

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PARENTS TO CHILDREN

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The ethical obligations of parents to children belong to an intellectual realm that does not, it seems to me, to have been very thoroughly explored. In secular discourse, especially that associated with economic and, more generally, consequentialist thinking, all individuals, including children, have rights and obligations induced by the need to preserve the benefits of society, but there is no special emphasis on the parent-child relation. Even religious discourse, though emphatic on the obligations of children to parents, places little emphasis on the reciprocal obligations. In fact, of course, a great deal of social activity, including economic activity, consists of parental support and maintenance of children. Moreover, the future adult life of children is profoundly affected by the family environment, so parental behavior becomes a serious externality for children, to use the economists' jargon. In fact, the legal systems of most countries recognize these problems, if only in an *ad hoc* manner.

I want to examine the questions of obligation that are raised by a consideration of these issues. I don't claim to have any definite answers. I do however want to illustrate that the issue is not purely imaginary, that there are real problems in the parent-child relation and in the legal system surrounding it.

1. INTRODUCTION

Let me explain how I came to be interested in this question. It arose from considering some questions which are very much in the mainstream of economics. I realized that to many this will be a strange way of approaching the question announced in the title. Nevertheless, I believe the economic 'take' on this social issue can be very useful. In any case, the

reverse direction of influence is of great importance to economic understanding. Resources flow from parents to children both individually and collectively. The child is (typically) maintained by the parents up to some point and to an extent governed by both individual preferences and social norms, enforced to some extent by the law. Inheritance and *inter vivos* gifts are significant factors in the distribution of income. These factors in turn are motives for saving and consumption. Further, society provides education, largely, though not entirely, through collective means. The increasing concern over the environment, particularly with regard to its more permanent features such as climate change, are in part a concern for our children (and their children and so on).

My main scholarly concerns have been concerned with this issue only through the problems of economic growth and especially the implications of environmental and resource degradation. But in the course of generally keeping up with the literature, a number of issues have bothered me.

The first was a minor issue in the controversies over the book of Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman [1974], which dealt with the economics of slavery. Among many other courageous calculations, they attempted to measure the degree to which slaves were exploited. They had, on the one hand, an estimate of the productivity of a slave, and, on the other, estimates of the consumptions of slave children and adults. Slaves started being productive at some given age (sixteen, as I recall). They discounted the productivities during working years to birth and the consumptions also to birth and compared them to find the degree of exploitation (the extent to which rewards fell below the competitive level, which would cause the two to be equal).

One critic argued that this was fallacious; we should compare, he held, the productivities and consumptions beyond sixteen and discount them to the beginning of working life. He argued that this was the standard method in national income accounting, especially in discussing the distribution of personal income. This sounded to me as being a real issue. In the case at hand, though, it was only mildly relevant.

The consumption of children before they begin work had to be accounted for somewhere. To be consistent with the critic's view, the consumption of children should be regarded as that of their parents. If, as was the case, the net reproduction rate was considerably greater than 2, there would be some correction, but it would not make a great difference.

Years later, I undertook to give a course on the distribution of income, not because it was one of my fields of research but because I felt the subject was neglected in the curriculum. (It still is.) I found that distribution of

income is presented by families, without any regard to the size of the family (to be sure, persons living alone are presented separately). There are two peculiarities of this presentation. (1) The family is treated as a unit, regardless of size. But our intuitions about income distribution are about the welfares of individuals. Clearly, for a family of given income, there are more people affected in a larger family. (2) Since the income of each family has to be spread over the members, the *per capita* income is smaller.

This suggested to me that a useful way of representing the distribution of individual income would be to consider, e.g., a family with annual income \$50,000 containing five members as five individuals each with annual income \$10,000. (There are obvious objections to this proposal, but they run in the direction of moving even farther from present practice. For one thing, small children have less needs for space and food, so each child should count for less than one (so-called, 'adult-equivalent scales'). This raises some interesting questions in interpersonal comparability of income, which have not, I believe, been well addressed in the literature. For another, there are economies of scale in household consumption. It may not be true that, 'two can live as cheaply as one', but two can live together at the same utility levels for less than the sum of the costs of their living apart.

Apart from the detailed analyses of these cases (interesting and important in themselves), these two examples show the ambivalent relation between family and its members. The concept of the individual, which is so dominant in economic or legal discourse, gets a bit blurry when children are concerned. The statisticians have sensed an ambiguity in our understanding of this boundary between the individual and the social.

My aim is to propose the issue of a useful analytic representation of family structure, especially the role of children. The purpose is normative, rather than descriptive; I want to start a study of the formulation of a welfare economics of a world in which children play a role but not the same as that of adults. All I can do here is to sketch some of the issues such a formulation will have to address.

2. SOCIAL ETHICS, RECIPROCITY, AND CHILDREN

Let us start with a quotation from the great eighteenth century jurist, William Blackstone, in his famous *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. This sets forth the issues in a very clear way. The next, and most universal relation in nature, is...that between parent and child. ...

The duty of parents to provide for the *maintenance* of their children, is a principle of natural law; an obligation, says Puffendorf, laid on them not only by nature herself, but by their own proper act, in bringing them into the world; for they would be in the highest manner injurious to their issue, if they only gave their children life, that they might afterwards see them perish. ...

The municipal laws in all well-regulated states have taken care to enforce this duty though Providence has done it more effectually than any laws, by implanting in the breast of every parent that...insuperable degree of affection, which not even the deformity of person or mind, not even the wickedness, ingratitude, and rebellion of children can totally suppress or extinguish. ...

The power of parents over their children is derived from the former consideration, their duty: this authority being given them, partly to enable the parent more effectually to perform his duty, and partly as a recompence for his care and trouble in the faithful discharge of it (quoted from Mnookin and Weisberg [2000], pp. 255-259).

Please note some of the relevant points: (1) There is a 'natural' obligation in the parent-child relation, which is automatically recognized by the parent. (2) Taking the action of giving birth to a child creates an obligation, since otherwise the child wouldn't exist (this is different from point (1)). (3) Society has the right (and the obligation?) to enforce the parental obligation, though usually the enforcement will be unnecessary. (4) The parental obligation implies also power to the parents, for efficiency in discharging the obligation but also (very curiously) as a reward to the parents.

There is enough in these four points to sustain considerable analysis, more than I will engage in here. Instead, with Blackstone's remarks in mind, I will consider the usual models for social analysis.

If one looks at the standard models which try to provide a normative foundation for social policy, we notice two common element in many of them. These remarks apply equally to utilitarianism, to John Rawls's concept of justice as fairness [1971], and to contractarian views from Thomas Hobbes on. One element is that of parity or reciprocity. The other is that of a mutual gain from social interaction.

Consider first reciprocity and parity. In the utilitarian ethical position, the criterion of social well-being is the sum of all individuals' utilities; all individuals enter symmetrically. The 'original position' argument, as advanced by Wiliam Vickrey [1945], John Harsanyi [1955], and John Rawls [1971], gives some justification to this symmetry. It imagines indi-

viduals contracting for a social and institutional structure before they know their individual characteristics. This line of argument can be used to justify utilitarianism (Vickrey, Harsanyi) or other criteria (as in Rawls). In effect, redistribution or other ethical steps are derived as 'insurance' under the uncertainty of knowing one's abilities and needs. This view implies that the contracting parties are in some sense drawn from the same universe of abilities and needs, even though they are not strictly speaking equal.

The second characteristic is that there are gains to all from the formation of a society. Thomas Hobbes, the fountainhead of the contractarian justification for social arrangements, explained vividly the advantages of society over the 'state of nature' which would prevail in the absence of social order. Economists speak more prosaically of the gains from trade, which, in turn, may stem from specialization due to differing skills and needs or from increasing returns to scale.

If we take the conventional view of children as not-yet productive members of society, then they can provide neither insurance nor their parts of social gains. (This consideration is even more relevant to our obligations to generations still unborn). The argument about insurance does have an important qualification. Children can be thought of as making an insurance contract over time; that is, they can, when they are grown and productive, take care of their now-retired parents. This function has certainly been real historically. It is now discharged collectively by social security systems, to the extent that they are not fully funded. However, I think it is clear that the net flow of resources is from parents to children if one includes everything (rearing, education, and inheritance).

These facts about children imply that most theories of justice have difficulty in accommodating the place of children. Rawls made an ingenious attempt to study the ethics of regard for children and subsequent generations is very unsatisfactory; its inconsistencies have been noted by Arrow [1973] and Dasgupta [1974]. Utilitarianism generally solves the problem by admitting that children's welfares enter the social maximand but with a discount factor.

Empirical works on the economics of the family, notably that of Becker [1981], have also faced this issue. Here, in effect, children are treated as durable consumer goods, though their welfare also enters into the family's welfare. This point of view would come closest to justifying treating the distribution of family income, uncorrected for family size, as the appropriate measure of income inequality.

3. SOCIAL ACTIONS AND INDIVIDUAL VALUES

Consider the problem of social choices in a general way. We have a society of individuals who must take a collective action. Economists may think of the outcome as the allocation of resources, but one could take a more general perspective. The point of view is that inherent in the usual economic analysis, that is, 'methodological individualism'. In the general social choice model, this means that the preferences of all individuals are taken into account in arriving at a social outcome.

Each individual is considered to have a set of values, i.e., a set of preferences over social outcomes. Both the market and the political system (and their joint operation) can be taken as sets of rules which, for given technologies, determine the social outcomes (e.g., the distribution of consumption goods, jobs, ownership rights, the levels of public goods, and other objects of legislation and government policy) in a way depending on individual value systems. The rules include spheres of individual decision and collective decision, which add up to a social outcome.

Hence, it is necessary for individuals to be able to express preferences. The bias of economic analysis is to assume that the individual represents his or her values through actions. These include voting, purchases and sales, or participation in the intermediate institutions of civil society, such as philanthropy and volunteer activities. It is also true that, in any system with an economic component, the possession of assets and productive abilities will cause an increase in the weight of one's individual value system on the social outcome.

How do children fit into this picture? Their ability to express preferences in actions (or other ways) is limited in two ways: an inability to express preferences or to understand the consequences of actions; lack of assets. (Both of these, of course, change with age.)

To represent true interests of child, it appears that it is necessary to have an adult 'trustee'. The trustee's assets may also be diverted from the trustee's own interests to those of the child, as expressed in the quotation from Blackstone.

Evolution has suggested that the natural trustees are the parents. In effect, the Beckerian value of children as durable consumer goods can motivate a trusteeship relation. Obviously, this system has worked fairly well. Indeed, it is noteworthy that while the Bible is full of injunctions for children to honor and respect parents, there are none (to my knowledge) imposing any obligations on parents to respect and nurture children. The pessimistic interpretation is that children are the property of parents, to do with as they like. But, more likely, the omission implies that parental love

is so strong that good treatment of children need not be enjoined. The feeling of children for parents, *per contra*, needs reinforcement.

In short, there is a widely felt obligation that parents act as trustees for children. The concept of, 'obligation', is not widely spread in ethical and economic discourse about social arrangements. Rather one talks about the achievement of happiness (even in the Declaration of Independence) or, as we frequently say, 'utility', or even, as with Sen, 'functionings and capabilities'. Another language talks of, 'rights'. I now have come to believe that there is a category of, 'obligations', which cannot easily be reduced to either utilities or rights.

Though the recognition of the obligations of parents to children may be widespread in practice, it is far from universal, and therein lies the need for policy discussions. The need for at least some state intervention has received recognition in the law of the United States. Thus, in the case of *Prince v. Massachusetts*, the opinion of the Supreme Court held that, the state's authority over children's activities is broader than over like actions of adults. ... A democratic society rests, for its continuance, upon the healthy, well-rounded growth of young people into full maturity as citizens, with all that implies. ... Among evils most appropriate for such action are the crippling effects of child employment, more especially in public places, and the possible harms arising from other activities subject to all the diverse influences of the street. *It is too late now to doubt that legislation appropriately designed to reach such evils is within the state's police power, whether against the parent's claim to control of the child or one that religious scruples dictate contrary action.* (Emphasis added. Quoted from Mnookin and Weisberg [2000], p. 83).

Even the libertarians Milton and Rose Friedman [1962] have defended compulsory education laws on the grounds that the interests of parents differ from those of children.

4. SOME EVIDENCE

I here present some United States data which bear on the extent to which there is a need to enforce the trusteeship obligations of parents.

In the following, 'children' are defined as those under 18. First of all, let us consider the income status of families with children. Certainly, it would be unfavorable for children to be brought up predominantly in households with little ability to provide for their maintenance and education. Here, the news is fairly good. Having children is positively associated with family

income; 52% of children live in families with incomes in the top 40% of the income distribution; 54% of children live in families whose incomes are 200% of poverty level or more.

However, the picture with regard to parental status is not good. In 2002, only 69% live with two parents. The educational and future handicaps of being raised with one (or in 4% of the cases, no) parent have been heavily documented, even holding income constant. ('Parents' here include step-parents and adoptive parents.) Of course, single-parent households are also much poorer.

The figures on child neglect and abuse are also startling. Each year, about 1.3% of children are reported as being subject to abuse and neglect. This means that over 18 years of childhood, 20% of children are, on the average, abused or neglected sufficiently to be reported. Other data, based on self-reports of adults, show something like 12% or 13% of children have been severely abused. Severe child abuse is a major risk factor in adult depression.

The large number of single-parent households in the United States is driven to a large extent by births to unmarried couples. But an increasingly significant cause is the rise in the divorce rate, mostly due to the increased prevalence of laws permitting divorce on the instigation of a single party (unilateral divorce). It is also clear that unilateral divorce has significant impacts on the subsequent adult behavior of the children; they are less well educated and have lower family incomes. They also marry earlier but separate more often and have higher odds of adult suicide. None of these effects is very large, but in the population of the United States there are considerable numbers of future adults at stake (Gruber, 2004). It has also been shown that parental divorce has negative effects on the child's subsequent mental health. Some of this can be attributed to the emotional environment in families that subsequently choose divorce, but there is evidence that the divorce itself adds to the impact on mental health (Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, and McRae [1998]).

5. POLICY ISSUES

Clearly, the obligations to children require some attention. Analytically, we lack an adequate framework to discuss what obligations are legitimate and how they are to be traded off against other claims, say to utility. This lacuna is strongly exemplified in the discourse on population.

From the practical policy viewpoint, the evidence seems to be that our present perception of obligations is failing a significant fraction of the chil-

dren. Increasing the role of the state may be called for in some cases, but we all know the problems there. The conflict shows up in every case of a child killed or gravely damaged by parents; there is a balancing of the state's rather crude and limited capabilities against the value of even an under-performing family.

I think, though I am far from confident, that our divorce laws have gone too far. Marriage *per se* is not a matter of great social interest; consenting adults should be free. But when children are involved, the situation changes considerably. There are, as the economist would say, externalities.

However, I must admit that the most intractable part of single-parent households are the never married. I have no good idea what can be done here.

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