Parental Obligation

NELLIE WIELAND
CSU Long Beach

The contention of this article is that parents have an obligation to care for their children, but for reasons that are not typically offered. I argue that this obligation can be unfair to parents but not unjust. I do not provide an account of what our specific obligations are to our children. Rather, I focus on providing a justification for any obligation to care for them at all. My argument turns on providing an external description of the parent–child relationship in order to establish that parents are in a unique position among adults in their ability to help and harm their own children. Given that children are deserving of moral regard, I conclude that parents are obligated – in a way that is often unfair – to provide this care. I end by considering implications for social policy.

What is best for a human is not necessarily being a parent. But it is best for humans to *have* a parent, and best to *be* parented for many years of one's life. So there is a conflict: there is a relationship that is best for some humans, but not for others, and both of these groups are deserving of moral regard. The common-sense view is that one obviously has an obligation to care for one's children or to ensure that another cares for them, except in the most unusual of circumstances. This is the case even though our obligations to our children often seem to be far and away the most demanding. The degree of sacrifice that is required to care for children is greater than the sacrifice for meeting any other associative obligation. In most circumstances, the kind of obligation undertaken is also the most life-altering among the associative obligations.[1]

Consider a hard case: tens of thousands of Tutsi women were raped during the Rwandan genocide. Many of these women became pregnant. Safe abortion was difficult to come by (abortion was illegal in Rwanda), and leaving the babies in an orphanage promised a particularly grim future for them. Approximately 20,000 children were born due to rape after the genocide.[2] Many of the mothers had other children to care for and were in the acutely difficult position of having lost many of their family members, including the fathers of their prior children, to

[1] I take heed of the clause 'in most circumstances'. Sometimes, obligations to friends, neighbors or fellow citizens are undeniably intense and life-altering (e.g. in wartime), and some obligations to other family members are more demanding (e.g. in the case of a family member who needs long-term care for a protracted illness or disability). Nevertheless, we typically provide more care, more intensively, and for a longer period for our children than for anyone else in our lives.

[2] See, Jonathan Torgovnik, *Intended Consequences: Rwandan Children Born of Rape* (New York, 2009).

Utilitas Vol. 23, No. 3, September 2011
doi:10.1017/S0953820811000136

the genocide as well. The idea is to consider the possibility that in this scenario the mothers are still the persons best situated to care for those children. On the other hand, the difficulty of caring for those children greatly outstrips the difficulty of caring for a child born in less arduous circumstances. It strains plausibility to think that a mother has an obligation in such a circumstance, and it is not beyond reason to accept abandonment as a morally permissible choice. The child, who is deserving of moral regard, could be best cared for by his mother; however, caring for the child is at great odds with the mother's well-being and integrity. The consequences for the mother are dim if she accepts the obligation, and the consequences for the child are perhaps even dimmer if she does not. These kinds of cases illustrate the need for a compelling argument in favor of parental obligation – that is, it ought not to be assumed that such an obligation is accepted freely or is somehow part of the nature of parents to accept. If such an argument is successful, it should provide a general justification for the obligation that most parents have to care for their children.

While parental obligation is profoundly different from all other obligations we have, it is assumed to be the least in need of argument. It has been the rare philosopher who has doubted whether caring for children is actually *good for* parents and children alike. The contention of this article is that parents do have obligations to care for their children, but for reasons that are not typically offered. I will argue that this obligation to care for one's children can be *unfair* to parents but not *unjust*. In what follows, I will *not* provide a detailed account of what our obligations are to our children. Rather, I will focus on providing a justification for any obligation to care for them at all.

I. DO PARENTS HAVE SPECIAL OBLIGATIONS TO THEIR CHILDREN?

In certain relationships our obligations to others are thought to increase. Obligations in these special relationships are sometimes called *associative obligations*. Dworkin[3] cites as examples of such relationships those that we have with neighbors, co-workers in a union, fellow citizens, friends, siblings, parents and children. He argues that we come to have these associative obligations even when we do not explicitly accept them. Instead, he characterizes attitudes that a group may have that result in these obligations in the absence of their explicit acceptance. Defenses of associative obligations raise a number of philosophical problems, including: the nature of the obligation generally, the necessity of voluntariness or explicit acceptance and

[3] Ronald Dworkin, *Law's Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 1986).

whether the obligation can be incurred for 'bare' (e.g. biological) rather than 'substantive' reasons (e.g. based on relationships). Further, there is reason to doubt that a single argument in favor of associative obligations will be able to cover relationships as varied in kind and degree as those listed above. Here, my narrow concern is with a specific associative obligation – that of a parent toward his child.

Humans are the kinds of creatures that are dependent for many years. Without someone to care for them, human children are unlikely to survive. Yet, even if we accept that *someone* ought to care for children in order to ensure their survival, it is not altogether obvious that those persons ought to be the parents of the children. We readily accept that biological parents lose their obligation to care for their children when they place them up for adoption, that sperm and egg donors can waive all responsibility for their biological offspring, and that we have duties to rescue the children of strangers if they are in peril. Given this, there are a number of philosophically plausible dependency-care relationships that one could construct. Children could be raised by communities with shared duties, by random assignment out of the hospital, in state daycare facilities, etc.[4]

This question of who is obligated to care for children is especially pressing because raising children to adulthood is incredibly difficult. Even within the range of associative obligations, caring for children stands out as especially demanding, consuming and life-altering. Unlike any other associative obligation, parental care seems to be the least revocable and most likely to undermine one's own welfare; a parental obligation could plausibly be interpreted as requiring a parent to give up her own well-being to the point of extinction for her child.[5] The example that I opened with – of Tutsi rape victims – surely illustrates such a point. I also mean for the point to apply to the most ordinary cases of parenthood. While the burden of parenting ranges from the elite child raised by a governess to something like the burden taken on by the Tutsi mothers described, the claim here is just supposed to be that for most people, most of the time, raising children is extraordinarily demanding. This is, of course, not to say that it does not come with extraordinary rewards as well. These will be addressed in the final sections of the article. However, this sense of

[4] See Claudia Card, 'Against Marriage and Motherhood', *Hypatia* 11 (1996), pp. 1–23. See also, Niko Kolodny, 'Which Relationships Justify Partiality? The Case of Parents and Children', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 38(1) (2010), pp. 37–75.

[5] This may be entirely unreasonable. Yet, those who believe that abortion is unacceptable even in the case where a mother's life is at risk hold such a view. Outside of the question of the morality of abortion, it is probably not uncommon to think that a parent ought to give her own life if forced to choose between herself and her child.

the enormity of the parental obligation should be kept in mind as we consider arguments that might possibly justify it.

Before considering arguments in favor of parental obligations, let's look at an objection to associative obligations broadly construed – the *distributive* objection – and an application of it to parental obligations in particular. The distributive objection is just that associative obligations purport to entitle us to distribute our resources in ways that are unfair to those not in some such special relationship. Samuel Scheffler helpfully explains it as follows:

> Suppose, for example, that there are three individuals, A, B, and C, none of whom has any special tie or relationship to any of the others. Each has only general duties toward the others, which is to say that each's duties toward the others are distributed equally . . . Now, however, suppose that A and B, acting independently of each other, become members of some group of a kind that is ordinarily thought to give rise to associative duties. And suppose that C is not a member of this group . . . A and B are now required to give each other's interests priority over the interests of C in a wide range of contexts.[6]

The distributive objection is that group membership works to the disadvantage of those not in the group. There are certainly ways in which the distributive objection applies to the family as 'in group'. The associative obligations we have toward our family members advantage those family members and disadvantage all others insofar as being in a family permits, or even requires, one to distribute one's resources in an inegalitarian manner, especially towards one's children.[7] However, I think there is a variation on the distributive objection that is even more interesting when applied to parental obligation.

Parental obligation differs from the obligations of friendship in that it is not requisitely reciprocal. Even if a child dislikes his mother and does not intend to care for her in return when he is an adult, the mother still retains her obligation to care for him.[8] If the parent were to aspire to distribute her resources in a truly egalitarian manner, the maldistribution of resources to her child *rather than to herself* should be seen as a significant distributive injustice. The distribution of resources from parent to child puts the parent in the position of individual C in Scheffler's example. In becoming a parent, she loses the right to

[6] Stephen Scheffler, *Boundaries and Allegiances* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 56–7.

[7] These questions have been thoughtfully addressed by Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift, 'Legitimate Parental Partiality', *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 37 (2009), pp. 43–80, and by Kolodny, 'Which Relationships Justify Partiality?'.

[8] This is compatible with thinking that we have filial obligations. It is just to say that a parent is *prima facie* obligated to care for her child independently of whether the child will meet his own filial obligations. Further, the care is largely temporally and epistemically distinct; the parent must provide the care without knowing how she will be cared for in the future.

distribute resources equitably to herself. Framing it this way puts a new spin on a classic problem of distributive justice: rather than casting parental obligations as a conflict in resource allocation between adult parents, or between one's children and the children of others, we can cast it as a conflict in resource allocation between parent and child.

Bringing these points together, there are two desiderata for a justification of parental obligation: (i) that it is strong enough to live up to the cost of the obligation itself (where this cost is weighed against the potential benefits); and (ii) that it rectifies the distributive imbalance between parents and their own children. What argument can do this? Here are four reasons for assuming that parents have an associative obligation both to be partial to their children and to provide long-term care and nurturance to their children even in the face of the distributive objection. I will come to reject the first three as insufficient and to endorse the fourth, despite some misgivings.

Option 1: parenting as a substantive life project

In *Law's Empire*, Dworkin describes four criteria that must be met in order for an associative obligation to stand in absence of its explicit acceptance: (i) a group must regard its obligations as *special* to the group's members; (ii) a group must regard its obligations as *personal* between the group's members; (iii) a group's members must see its obligations as stemming from *personal concern* for one member over another; and, (iv) a group's members must suppose that a member's personal concern for another is an *equal* concern for all members.[9] Parental obligation clearly falls under associative obligations as described – at least some of the time. Certainly all four conditions are met in some families; some parents have come to value parenting as a substantive life project, but not all. And some have developed these relationships or adopted these projects, but not sufficiently to meet the sacrifice involved in caring for children. With little reflection it may be assumed that parenting is a natural or intrinsically rewarding life project for adults, and indeed for many it is. But, it is not difficult to recognize the limits of this assumption.

The concern is that grounding parental obligation in the adoption of parenting as a substantive life project is grossly insufficient to ensure the care of dependent children. Reproduction is relatively easy; it is usually easier than nurturing a friendship, fostering community between neighbors or serving one's country out of a patriotic sense of obligation. The process of reproduction outstrips and is independent of the adoption of parenting as a substantive life project. Ensuring the care of dependent children cannot rely on a coincidence between

[9] Dworkin, *Law's Empire*, pp. 199–200.

parental affection and a child's need. Further, there is considerable evidence that not all parents regard their obligation as meaningful to them in the appropriate way or to the necessary degree. For these reasons, this option is insufficient to ground parental obligation. Below, I will also argue that it is not necessary either.[10]

Option 2: parenting as mere biological relation

If the goal is to establish a broad account under which all, or even most, parents have an obligation to care for their children, then we need to establish that a parent has a special obligation to her children regardless of whether Dworkin's conditions hold in her particular case. In order to do this, we could invoke the distinction between 'bare' and 'substantive' obligation[11] and claim that the biological connection between parent and child is 'bare' but still obligating.

The idea that the mere biological fact of relation is enough to motivate some sort of special obligation is dubious but still interesting in the case of parent–child relationships. Consider how you might feel if you discover that you have a living biological father whom you did not know you had (or that the father you thought was biologically related to you is in fact not). The discovery of a parent to whom you are biologically related can be a curious and welcome discovery, but it's doubtful that it creates a genuine obligation to that person. If your biological father were suddenly to appear in your adult life, claim that he is suffering from an ailment, and claim that you are morally obligated to care for him, you could rightly reject his claim.[12] On the other hand, consider how you might feel if you were to discover that there is a young child, who is biologically *your* child, about whom you did not know. If this child were to claim that he is suffering from an ailment, and that you have a moral obligation to care for him, you would likely treat this claim differently from that of the long-lost father. *Mere* biological relation to a child, it seems, resonates with many people, but is still insufficient to establish obligation.

[10] There is a substantial literature documenting parental (particularly maternal) ambivalence. As an example, see Adrienne Rich's influential account of motherhood (Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, (New York, 1986), pp. 13–14, 32–3). There is also evidence that parental ambivalence and infanticide are human universals given certain environmental or cultural conditions. See, Jennifer Nerissa Davis and Martin Daly, 'Evolutionary Theory and the Human Family', *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 72 (1997), pp. 407–35, at 430. See also Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, 'The Past, Present, and Future of the Human Family', *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* 23 (2002), pp. 57–110.

[11] See Lionel McPherson, 'The Moral Insignificance of "Bare" Personal Reasons', *Philosophical Studies* 110 (2002), pp. 29–47.

[12] This is a variation of an example used by McPherson, 'The Moral Insignificance of "Bare" Personal Reasons', esp. p. 38.

Even if we were to accept obligation for 'bare' biological reasons, we would be hard pressed to accept a description of the obligation that is as robust as that which is required to care for a child. The extent of sacrifice and resource allocation that is needed to raise a child goes far beyond what would be expected of any other associative obligation, including all of those others for which we might have 'bare' reasons, such as sibling relations or filial relations. A biologically grounded obligation would also fail to explain the obligations that we readily assume are waived in the case of adoption, sperm and egg donorship, and, possibly, in cases of rape. Although a 'bare' biologically grounded obligation would be sweeping in its reach – children would be broadly covered by their biological parents – it fails to demonstrate that there is moral content in biological relation. This final point is, perhaps, the most important. But given that we readily talk as if mere biological relation matters, morally speaking, this is probably due to the caused dependency of child on parent.[13] This option will be considered next.

Option 3: parenting as caused dependency

In a variation on Option 2, Lionel McPherson has argued that the biological relation between parents and children provides a *substantive* reason for an obligation to care for one's children. It is worth considering this claim in its entirety:

> Biological parents, *being causally responsible for the existence of their children*, presumably inherit a moral responsibility to care adequately for their dependent children or to see that they are cared for by others. Generally speaking, parents have basic substantive reasons to give priority to their children's interests, reasons tied almost inextricably to biological relation. These reasons are substantive not because the biological relation in itself gives rise to them but *because parents have brought into the world children who need care*.[14]

McPherson is a 'substantivist', meaning that he thinks any special obligations we have toward others must be based on having substantive personal relationships or projects, and not on mere bare or biological relations. Here he claims that biological parents are automatic candidates for a substantive obligation because they 'brought into the world children who need care'. This initially seems obvious and

[13] Intuitively, the bare relation matters more, in terms of obligation, as it goes from parent to child rather than from child to parent. While I don't think that an account of parental obligation and an account of filial obligation should parallel one another (as will be clear in this article, I think they clearly have different justificatory grounds), I do think it is telling that we probably wouldn't regard bare biological relation as a good enough reason to care for one's parents. If the bare biological relation is insufficient in this case, it is likewise insufficient for the case of parental obligation.

[14] McPherson, 'The Moral Insignificance of "Bare" Personal Reasons', pp. 32–3, emphasis added.

plausible. In the footnote to this passage, he excludes what he calls 'unusual circumstances – e.g., rape, incest, surrogacy, sperm or egg donorship'.[15] This is also a prudent and plausible set of exceptions. The claim, then, is that in a case of rape, one or both of the parents of the resulting child would not have a special obligation to care for that child beyond, say, minimal duties of rescue. This should be extended to the other unusual circumstances. However, I worry that justifying this associative obligation in this way does not have the kind of reach one might anticipate.

Considering what McPherson calls 'unusual circumstances', we can see that they each involve a parent who does not *intend* to bring a child into the world who will be cared for by that parent. That is, the caused dependency in question must be intentional in order for it to be obligating. Are there situations other than the ones listed in which the bringing of children into the world is not intentional? This is, of course, tricky. We may want to include under 'unusual circumstances' cases where contraception is used but fails, where no contraception is available, where safe abortion is not available, or where power and legal structures are such that parents (typically mothers) have diminished control over their reproductive lives. But such cases would no longer be unusual; in fact, they may be the most typical. On the one hand, we would like to say that willfully engaging in activities that one knows will bring about a dependent child is enough to create a long-term obligation to care for that child. And yet, we also know that reproductive control is complicated beyond clear cases of rape, incest and the like. This highlights the fact that reproduction is, perhaps, largely *unintentional* – at least in the strongest sense of that term.

McPherson is initially unconcerned with the intentions of the parents; rather, he is principally concerned with the causal relations between the actions of the parents and the existence of their children. But then why allow that there are any unusual circumstances? Strictly speaking, even if a mother is raped she (or at least her body) plays a causal role in bringing into existence a child who needs care. Of course it's absurd to assume that a rape victim has an obligation given this sense of causation. So the causation McPherson has in mind must have *something* to do with the intentions of the parents, and this leaves open the possibility that there are large numbers of children born unintentionally. If this is the justification for parental obligation, vast swaths of parents (typically mothers) worldwide have no substantive reasons for an obligation (or, perhaps, diminished substantive reasons for an obligation) to care for their children. For example, legal and

[15] McPherson, 'The Moral Insignificance of "Bare" Personal Reasons', p. 47.

safe abortion is unavailable or tightly restricted for a significant number (perhaps the majority) of women in the world; this is true of birth control as well. Legal and social structures that create a hostile environment for women's reproductive control play a murkier causal role here, but are nonetheless considerable. In a case where a marriage is arranged and where there are legal barriers to a spouse owning property or getting an education or working outside the home, we might consider that spouse's determination of family size and structure limited. In such a case, her causal role in bringing into the world a child who needs care is arguably mitigated by her relative powerlessness, and, as such, her obligation toward that child is likewise mitigated.

This claim that parents accrue an obligation to care for their children because they are causally responsible for the existence of those children is certainly enough to ground an obligation for some parents. But, the complexities of reproductive voluntariness, autonomy and control are enough to cast doubt on many, if not most, cases.[16] Other substantive reasons to care for children may develop over time (e.g. one may assume the obligation out of love for the child or out of a sense of self-fulfillment), and bare, or biological, relations remain, but there should be no assumption of obligation *prima facie*.

Option 4: parenting as unique ability to help and harm

The case for parental obligation as a species of associative obligation looks weak. Taking stock, some parents have a 'bare' or biological relation to their children. But this bare relation does not in itself warrant special obligation given that there is no moral content to a mere biological relation. More, in terms of life projects, affection and concern is minimally required for moral content. A parent may, however, have substantive reasons for having a special obligation to his child if he meets Dworkin's conditions (i)–(iv) or he is clearly causally responsible for his child's existence and his actions are appropriately voluntary. If either of these is in doubt, then the source of his obligation is correspondingly dubious. There is also a distributive

[16] How to quantify over this conclusion is an empirical matter that is not easily resolved. The factors to take into consideration include the circumstances mentioned above, but also societies where mothers have diminished power in the family structure, where there are religious or cultural forces constraining a person's reproductive life, and perhaps even where a person does not choose her spouse. Each of these factors mediates the voluntariness of parenthood to different degrees, and they interact with one another to create complicated constraints on the causal control a parent has over reproduction. Here, I am making the normative claim that they *do* in fact diminish a parent's obligation toward a child. The further empirical question is how many parents have such a diminished obligation if the normative claim is correct. My suspicion is that it will be the majority of mothers worldwide, although not necessarily the majority of all parents.

objection to the inegalitarian nature of the parental obligation. If there is a successful substantive case to be made for parental obligations, then it has to overcome the hurdle of the distributive objection as well. So far we have not seen a case that meets this threshold.

A possibility still to consider is that there could be umbrella reasons for parental obligations – those that create obligations in almost all parent–child relationships. Such reasons would have the furthest reach of all substantive reasons considered thus far. The most promising tactic for such an umbrella account lies in external descriptions of the parent–child relationship. For example, if a case could be made that, *ceteris paribus*, it is best, externally speaking, for children to be cared for by their mothers or fathers, then this might count as a *substantive* reason for a special obligation. What makes this reason substantive rather than bare is that, although parents and children have a mere bare biological relation, this particular biological relation is unique and, *ceteris paribus*, superior to all other relations in promoting the well-being of the child. The parent–child relationship, then, is unlike the friendship, co-worker, fellow citizen, or even sibling or filial relationship in this respect. Even if I were to accept that a bare biological relation with my brother gives me a reason to accord him special obligations, and even if I were to fail to act accordingly either by caring for him or ensuring that others care for him in my stead, I have not harmed him in the way that I would if I failed to meet such an obligation to my child. The measure of potential harm does not even come close in any of these other associations. The critical maneuver in this argument is that obligation is measured by unique ability to harm and help rather than by either (i) the explicit, reasoned adoption of a commitment, (ii) mere biological relation, or (iii) caused dependency. This would be a sweeping defense of parental obligations. It would even include some of the 'special circumstances' discussed above. For example, if it could be established by means of an external description of the parent–child relationship that even children born to rape victims are best cared for by their mothers, then this would create an assumption of parental obligation that is far-reaching. Again, it is worth emphasizing that this obligation is created by the interests of the child and not by the interests of the parent. More on this final point below.

In section II, I provide an external description of the parent–child relationship. I do so in order to argue that parents are in a unique position in the lives of children. Most parents, most of the time, are in the position to help their children by parenting them – more so than any other caretaker could. They are also in the unique position among possible caretakers of being able to cause the greatest harm to their children by not parenting them. In section III of this article, I return

to a fuller defense of Option 4 once this external description of the parent–child relationship is on the table.

II. AN EXTERNAL DESCRIPTION OF THE PARENT–CHILD RELATIONSHIP

The challenge of this section is to provide an external description of the parent–child relationship that is obligation-generating. The description should establish that parental care is good for children, and, importantly, better for children than care from other adults. Once this is established, two further points need to be brought to bear: first, that it is obligatory that parents do what is good for their children, whether or not it is good for the parents themselves to do so, and, second, that this obligation falls on most parents most of the time.

Here I will argue that, despite the great deal of variability among human parents, there are clearly identifiable parental behaviors that optimize the well-being of children. These behaviors are not exclusive to biological parents; but, by and large, it is predictable that children will be best off if consistently cared for by biological or adoptive parents (who *have* explicitly adopted the commitment). The reader at this point may think this is so obvious that it is not worth arguing for. However, it is important to keep in mind the goal: to provide a sweeping defense of an obligation for parents to care for their children despite the high costs of doing so, and whether or not the parents are motivated to do so out of love, or personal reward, or biological relation or because they voluntarily brought children into the world.

My argument will be relatively simple: (i) parents are in the best position to optimize the well-being of their children; (ii) those same parents are in the best position to cause harm to their children by not attempting to optimize this well-being; and (iii) children are deserving of moral regard. Therefore, (iv) parents have an obligation to care for their children even when it is costly, involuntary and unrewarding. (i) and (ii) are empirical claims, and (iii) is an assumption made (but undefended) for the purposes of this article. First, I will turn to a brief (but hopefully persuasive) defense of (i) and (ii). Some of the following will apply only to mothers, but the majority of it has implications for all parents: mothers and fathers, adoptive or biological.

From an external perspective, it is in a parent's interest to provide nutrition, affection and protection to a child for as little time as is compatible with thriving such that resources can be diverted to other children or to the parent herself.[17] Beyond this, while there

[17] The true analysis of this conflict is much more complicated and may depend on factors such as the perceived quality of the offspring, whether paternity is shared

is a great deal of variability among human parents, there are also clearly identifiable parental behaviors that optimize the well-being of children.[18] We can be confident that consistent parenting by biological or adoptive parents creates a critically important cycle of nutrition, protection and affection for children. Again, from an external perspective, it is most straightforward (although admittedly oversimplified) to describe this cycle in terms of the hormones prolactin and oxytocin. Both of these are implicated in the well-being of children and both of them are critical in the cycle of care that optimizes this well-being. While we are likely to identify these hormones with biological mothers (and this is not unreasonable), the physical, hormonal changes that compel most parents to provide extraordinary care for their children are evident in mothers, fathers and adoptive parents.

Despite its name, prolactin is a multi-purpose hormone that shows up across animal species, even in animals that are not mammals. While it causes females to lactate, it is also more broadly associated with parenting.[19] Among primates, prolactin levels increase right after the birth of a child for both mothers and fathers. After birth, higher prolactin levels are associated with a stronger desire to protect babies from harm; this appears to be true across species. There is a cycle here: the more nurturing caretakers are, the more their pituitary glands produce prolactin. This may be one of the ways in which the human infant encourages adults to parent him.[20]

Another hormone implicated in this cycle of parenting is the more mammalian-specific oxytocin. A suckling baby stimulates her mother to produce oxytocin, which is then released in the milk back to the baby. The effect is that both mother and baby are mildly sedated and intimacy between them is promoted.[21] The interaction between pregnancy and postpartum hormones generated in the parent–child relationship

between offspring, the needs of other children (e.g. how close they are in age), and possible conflicts in genetic expression between both genetic parents. See Robert Trivers, 'Parent–Offspring Conflict', *American Zoologist* 14 (1974), pp. 249–64; D. Haig, 'Placental Hormones, Genomic Imprinting, and Maternal-Fetal Communication', *Journal of Evolutionary Biology* 9 (1996), pp. 357–80.

[18] Unlike other animals, humans are not uniform in our care of children. We don't always gobble up the placenta, lick our babies, or build nests. Unlike many other primates, we sometimes abandon our sick or disabled babies, and we don't always protect them from abuse by unrelated adults. We don't always choose to care for them in difficult environmental conditions, and we don't always mourn their deaths. We also differ from most other primates in that we sometimes space our babies too close together, accepting that some of them will die.

[19] For much of this section I am indebted to the research and accompanying scholarship of Sarah Blaffer Hrdy. In particular, see *Mother Nature* (New York, 1999) and references therein.

[20] Hrdy, *Mother Nature*, p. 131.

[21] Hrdy, *Mother Nature*, pp. 138–9.

creates the conditions for survival, nurturance and protection in the early years of a child's life. Throughout history (particularly in pre-industrialized societies) and across the species, it is proximity to a lactating mother with support from other related adults that is the best predictor of early childhood well-being.

The parental behaviors that children ought to regard as best are those that optimize nutrition, the certainty and constancy of affection and protection from dangerous situations. These three behaviors are often connected: the more prolactin produced by a parent, the more protective that parent is of a child; prolactin is also what stimulates lactation, and as suckling continues, oxytocin is produced and shared, sustaining the bonds of affection between parent and child and giving the parent an increasing desire to sustain and protect the child as the days go by. There are, of course, a number of routes to achieving this cycle of nutrition, affection and protection other than gestating and birthing babies. Without the immediate bodily and hormonal transformations of pregnancy, childbirth and lactation, males and females of many species can develop all of these behaviors along with the accompanying hormones that sustain the cycle.[22]

There is more to nursing babies than survival, nutrition, protection and affection. It is unarguable at this point in medical science that babies that are nursed enjoy a wide range of long-term benefits. These benefits include immunities to a host of childhood diseases, long-term health outlook, increased intelligence (under certain genetic conditions) and academic ability, and improved psychomotor and developmental skills.[23] The benefits to children (and the adults they will become)

[22] Hrdy shares the following stark anecdote about rats: 'A virgin female rat . . . will either ignore or devour a pup she happens upon. But if she is repeatedly exposed to pups, this inexperienced "au pair from hell" becomes quite nurturing – without undergoing the hormone changes specific to pregnancy. When experimenters place pups in her cage again and again, eventually she stops killing and begins to care for them . . . In a now classic experiment, blood from a rat who had just given birth was injected into a virgin female. The transfusion caused a dramatic reduction in the amount of time it took this virgin to retrieve babies. Within fifteen hours, virgin females spontaneously gathered up babies without requiring long, often gory, prior exposure' (Hrdy, *Mother Nature*, p. 151).

[23] The medical literature on this topic has grown considerably in recent years. See Avshalom Caspi et al., 'Moderation of Breastfeeding Effects on the IQ by Genetic Variation in Fatty Acid Metabolism', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104 (2007), pp. 18860–5; A. S. Cunningham, 'Breastfeeding: Adaptive Behavior for Child Health and Longevity', *Breastfeeding: Biocultural Perspectives*, ed. P. Stuart-Macadam and K. A. Detwyler (New York, 1995), pp. 243–63; L. J. Horwood et al., 'Breast Milk Feeding and Cognitive Ability at 7–8 Years', *Archives of Disease in Childhood: Fetal and Neonatal Edition* 84 (2001), pp. F23–F27; T. W. McDade and C. M. Worthman, 'The Weanling's Dilemma Reconsidered: A Biocultural Analysis of Breastfeeding Ecology', *Journal of Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics* 19 (1998), pp. 286–99; P. C. Lee, 'The Meanings of Weaning: Growth, Lactation, and Life History', *Evolutionary Anthropology* 5 (1996), pp. 87–9; W. H. Oddy, 'Breastfeeding Protects Against Illness and Infection

of prolonged breastfeeding are not in doubt. But the burdens on the resources and activities of the nursing mother are significant; and, age at weaning can be predicted along a nexus of environmental and socio-economic conditions. Mothers who work outside of the home are likely to wean early; mothers who have support with housework from spouses, older children, or relatives are likely to wean later, etc.[24]

Beyond the early years of the lives of children parents remain integral to their well-being. There is evidence that parental affection throughout childhood mediates a child's response to harsh conditions (such as punishment) and promotes academic achievement.[25] These effects do not appear to be tied to biological parents and are replicated in adoptive parents as well. Whether these results could be reproduced on the basis of warmth from other adults in a child's community seems to be a further stretch of the original implications, and not evident in the research. Similarly, there is evidence that emotional bonds (like love) are part of what tie families together into cooperative networks. These cooperative networks appear to be crucial for the success of the child; it is affection between family members that structures the cooperative network crucial to a child's well-being.[26]

Thus far, I have been describing parental behaviors that optimize a child's well-being. The description is meant to support the idea that children are best cared for by their parents rather than under some other possible social scheme. While there are undoubtedly benefits that accrue to children by having those parents be biologically related to them (e.g. the ease of lactation, or powerful hormonal changes), it certainly is not necessary to optimize well-being for all children. Further, it is reasonable to suppose that there is no *natural* family structure among humans; history and cross-cultural studies show us that families are constructed in all sorts of ways. Although this seems correct, this is not to say that there is not a disposition to structure

in Infants and Children: A Review of the Evidence', *Breastfeeding Review* 9 (2001), pp. 11–18; Robert Quinlan, Marsha Quinlan, and Mark Flinn, 'Parental Investment and Age at Weaning in a Caribbean Village', *Evolution and Human Behavior* 24 (2003), pp. 1–16; D. W. Sellen, 'Comparison of Infant Feeding Patterns Reported for Nonindustrial Populations With Current Recommendations', *Journal of Nutrition* 131 (2001), pp. 2707–15; M. Vestergaard et al., 'Duration of Breastfeeding and Developmental Milestones during the Latter Half of Infancy', *Acta Paediatrica* 88 (1999), pp. 1327–32.

[24] See Quinlan, Quinlan, and Flinn, 'Parental Investment and Age of Weaning in a Caribbean Village'.

[25] See K. Deater-Deckard et al., 'Maternal Warmth Moderates the Link Between Physical Punishment and Child Externalizing Problems: A Parent-Offspring Behavior Genetic Analysis', *Parenting: Science and Practice* 6 (2006), pp. 59–78. See also, S. D. Simpkins et al., 'Mother–Child Relationship as a Moderator of the Relationship between Family Educational Involvement and Child Achievement', *Parenting: Science and Practice* 6 (2006), pp. 49–57.

[26] See, Davis and Daly, 'Evolutionary Theory and the Human Family'.

families in ways that tend to promote the well-being of the children in those families. These dispositions are not always easy to recognize because they often clash with cultural or religious expectations and adapt to environmental circumstances. For example, in many cases, children are best off when raised by a network of caregivers at the center of which is the primary caregiver (typically the lactating mother). In other cases, children are best off in situations of paternal uncertainty that promote support from multiple fathers.[27]

Humans, like some primates, are unusual among animals in that we readily care for children with whom we have no biological relationship.[28] However, we predictively provide that care in nepotistic ways when we have no biological children of our own. The tendency among human parents is to provide care for unrelated children only when we have already successfully reproduced, and only when the care is reciprocal. We tend to be less reliable caretakers of children when neither of these situations hold (i.e. there are no related children for us to care for, and we receive no return for our care of unrelated children). Humans are also like other primates in that the stability of our family structure tends to deteriorate with the introduction of unrelated adults.[29] This appears to be universal across cultures. Again, the evidence is not that children will *necessarily* experience such stress or instability, or even that this is caused by the family composition as opposed to being merely correlated with it. The point here is merely to conclude reasonably that – given that children need care by *some* adult for long periods of time – that care is best provided by parents of children. Without such care by one's parents, the likelihood of harm to most children is immorally high.[30] When parents abrogate the

[27] See Hrdy, *Mother Nature* and *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origins of Human Understanding* (Cambridge, 2009) and references therein.

[28] There are exceptions among other animals (e.g. an adult dog raising a litter of kittens), but these are true exceptions and are in no way typical of the species. However, the issue of how it is that social animals may help unrelated members of their own species or members of another species is a complicated one; Hrdy's *Mothers and Others* provides an introduction to some of the research and literature on this topic.

[29] On this see: M. Daly and M. Wilson, 'Violence against Stepchildren', *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 5 (1996), pp. 77–81. There is research to suggest that stepfamilies are less stable with each child that is not biologically related to the parent, and more stable with each child that is. More to the point, there is a body of cross-cultural evidence that suggests that stepparents tend to invest in stepchildren less than in biologically related children. Correlatively, child abuse and – in the rare cases in which this occurs – the murder of a child are far more likely to be perpetrated by stepparents. Davis and Daly, 'Evolutionary Theory and the Human Family', and reference therein.

[30] There is also reason to believe that children who live with stepparents, distant relatives, or non-relatives are more likely to experience stress and a depressed immune system. Mark Flinn and Barry England, 'Childhood Stress: Endocrine and Immune

obligation to provide this care, the consequences can be quite dire for the children involved.[31]

The purpose of presenting such claims is simply to provide a cursory, but still plausible, external description of the parent–child relationship, and the conditions that predictively promote childhood well-being, that could serve as an umbrella reason for parental obligations if, *ceteris paribus*, it is best for children to be cared for by their parents. This maintains intact what is surely the case: that *some* children *some* of the time are in fact best off in a range of different family structures, but not in communities with no family structure at all, or where certain adults have no strong obligations to care for them.

III. AN ACCOUNT OF PARENTAL OBLIGATION

I have offered several cases for parental obligation. In one such case, obligation is created by developing substantive relationships with one's children or adopting parenting as a life project. I argued that this is unsatisfactory as a broad motivation for parental obligation because of the lack of fit between the burden of the obligation and the substantive relationships required to generate it. In another plausible case, obligation is created by playing a causal role in bringing a child into the world. That account of parental obligation creates fewer obligations to fewer children than is commonly supposed. If these are the only defenses of parental obligation, then parents as a group have a level of obligation that is relatively low – certainly less than the common-sense expectation.

However, there is still room for a far-reaching account of parental obligation that is created by an external description of what is best for children. This case for obligation is insensitive to whether the parent

Responses to Psychosocial Events', in *Social & Cultural Lives of Immune Systems*, ed. J. M. Wilce (London, 2003), pp. 107–47.

[31] Large-scale experiments with wet-nursing as in eighteenth-century France were particularly disastrous and lethal to the babies involved. The social complexities of Europe during this period led to extremely high levels of wet-nursing and the sending of children to foundling homes despite the known risks involved (90 per cent of children failing to survive in some cases). Some have read the history of this period in Europe as well as other cases of endemic child abandonment as clear evidence that maternal love, instinct and affection are not universals, and that they are instead social constructions, or patriarchal impositions. I think this is probably the wrong way to interpret these periods in history. Maternal responses in these cases were probably exceptional responses to the social and environmental constraints of the time. However, terms such as 'maternal love' and 'maternal instinct' are worthlessly vague. I do not rely on them in this article. See Hrdy, *Mother Nature*; David Kertzer, *Sacrificed for Honor: Italian Infant Abandonment and the Politics of Reproductive Control* (Boston, 1993); Richard Trexler, 'The Foundlings of Florence', *History of Childhood Quarterly* 1 (1973), pp. 259–84; John Boswell, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York, 1988).

is responsible for her child's existence or whether she cares about the child to the degree necessary to nurture it through childhood; rather, this case is predominantly concerned with the well-being of children, and how an account of that well-being creates an obligation on the part of the parent. The well-being of children would have to outweigh the cost to the parents – this is the next and necessary step of the argument.

I have not endeavored to provide a complete account of the tasks of parenthood, but even the little that has been mentioned here produces a wide network of constraints on the activities of parents and the distribution of time and resources within a family unit. That which produces the best outcome for a child requires that parents structure years of their lives around providing goods and services to children or constructing ways in which their care can be mimicked. This sacrifice on the part of parents is considerable (and it will be addressed further in the next section), but it seems plausible that the cost of parents as a group not making such sacrifices would deprive parents and children of substantial benefit and cause substantial harm.

Thus far I have focused on the helping and harming that are implicated in parental care; however, the calculation of the obligation created by parental behavior should not neglect the benefit that might accrue to parents by fulfilling parental obligations, or harm that might accrue by neglecting them. It is unarguably the case that, for many parents, parenthood is a supremely valuable association; it is the most important association in the lives of many adults. Parenting children under this description could be something that provides deep meaning to a parent's life, something that fulfills her desire to care for those whom she loves and that structures the decisions of her life – including, perhaps, divisions of resources that are wildly unfair to the parent herself. It has been important for the argument of this article that there are parental obligations even if parents do not explicitly adopt them by either voluntarily bringing children into the world who need care, or incorporating the project of parenting into their own account of well-being. However, a final calculation of parental obligation should take into account the potential for benefitting both the child *and* the parent. As such, the emotional and personal rewards of parenthood are added to, but independent of, the benefits to children.

Once we accept that the benefits of parental care to children outweigh the costs to parents, we are in a position to accept that a moral regard for the well-being of children (and the adults they become) is enough to bite the distributive bullet. It is indisputable that the distribution of goods toward children and away from parents is subject to the distributive objection against any case for a parental associative obligation. However, it seems morally justified simply to accept that parental care is distributively un*fair*, but maintain that it is not un*just*.

Children need care. Parents are, *ceteris paribus*, in the best position to provide that care. This is a substantive external fact about the parent–child relationship; it is a moral fact that children are deserving of well-being. The conclusion is that parents, as a rule, incur an obligation to provide that care.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL POLICY

In this article, I have made a case for parental obligation with a broad reach. The motivation for this argument has been to look at this obligation from the perspective of children and what might constitute their well-being. If it were the case that the well-being of very young children is *ceteris paribus* optimized in proximity to their parents, then what would change if social systems were organized in such a way as to prioritize the well-being of children? Perhaps communities would divert resources to the parents of young children, and would recognize that the extent to which a parent is a means to the well-being of her children is the extent to which it is a community's obligation to compensate her for that. Another way of approaching this is to recognize that the distribution of goods between parent and child can be unfair but just; in order to bring the fairness in line with the justness, we ought, as a society, to compensate parents for this unfair distribution.

Unfortunately, my conclusions must remain at a high level of abstraction. My focus here has been on parental obligation *simpliciter* with limited discussion of the content of that obligation. For instance, the content of this obligation might be that parents are responsible for providing nutrition, protection and education to their children, but not a nice car, or a first-rate university education. It might also limit parents only to provide such goods to their children as is compatible with fairly aiding the children of strangers. With such content in hand, it would be possible to formulate genuine political goals. While I think there is an interesting discussion to be had, that has not been my principal focus here.

One might object that dependent children are brought into this world in all sorts of ways, including the straightforward way described by McPherson above. That is, some parents intend to bring children into the world and cause this to happen in a robustly intentional way. And some parents have adopted parenting as a substantial, meaningful life project central to their conception of their own well-being. Should such parents be regarded as suffering from an unfair distribution? No, probably not. So then, from a social policy perspective a fair society has two broad choices: It must either (i) eliminate all barriers to reproductive autonomy, or (ii) create schemes of compensation for the unfair burden taken on by parents. Ideally, it would do both. After

all, creating conditions of total reproductive autonomy would slowly eliminate the need for such compensation. Given that (i) is ideal but probably unattainable, serious philosophical consideration ought to be given to the costs of parental obligation *qua* associative obligation and why a moral society ought to take these seriously.

So, is the solution to advocate on behalf of extending the period of leave with job security? Is it to provide better child-care options so as to optimize the well-being of children while allowing their parents to delegate their care to others? Is it to recognize the birth of children due to rapes committed during wartime as a further, long-term cost of war deserving of treatment in a war crimes tribunal? There will be many such social considerations that result from a rethinking of parental obligation. It is beyond the scope of this article to draft nuanced social policy. Rather, my aim is only to propose that societies are fairer when they are able to provide adequate justification for parental obligation, when they recognize the inherent distributive conflict between parent and child, and when they promote compensatory schemes to remedy the cost of parental associations.[32]

nwieland@csulb.edu

[32] I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the editors of this journal and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments in revising this article. I am also especially grateful for the extensive assistance provided by Michael Tiboris and Cory Wright on earlier versions of this article.