

Committing to Parenthood (Penultimate Version)

How do adults acquire the right to parent a child? Luara Ferracioli's *moral commitment* account of parenthood (MCA) says, "The parental role is best undertaken by those who *morally* commit to pursuing a parent-child relationship with a particular child" (2023: 30). In Ferracioli's defense of the MCA, she claims it can accommodate worries about whether ambivalent gestating parents count as moral parents (they should) and whether it licenses parental proliferation (it should not). Here, I argue these worries are more worrisome than Ferracioli lets on.

1. What is the MCA?

A. Moral Commitment

Let us start with what Ferracioli means by *moral commitment*. In her view, "moral commitments are commitments that persons make to morally valuable projects and relationships partly due to their recognition that such projects and relationships are of great value" (39). Ferracioli sees humanitarian work as a paradigm case of moral commitment, as those who engage in this work do so because they see charitable aid as a project that promotes value by raising well-being and respects value by serving other human beings with dignity (ibid).

We can get more specific. In Ferracioli's view,

S is morally committed to Y if and only if S is (i) motivated by recognizing the value of Y, (ii) expresses her recognition of Y's value through moral actions, and (iii) avoids expressions that violate stringent moral requirements (40).

The first condition, (i), says we must be sufficiently motivated by the right reasons for our commitment to a project or relationship to count as a moral commitment. If I am committed to helping those in poverty, my commitment is not moral if I am only motivated by how this would look on my resume and not by their well-being. I might be motivated to help for both reasons, but if the latter reason plays an insufficient role in my motivation, this will not count as a moral

commitment. So, for childrearing to count as a moral commitment, the parent must be sufficiently motivated to rear her child by recognizing the value of the parent-child relationship (43).

The second condition, (ii), requires us to *act* on the value recognition in (i) for our commitment to count as moral. While we may generally act on our recognition of some valuable project or relationship, there are many cases where we fail to do so. Ferracioli's example is instructive: "Paul might genuinely value the lives of poor people in the developing world, and yet end up failing to donate to charity because he is too busy with his other projects" (41). Paul recognizes the value of charity but fails to act on that recognition due to his other tasks. So, our moral commitment to a valuable project or relationship must be a *commitment*; we must express ourselves by acting toward the project or relationship. Within the parent-child relationship, the parent acts on her recognition by adequately promoting and protecting her child's interests. If she only recognizes the value of the relationship but fails to act on it, she is not morally committed to raising her child.

The last condition, (iii), is a basic constraint: Moral commitments cannot happen at the expense of other moral requirements. Moral commitments should not lead us to do seriously immoral things. Even if charitable giving is worthwhile, we should not steal from our friends to pursue this project (42). This means that parents generally cannot promote and protect their children's interests by violating other stringent moral requirements. For example, adults who might otherwise meet their children's needs but conceive through sexual assault will not count as morally committed to the parent-child relationship (ibid).

So, for S to morally commit to parenting a child, she must (i) be sufficiently motivated to take on the relationship by a recognition of its value, (ii) act toward the child in ways that appropriately express her recognition of the relationship's value, and (iii) avoid violating any stringent moral requirements (without good reason).¹

B. Moral Commitments Beget Moral Rights

¹ Sometimes, we must commit wrongdoings to protect our children's interests or when the stakes are sufficiently high (153).

On the MCA, if we have an adult who satisfies the conditions of moral commitment to a child, then we also have an adult with the moral right to raise that child. The reason a moral right to parent follows from a parent's moral commitment to a child is that "a morally committed parent is necessarily a good parent...because a morally committed parent is necessarily robustly disposed to take on the steps required for her child's life to go well" (43). That is, the moral right to parent follows the moral commitment to parent because morally committed parents will *care for their child reliably*, while parents without this disposition are not as reliable.²

Whereas other theories of parenthood (e.g., voluntaristic or causal accounts) do not guarantee that good parents will raise children, the virtue of Ferracioli's account is that it has such a guarantee. If a child is not raised by good parents, then they are not morally committed and, therefore, do not count as adults who have the moral right to raise their children (43-4). Parents can fail to be good by failing to be morally committed to their child in some way: They could fail to be sufficiently motivated (i), to express their sufficient motivation in actions (ii), or to avoid violating their other moral requirements (iii). However, provided adults meet these conditions, they are moral parents.

C. Two Aspirations³

Ferracioli has two aspirations for the MCA: (1) The view is supposed to be *monistic*—i.e., the theory should "locate the grounds of moral parenthood in only one essential feature" (32). For any case of moral parenthood, the MCA requires that the parent's moral commitment is the *only* thing that explains why that parent is the moral parent. In section 2, I will raise worries about whether the MCA can deliver on this aspiration in cases where ambivalent procreators seem like moral parents while they also seem to lack a moral commitment. Moreover, (2), the view is supposed to explain an

² An anonymous reviewer asks why the parent's commitment entails a right. In Ferracioli's words: "[W]hy should the moral right to parent attach to the morally committed parent? The reason is simple: a morally committed parent is necessarily a good parent" (43). She follows up her discussion of this fact with this: "It should therefore be clear that [the MCA] will be quite well placed to comply with the aims of a dual-interest theory of the family," which is one of the desiderata Ferracioli is after in constructing an account of moral parenthood (44). So, as I see things, the reason the moral commitment entails a moral right to parent is that it secures the child's interests (because it is good for her to be raised by someone robustly disposed to care for her) and the parent's interests (because it is good for her to participate in what she sees as a deeply valuable relationship). Anyone not antecedently committed to the dual-interest theory will not find this persuasive, but because Ferracioli takes it on, I will, too.

³ Thanks to Anne Jeffrey for suggesting I make explicit how the worries below target the MCA.

exclusionary moral right to raise a child, one that “explains why other nonstate agents have a moral duty of noninterference and must respect the decisions undertaken by the moral parent” (30). In section 3, I will raise worries about whether the MCA can explain these exclusionary claims in cases where a third party wants to raise a child who already has a morally committed parent.

2. Ambivalent Procreators

The first worry I have about the MCA is that it delivers counterintuitive results for ambivalent mothers and third parties. Consider this case:

Ambivalent Procreator: Ann is in her second trimester and...has not decided yet whether she wants to rear the child with whom she is pregnant. By contrast, her friend Frank emotionally invests in and supports Ann’s pregnancy and, without Ann’s knowledge, forms the intention to parent the child himself (Lange 2023: 15).

Who counts as morally committed to this child? Plausibly, Frank is morally committed, while Ann is not. Whereas Ann is ambivalent, Frank (i) is sufficiently motivated by a recognition of the value of a relationship with Ann’s child, (ii) acts on that commitment by helping Ann in her pregnancy, and (iii) avoids violating any stringent moral requirements.⁴ But if Frank is morally committed while Ann is not, then we get a strange result: third parties can acquire a moral right to rear a child without the

⁴ An anonymous reviewer says Ferracioli might deny Frank has a relationship with Ann’s fetus. This is not to say third parties cannot have relationships with fetuses. Ferracioli herself notes that nongestating parties can count as morally committed “by supporting the gestating parent with the costs and hardships of pregnancy [or] preparation for taking up the parental role after birth” (45).

Instead, the anonymous reviewer claims an asymmetry between third parties like Frank and intentional, non-gestating co-procreators. Perhaps intentional co-procreators owe it to each other to facilitate engagement with the fetus in pregnancy because they embarked on this parental project together. This does not mean third parties have the standing to *demand* gestating parents make their bodies accessible, for this seems incompatible with the parents’ bodily rights. But these third parties may, nonetheless, legitimately expect the gestating parent to give them opportunities to commit to the fetus they procreated together. Frank, however, is not Ann’s co-procreator, which means she does not owe him any engagement with the fetus.

My response is twofold: (a) Even if we grant the asymmetry, this case is one where she allowed his engagement anyway. If she allowed him to engage with the fetus, it is beside the point whether she had the right to exclude him from doing so. Now that she has allowed Frank the space to engage, he satisfies the conditions of the MCA and is thereby the moral parent. (b) The asymmetry relies on moral commitments having the power to exclude others from interfering with them; this is presumably why non-gestating, intentional co-procreators can expect engagement with the fetus while third-parties like Frank cannot. However, there are two problems with this: First, it assumes Ann is the moral parent with the power to exclude, and I am arguing in this section that she is not the moral parent on the MCA. Second, even if Ann is the moral parent, I argue in section 3 that the MCA cannot explain how moral parents have the power to exclude others from inserting themselves into parent-child relationships. Either way, the asymmetry spells no trouble for my analysis.

permission of ambivalent gestational parents. I imagine most would reject this strange result; however, if the MCA is monistic and Ann is the child's moral parent without a moral commitment, something else must explain why she is the moral parent and Frank is not.

However, Ferracioli denies that a third party like Frank should count as the moral parent and insists that ambivalent parents like Ann should count as morally committed. She writes,

[G]estating parents who are somewhat ambivalent about becoming parents can count as morally committed if, by the time the child is born, they have come to value the relationship with their newborn and want to maintain that relationship. After all, the mere act of gestation will be considered a form of recognition of the value of the future child, so long as the gestating parent does not actively harm the fetus by engaging in behavior that is clearly detrimental to its healthy development (45).

The idea is this: Ambivalent parents can still be moral parents by choosing not to harm their gestating child. This choice counts as a moral commitment because it expresses the parent's recognition of the value of her relationship with that child.

But there is a problem. Choosing not to harm one's gestating child does not necessarily count as a moral commitment in the same way that my choosing not to harm any third party does not necessarily count as a moral commitment. After all, we can abstain from harming others for various reasons that have nothing to do with recognizing the value of a relationship with them. My choosing to avoid harming a random bystander on the street may result from my not giving them a second thought or being in a hurry to get somewhere else.⁵

When we consider Ann, things are no different. Recall the MCA says, "[F]or a moral commitment to a particular parent-child relationship to arise, parents have to actually recognize the moral value of their unique paternalistic relationship with a particular child, and be sufficiently moved by *that* reason" (43). While many gestating parents act for this reason, *Ann is not acting for this reason, which means she is not morally committed to the child*. Of course, as Ferracioli points out, ambivalent parents like Ann may "choose not to have an abortion, decide not to take active steps to harm the fetus, and seek medical treatment and support during pregnancy" (44). While there are choices that secure the gestating child's biological interests, these are also choices Ann can make without any

⁵ Thanks to Anne Jeffrey for helping me sharpen this paragraph.

recognition of the value of a relationship with her child. When she does these things, perhaps she is simply doing what she thinks is right or conforming to what others expect her to do. Whatever Ann's reasons are, though, if one of them is not a recognition of the value of the parent-child relationship, she is not morally committed and is, therefore, not the moral parent.

So, how do we explain Ann's moral parenthood, something she seems to possess despite the preceding objection to the MCA? If the MCA cannot explain Ann's moral parenthood, then there must be some other normative feature—consent, causation, intentions, or something else—that explains our intuition that she is a moral parent. But if Ann's moral parenthood is explained by one of these other features and not a moral commitment, then the MCA fails in its aspiration to be a *monistic* account—i.e., only *one* normative feature explains moral parenthood in every case.⁶

Now, one could appeal to further views in the metaphysics of pregnancy that complicate this verdict on Ann's moral parenthood. Fully evaluating this strategy's prospects is beyond this paper's scope; nonetheless, I want to give a brief cautionary note about this strategy through an example. Suppose a view says pregnancy is unique because there is no parent-child relationship yet for the parent to enjoy.⁷ If true, perhaps the conditions for the expression of value the MCA requires need some relaxation. Whereas the moral commitment of a parent whose child is already born will be extensive, a pregnant parent may still count as morally committed to her fetus so long as she meets her fetus' biological interests.⁸

Unfortunately, this view does not justify Ann's moral parenthood. After all, moral commitments to anything—relationships or projects—*require* a recognition of the value of the object of one's commitment, and the whole point of Ann is that she is not acting on or recognizing any value concerning her fetus. As long as the value of her fetus plays *no* role in her reasons for continuing the pregnancy, she is not morally committed. Pregnancy may be a case where the conditions for moral commitment need relaxation, but the conditions cannot be so relaxed that it allows a moral commitment even when the agent does not satisfy two out of the three necessary

⁶ This outcome is not necessarily a reason to reject the MCA simpliciter; plausible accounts of moral parenthood are pluralistic insofar as they allow multiple normative features to explain it (e.g., Bayne and Kolers 2003). Ferracioli might just need to drop the monistic aspiration for the MCA.

⁷ Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this suggestion.

⁸ This is Ferracioli's own view, though she never claims it is an entailment of this particular view of pregnancy (159).

conditions for a moral commitment—i.e., she has (i) no recognition of value, which means (ii) she has no recognition of value to express in morally good actions. So, in short, the caution is this: No matter the metaphysical view of pregnancy on offer, moral commitments still need to be moral commitments.⁹

3. Parental Proliferation

The second worry I have about the MCA is that it cannot explain why adults should not be able to insert themselves into existing parent-child relationships. Consider this next case:

The Prodigy: Billy, a 5-year-old prodigy, goes viral for playing Bohemian Rhapsody on the piano. Hundreds of adults across the country desire to parent Billy even though Billy already has two morally committed parents who do not want to co-parent with his fans.

On an overly simplistic understanding of the MCA, one might think Billy's fans are his moral parents because they seem morally committed to him. But Ferracioli notes that merely committing to a child does not guarantee becoming that child's moral parent when that child already has morally committed parents:

[M]y moral commitment to my child is violated [if someone] unilaterally inserts himself into my family life. *This is because for any additional person who commits to my child without my consent, my ability to engage in actions that adequately express recognition of the value of my relationship with the child is severely compromised.* Implications may include, for example, the inability to see my child as much as it is good for our relationship and the

⁹ An anonymous reviewer claims pregnancy does not create any new problem for Ferracioli that is not already there for other accounts. In one sense, I agree: other views may fare better or worse depending on which metaphysical view of pregnancy is true. But in another sense, I disagree: If the MCA is supposed to ground moral parenthood in every case and the MCA has strict motivational requirements, then it's a unique problem for the MCA that there is no apparent view of pregnancy that could make Ann morally committed while she seems to fail those requirements. This is not as much of a problem for other views that lack the MCA's strong motivational requirements. For example, the *investment* theory of moral parenthood says someone's claim to moral parenthood is grounded in their work toward the child's development (Millum 2017: 21). On this theory, Ann still counts as the moral parent despite her ambivalence because of the gestational work she has put into the development of her fetus, *even if* she is ambivalent about the fetus. Or, the *causal* theory of parenthood says the relevant cause of a child's existence has the prima facie right to claim the right to raise that child (e.g., Archard 2010). Whatever demerits this view has—and see Ferracioli 2023: 2.2-3 for a convincing discussion of them—it has no problem explaining how Ann is the moral parent of the fetus: she is the relevant cause of its existence. Or there is the *project* view, one where procreators have a right to continue their procreative projects so long as their doing so does not violate the rights of others (e.g., Richards 2010: Ch. 1). Ann may have a right to continue her parental project regardless of how she feels about the project. So, while it is true that pregnancy is a problem all views must deal with, and work on the metaphysics of pregnancy will help adjudicate that problem, the strong motivational requirements of the MCA make ambivalent pregnancies a unique problem for the MCA that other views do not face.

inability to forbid her to engage in what I take to be risky activities (50, emphasis added).

Ferracioli's response explains nicely why Billy's thousands of adult fans should not count as moral parents simply by attempting to morally commit to him. If they become Billy's parents, their involvement in Billy's life would essentially eradicate Billy's original parents' abilities to express moral commitment to him. Moreover, Billy is psychologically incapable of having relationships with hundreds of parents, so this is not in Billy's interest either.

However, there are other cases where a third party would either very minimally restrict an original parent's moral commitment or even *enhance their* ability to express themselves morally. Here is another case:

The Kindergarten Teacher: Nikhil is a single father raising his precocious 5-year-old, Jimmy. One day, Jimmy's Kindergarten teacher, Lisa, notices Jimmy is an excellent poet and forms the desire to raise Jimmy. Nikhil does not want to co-parent Jimmy with Lisa.

The only other person who wants to raise Jimmy is Lisa. It would not take much to accommodate a custodial schedule between two adults—co-parents do this all the time. This arrangement might even *increase* Nikhil's ability to morally commit to his child. After all, single-parenting is very hard; parents in these situations must split their time because they are working on one salary to support their households.¹⁰ Even if Nikhil dislikes Lisa, her involvement in Jimmy's life—whether through additional income, free childcare, etc.—would enhance Nikhil's life by reducing the socioeconomic strains of being a single parent. So, not only would Lisa's involvement minimally conflict with Nikhil's plans, but there is good reason to think it would enhance Nikhil's relationship with his child.

Ferracioli could respond in the following way: Lisa is not morally committed to Jimmy because she is in “violation of a basic moral requirement not to significantly jeopardize the moral commitments of others,” particularly Nikhil's commitment to raising Jimmy *as a single parent* (50).¹¹

¹⁰ I thank Matthew Lee Anderson for suggesting this point to me.

¹¹ I thank an anonymous referee for raising this point.

So, even if Lisa's involvement would reduce Nikhil's troubles as a single parent, her involvement undermines Nikhil's moral commitment because he wants to raise Jimmy alone.

However, moral commitments generally do not have this sort of exclusionary power.¹² Recall Ferracioli's paradigmatic example of a moral commitment: humanitarian aid (2023: 39). Professionals who commit themselves to this endeavor count as morally committed "because saving the lives of innocent people is an exceptionally valuable activity to engage in, but also because it is an activity pursued without recourse to gross human rights violation" (ibid). But nothing about this moral commitment grounds an exclusionary right against others who want to join this cause. This would be the case even if the professionals initially set out to help others on their own and even if the involvement of others would reduce the professionals' abilities to express themselves to those in need. Similarly, Nikhil's intention to raise Jimmy on his own does not, on its own, ground an exclusionary right against Lisa.

The MCA is supposed to be an account that grounds the moral parent's exclusionary right to keep other adults from parenting their child without their consent. I am not disputing that an adequate account of moral parenthood should include this normative power. I *am* disputing that the MCA can explain how moral parents have this power against people like Lisa. If Ferracioli wants morally committed parents to have this power, she must clarify how a moral commitment to a child has an exclusionary power that most other moral commitments lack.

4. Conclusion

Ferracioli has provided the ethics of parenthood literature with a novel account of moral parenthood. However, several cases show the MCA is either not truly monistic or too weak to ground the sort of exclusionary power we typically associate with moral parenthood.¹³

¹² I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting the following counterexample.

¹³ Thanks to Anne Jeffrey, Matthew Lee Anderson, and two anonymous reviewers for offering very helpful feedback on this paper.

Works Cited

- Archard, David (2010). "The Obligations and Responsibilities of Parenthood," in *Procreation and Parenthood*, edited by David Archard and David Benatar. Oxford University Press.
- Bayne, Tim., and Avery. Kolers, (2003). "Toward a Pluralistic Account of Parenthood," *Bioethics*, 17(3): 221–42.
- Ferracioli, Luara (2023). *Parenting and the Goods of Childhood*. Oxford University Press.
- Lange, Benjamin (2023). "A Project View of the Right to Parent." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 1:1-23.
- Millum, Joseph (2017). *The Moral Foundations of Parenthood*. Oxford University Press
- Richards, Norvin (2010). *The Ethics of Parenthood*. Oxford University Press.