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Parental Labor as Cooperative Labor

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Abstract: The procreative justice debate asks whether justice, and in particular, whether a principle of fair play, requires that non-parents share in the costs of procreation and child-rearing. The principle of fair play demands that persons who benefit from the cooperative labor of others share in the burdens of producing that benefit. Non-parents should share in the costs of procreation and child-rearing if reproductive and parental labor count as *cooperative* labor, but they are not obligated to share in those costs if parents incur those costs as part of a personal project. I argue that parental labor counts as cooperative labor because becoming a parent involves knowingly assuming a social role whereby one incurs new moral and legal obligations. Even if parents are ultimately motivated by personal reasons, they nevertheless constrain their liberty in order to comply with the rules of a cooperative scheme, and, in doing so, their labor plausibly counts as *cooperative*. Parents have a claim of justice on others, then, to consider whether the benefits and burdens of procreating and child-rearing are fairly distributed.

Keywords: Procreation, Parents, Fair Play, Rawls, Cooperative Labor, Social Roles

The procreative justice debate asks whether justice, and in particular whether a principle of fair play, requires that non-parents share in the costs of procreation and child-rearing. On the one hand, becoming a parent seems to be a choice persons make for the sake of their own good or well-being. For many people, creating a child to parent is part of what gives their life meaning or purpose.¹ The specifics may vary, but in general procreating and parenting, to the extent that they are undertaken on purpose, seem to reflect an individual's judgment about what is valuable and what will make their own life go well.

On the other hand, even if prospective parents' motivations are ultimately personal, once they become parents, they are saddled with a heavy burden for close to two decades, if not longer. Children require constant supervision, physical and emotional care, education, discipline, protection, and affection. Parenting is a full-time job with no sick days or time off. Parents are responsible for their child all day, every day—including when they entrust their child to someone else's care part-time. Children require seemingly endless resources to keep them fed, clothed, healthy, entertained, educated, and sheltered. And unlike other elective activities a person might pursue, like travel or training for a marathon, parenting is not an activity you can just *stop* if you change your mind or decide the costs are no longer worthwhile. Once you've undertaken the care of a child, the child's dependence on *you* for their care locks you into the moral responsibilities of parenthood. You can't just decide one day that you're not interested in being a parent anymore, at least not without great moral cost.

What's more, parental labor seems to play a crucial role in the ongoing functioning of society and the state. Procreators and parents play an important role in our social structure: by

procreating and then parenting one's offspring, parents create new, contributing members of society. Each child is part of a new generation of not only taxpayers or pension-funders, but workers, caretakers, builders, and innovators. Society relies on procreation and parenting not just for economic production, but to reproduce its social and political institutions over time. Citizens don't materialize out of nowhere; they are created and reared by *someone*.²

Persons who choose to procreate and parent seem to play an important function in society, at great cost to themselves. According to Rawls's principle of fair play, when persons voluntarily bear some cost that in turn produces a benefit to everyone, third-party beneficiaries are obligated to share in the production costs of those benefits. Rawls describes the principle as follows:

“When a number of persons engage in a mutually advantageous cooperative venture according to rules, and thus restrict their liberty in ways necessary to yield advantage for all, those who have submitted to these restrictions have a right to a similar acquiescence on the part of those who have benefitted from their submission. We are not to gain from the cooperative efforts of others without doing our fair share.”³

The principle of fair play has three key components: there must be some good or benefit produced, the producers must have incurred some cost to produce it (restricted their liberty), and the producers must have produced that good as part of a cooperative scheme. Behind the principle of fair play is a condemnation of free riding. You shouldn't enjoy the fruits of someone else's labor without also doing your fair share—whatever that amounts to. For Rawls, the principle of fair play is what underlies our general obligation to follow the law, and it helps explain why, for instance, it's appropriate to coercively enforce a taxation system.⁴

The procreative justice debate has largely centered on the applicability of this principle to procreation and parenting: Do parents produce a net cost or benefit to others? If they produce a net benefit, do they also assume some cost to produce it? If so, is that cost incurred as part of a cooperative scheme? And, even if those conditions are all met, do non-parents count as free riding on parental labor or are they already contributing their fair share?

While the cost-sharing debate can't be fully settled without addressing each of these questions, my focus is whether parents meet what I call the *cooperation condition* of the fair play principle. For Rawls, the principle of fair play captures unfair free riding. The unfairness isn't simply that one person benefits from the actions of another or that someone undertakes a costly activity; the unfairness arises when someone benefits from another person's having followed the rules, restricted their liberty, or submitted to restrictions. The persons who merit cost-sharing don't simply do as they wish and coincidentally benefit others; they restrict their liberty in accordance with rules that are designed to *benefit* our “mutually advantageous cooperative venture.”⁵ To be responsible for your contribution in a way that generates a claim of fairness on others, you must *voluntarily* participate or cooperate in what we're doing together.

Proponents of both sides of the debate have assumed that parents fail to cooperate because their choice to have and raise children is singularly motivated by some personal desire or sense of meaning. Parenting may be costly, but if those costs aren't incurred as part of a cooperative scheme, then parental labor is not a form of cooperation. Parenting, on this picture, amounts to a costly personal project or hobby and so does not generate a claim on others to share in its costs.

The assumption that parenting is ultimately a costly personal project or hobby has largely gone uncontested. My aim is to challenge the assumption that parenting is an individual activity unconnected to our larger social and political organization. My aim is not to challenge either the

use of the principle of fair play or the assumption that cooperation must involve some kind of voluntary participation from parents; rather, I will give an alternative conception of what is to take on the parental role that explains why parental labor counts as cooperation in Rawls's framework.

I will begin by showing that, despite being on opposite sides of the cost-sharing debate, both Casal and Williams and Olsaretti share the assumption that the choice to become a parent is a largely made for personal reasons and so does not count as voluntary cooperation. Casal and Williams rely on that assumption to argue against cost-sharing, whereas Olsaretti rejects the requirement that parents must explicitly cooperate in order to merit compensation under a principle of fair play. Both sides agree, however, that parents are *not* intentionally and explicitly cooperating to produce a social benefit.

I will argue that parents can be motivated by their personal desire to have and raise children and at the same time choose to accept constraints on how they do so that come with occupying the *social role of parent*. Via the social role of parent, society distributes the burden of child production and rearing largely to individuals and families. Because society shapes the role of parent, the choice to become a parent is transformed into a kind of cooperation. Even if persons initially become parents for personal reasons, their choice is ultimately a choice to knowingly accept social and legal constraints on their liberty in a way that contributes to a cooperative scheme.

§1 *Fair Play and Parental Cooperation*

Casal and Williams's argument against cost-sharing depends on the assumption that parenting is ultimately a personal choice.⁶ Some people find happiness or meaning in raising pets, collecting art, mountain climbing, fine dining—others find it by becoming parents. Even if non-parents sometimes benefit from others' having and rearing children, that does not entail that, as a matter of fairness, they should help subsidize it. Casal and Williams argue that the principle of fair play supports compensation for labor only when individuals *cooperatively* produce a benefit. The principle of fair play demands that persons not free ride on the cooperative labor of others, but it wouldn't apply if parents incur costs in the pursuit of a personal project.⁷

Casal and Williams's argument that procreating and parenting does not count as cooperative labor depends on two related claims: the costs of parenting are largely unnecessary for the production of the social benefit in question, and, to the extent that parents do bear some costs relevant to producing a social benefit, they don't count as cooperating unless they *intentionally* undertake those costs for the sake of producing that benefit. With regard to the costs of parenting, they acknowledge that procreating and parenting can be costly, but they argue that taking on those costs isn't necessary for the production of a social good and so doesn't count as cooperation.⁸ Parts of parenting might count as cooperative, like vaccinating one's child or sending them to public school, but non-parents also cooperate in ways that contribute to the health and wellbeing of the community, by, for example, paying taxes that contribute to healthcare and education. Much of parenting, they claim, is parents getting to parent how *they* want, not complying with rules for the sake of everyone else's benefit. Though fancy private schools or music lessons may be expensive, they are expenses that are optional with respect to our cooperative venture because fancy schools and music lessons aren't necessary for the production of a social good that we couldn't have access to without their doing so.

What's more, persons choose to become parents, presumably, because there is some overall benefit to them, or some meaningful contribution to their own good. Many activities that persons undertake for their own good are costly. Activities like training for a race, participating in

a religious or cultural community, creating art, etc. all require time, material resources, and physical sacrifice. Persons know the costs associated with their private life choices. If they choose to pursue some activity that has costs associated with it, then they have judged that the benefits of that activity outweigh or justify those costs. Procreating and parenting may be one of the more costly activities one can choose to do, but those who choose to become parents must not see parenting as an overall burden or else they wouldn't choose to become parents to begin with.

That parents willingly accept the costs of parenting sets up Casal and Williams's second claim: even if all the costs of parenting were relevant to the production of whatever benefit they produce, it's not as if persons have and raise children *for the sake* of producing that social benefit. This second claim is key to understanding Casal and Williams's interpretation of the principle of fair play. For them, cooperation requires an explicit intention to benefit others (or our cooperative venture) by one's labor. If persons procreate and parent because doing so is important to them, then they don't count as intentionally producing a social good. Parental labor, then, is not cooperative labor, and so third parties do not have an obligation to share in the costs of that labor, even if they benefit from it.

In "Children as Public Goods?," Olsaretti rejects Casal and Williams's interpretation of the fair play principle, because many of the costs of parenting are the result of our social and political structures being organized in a way that takes advantage of parental labor.⁹ Olsaretti puts the point this way, "Some of the costs of parenting are socially created, *and they are created as a by-product of the activity's being beneficial* to third parties."¹⁰ If some of the costs of parenting are socially created in order to benefit society, then arguably parental labor merits cost-sharing. Parents don't set the costs of parenting, and they don't control what happens to the product of their labor. Insofar as parenting is made more costly in order to benefit others, those additional costs should not be fully internalized by parents.

Olsaretti notes, for example, the rising costs to provide children with an education adequate for them to have decent job prospects as adults (which now increasingly includes the costs of the child continuing to live at home while they pursue higher education or while they struggle to find employment). Setting aside the pressure to send one's child to an elite college, the state often mandates that children receive some baseline education, not simply for their own sake but for the benefit of society. And while, for example, there is some provision of public education in the US, it's not completely free, the quality varies, and it can be insufficient for children with specialized needs.¹¹

Or consider accessibility to childcare. In the US, childcare deserts are a major problem, and they're not the fault of individual parents.¹² When parents live in geographical locations with an inadequate supply of childcare centers, they face an *increased* parental burden. The state could offer universal pre-K or subsidize childcare facilities, especially those that operate in high cost of living urban areas where there's more work opportunities for parents, but, at least in the US, this hasn't gotten political support.¹³ Prospective parents may wish to have access to paid part-time or flexible employment, or to not have to work outside the home at all while their children are young, but for many parents, these are not affordable options due to the rising costs of living and lack of state support.¹⁴

Olsaretti's key insight is that the state context in which persons parent is relevant to the application of the principle of fair play.¹⁵ She focuses primarily on the benefits parents produce by creating future taxpayers in a welfare state. Though we could create a bifurcated welfare system that distinguishes between parents and non-parents, to the extent that we don't, non-parents benefit from the labor of parents.¹⁶ Non-parents don't necessarily free ride maliciously, or even intentionally, and yet by participating in a structure that is *organized* to siphon off the benefits

of parental labor to the benefit of all, they ought to share in the costs of parenting. Parental labor, then, is transformed into cooperative labor by the state's socialization of its benefits—regardless of parental motivation.

Olsaretti agrees with Casal and Williams, however, that parents aren't explicitly or intentionally cooperating when they parent. They may be aware of how their parenting benefits others, but ultimately, they are acting for the sake of themselves and their children.¹⁷ Olsaretti gets around this issue by attributing responsibility not to parents but to *the state*. The fact that the state funnels the benefits of parental labor to others via a welfare scheme makes parental labor cooperative. However, there needn't, on her view, be any purposeful or voluntary cooperation on behalf of parents themselves.

Though I largely agree with Olsaretti's argument that parents produce a socialized good, I disagree that we should reject the cooperation condition of the principle of fair play because doing so *undersells* the extent to which parental labor involves submitting to the rules of our cooperative venture. In what follows, I will show that parenting doesn't just count as cooperative because the state socializes the benefits of parental labor, parenting counts as cooperative because the state sets the terms for what it is *to be* a parent.

§2 *The Social Role of Parent*

Implicit in Casal and Williams's account is the idea that being the cause of a benefit isn't enough to merit compensation; someone must be responsible for that benefit in some *thicker* sense. If parents accidentally or coincidentally produce a social good, then they may be its efficient cause, but we shouldn't attribute the social benefit *to* them. I agree with Casal and Williams that parents don't count as cooperating if they accidentally benefit others. To be responsible for their contribution in a way that generates a claim of fairness on others, they must voluntarily participate in what we're doing together. However, Casal and Williams make the further claim that cooperation must involve an explicit *motive* to benefit others. And though I agree with them that it is highly implausible that parents have as part of their psychology an explicit aim to benefit third parties, it is also implausible that such a motivation is required by Rawls's principle of fair play.

For Rawls, society can be understood as a cooperative venture for mutual advantage.¹⁸ This cooperative venture includes the legal and political system, but it also extends beyond that to include the social institutions that form the backdrop of our lives. The rules of these institutions are designed to benefit the members of society.¹⁹ Rawls's principles of justice apply to the institutions and their rules, not the conduct or motivation of individuals.²⁰ Persons must comply with the rules of these institutions, but (formal) justice does not require them to have a further altruistic motivation for that compliance.²¹ Persons may advance their own ends within the *confines* of the rules, then, and still count as submitting to those rules, or cooperating. For example, a person who pays their taxes is cooperating just by following the rules of our tax system; they needn't also have some desire or intention to benefit others by doing so.

Among those basic institutions is the family.²² The family is not merely a private association. It is a social and political institution governed by rules. Those rules are not at the discretion of individual parents; rather, the rules set the terms for what it is *to be a parent* in society. Parents are contributing to our cooperative venture, then, if they parent in compliance with the social and legal rules that govern the institution of the family. Parents needn't, as Casal and Williams claim, have altruistic motivations in order to count as cooperating. The question, then, is whether parents are merely acting on personal preference or if, in taking on the social

role of parent, they are also voluntarily constraining their parenting to comply with the rules of our cooperative venture.

To better understand why parenting involves submitting to rules, we must reconsider the assumption both sides of the debate share: that parenting is *merely* a matter of personal preference. This assumption faces two problems. First, it's not obvious that the initial choice to become a parent is one for which parents are *solely* responsible; and second, even if parents are solely responsible for their choice, it's implausible that parents are *only* acting on personal preference in how they parent.

Regarding the choice to become a parent, the key takeaway from Olsaretti's account is that parenting happens in a particular social and political context. To understand the costs of parenting, we must take a more expansive view of who is responsible for those costs. The context in which persons choose to become parents is at least partially the result of collective or state action that targets prospective parents, both explicitly and implicitly, by way of policymaking. For example, the state has a long history of explicitly and unjustly controlling reproduction by *overriding* a person's choice to become a parent (slavery, forced sterilization, inadequate sexual education, blocking access to birth control, criminalizing abortion, etc.).²³ Though the principle of fair play is meant to apply to the *just* state, the explicit control the state has *already* exerted over reproduction and parenting highlights the pervasive influence the state has over a person's choice to become a parent in the first place.²⁴

Even if we set aside unjust control over reproduction, state policies will still affect family formation, both directly and indirectly, in a just state. In Rawls's framework, for example, so long as the state conforms to the two principles of justice, there's still room for it to intentionally *influence* reproduction by incentivizing (or disincentivizing) reproductive choices through tax, housing, education, healthcare, and childcare policies.²⁵ Okin and Schouten go even further, arguing that a just state *ought* to use such policies to bring about greater gender justice in the family.²⁶

Recognizing that the state has some responsibility in the reproductive choices of individuals needn't entail that parents are merely cogs in the state reproduction machine. Instead of exchanging one responsible party for another, we should instead expand the scope of responsibility. It can both be true that individual parents make a choice for which they are responsible *and* that the state shares in that responsibility in virtue of *its* actions. We should be wary, then, of treating the choice to procreate and parent as the sole responsibility of individuals. Instead, we should ask what state policies are justified given that they will inevitably influence both the choice to become a parent and its corresponding costs.

Even if, implausibly, we assume that the state has *no* influence over a person's choice to become a parent, it would still be a mistake to assume that how persons parent is merely an expression of personal preference. Becoming a parent in a society involves taking on a *social role* that has its own set of responsibilities and obligations.²⁷ Parents aren't free to do what they please as parents; they face social and legal constraints on *how* they parent.

In *No Exit: What Parents Owe their Children and What Society Owes Parents*, Alstott's argument about the extent to which the parental role is shaped by state policies helps illustrate why the terms of what it is to be a parent are not up to individual parents.²⁸ Alstott argues that one of the biggest constraints on parents from the state is the duty to provide continuity of care for their children, or to stay in a long-term relationship with the child where the child's needs are given reasonable priority. Continuity of care is crucial to a child's ability to develop into an independent person. And even though the state has other institutions that are involved in

children's care (e.g., the education and health care systems), those institutions do not operate effectively for children without the advocacy of their parents.

What Alstott calls the No Exit obligation is a legally enforced obligation to remain in the parental role and to continue caring for one's child. The state both incentivizes and punishes parents in order to ensure that they *stay parents*. When parents successfully provide continuity of care for their children, they are given more authority over them. And while the state can't coercively force parents to stay parents, it can punish them for stepping away from the parent-child relationship (even if temporarily doing so is in both the parent and the child's best interests).²⁹

The agential cost on parents to provide continuity of care is extraordinarily high, because doing so requires that parents continuously prioritize the needs of their children without an option to exit (or take a break) if providing that care becomes overwhelming or alienating for the parent.³⁰ Alstott describes the burden on parental autonomy of providing continuity of care in this way: "The No Exit obligation curtails the exercise of two capabilities that citizens of a free society ordinarily take for granted: the capacity to set one's own priorities among competing projects or values, and the capacity to revise one's priorities and projects over time."³¹ Society says, in effect, unlike persons who occupy other social roles, persons who occupy the role of parent must not revise their life plan because the cost of doing so is too high for the child (and in turn, the rest of us). Alstott doesn't argue that the state's enforcement of this obligation is illegitimate; she argues, and I agree, that the state should at the same time help alleviate some of the costs of this obligation on parents by providing better parental support.³²

If we take Alstott's argument seriously, then the choice to become a parent is a choice to accept a role that is already largely defined and constrained. And while that choice may be deeply personal, it is not a choice to do an inherently individual or idiosyncratic activity. Even if parents have largely internalized the social and legal rules that bind them and so don't experience them as burdensome or constricting, that doesn't entail that parents aren't still constraining their actions to comply with them.³³

When someone takes up a social role, like that of a parent, they accept the role obligations or rules associated with the role in question as action-guiding.³⁴ Prospective parents understand the constrained nature of the choice available to them: to become a parent in a society is to take on *new and demanding obligations* as much as it is a choice to give one's life meaning or to advance one's personal well-being. Parenting requires that persons constrain their liberty in order to meet the changing social and political obligations that their role incurs. Parents are increasingly expected to devote more time and energy to their children, which requires a greater sacrifice of their personal liberty. These obligations are burdensome, both materially *and* personally. The sacrifices parents make benefit the child, yes, but they also benefit society, because the child becomes a member of a new generation that maintains and reproduces society's workforce and institutions.³⁵ And when we understand the choice to become a parent as an informed choice to take on a role with corresponding obligations, then parenting starts to look a lot more like cooperation in the production of a social benefit than an idiosyncratic hobby.

Social roles, including the role of parent, can be both intrinsically valuable to the person who occupies it *and* instrumentally valuable to society. The fact that someone would be motivated by the intrinsic value they find in some activity doesn't mean their labor isn't cooperative or that we may take advantage of their willingness to take on that role for its intrinsic value. When someone becomes a teacher, for example, they might be motivated by a personal desire to work with children, rather than by a sense of duty to meet some social need. But at the same time, in becoming a teacher, that person is aware that they are also assuming a role that has norms and

expectations for *how* one teaches. The teacher may expect or hope to get something out of teaching that contributes to their personal well-being (be it a salary or personal fulfillment), but part of what it is to operate in the role of teacher is to accept that its rules or norms are binding over how one acts in that role. Even if someone becomes a teacher to satisfy a personal preference or desire, when acting as a teacher that person must *subordinate* their personal preferences or aims in order to meet their role obligations. If they are unwilling to do so, then they should give up that role.

An implication of my view is that parents are likely not the only persons who are undercompensated for their labor because they are also motivated to do that labor on the basis of the value they find in the role itself. Other caregiving and service roles tend to be compensated poorly or inadequately supported, yet many persons continue to take on these roles in part because they find that work meaningful. Those persons can be motivated by the care and concern they have for the recipients of their roles and still count cooperating in a way that is beneficial to society. We shouldn't underpay teachers, childcare workers, or nurses, for example, even if they might be willing to do that work for less. Their work is no less part of our cooperative venture just because they are sometimes also personally motivated to do it.

A person might *benefit* from becoming a parent, then, and still face unfair costs to do so. Once we recognize the role that society plays in setting many of the costs of parenting, including the rules that bind parents, we should be wary of allowing the costs of parenting to rise just because parents are willing to pay them.³⁶ And if the principle of fair play rules out actors whose motivations are overdetermined, or those who recognize a good that is intrinsic rather than instrumental to their activity, then that's a strike against the principle of fair play, not against parents' claim that others share in the cost of parenting.

What sets the parental role apart from other roles is the *extent* of the costs involved. Many role actors who occupy paid employment positions can clock out at the end of shift or quit their profession all together, but there is no time off for parents and no option to quit. Parents aren't morally free to re-prioritize their own good above or at the expense of meeting their child's needs.³⁷ Other role actors can live lives outside of their roles and are not always bound by their role obligations. A parent, however, never steps out of their role while the child is still dependent on them. They may solicit help, which can itself be costly, but they can't *stop being a parent*, even for a day (at least not without great moral cost).

Once we include in the costs of parenting the liberty constraints associated with the parental role, it's not hard to see how becoming a parent, even if initially personally motivated, still counts as cooperative labor. To assume a social role is to take on constraints which shape one's activity going forward. As Olsaretti noted, parents are not unaware that their actions help make their children ready to participate in society. But more than that, the end or aim of parenting *includes* readying one's child to operate in society, an end that not only benefits the child but also, arguably, everyone who enjoys the maintenance and reproduction of society's institutions.

And if Alstott is right about the way in which the state is also responsible for the high cost to a parental autonomy, then Olsaretti's own account doesn't go far enough. When our focus is on how the welfare system makes parenting more economically costly, we aren't paying attention to the way in which society makes parenting *personally* costly, or costly to parental freedom. If a particular state were to do away with their welfare system, or create a bifurcated system, that would not transform parental labor back into an individual hobby. It's not just the welfare scheme that transforms what's fair in cost-sharing, it's also the social and legal rules that bear on what constitutes being a parent in the first place. If parents willingly submit to those rules,

then, by the lights of Rawls's principle of fair play, they are genuinely and voluntarily cooperating.

Even if parents are cooperating, one might still object that parents aren't producing a benefit, or at least, the right kind of benefit. And while I am not taking a stance on the nature of the benefit parents produce (e.g., if children are a public or socialized good), the product of parental labor must be plausibly *beneficial* for my account of parental labor as cooperation to get traction. To that end, as I mentioned at the outset, procreation and parenting is (at the very least) necessary for there to be a cooperative venture at all.³⁸ Society *needs* reproductive labor, not just to generate new generation of workers (and with it, tax payers), but also to instill in the next generation a sense of justice or commitment to our cooperative venture.³⁹ Even in cases where parents are *minimally* equipping their children to contribute to our collective arrangements, producing and rearing new persons who are at least capable of contribution is necessary for our cooperative venture to persist over time.

One might still ask about an individual parent whether *they* merit compensation or cost-sharing if they've produced a child who is more costly to society than beneficial. Not all parents are equally conscientious, but even for those who are, some children will require more costly medical care, education, or, for whatever reason, fail to contribute to society when they are older. Even so, policy is a blunt instrument. The goal of policymaking aimed at externalizing some of the costs of parenting wouldn't be to ensure that only the persons who really need or merit some benefit receive it (thus requiring expensive process of figuring that out). The goal would be to put in place *general* supports for parents so they have a better shot at producing children who will benefit society.

And even if *most* parents fail to produce a net benefit, that doesn't entail that the blame lies solely with parents. Rawls says of the rules of our cooperative venture that they "specify a system of cooperation designed to advance the good of those taking part in it."⁴⁰ Individual parents are responsible for following rules of our cooperative venture, but it is not their responsibility to ensure that the rules themselves are adequately designed to produce a benefit for others. If we take seriously that parents act within the constraints of the parental role, then *if* some (or even most!) parents largely aren't producing a net benefit to society, that failure may lie in how we've constructed the social role of parent, or the rules that govern the institution of the family, not a failure of cooperation on the part of parents.⁴¹ For example, if our policies prioritize the nuclear family over a more communal model of child-rearing, and if doing so tends to undermine the effort of parents to help their children contribute in a positive way to their community, then we should rethink how we conceive of the role of parent and the structure of the family rather than treat parenting as an expensive hobby.⁴²

If the costs of parenting are unfair, that also doesn't entail that the fault lies with non-parents. In the debate on parental cost-sharing, parents and non-parents are often treated as adversarial: either parents are demanding unreasonable subsidies from non-parents, or non-parents are failing to do their fair share. The real problem isn't that non-parents aren't fully cooperating or contributing sufficiently to our cooperative venture; rather, once we recognize parental labor as part of our cooperative venture and not some expensive hobby, we have reason to investigate whether the *rules* of our institutions, including that of the family, are designed so that following them generates mutual advantage to us all. If parents are unduly burdened in our current system, one in which parents lack an exit from the parental role, then we have reason to put different or better supports in place to help mitigate the costs of parenting that are imposed on them by our social and political organization.

What's more, when we talk about whether the product of procreation and parenting is a net benefit or cost, it's easy to forget that a child isn't like clean air, national defense, or a radio program. The product of parental labor isn't a thing at all—the product is a *person*. That person can be costly or beneficial to society, but they are not a good or commodity. The fact that the product of parental labor is a person is another reason we shouldn't treat the choice to procreate and parent as *merely* a personal project or expensive hobby.⁴³ Parental role obligations are in part a response to the value of the child as a person. Parents owe it to their children to meet the obligations of their role and society ought to support their doing so successfully because a child isn't merely an instrument to satisfy the desires of individual parents *or* to generate some social benefit.

Conclusion

According to the principle of fair play, whether non-parents have a duty of justice to share in the costs of procreation and child-rearing is in part a question about what counts as cooperative labor. Both Casal and Williams and Olsaretti underestimate the control that society exerts over reproduction and parenting, and by extension they fail to adequately capture the cooperative nature of parenting. I ultimately agree with Olsaretti that society is partially responsible for transforming parental labor into cooperative labor. However, on my account society does so not only by redirecting the product of parental labor after the fact, but also by shaping what constitutes *being a parent* in the first place.

I've proposed that we understand parenting as an inherently cooperative activity because parents occupy a social role that constrains how they parent. Persons who become parents are not just aware of these obligations, they voluntarily accept them when they choose to become parents in a society. In doing so, they count as taking up a cooperative activity, even if their ultimate motivation for accepting these constraints is personal. Parental labor, then, *is* cooperative labor.

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¹ For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on persons who procreate in order to parent their offspring (sometimes called procreative parenting). Though persons may become parents by adopting a child who already exists, the question of procreative justice at stake isn’t triggered in the same way by persons who take on the care of existing children.

² This point is at the heart of Okin’s criticism of traditional political theories that *assume* the reproduction of the population and social and political institutions without accounting for the labor behind it. My argument echoes Okin’s treatment of Rawls. See Chapters 4 and 5 in Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 1989.

³ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 112. Rawls refers to this principle as the principle of fairness. In the procreative justice debate, it’s often called the principle of fair play, which is how I will refer to it here. See also Hart’s discussion of the principle of fair play in Hart, “Are There Any Natural Rights?”

⁴ For the purposes of this paper, I will take the principle of fair play for granted and focus on its application in the context of what we owe parents. For arguments against the fair play principle, see Lowe, “Free Riders, ‘Fair Share,’ and the Principle of Fair Play”; Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*; Simmons, “The Principle of Fair Play.”

⁵ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 4.

⁶ Casal and Williams, “Equality of Resources and Procreative Justice,” 159.

⁷ Casal and Williams’ emphasis on the personal nature of the choice to parent is consistent with their appeal to Dworkin’s resource egalitarianism. According to resource egalitarianism, justice doesn’t require that we equalize how well persons are doing (by their own lights), because a person’s well-being is in part a function of their own choices and so is something for which they are personally responsible. Persons are responsible not only for their own well-being but also for how their choices impact others. For Casal and Williams, procreative justice largely depends, then, on what costs procreating and parenting impose on the resources available to third parties, or non-parents. Casal and Williams, 153; Dworkin, “What Is Equality? Part 1: Equality of Welfare”; Dworkin, “What Is Equality?”; Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality*.

⁸ For Casal and Williams, not only does parenting not count as cooperative labor, but parents should be sensitive to the way in which parenting can generate negative externalities for others. See Casal and Williams, “Equality of Resources and Procreative Justice,” 159; 161.

⁹ Olsaretti, “Children as Public Goods?,” 2013, 244.

¹⁰ Olsaretti, 243.

¹¹ The quality of public education in the US also varies by location due to the local funding of schools. The cost of housing can serve as a barrier to accessing higher performing schools. See DiSalvo and Yu, “Housing Affordability and School Quality in the United States.”

¹² Malik et al., “America’s Child Care Deserts in 2018.”

¹³ In the US, it’s notable that both Biden’s *Build Back Better* Plan and Romney’s *Family Security Act* failed to receive sufficient congressional support in 2021, despite the economic instability families faced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

¹⁴ Shelby makes this point with respect to the tradeoff that poor single mothers face between caring for one’s child and engaging in paid employment. See Shelby, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform*.

¹⁵ Olsaretti, “Children as Public Goods?,” 2013, 245.

¹⁶ Olsaretti, 250.

¹⁷ That parents aren’t explicitly cooperating, or intentionally producing a social good, is one reason Olsaretti rejects the public goods argument for cost-sharing in favor of the socialized goods argument. See Olsaretti, 243.

¹⁸ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 4.

¹⁹ Rawls, 7.

²⁰ Rawls, 54–57.

²¹ Cohen famously objects to Rawls on this score. See Cohen, *If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?*, 137–43.

²² Okin and Cohen both criticize Rawls for being ambiguous about the family’s inclusion in the basic structure. Okin argues that Rawls doesn’t fully appreciate the family’s role in a just society. Cohen’s critique is aimed at the idea that persons in a just society need only comply with the (coercively enforced) rules but that they needn’t have some additional altruistic motivation to benefit others. If Rawls does include the family in the basic structure, then he can’t help himself to the subject of justice being the (coercive) basic structure of society as opposed to the choices of individuals. However, if the family isn’t included in the subject matter of justice, then his theory neglects a social institution that has a profound effect on people’s prospects. For my purposes, taking seriously how the family is shaped by the coercive element of state is enough to show that parenting isn’t *merely* a personal hobby. With Cohen, I’m inclined to see the noncoercive social structures as part of the subject matter of justice; however, I don’t think we can fully separate the choices of individuals (in the family) from the way in which norms about the family are internalized by those individuals. Cohen, 134–40; Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 1989, 89–109.

²³ The Reproductive Justice movement captures the ways in which the state *unjustly* controls reproduction and parenting, often making it more costly for persons of color to reproduce and parent. For examples of reproductive control by the state in the US, see Lira, *Laboratory of Deficiency: Sterilization and Confinement in California, 1900–1950s*;

Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*; Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction*; Theobald, *Reproduction on the Reservation Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Colonialism in the Long Twentieth Century*.

²⁴ Shelby argues, for example, that welfare restrictions aimed at disincentivizing persons in the ghetto from procreating treat individuals as wholly responsible for the economic conditions in which they would parent (and the subsequent negative effect on child) while neglecting the responsibility of state for its unjust distribution of resources. See Shelby, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform*, 119–41.

²⁵ Tax breaks for dependent children is one way the US has encouraged procreation. Countries like Hungary and Singapore have offered bonus payouts, childcare and housing subsidies, and even subsidized IVF to encourage their citizens to procreate. For examples of these policies see Cook, Iarskaia-Smirnova, and Kozlov, “Trying to Reverse Demographic Decline: Pro-Natalist and Family Policies in Russia, Poland and Hungary”; Jones and Hamid, “Singapore’s Pro-Natalist Policies: To What Extent Have They Worked?”; Ratcliffe and correspondent, “Singapore to Offer Baby Bonus as People Put Plans on Hold in Covid Crisis”; Walker, “Baby Machines.”

²⁶ See Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 1989; Schouten, *Liberalism, Neutrality, and the Gendered Division of Labor*.

²⁷ For a discussion of parental rights and responsibilities, see Alstott, *No Exit*; Archard, *The Obligations and Responsibilities of Parenthood*; Brake, “Willing Parents: A Voluntarist Account of Parental Role Obligations”; Hall, “The Origin of Parental Rights”; Millum, “How Do We Acquire Parental Responsibilities?”

²⁸ Alstott, *No Exit*.

²⁹ For an example of the state punishing a parent who failed to provide continuity of care for his child, see Alstott’s discussion of *Painter v. Bannister*. Alstott, 33–43.

³⁰ Alstott, 63.

³¹ Alstott, 54.

³² Bou-Habib and Olsaretti argue that because continuity of care is a *moral* obligation (and not merely a contingent restriction of the state), the state’s enforcement of the No Exit obligation does not itself generate a claim for compensation on behalf of parents. To support the cost-sharing view, they add the further condition that in general persons would wish to have the option open to them to be able to become a parent. Bou-Habib and Olsaretti, “Equality, Autonomy, and the Price of Parenting,” 427; 432.

³³ Alstott, *No Exit*, 54.

³⁴ For a general discussion of social roles, including the parental role, and their corresponding moral obligations, see Brake, “Willing Parents: A Voluntarist Account of Parental Role Obligations”; Chambers, “Wronging Future Children”; Hardimon, “Role Obligations”; Simmons, “External Justifications and Institutional Roles.”

³⁵ Even if procreators and parents don’t create such a benefit, there’s reason to think that the state operates as if they do. State policies that incentivize procreation and/or create obstacles to avoiding pregnancy treat reproductive labor *as if* it produces a benefit to society.

³⁶ For discussion of how women in particular are impacted by these costs, see Kittay, “At the Margins of Moral Personhood”; Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 1989; Schouten, *Liberalism, Neutrality, and the Gendered Division of Labor*.

³⁷ For this reason, we might be hesitant to accept child-interest only accounts of parental obligations, which can treat parents as if *their sole purpose* is to care for their children. See Brighthouse and Swift, *Family Values*.

³⁸ Folbre, “Children as Public Goods”; George, “Who Should Bear the Cost of Children?”; Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 1989; Olsaretti, “Children as Public Goods,” 2013.

³⁹ Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, 1989, 97–101.

⁴⁰ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 4.

⁴¹ For an argument for parental support, see Engster, “The Place of Parenting Within a Liberal Theory of Justice.”

⁴² Cutas and Smajdor, “The Moral Status of the (Nuclear) Family.”

⁴³ Taylor, “Children as Projects and Persons.”