes a good life is certainly debatable, considering the range of cultures and conceptions of life. I do not doubt that there are other rewarding and satisfying things that make one's life good—even, under certain circumstances, almost equally good (some make such claims for saving children from poverty or helping animals). But even if we agree that some specific childless life is better, all things considered, than one specific life with children, it does not follow that the life with children is worse for having childrearing as a part of it. Furthermore, if a person thinks she is happy with the outcome of her decision, that does not negate the possibility that her life may have been even better had she made the opposite decision. I am not suggesting that childrearing is a basic need; obviously, people can lead a rich, satisfying, and worthwhile life without a parent–child relationship. But a good life is (also) determined by the value of a person's goals. It is not enough that a goal is of value to a specific person unless it serves her well-being, whether or not she believes it to be valuable. In addition, the value of a goal such as childrearing is best judged in relation to a person's entire life rather than a particular moment or interval.[34]

4.3.3 | Childrearing and Well-Being

One plausible objection to my view is that there are people who regard childrearing as a harm or even a wretchedness to be avoided. They argue that childrearing can make one's life worse and that a child-free life can be better. There are certainly people for whom life does become worse as a result of childrearing, such as parents whose child is very sick or perishes at a young age.[35] However, even the lives of such parents gain value from their relationship with their sick or lost child.[36] It may well be that had the sick child's mother never had the child, she would have avoided much pain, have developed a successful career and friendships, and so on. Instead, the child's medical treatments may have left her penniless, and the emotional distress broken her spirit. Even so, it is possible that the relationship with her child was intrinsically beneficial to her well-being; the problem is that it had terribly bad instrumental effects, and the balance is negative.

There are additional reasons for taking childrearing to be in one's interest. There is a connection between what people care about and what they think will be good for them (or in their interest) [57, p. 82],[37] and people care about childrearing. In fact, they often sacrifice their non-parental interests in favor of their parental interests, even when they may benefit from the removal of their child from their custody.[38] These elements of childrearing indicate that with all other things equal, it makes a person's world richer.

In addition to its benefits to parents, the parent–child attachment is (obviously) also beneficial for children; indeed, it has been shown to be *essential* for child development [5]. Beyond the individual level, childrearing makes contributions to the collective by creating continuity, advancing morally responsible behavior, and thereby making society more just. These constitutive elements of childrearing are evidence for a broader claim that childrearing is good not only for parents but also for everyone [60, p. 42]. However, in this paper, I have confined my argument to the individual level.

5 | Conclusion

I have argued that the parent–child attachment is objectively valuable and that one's life is better both for the commitment to and love for one's child and for the relationship's objective worth. An objective standard allows for the possibility that someone's life is better for reasons of which she is not cognizant.

The parent–child relationship differs from other intimate relationships, including romantic and caregiving relationships. It entails a unique vulnerability and form of selflessness. While children's vulnerability derives in part from their need for care to survive and develop (at least) their basic capacities, parents' vulnerability is a kind of susceptibility and sensitivity fostered particularly in relation to their children. The vulnerability and selflessness that childrearing calls forth from parents enriches their lives and their very being.

My argument has not been that childrearing produces good parents, nor that what is good about parenting lies merely in the intimacy of the relationship. Rather, it is simply that childrearing itself is a good, and that it therefore makes a difference to the parent's well-being—whatever kind of person they become—improving it or at least making it richer. This is chiefly because childrearing *consists of* vulnerability, selflessness, appropriate tolerance, support in developing moral thinking, and other such things that contribute to eudemonia. Childrearing is a good—and for that reason, something we ought to value.[39]

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were generated or analysed in support of this research.

Endnotes

[1] The legal rights and obligations of biological parents allow less room for maneuver than other interpersonal rights and duties. It is difficult for a child to release her parents from their obligations or terminate their parental rights. The impossibility of exit particularly

distinguishes the parent–child relationship from other intimate relationships; see [1, p. 27]. See also [2–4].

[2] The attachment relationship is an essential component in a person's physical and mental development; see [5].

[3] James Griffin draws a distinction similar to Parfit's between desire accounts and objective accounts. He argues that we have obligations, grounded in (objective) human nature rather than in anyone's wishes, to respond to other's strong, basic needs. But I am less certain that childrearing is a *basic need* necessary for the "basic task of living a worthwhile life." See [7, p. 42].

[4] See [8–10], and [11, p. 95]. See also [12, 13]. Some, like Monroe Beardsley, argue that all value is extrinsic, that the concept of intrinsic value is "inapplicable," and that there would be no way for us to know if something did have intrinsic value; see [14].

[5] Kagan [8] argues that this dependence relation can be based, at least in part, on relational as well as intrinsic properties.

[6] It is, of course, possible for something to possess both instrumental and intrinsic value, although perhaps on independent grounds. Kagan [8, p. 286] suggests that something can possess intrinsic value—in part or in whole—*because* of its instrumental value; that is, in some cases instrumental properties may ground intrinsic value.

[7] For the legal perspective, see [17]. For political context, see [18].

[8] As cited by [20, p. 137, 21]. See also [22].

[9] Many thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing out that many others have argued for the value of procreation as being separate from that childrearing. For example, in "Procreative Liberty and the Control of Conception, Pregnancy, and Childbirth" [17], Robertson maintains that procreation consists of bringing into existence a genetically related child, valued as an extension of identity, a mode of self-expression, and the continuation of a lineage. Childrearing, in contrast, is (in this account) the practice of raising and nurturing a child, with its value residing in the relational and social goods it fosters. Although the two may converge in ordinary cases, Robertson argues that they are conceptually and ethically distinct, with the right to procreate protecting the former independently of any claim to the latter. Others hold that procreation is intrinsically valuable, viewing it as an end in itself (e.g., for religious reasons). I shall not refute this view in the present paper, as its soundness is irrelevant to my main argument.

[10] See, for instance, the articles on becoming a parent and caring for children in [1].

[11] I refer to the closeness ideally shared by parent and child, not to sexual intimacy.

[12] In addition to the parent's instinct or desire to satisfy the child's immediate needs for safety, enjoyment, shelter, nourishment, love, and so on.

[13] According to the Brazelton Neonatal Behavioral Assessment Scale, the individuality of infants' behavior is determined before their birth, and they are separate individuals from their parents. In saying that children become distinct beings only gradually, I mean not to disagree but rather to emphasize the parent-to-child attachment. See [23]. See also Alice Miller's analysis of child development in [24, pp. 26–59]. Also see [25]. This focuses on the *bonding model*—a mother's attachment to her infant in the immediate postpartum period and the growth of her love for her child. It is about the extent of the necessity of the mother-to-infant attachment, not the needs of the child nor the child's attachment to the parent.

[14] [26]. See also [27]. Also see [28, Book V, para. 6].

[15] For a modern perspective on self-ownership and genetic relation to children, see [28].

[16] [1, pp. 124–137]. Although what I say about parenting is not meant to exclude adoptive parents and other primary caregivers, I shall limit myself here to discussing biological parenthood. For a discussion of whether parent–child genetic relations are important, see [29].

[17] See John Locke's theory of labor in [30, pp. 287–288].

[18] For a view that grounds the right to parent in the fundamental interest that parents have in the special goods of intimacy that are uniquely available in good parent–child relationships, see [4]. For an interesting examination of different considerations of competency regulating the moral right to parent, see [31].

[19] See R. Jay Wallace's analysis of Joseph Raz's distinction between the intrinsic good of acts and the intrinsic good of activities in [33].

[20] Resolving this apparent paradox may require distinguishing interests at different levels.

[21] Harman [20, p. 109] suggests the following improvement in the definition of intrinsic (and instrumental) value: S is instrumentally desirable to the extent that S does not entail but increases the probability of something intrinsically desirable.

[22] The parent–child intimate relationship and the practice of childrearing differ in some respects; the latter can exist without the parent–child intimate relationship, whereas the former varies substantially according to the extent or nature of childrearing involved. A parent who sends her child to foster care but maintains an intimate relationship with her lacks many of the duties of parents rearing their children at home.

[23] Childrearing also entails a moral sense, with standards of conduct and feelings of obligation, pride, and respect. For psychological models of how people acquire a moral sense, see [36].

[24] Chapter 6 introduces her "Hazmat theory" of parental responsibility, based on "our ownership and control over hazardous materials, namely, our gametes." In this theory, "when we choose to engage in activities that put our gametes at risk of joining with others and growing into persons, we assume the costs of that risky activity" [41, p. 112]. See also [42].

[25] As Philip Pettit says about certain goods, such friendships are robustly demanding [45].

[26] See [46, 47].

[27] Any mention of a life being "better" or "worse" should be read as a remark about eudaimonic well-being (as opposed to hedonic or prudential well-being) throughout this paper. If one asks in what sense life becomes better, then the answer is not to be found in pleasure. Motherhood is seldom easy, and rarely a source of simple delight. Yet, it calls forth patience, a sustained attention to another, and a vulnerability that many would refuse to count as good. Still, mothers (and fathers) come to inhabit these qualities, not as instruments for happiness, but as a form of moral growth. They constitute an objective good: an enlargement of the soul's capacity to see and care. It is not necessarily good for *her* in either a prudential or hedonic sense, yet it remains an "unaffected" good to possess, and in that way, it renders a life more meaningful, more fully worth living. For the distinction between eudaimonic and prudential well-being, see [50].

[28] I shall not address the question of what constitutes needs, *philosophically* speaking, since I limit my use of the term to its basic meaning. For a further discussion see [7, pp. 40–53].

[29] For an argument against the "necessity factor" of genetics in parenthood, see [51].

[30] This view focuses on the biological connection between parents and children. I will not discuss other types of parent–child relationship here.

[31] I do not deny that a life can go better as a result of satisfying preferences that are not of universal moral value. But certain things can make a person's life richer and more worthwhile, whatever their preferences.

[32] L. W. Sumner objects to pure objective-list theories, arguing that if something is to be intrinsically good for us, it must not only meet an objective standard but also give us pleasure; see [52]. For more on objective-list theories, see [53].

[33] This is so, especially if there is no possibility of a relationship. Perhaps the parent (or the child) is an abuser, or intimacy and attachment are impossible as a result of incest, rape, or mental illness. Not all people should have children, and certainly not as a "happiness promoter."

[34] For a discussion of well-being over an extended period, see [55, pp. 56–84] and [56].

[35] Or even people who just hate childrearing, are exhausted by it, or become poorer and more miserable for it; although even such parents are rarely amenable to the idea of giving their child away unless they can maintain some contact.

[36] My evaluation is grounded wholly in objective value rather than subjective emotional experiences.

[37] For a comprehensive analysis, see [58].

[38] For a wide-ranging review of forms of parenthood, see [59].

[39] I would like to thank an anonymous referee for their invaluable feedback that has helped me to focus my paper better and situate its main argument more securely within the appropriate literature.

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